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Paulina Bren and Mary Neuburger, eds. *Communism Unwrapped - Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012. 413 pp.; Cathleen M. Giustino, Catherine J. Plum, & Alexander Vari, eds. *Socialist Escapes - Breaking Away from Ideology and Everyday Routine in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013. 284 pp.

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The so-called Eastern Bloc was not a monolithic bloc. Rather than a homogeneous entity, as they have often been perceived in politics, popular culture and academia alike, Central and Eastern European countries were (and are) a plethora of various cultures and economic and political regimes. State socialism in Romania clearly differed from state socialism in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The Stalinist regime was different from the later period of Kadarism in Hungary. Granted, acknowledging chronological and regional discrepancies within Central and Eastern Europe is not a groundbreaking discovery. Nonetheless, the two new volumes discussed here do a fine job of demonstrating historical similarities and differences within the region and questioning the tired and simplistic West-East binaries that long outlived the Cold War division. *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*, edited by Paulina Bren and Mary Neuburger, and *Socialist Escapes: Breaking Away from Ideology and Everyday Routine in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989*, edited by Cathleen M. Giustino, Catherine J. Plum, and Alexander Vari, reject the idea known from modernization theories that *all* societies develop along the familiar lines of a Western model. As both volumes demonstrate, leisure and consumption practices in communist countries followed "[their] own rhythm and logic" (CU 3) rather than merely imitated capitalist lifestyles.

The authors and editors of *Communism Unwrapped* explore consumption in pre-1989 Central and Eastern Europe "beyond the one-dimensional image of shopping lines, shabby apartment blocks, bare shelves and outdated fashion" (4). The reader may be surprised to find out, for example, that contrary to the general assumptions of poor service and bad products, "socialist regimes actively tracked and courted the consumer for much of the period" (87). The socialist quest for quality is evident in the articles on Bulgaria (one by Mary Neuburger and one by Rossitza Guentcheva), but it is also discussed in other geographic contexts throughout the volume. *Communism Unwrapped* points to the obvious but often overlooked distinction between



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consumption and consumerism, the latter associated with postwar Western cultures. Consumption is a much basic and broader term and "a far more useful and value-neutral category of analysis that does not necessarily presuppose a Western teleology or privilege presumably Western forms" (5). Moreover, consumption, the editors propose, offers a "window" into everyday life under communism and CEE's "complicated engagement with the 'West'" (5).

Bren and Neuburger's volume is thematically organized according to sections devoted to consumer elites, production of desire, gender and consumption, black markets, and state-generated critiques of consumption. Each section is prefaced with a brief historical background that offers a larger context for the section's articles. Several contributions in the volume demonstrate the inadequacy of binary oppositions between the West and the East. Upon a closer inspection, some consumption and living patterns behind the Iron Curtain were not much different from those in the West. In her analysis of so-called nuclear cities (designed for workers at nuclear weapon factories and their families), Kate Brown points at parallels between Soviet and US-American utopian zones of privilege. As Kacper Poblócki notices, after World War II both Western and Eastern nuclear cities could be described as Keynesian – though, arguably, to varying extents – in that they relied largely on subsidized oil, motorways, and housing. Patrick Hyder Patterson spots "substantial correspondences" (125) between merchandizing practices in the West and in the East, especially during the post-Stalinist "consumer turn" in the 1960s and 1970s in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and the GDR.

It is hardly a secret that communist regimes did not create equal societies. As in capitalist societies, under state socialism the privileged groups (the new communist elites) enjoyed privileged consumption. Among the consumption patterns exhibited by communist "have"s and "have-not"s the phenomenon of *veksláks* (Czechoslovak hustlers dealing currency), discussed by Paulina Bren, strikes one as particularly fascinating. *Veksláks* were known for their conspicuous consumption of (what back then seemed like) luxurious Western products. Bren discusses their activities and lifestyles in the context of the 1987 film *Bony a Klid* (evoking *Bonnie and Clyde*, but referring also to *bony*, i.e. vouchers used in foreign currency shops, and *klid*, a call to relax, as in the famous Frankie Goes to Hollywood song that was included in the soundtrack). *Veksláks* were not merely "underworld rogues" (38), Bren argues, but rather represented "the top end of a shared spectrum of economic behavior that came to define the times" (45): in order to succeed one had to engage in unofficial economic activity on some level. Like *pénzváltók* in Hungary and *cinkciarze* in Poland, Czechoslovak *veksláks* were "born entrepreneurs trapped in a non-capitalist straitjacket" (38).

Social inequality was not only the cause of prevalent complaints about the system, but also, at times, as Poblócki argues (69), was used to target certain groups as enemies – as in the case of the 1968 anti-Semitic expulsions in Poland whereby the "Jew" represented the metropolitan, self-serving elites disenfranchising the masses. Common complaints about low levels of consumption in Poland of the 1960s were not so much about the absence of goods in general, but rather about their unequal distribution. Even access to water (consumed for drinking and hygiene as well as recreation, e.g., lakes and public swimming pools) – hailed as a common good under socialism – differed depending on neighborhood. An important point Poblócki makes is that in this regard the year 1989 may not be as major a watershed as it is generally regarded. Social exclusion and

stratification existed before 1989; the fall of communism merely accelerated and intensified urban inequalities. In the words of the Polish geographer Grzegorz Węclawowicz: "affluent areas became more affluent, whereas poorer ones grew poorer" (quoted in Pobłocki 83).

Unlike *Socialist Escapes* which - perhaps with the exception of Mark Keck-Szajbel's article on hitchhiking in the People's Poland - does not directly address gender issues in relation to leisure practices, *Communism Unwrapped* includes several contributions on gender roles in the procurement and consumption of socialist goods and services. Discussing food consumption in Yugoslavia, Wendy Bracewell notices that socialist cookbooks were not simply instructions of how to prepare food, but they also "struggled to reconcile the ideological expectations of socialism [i.e., its alleged equality of women and men] with very different messages" (191), like naturalizing cooking as women's work. Yugoslav cookbooks reinforced "the double burden of work and domestic responsibility by celebrating cooking as a labor of love and as a fulfilling leisure pastime, even promoting shopping and cooking as a means of women's self-definition" (192). In a similar vein - and not unlike the postwar United States - the state-backed consumption practices in Romania were supposed to fashion a new, modern, socialist woman. However, as Jill Massino notices, household appliances such as vacuum cleaners failed to reformulate gender identities and fulfill "the Leninist promise to liberate women from domestic servitude" (231). With advertisements directed at and featuring solely women, producers of these new domestic wonders conveyed a clear message: modern technology makes women's domestic work easier, but it definitely does not free them from performing household chores.

The importance of gender roles resurfaces also in the discussions of informal markets. Women were particularly active in *trader tourism* - i.e., "traveling for the purpose of shopping," which involved elements of "soft smuggling" (251) - and in the so-called *second* or *unofficial economy* (informal exchange on the black or gray market). Consumer resourcefulness and creativity were facilitated through elaborate kinship- and friendship-based networks (Małgorzata Mazurek), which were locally specific, as demonstrated by Narcis Tulbure's article on the production and distribution of *moonshine* (illegally distilled homemade whiskey) in rural Romania. Besides the gender division of roles within socialist informal economy, another important aspect of the unofficial networks of exchange was the niche economic role of the intermediary played, for example, by the Hungarian Roma (in Karl Brown's article on pig killing in Stalinist Hungary).

Here, again, the volume questions the relevance of simple binaries such as "official" versus "unofficial" because of the high degree of their entanglement. Across the region, black and gray markets coexisted with the official markets in most creative and often unexpected constellations. Unofficial economy, however, is hardly a thing of the past or an exclusive feature of former socialist regimes. As Tulbure notices, the second economy provided "the necessary corrective for the scarcity induced by extreme austerity measures" (256). It is difficult to resist the temptation of comparing these informal practices to the unofficial exchanges and family-centered resourcefulness prevalent contemporarily in countries undergoing severe austerity programs such as Greece and Spain.

As *Communism Unwrapped* makes clear, socialist consumption was not static, but varied spatially and temporally. In Hungary the meager years of Stalinism produced different

consumers than the relatively affluent years of Kadarism, for example. In their article on "Kids, Cars, or Cashews?" Tamás Dombos and Lena Pellandini-Simanyi discuss how the contradictions between "the original socialist ideals and growing affluence" (328) were negotiated publicly and privately after 1956. Debates on socialist lifestyle in goulash communism – known as "democratic media debates" – practiced "a priori and post facto censorship," were dominated by the so-called "three Ts": *tűrés, tiltás, támogatás* ('tolerance, prohibition, support'), played out mainly on the pages of the four periodicals *Élet és Irodalom*, *Kortárs*, *Kritika*, and *Új Irás*, and followed "a more or less common script" (329). At the center of the lifestyle debates was the concern about "rampant materialism and its incongruity with socialist ethics" (346). As Dombos and Pellandini-Simanyi's analysis of memories of Hungarian socialism reveals, however, this concern, as expressed by socialist elites, was shared by neither socialist workers nor socialist entrepreneurs, but, rather, as they point out, "this tension between official ideology and discourse on the one hand and people's actual practices and views on the other represented an internal and seemingly perpetual contradiction of the system" (346).

Tensions between the official ideology and everyday life practices also lie at the center of *Socialist Escapes*. The main question approached by the authors of this volume is whether "free time [was] ever truly 'free' in these mono-party states" (253). Despite the seemingly all-encompassing Party rule, people under state socialism "did find some moments for practicing agency, exercising influence, and creating unofficial meanings and communities that were important to them" (254). What strikes one about *Socialist Escapes* is its clear focus on the spatial aspects of tourism, leisure, and entertainment. The volume is divided into five sections focusing on different types of spaces where "free time" was practiced: concert halls and estate museums; cabins in the woods; beach parties; roadside adventures and bright city lights; and sports and stadia. Geographically, the book encompasses Hungary, Czechoslovakia, the GDR, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria. Although the volume does not include many explicit editorial interventions (there are no prefaces to individual sections, for example) besides Preface, Introduction, and Conclusion, still, a close reading demonstrates multiple connections between various contributions. Giustino, Plum, and Vari present a collected volume, in which individual articles are linked through various references and their authors seem to "talk" with each other, which is not exactly a common feature of publications of this kind.

In her preface to *Socialist Escapes*, Giustino explains how the title of the volume was conceived. Starting with "fun places," the editors shifted their attention to "getaways," a category that helped them raise questions about "popular motivations and experiences" (ix) of Eastern Europeans in their everyday lives; this term too proved to be limiting and was eventually replaced by "escapes." The title is further explained in Vari's informative introduction: "leisure pursuits and countercultural ways of life allowed people to 'escape' socialism 'without leaving it'" (3). Escapes are understood as consciously planned and "highly intentional acts" (5) that could be considered, Vari argues, "a softer (and therefore less discerned and examined) form of dissent against the socialist system" (4). The volume features analyses of various types of everyday escapes under state socialism and the practices and meanings they entailed. Regardless of their particular foci, all the articles demonstrate "how average people experienced and reacted to state policies in their everyday lives" (5).

Because of the volume's focus on leisure activities and vacations, the ten articles of *Socialist Escapes* read at times like travelogues in which the authors embark on trips through various parts of the region and through various time periods. The early socialist escapes (from the Stalinist and early post-Stalinist periods) are discussed in the articles about music festivals in the GDR and the People's Poland (David G. Tompkins), about guided tours of castles and chateaux in Czechoslovakia (Cathleen M. Giustino), and about tourism in the Polish Bieszczady Mountains (Patrice M. Dabrowski). Three articles – on GDR summer camps (Catherine J. Plum), nudism in Romania (Irina Costache), and cigarette and alcohol consumption in Bulgaria (Mary Neuburger – one of the editors of *Communism Unwrapped*) – demonstrate how socialist escapes developed over decades from the 1950s until the 1970s. Finally, Florin Poenaru's article on soccer stadia focuses on the last decade of state socialism in Romania. The relatively wide geographic and temporal scope of the volume enable the reader to better understand the heterogeneity of everyday practices under communist regimes and the multiple ways in which average people were able to practice their agency and exercise influence within, despite, and at times helped or approved by the system.

Among the escapes featured in the volume, two seem to have given its practitioners a particular sense of freedom and control over their own lives: hitchhiking and alternative music (punk in Hungary, blues and heavy metal in the GDR). For Polish students (the largest hitchhiking group), being on the road was possibly no less liberating than it had been for Jack Kerouac and his buddies, despite the official state sponsorship of the hitchhiking program in Poland (1957–1993). Keck-Szajbel claims that hitchhiking (or *autostop*) was much more than just the cheapest form of travel in the People's Poland. Thematized in pop songs, TV shows, and popular movies (most famously in Roman Polanski's *Knife in the Water*), *autostop* "grew to become an escape from the very system that initially condoned its creation" (169), an escape from organized socialist group vacations, and thus "an escape from a plan" (182). Young people (admittedly, mostly men as despite state control hitchhiking was still considered potentially dangerous for women traveling alone) thus managed to appropriate a state program for their own goals and needs.

Whereas hitchhikers found escapes from socialism within the official socialist framework, the escapes practiced by alternative music aficionados in Hungary and the GDR took place literally right outside state sponsored entertainment programs. In his article on the liberalization and commercialization of Budapest's nightlife after 1956, Vari discusses the three-tiered structure of nighttime entertainment in Hungary's capital as experienced by Westerners (centered around five-star hotels such as Duna Intercontinental, or the Marriott in its incarnation today), by socialist youth (attending events at the large entertainment complex *Ifipark*, operating from 1961 until 1984), and by supporters of the counterculture (frequenting underground punk clubs), whereby the latter tier turned out to be particularly important. By the 1980s, Vari notes, the punk's nonconformity "captured the imagination of Hungarian youth – turning youth's nocturnal pastimes into daily escapes from socialism" (204). The anti-government texts of punk bands – initially known only to the members of the subculture – seeped into the mainstream and significantly affected the general atmosphere in Budapest of the 1980s. The attempts of the state

authorities to destroy the punk movement not only made it stronger but also increased its relevance.

Socialist governments differed greatly from one another when it came to tolerance of counter-cultural activities and sub-cultural appearances. The GDR authorities were famously strict in this respect. As Caroline Fricke notices, "in order to keep official public festivities free of demonstrations of noncompliance, the regime reluctantly tolerated spaces of escapism outside the public view" (215). The people, whose appearance (long hair, black leather clothes) clearly testified to their belonging to the blues and heavy metal sub-cultures, were excluded from participation in the famous motor races *Bergringrennen* in Teterow, Mecklenburg. In order to avoid the common police controls at the motor races and their likely expulsion from the event, these "negative-decadents" (227) camped near Karkow am See (a half-hour drive from Teterow) and turned the place into "a private escape in a public setting" (225). Unsurprisingly, as was the case with other state socialist regimes in the region, the official attempt to ban a counter-cultural group from a mass event gave way to "nonconformist adolescents carving out their own self-determined escape" (227).

The biggest accomplishment of both volumes lies in their ability to overcome the limits of the popular binary oppositions such as the state vs. the people, oppression vs. resistance, official culture vs. counter-culture, official market vs. black/gray markets, etc. *Communism Unwrapped* and *Socialist Escapes* draw the reader's attention to the complexity of relations and networks under state socialism and add many colors to the everyday life experiences in socialist Central and Eastern Europe, still commonly related to as gray.