

From "Culturedness" to Westernness: Old and New Consumption Practices in Romanian Postsocialist Homes

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Former socialist countries have gone through many economic and social transformations since the fall of the regime. Still, values and practices from the past are not completely left behind. One way of capturing what has changed and what stayed the same is to look at material culture and social relations centered around it. The general aim of this paper is to contribute to the discussion about the history of consumption in the Eastern Bloc, by looking at how the value and use of domestic objects has changed from socialism until today. Namely, I analyze the acquisition, circulation, use, preservation and discarding of objects from socialism in order to understand changes in the social and cultural relations in Romania.

The ideas discussed in this paper are based on fieldwork conducted between 2012 and 2014 in various Romanian communities. More specifically, I did interviews and observation in the homes of families formed in the last two decades of socialism and in households of younger generations, established after 1989. The domestic objects at the core of this research are porcelain and crystal table sets and ornaments that were produced and acquired during socialism in Romania and other Eastern European countries.

Then analysis focuses on the complex and contradictory relation between luxury and austerity during socialism and on how these notions have shaped the post 1989 consumer culture. The data gathered indicates that during socialism these objects played an important role in the differentiation of individuals through consumption and in the consolidation of social relations, by being exchanged as gifts or through the informal economy. In the post socialist decades, these items have not been completely removed, but seem to be "downgraded", by being given to relatives, kept in less visible spaces of the house or placed in second homes in the country side. The preservation of these objects indicates a persistence of values of the "old" middle class, such as "culturedness" (Volkov, 1997) and civilization. At the same time, a reconfiguration of the domestic space by reducing clutter and emphasizing functionality, indicates postsocialist aspirations to a "Western" standard of living.