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Return to the 'consuming West'

Young people's perceptions about the consumerization of Estonia

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Abstract

This article looks at how young people in post-communist Estonia attribute meaning to consumer goods and to the development of consumption during the last decade. The empirical material comprises 45 qualitatively analysed student essays and 25 in-depth interviews. The authors arrange the material onto two main axes: the temporal axis of Estonian transformation and the spatial axis of Estonia (including the memory of Soviet Estonia) versus today's construct of the West. Also, we look at how 'Western-ness' as a socio-cultural reference point is used by young people in representing consumption. We argue that the decoding of Western consumer culture is ambivalent for Estonian youth as it brings up national collective ideals of freedom as well as highly individual distinction-seeking. Value references ranging from more traditional to 'post-modern' are inextricably interwoven in representations of today's consumption processes. Plural processes are at work among the studied students: having a strong desire to distance oneself from the Soviet heritage and to view 'Western-ness' as the only alternative, while at the same time criticizing the adoption of the Western consumer capitalist model. This is manifested in a willingness to 'outsmart' the Western consumer by using experiences from the Soviet period as well as Estonian ethnocultural heritage.

Keywords

consumer freedom, consumer goods, consumption, individual distinction, post-socialist transition, West

One of the most significant features distinguishing independent Estonia from its Soviet predecessor is free market economy. There are numerous studies that explain the rapid transformation processes in the Estonian political and economic fields. However, we argue that the link between the onset of a Western model of consumer society and the formation of a new habitus has not been adequately studied. Our research makes an early contribution to this developing field of study.

In this article we first provide a theoretical framework, drawing mainly on the works on consumer freedom by Zygmunt Bauman and to a lesser extent on the theories of Don Slater and Pierre Bourdieu, to aid our understanding of the mixed connotations of Western consumer goods during the decade of Estonian transition from socialism to liberal capitalism. Second, we sketch a background for the value shifts occurring among the younger Estonian generations that should shed some light on their construction of meaning as regards Western consumer culture. After a methodological explanation we proceed to an empirical analysis organized around a timeline starting with the 'early days' – that is, the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the re-independence period – moving on to the mid-1990s, a period of growth and stabilization. Our analysis is completed by the young people's accounts of 'today' – meaning the turn of the 21st century. In the concluding discussion we attempt to give explanations for the ambivalence evident in the discourse of the educated Estonian youth concerning the development of Western consumer culture as well as the concept of the West itself.

CONSUMER FREEDOM AND THE TRANSITION FROM SOCIALISM

Estonia's shift from Soviet-style state management of individual life to a situation of (at least theoretically) unlimited freedom of choice, characteristic of Western free-market democracies, is remarkable. Although macro-economic figures are far from the 'full story', it may be useful to give some evidence here of the rapid economic changes in Estonia. Whereas in 1993 GDP declined by 8.8 percent, in 1997 the economic boom was in full swing, with a real GDP growth of 9.8 percent. In 2001 and 2002, real GDP growth stabilized at around 5–6 percent and the predictions for 2003 are the same (Bank of Estonia). The volume of retail trade was around €360 million in 1993; by 2001 it had increased nearly five-fold to €1.7 billion (Statistical Office of Estonia). Commercial retail trade space increased by around 170 percent between 1993 and 2000 (from 281,000 m² to 747,000 m²). The years 2001–2002 witnessed a boom in new supermarkets and shopping centres, and although per capita retail space in Tallinn today is less than half that of the European average (0.9 m² compared with 2 m²), it is expected to reach 1.5 m², or 75 percent of the European average, in 2004 (Uus Maa Ltd, 2003).

The volume of the Estonian consumer market grew by 10 percent in 2002, amounting to approximately €3 billion. However, the absolute volume of consumer expenditure per capita is approximately a tenth of that of Finland. The net income per household grew by 12 percent in 2002, an increase of almost three times the rise in the consumer price index over the same period (3.6%), meaning a substantial growth in purchasing power (Emor Ltd, 2003; Statistical Office of Estonia, 2003).

The rapid transformation of Estonia's economic environment during the past decade constitutes part of the framework shaping a new social competence for the

subject or a new habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). We assume that individual consumption and consumer goods play a crucial role here and that the historical trajectories and ideologies that contextualize Western consumer goods in Estonia offer us a valuable source of information on the development of Estonian society.

The limitation of individual freedom under Soviet rule created various modes of protest. Patriotism and the efforts to establish a nation state that emerged particularly powerfully at the end of the 1980s have been widely analysed (Brubaker, 1995; Calhoun, 1994; Laitin, 1998; Linz and Stepan, 1996; Kolstø, 2000). We argue that the desire for consumer liberty was a mundane, 'soft' form of resistance. For example individual re-contextualization of homogenized commodities as well as the acquisition of officially unavailable merchandise and consumption of *defitsiit* goods¹ – i.e. either Western commodities or sometimes even objects produced in the Soviet Union or other socialist bloc countries – became a prominent and distinctive practice.

The so-called symbolic economy of the Soviet Union was largely based on personal ties and relationships – social rather than economic capital. Having 'acquaintances' in shops or central supply organizations or in other useful positions (e.g. sailors, who had a constant opportunity to go abroad and bring home various foreign gifts) was a powerful form of social capital that facilitated the assertion of individual identity and formed part of the above-mentioned soft resistance to the regime. The ability to obtain goods of symbolic value (deficit ones like bananas or jeans) was an important social differentiator and positioning device. Thus a specific form of social capital was inevitable in the usage and reproduction of one's cultural capital; that is knowledge, competence and ease as regards taste and classifications.

This phenomenon is well explained by Slater (1997), who states that the dream of free consumption – the so-called 'mundane version of civic freedom' – was one of the basic driving forces towards separation from the Soviet Union and its economic model in many communist countries. He says:

What emerged so harrowingly for western socialists in 1989 was the extent to which eastern citizens had indeed come to see consumer freedom exercised through the market as both the epitome and linchpin of all other freedoms, and the extent to which *all* collective provisions for need . . . were neither valued nor connected to the idea of freedom. (Slater, 1997: 37)

In a similar vein Zygmunt Bauman has theorized issues of consumer sovereignty in relation to the communist state. He states that one of the basic differences between the communist regime and Western consumer capitalism is the absence of an opportunity to 'buy oneself out' from the dependent relationship with the 'nanny state' (see also Slater, 1997).² Such a regime functions through the state determining and managing individual life:

What the needs of the individuals are, and how and to what extent they ought to be gratified, is decided by the political state, and acted upon by bureaucracy; the individuals whose needs are determined in such a way have little if any say in the matters of either the state or bureaucracy. They have, so to speak, neither 'exit' nor 'voice'. (Bauman, 1988: 87)

Thus, we proceed from the premise that, apart from the individual dimension discussed above, the Western consumer world seen on Finnish television (in the northern part of Estonia) or on the rare visits to the other side of the 'iron curtain' – also gave a collective image of freedom and democracy to the whole Estonian nation.

Objects from 'out there' were mini-models of the system that was forbidden to the inhabitants of the Soviet Union. The formal Soviet ideology denigrating the West for its 'imperialism' and suppression of the will of the people created an opposite effect: it augmented the sweetness of the forbidden fruit and, at least initially, weakened whatever real and substantiated criticism of the Western consumer model there might be during the Soviet period and in the early years of re-independence (see also Keller and Vihalemm, 2001; Lauristin and Vihalemm, P., 1997; Rausing, 1998). Indeed, according to Bauman, 'political-bureaucratic oppression' is the only alternative to consumer freedom (and vice versa) since no practically tested or even theoretically plausible alternatives have been postulated. So he concludes that 'for most members of contemporary society individual freedom, if available, comes in the form of consumer freedom, with all its agreeable and not-so-palatable attributes' (1988: 88). Although Bauman is writing from first-hand experience of state oppression in his home country, Poland, his attitude towards consumer freedom is ironic. Similarly, we have reason to assume that the discourses by the students of Estonia are controversial, as they view Western consumer capitalism both in terms of liberty and of restrictions and domination. So our study sets out to trace possible manifestations of the critique of the Western consumer society model. Does the Soviet experience encourage or discourage new visions and alternatives to neo-liberal market individualism?

We would argue that striving for political liberation and the establishment of a democratic nation state is inextricably interwoven with the simultaneous desire to establish individual self-determination as a free citizen/consumer and to take responsibility for one's 'reflexive project of the self' (Giddens, 1991).

Individual distinction in contemporary consumer societies is often conceptualized in terms of lifestyle which, according to Giddens (1991: 81), is 'a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity'. For Bourdieu (1984[1979]) lifestyle patterns are relatively static, the prerequisite of this being relative stability of the fields, or the 'space where the game takes place' and where a constant power struggle goes on. Thus differentiation leads automatically to the forming of (vertical) hierarchies, where the boundaries of status groups are relatively stable as well. Although such fixity is rarely found in the dynamic Western world of late modernity (including Estonia, with its specific transition context), lifestyle choices or stances (*prises de position*) still determine the relationships governing and the struggles taking place within the social space.

Indeed, as Bauman says, consumer freedom offers an unprecedented opportunity to form an identity through distinctive practices which, however, is not a zero-sum game. Although the supply of material goods is always finite, the supply of symbols and meanings associated with goods is endless. According to Bauman:

... devaluation of an image is never a disaster, however, as discarded images are immediately followed by new ones, as yet not too common, so that self-construction may start again, hopeful as ever to attain its purpose: the creation of a unique selfhood. (Bauman, 1988: 64)

In advanced Western societies, social approval of individual choices is offered by the market, the mass media and its advertising content as well as by other agents such as peer and taste groups. In the late modern age however, the boundaries to be demarcated are blurred and constantly being re-shaped. Some theorists have postulated a

'post-modern' or 'liquid modern' identity game based on the presumption that fixed structures of society and of meaning are becoming increasingly fragmented and fluid (Bauman, 2000; Featherstone, 1991).³ However, one can by no means claim that the identities that are 'simple modern' in their yearning for the secure vertical status ladder based on a relatively fixed and clear value system have disappeared. We assume that the Soviet background (e.g. the highly emotional connotations attributed to Western goods) and the specific transitional context of Estonia create a particularly volatile and ambivalent situation. The post-socialist transition in Estonia has been conceptualized as a process of recuperation from the Soviet 'pathology of modernity'. In her work on the post-socialist transition, Estonian scholar Marju Lauristin has said:

In the countries of East and Central Europe today, we can observe how 'catching up' with the technological and institutional forms of Western modernization is occurring simultaneously with the adoption of the values and patterns of post-industrial culture, and with the implementation of new information technologies. This simultaneousness of two normally sequential phases of cultural development makes post-Communist societies internally even more controversial and difficult to understand. (Lauristin, 1997: 36)

This gives us grounds to assume that one of the fields where these mixed and even conflicting cultural patterns are expressed is consumer culture. We rarely find fixed lifestyle groups or taste patterns since the sign systems underlying the social construction of meaning in the field of consumption are many and diverse, often pulling in opposite directions. Thus it is interesting to find out which goods and consumption-related practices are represented as positional and distinctive 'then' – that is, at the end of 1980s and at the beginning of the transition period – and 'now'. Also, this fluidity leads us to the question of what types of value references are used when talking/writing about consumption: materialist (wealth, status, success) or post-materialist (self-expression, playfulness, as well as overall cultural orientations) (cf. Inglehart, 1997).

In this context it is also interesting to trace which connotations are attributed to the West as the central metaphor in the contextualization of consumer goods and consumption patterns. The West can be viewed as a political and ideological construct 'that meant the "Free World" whose synonyms were market economy, Western democracy, freedom of speech and thought' (Lauristin and Vihalemm, 1998: 683). Or it can be seen in a more critical light as a homogenizing source posing a potential threat to small cultures. Piotr Sztompka (1996) understands Westernization as liberation from the Soviet organization of life and the re-establishment of various connections with (Western) Europe. However, a complicating factor in interpreting the discourse on (particularly Western) commodities and consumption is the tacit claim that Estonia has always been part of the West. Sigrid Rausing describes how the term 'normality' connoted a powerful means of situating Estonia in the West, which forced her informants to greet Western objects with less 'of the surprise, enthusiasm or confusion that might be expected' (1998: 190). This was part of a silent redefinition of objects already taken for granted. Rausing concedes: 'the world of goods in this region, as in any other, was bound up with questions of identity, and particularly perhaps, with questions of national and class identity' (1998: 196). This highlights a peculiar configuration of different meanings attributed to commodities in the transition context. In our study we focus on the following: How are freedom and

opportunities of choice associated with consumption and particularly with the model of the West? Does the field of consumption bring to light congruence and/or opposition between the stereotypical constructs of 'Estonia/Estonians' and the 'West'? Which geographical areas and cultural features are associated with the construct of the West?

VALUES OF THE 'NEW YOUNG'

Research on how the transition to consumer capitalism is echoed in Estonian people's discourses is rather modest. Our study starts to fill this gap by focusing on a very particular consumer group: young educated people, the students who form a part of the so-called 'new young' of Estonia – 15–24-year olds (see Tallo, 1998).

Generally, post-materialist orientations (e.g. being useful to society, interest in high culture, understanding the world, altruism) were highly valued under the Soviet system (Saarnit, 2000). The gradual opening to the Western world during the 1980s and the rapid change after the collapse of the Soviet regime, which entailed increased consumer choice, market competition and 'a cult of economic success', forced value orientations in the direction of materialism. According to the World Values Surveys, this is characteristic of post-socialist countries on the whole in the first half of the 1990s (Toomere, 2001) and contrary to the trend in advanced Western countries, where post-materialist values such as self-expression, a need to belong, aesthetic satisfaction, denial of authority, etc. are gaining ground.

In the course of this individualization and 'neo-materialization', the older age groups of the Estonian population showed a decrease in personal development-related values and openness to change. For younger age groups, the value replacement seemed to be easier and, in tandem with individualization, universal values like inner harmony and clean environment were retained (Lauristin and Vihalemm, T., 1997). Also, according to Inglehart's system, the average of the post-materialism index decreased less for the younger generation than for the older generations (Toomere, 2001). Thus the younger age groups are more open to Western cultural flows and value discourses. The other studies conducted by Estonian scholars reveal that compared to the graduates of 1996–8, the graduates of 1992 are less oriented to social altruism and more interested in material well-being, individual social position and their careers.

The meaning of values has changed, too. For example, for the young, the meaning of a career has shifted from a hierarchical model to interest in inner development and in opportunities to work in different environments (Raag, 2000). Also, young people display quick changes in their understanding of some values like freedom, which at the beginning of the transition evoked a unified context (i.e. Singing Revolution),⁴ but by 1995 was spontaneously linked with leading an exciting life, and related to personal choices between different options like travelling, 'watching people' and self-realization (Vihalemm, 1997: 276ff.).

Thus we may assume that the segment of the 'new young' whom we have studied is equipped in their value consciousness to compare different value worlds and to reflect on social change – which could include being critical or at least sceptical of the materialistic, neo-liberal consumer capitalism that was dominant in Estonia in the 1990s. This is perhaps all the more evident since our informants are amongst the

more educated of their generation. This critique expressed in words may or may not form a foundation for our informants' actual consumption patterns; but this remains an object for further research.

To grasp our students' views on Estonian consumerization, it is important to ask how they represent 'then' versus 'now' – that is, the retrospective discourses on the Soviet period's as well as today's consumption, consumers and commodities. The main line of inquiry focuses on the links between the Soviet experience and the perceptions of transition and also the representations of relations between Estonia and the West.

DATA AND METHOD

The empirical material in this study consists of essays and interview texts by the students of the University of Tartu and Tallinn Technical University (born between 1977 and 1983), who write or talk about how they understand the development of consumer culture in Estonia. They have lived under both Soviet rule and the Estonian Republic, and have first-hand memories and experiences from both systems and thus a basis for comparison. Our informants are unique in the sense that their most active socialization period (school age), has coincided with the rapid transformation of Estonian society.

We are aware that retrospectively, this generation tends to see the past as quite simple and the present as very complex, which is in line with the universal narrative of leaving childhood and entering the adult world. Also, they may have more critical, 'black-and-white' views in relation to the past. Compared to their parents (who could be considerably more nostalgic about the 'good old times'), the young generation has undergone an 'easier' version of personal transition and adapted more smoothly to the increasing labour market competition, the new social security system, etc. They are presumably also more 'open' to the ideas mediated via the global mass media – including postmaterialist values. These educated young people are like 'participant observers' in the extensive processes of social change: they are personally less hurt by the game of 'losers and winners', less nostalgic about the past, while at the same time able to be critical (learned as well as mediated) of contemporary society. It is quite probable that all the ambivalences described above contribute to the considerable amount of anxiety about the Western consumer capitalist model as well as about today's individual consumption patterns, which is evident in the young people's spoken and written discourse.

Our sample consisted of two kinds of sources. The first contains a total of 45 student essays: 15 written essays from the year 2000 (8 by female and 7 by male authors), 15 from 2001 (11 by female and 4 by male authors) and 15 from 2002 (9 by female and 6 by male authors).⁵

The students were from various faculties (but mainly from the social sciences and philosophy) and all of them were in their second to fourth year. The authors of the essays had all participated in the course 'Consumer Culture and Branding' taught by one of the authors of this article (Keller). These young people are more educated (particularly in social theory) than their peers and thus more capable of being reflexive and critical about themselves and the surrounding (consumer) society. And as they attended a course on consumer culture, their analytical lens was of course very

sensitive to the problematics of consumption. Most may be considered middle class; and even though the contours of the emerging class structure in post-socialist Estonia are still fluid, we may assume that these students are on their way to becoming an educated elite. As a consequence, a close reading of their essays does not permit overarching generalizations about shifting popular perceptions and attitudes. However, it does provide a useful first step in studying everyday interpretations of Estonia's 'return to the consuming West'. In particular, these essays point to emerging ambivalences and tensions in attitudes towards the new consumerism and they draw attention to themes that require further, more broadly based, and systematic investigation.

We are also aware of the limitations of such a retrospective narrative; it inevitably wears the imprint of today. Our young people conceptualize the past in terms of the cultural capital they have obtained during the past 11 years. This gives them grounds for regarding themselves as wise and experienced compared to the consumers (including themselves and their family and friends) of a decade ago, whom they depict with considerable critical distance and sometimes irony. This is not a picture of 'how things were' but a picture of how the 'then' is seen today and how today is represented making use of the experience of Estonia's transformation.

Our second source is 25 interviews conducted in autumn 2001 with 21–23-year-old students from the University of Tartu and the Technical University of Tallinn. They were studying various disciplines – mathematics, the social sciences, natural sciences and the arts. The interviewers were specially trained third-year sociology students who were practising qualitative social science research methods. The interviews were semi-structured, and their general mood was informal. The respondents did not participate in any special consumer culture courses and they had no other type of formal connections to the subject.

In spite of the two samples' different backgrounds in consumer culture theories, and different circumstances when producing the analysed text, we found their overall argumentation and construction of meaning rather similar. We decided to code them according to the same scheme – that is, interview texts are not compared with essays. The text analysis of essays involves no fragments that explicitly refer to or discuss social theories. Either personal evaluations or examples and illustrations (e.g. personal consumption experiences, naming of significant objects, etc.) are coded.

The coding partly follows the narrative structure similar to the temporal axis proposed by Lauristin and Vihalemm (1998). In the first period, which we have termed 'the early days', we include the 'breakthrough' (1987–1991) and the 'radical reforms' (1991–1994), the end of which overlaps with the beginning of the second period of 'economic and cultural stabilization' in 1994–1998. We have also added a third period, 1999–2002, metaphorically designated 'coming of age'.

The thematic categories represented in the texts were developed inductively after the first readings. The first and the third period had three thematic codes:

- significant consumer objects – explicit mentioning of consumer goods and brands;
- the development of consumption in general – either descriptive or evaluative statements about the current state of Estonian society in terms of the development of consumer culture (e.g. purchasing power, lifestyle constructions, criticism of consumption boom, etc.); and
- the West – either descriptive or evaluative statements about the relations,

comparisons, etc. between the Soviet system, free Estonia and the West. Text fragments were coded here when more general category markers ('the West', 'foreign countries', 'more developed countries' and the like) or names of specific countries (e.g. Finland, the USA) were explicitly stated.

The period of 'stabilization' was least represented in the texts; thus no subdivision of this temporal code was made. All text excerpts referring to a later period than the beginning of the transition or explicitly naming the period of the mid-1990s were included under this temporal code.

The second step in our analysis delineates different discourses on the construction of the relations with the West as well as on consumer objects as significant elements of personal and collective (Estonian, Soviet or anti-Soviet, Western) identity formation. An interview fragment is marked with INT and an essay with ESS.⁶

THE EARLY DAYS – DISTINCTION IN SOVIET ESTONIA AND AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TRANSITION

Looking at the students' reminiscences about consumption under Soviet rule, we can distinguish a number of discourses. The Soviet official economy was seen to provide only for basic utilitarian needs and to try to artificially stamp out individual differences. This is clearly illustrated in an interview:

During the Soviet time the consumption habits were limited as regards the choice and amount of goods that were offered in shops. You had no choice but the shoes from Kommunaar, and since the maximum size of the living room was 16 m² this did limit the size of the sofa you bought there. (INT, M, SO, 01)⁷

This situation brought about more and more protest and called for ingenuity in order to distinguish oneself with whatever means were available:

The Volga owner was clearly on a higher step of the social ladder than the driver of a Zaporozhets.⁸ The tourist vouchers for the resorts of Sochi and even for the spas of Pärnu were an object of remarkable fuss. (ESS, M, JRNL, 00)

The most important however, was investing in food that could then be demonstrated at large parties (weddings with at least a hundred guests, birthday parties, funerals). It was crucial to offer anything that was hard to get. The real players had access to warehouses or sales people, with whose help they got frankfurters and sprats. (ESS, F, PR, 00)

It is noteworthy that the concept of '*defitsiit*' and the difficulty of its acquisition (because of the amount of networking and social capital needed) was one of the main markers of distinction. Naturally it remains a moot point among which social groups the so-called clever Volga owners created envy and admiration and from whom they drew contempt and ridicule. Nevertheless, since the topic of the acquisition of *defitsiit* goods figures so prominently in the students' texts, we can conclude that it formed an important part of the symbolic capital of the time (see Bourdieu, 1998).

Certainly the greatest status markers (the greatest *defitsiit* goods) were Western commodities. Even small and worthless knick-knacks are seen as decisive factors in identity creation. Our informants were children at the time and their immediate

experience is related to the gifts their parents or relatives brought from abroad or from the hard currency shops that were created at the very end of the 1980s.

At the very beginning there were hard currency shops, of course, from where one could buy chewing gum and all sorts of trinkets for the Finnish marks saved on a work trip. I became the owner of chequered neon pink leggings after having begged my parents for a long time (I remember exactly that they cost 35 marks). Having such nice leggings was for me a question of being different (or better) than the others. (ESS, F, PR, 00)

However, we can also detect some nostalgia for the 'Soviet-West' (Estonia together with the other Baltic republics), which in retrospect is viewed as a more Westernized enclave of the Soviet Empire:

In Estonia there was a lot more 'under-the-counter' Western merchandise (jeans, Finnish coats) and cultural circulation was livelier (a recent exhibition in the Estonian National Museum proved to me that the punk movement and punks were in Estonia already from the 1970s). (ESS, M, PA, 01)

In addition to their own immediate experience, the students make retrospective, often hyperbolic generalizations about the adult world they did not directly participate in at that time. Used Western cars, coffee machines and leather jackets are presented as objects with considerable sign value and their owners are described with irony, showing today's sophistication and an ability to distance oneself from those patterns. Such 'wannabe Westerners', who even could make do with pirate goods (with names that slightly deviated from the original brand names) bought from the market place, are mostly seen in a derogatory light.

The hated tracksuits of Marat (even if stored in the closet corners) were replaced with Abibas; Nices were bought instead of Kommunaar galoshes (and stored for the bad days). (ESS, M, PR, 02)⁹

A very powerful image recurrent in many texts is colour:

In comparison with the dull and colourless Soviet products these [Western] things were naturally an entirely different, attractive and interesting world. Those for whom their uncle had brought 24 or even 36-colour crayons from Finland had a rise in their social status at school guaranteed. (ESS, F, PR, 02)

The Western world of colourfully packaged consumer items stood in stark contrast to the Soviet greyness. Colour was a symbol of a different world often described as 'glowing behind the iron curtain' and grey was the metaphor for totalitarian uniformity. However, as we see in the texts about the present, the connotations of 'colour' change remarkably (see later).

The distinctive consumption practices of that period are often contextualized in terms of a rather primitive vertical hierarchy – being (or seeming) more successful, i.e. better than the others. Many examples play up the stereotype of unselective and greedy consumers whose main goal is to demonstrate their newly gained status via consumer goods. This manifests strong normative desires as well as anxiety about consumption. The roots of both can be traced back to the different value orientations during the students' early socialization under Soviet rule as well as to present-day disillusionment. The latter offers abundant material for criticism of and even pity for the growing stratification of society, distrust between the individuals and the state,

and also concern for social and economic sustainability, which are all widespread discourses in Estonia today (Lauristin and Vihalemm, 2002; Vetik, 2001).

Individual striving to be different and better is, however, only one side of the coin. The other is the ideal of collective freedom for Estonia, separation from the Soviet Union, and re-asserting Estonian affiliation with the Western socio-cultural sphere by 'becoming a normal state with a free government and a free market regulated by laws' (Laar, 1996: 98).

There are many examples in the texts where Western consumer goods were seen by our students as a flood of freedom washing over them (the famous 'no choice but to choose' claimed by Giddens [1991]), but with the long-yearned-for liberty very much interlaced with confusion:

The Estonians freed from the yoke of the planned economy could be compared with children who are as yet not very well able to consciously distinguish between needs and wants and who feel great but short-lived joy for every new knick-knack. (ESS, F, PR, 00)

The consumers of that time are sometimes represented with a certain tint of irony, but also with considerable warmth and understanding. Senseless admiration of the West and senseless consumption are seen as absolutely natural behaviour for the newly liberated people. They could by no means possess all the cultural capital – e.g. knowledge of financial risk management or Western brand hierarchies – needed for successful and sustainable life under capitalism.

These [Western] things symbolized a Western concept of liberty, democracy and freedom of choice. At the time of opening the borders, when the myth of the West became ever more powerful, the most trivial knick-knack obtained magic value. (ESS, M, JRNL, 01)

At the beginning of the nineties everybody bought bananas, right . . . a banana had been a symbol during the Soviet time – the Western world. (INT, F, Arts, 01)

STABILIZATION AND GROWING SOPHISTICATION

The time of stabilization is represented as the time when Estonians' initial thirst for freedom was satisfied and when consumption gradually became more sophisticated, involving the acquisition of the cultural capital of the late modern Western world. The development of the country is also conceptualized in terms of increasing stratification.

Access to consumption possibilities determines the 'losers' and 'winners' in the transition:

Some pensioners would have lived much better during the Soviet time than now . . . but at the same time a thirty-year-old would have been only a small citizen in the Soviet Union who could not have expected to be able to travel to the Canary Islands in winter and to Los Angeles in summer. (INT, M, Math, 01)

The sign systems underlying the practices and goods of distinction are becoming more refined and closer to Western taste patterns. Estonian consumers are described as more selective, seeking quality and not just an attractive package:

Maybe people have become more selective in a way. Before they bought Western goods by the package. Nowadays people already know what is trash and what is not. (INT, F, Math, 01)

Brand awareness is seen to grow with purchasing power. Brands begin to be connected with certain lifestyles. Consumption as a signifying process is described as more complicated nowadays when compared with the beginning of the 90s:

An elite consumer culture can be separated out – people buy more exclusive and expensive things, like Moschino things. Particular groups within the mass-consumer culture can be differentiated as well. (INT, F, Arts, 01)

The rapid development of the mid-1990s (with the introduction and increasing use of credit cards and leasing, and the stock exchange boom) is thought to have fuelled what is often normatively represented as 'over-consumption'. The critique centres on condemnation of individual lack of reason and hedonism (instead of a 'protestant ethic' traditionally associated with the conservative and 'down to earth' stereotype of an Estonian). The texts abound with phrases like 'stock exchange mania', 'consumption boom', 'senseless leasing'. There is also a concern about the Western impact on the country's economy and ethno-culture:

There was hardly any complaining about the invasion of Western culture or emergence of consumer society in the early years of Estonian freedom. This discussion came about only a few years later, when the consumption boom had reached its peak and concerns arose about the competitiveness of Estonian economy and the excessive influence of Western culture on Estonian culture and society. (ESS, F, PA, 01)

Although the overheated stock exchange is long forgotten, we can see that similar causes for worry may be discerned in the consumption patterns of today.

COMING OF AGE – CONSUMPTION TODAY

Today's commodities and consumption patterns are increasingly interpreted in terms of the stratification of society into different status groups (classes), where the dominant majority is represented as the 'poor' (or the 'repressed' to use Bauman's [1987] term) and increasing fragmentation into different lifestyle patterns among the rich or the 'seduced'. The naïveté of valuing cheap items from China is history and the present-day consumer world is considered very complex. We find rather conflicting discourses here, extending from a discourse on distinction with a very modern value orientation to more fluid and code-mixing identities and lifestyles usually associated with 'post-modern' consumer culture (see Featherstone, 1991).

Mixed values and freedom of choice

Consumption is often connected with status and wealth, sometimes even constructed as a duty to be fulfilled once a certain position has been reached. However, the 'purchased' status is distrusted, often shown as grotesque. The students acknowledge the social norm that induces some people to consume in such a hyperbolic way. By ridiculing it, they try to distance themselves from such reprehensible conduct and indirectly show that the norm for them is different. It is also clear that we cannot

point to coherent taste and lifestyle patterns characteristic of a more stable society; Estonia is a country of 'messy' sign values:

There are people who drive a BMW and wear Armani clothes but live in a lousy one-bedroom flat full of cockroaches, where they do not even have a closet to put their Armanis nicely on a hanger. (INT, M, NS, 01)

A typical example is working (class) youth who, by skimping on food, buy themselves rather expensive used cars while living in rental apartments at the same time. (ESS, M, PA, 01)

Positional goods are as important as before, only the code has become more nuanced, including, for example, luxury brands and various configurations of taste. At times it appears that the seemingly playful identity constructions negating fixed status codes are quite normative and rigid for the young people. The trend is the norm and taste configurations are used for social classification according to a relatively simple and solid modern hierarchy:

When the celebrities of *Kroonika* already demonstrate their designer-made and high-art-decorated bedrooms, then the dreams of an 'ordinary person' are with greater probability full of solid wood furniture in peasant style or even pseudo-baroque Italian bedroom sets. However, the dreams of a younger, a bit wealthier and trend aware urban person are, at least in my circle of acquaintances, quite minimalist and shiny with chrome. (ESS, F, PR, 00)¹⁰

Sometimes even the irony is gone and some of the informants seem to make their everyday decisions about people's reliability based on the signs belonging to the code of wealth and status, which seem to matter a lot.

I systematically do not take seriously economics professors who wear cheap clothes. They are not believable. A person, who is talking about how to get rich, must be rich himself. And it must be visible. Maybe some of them can make money, but I do not see his bank account, so it must be visible in some other way. If there is an investment professor who is driving a 1992 Toyota, I cannot take him very seriously. (INT, M, Eco, 01)

More critically reflective accounts can also be found. Personal freedom is viewed in a paradoxical way. On the one hand, the choice between various items is extensive, at least compared to the Soviet period, but on the other, there is limited personal freedom to choose the rules of the game – to switch 'in' and 'out'. The global media culture, stereotypically associated with America, is seen to be the referee who regulates the game. If one does not wish to become an outsider or an eccentric, one has to abide by the rules of consumer culture.

In spite of the anxiety it causes, some students rationalize it by acknowledging that consumption is an everyday, mundane practice whose deeper meaning one should not worry too much about. We can detect traces of nonchalance associated with the young 'post-modern' consumer for whom consumer choice provides the building blocks of an ever-changing identity game:

We can ridicule it, but no one is pushing it on you, are they? No sanctions follow – but he tells me, see this is good. But at the same time I have freedom of choice. Maybe I am stupid, maybe I have no choice since all the options have been pre-determined by the fact that I am a member of a society. . . . so that somebody else is the master who determines my behaviour, right? Following this one could argue that this is not good,

but since things in everyday life are not so philosophical, right, why not then? Let them consume. Let us consume. (INT; F, SS, 01)

A very interesting example describes consumption patterns in Estonia (or at least some of them with metaphoric meaning in this context) as a configuration of pre-modern values seen as 'cool' particularly by foreigners:

Abroad, at the same time, you can hear stories about Tallinn as one of the new trend cities (in addition to Berlin, London being already way-out) where in certain circles such cool things are done as valuing one's family, buying Estonian goods, making babies and weeding in one's own garden! In clubs gin with cranberry juice is drunk and drugs are not talked about. (ESS, F, JRNL, 02)

Considerable irony can be detected in this quote, particularly in the phrase about drugs, since the latter are a prominent theme in Estonian public and private discourse. However, it is definitely not a complete trick mirroring of the perceived lifestyles of Estonians. On the one hand, the traditional values and habits as well as loyalty to local goods are elevated to the status of a consciously trendy activity, which can provide a source of meaning in life for the young urban people (Estonian and foreign) who perhaps feel too cosmopolitan and adrift. On the other hand, growing one's own vegetables, focusing on family life and buying cheaper Estonian goods are seen as an inevitability for the relatively poor majority of Estonians. Foreigners who consider it trendy are ridiculed.

There are also other examples where similar issues are opened in more straightforward terms: Estonians finding a new identity based on rather archaic stereotypes of purity (pure nature equals pure food with no additives) and authenticity under the siege, so to speak, of Western consumer culture.

The same Westernization and consumerism have brought people closer to Estonian-ness and nature, it has drawn people's attention to preserving Estonian culture, to the need to save money and natural resources. A sensible consumer has found consumption through his/her Estonian nature. (ESS, F, PA; 01)

At the same time there are 'courageous' admissions of the hedonistic pleasures of consumerism, that provide a noteworthy contrast to the more normative-critical mood of most of the essays and interviews:

How many people remember in what conditions they bought fuel for their car fifteen years ago? Today's visiting Statoil or Shell has become a remarkably more nuanced pleasure than could be expected from an ordinary filling up. I enjoy the clean, pleasantly ergonomically designed petrol tank nozzle, the masculine sound of the clicks of the nozzle trigger reminding me of closing the cover of a zippo-lighter, tens of fuel litres zooming by in front of my eyes, the knowledge that I can take as much fuel as I want with one-cent precision and the meticulously clean, aesthetically designed, lit and aromatised environment. (ESS, M; PR, 00)

Buying Vogue is like a ritual . . . Usually I save myself for the moment, that is if I really need something to cheer me up, that is when I am in a bad mood or the weather outside is lousy. . . then I buy Vogue, make tea, lie down and browse in it for an hour or so. Estonian magazines are so thin, these I have already 'consumed' by the time I get to the counter . . . (INT, F, Arts, 01)

However, life in Estonia is not easy for hedonists since hedonism goes against the

grain of society. The reflexive game with commodity signs is a pleasure – if for only a few:

This whole playfulness, hovering meanings and changing identities does not match with the worldview Estonians have held so far (it has been taught that one has to buy what is absolutely necessary and the rest should be put in the piggy bank); at the same time one still wants and justifications are sought – why indulge in this or that? As a matter of fact, post-modern consumption is not easy at all; one has to have a tremendous amount of knowledge and be informed about everything. What fun is there to wear Manolo Blahnik shoes with old jeans or put one's Philip Starck orange press on grandma's wooden chest, if there is no one to grasp your fine post-modern irony? (ESS; F, PR; 01)

Thus we see an interesting jumble of connotations that give grounds for believing that young people's discourse about the West and Western models of consumption is influenced by the ambivalent and often contrasting background of values and practices prevalent in contemporary Estonian society, ranging from more traditional traits expressed in the longing for the purity of ethnic Estonian peasant culture to references to the often cosmopolitan carnivalesque, which is heavily influenced by the global media culture.

Growing ambivalence about the West

The West no longer symbolizes a promised land of freedom for the individual and for the nation. Instead, the meaning of the West is increasingly plural, even contradictory. The normative discourse of over-consumption and false needs is very prominent, with packages, shopping malls and trash as central metaphors. Note that the meaning of colour has acquired a negative connotation of false glamour and artificiality:

Most of all colourful packages made according to Euro-directives, large department stores, plastic bags, queues and bankcards, large shopping centres. Everything, even the smallest bite is wrapped into something. A senseless heap of garbage and preservatives. (INT, F, SO, 01)

I mostly understand over-consumption as this Western consumer culture: you consume what you do not actually need. Society has set such demands on you. Subconsciousness is under too much influence – advertising and everything else that surrounds us. (INT, M, NS, 01)

On the other hand, admiration of the West as a whole is rationalized and based on the Soviet experience – that is, Estonia's need to distance itself from the East. The West (particularly Northern Europe) is a functional model from which to learn skills and improve standards as well as a reference point for identity creation both on the national and individual level.

Lifestyle taken over from the Western value system gives an opportunity to identify oneself with 'an international shopper', citizen of a welfare state and 'real European'. No matter that living standards and transition problems do not let Estonia be designated a 'real European state, yet it cannot prevent us from feeling like taking part of this added value that is given to us by the image of Westernized Estonia. (ESS; F, PR, 01)

Quite expectedly, the West is also beginning to elicit a fear of cultural dominance that could damage the national culture, and to be a negative role model, bombarding

Estonia with excessive materialism and eroding the 'right values'. Such 'attacks' are most often seen to come from the mass media, particularly advertising. The critique ranges from rather straightforward oppositions between Estonian and (not surprisingly, American) power brands to a more sophisticated account of the re-assertion of archaic practices by 'urban hedonists' as conscious resistance (as has been seen earlier in this article).

As an example we can take Muhumaa, Kihnu or the Võru and Põlva forests, where urban people working in the name of modern values feed their mythic and hedonistic needs, actively denying (even by sitting in a sauna) the need to bow down to the authority of Western culture. (ESS, F, PR, 01)¹¹

The metaphor of the West has acquired plural meanings that have parallel positive and negative connotations. It is interesting to note that the construct of the West is seen as rather homogeneous. The most distinguishable 'chunk' separated from the aggregate is the USA (often characterized with powerful phrases like 'consumption freaks', 'consumption mania' and considered the main source and symbolic resource for life 'like in the movies'). The Nordic countries, being close neighbours, are also sometimes mentioned separately. Quite expectedly the Nordic (or 'Nordic with a twist' as postulated in the state-financed promotional project, 'Brand Estonia' of 2002) identification pattern is mostly seen as positive. Finland (seen mainly on TV in North Estonia) was a glimmer between the iron curtain, an epitome of the West. It continues to be a role model of sustainability and sobriety with whom it is believed Estonians share a common cultural heritage. The official political discourse has also played its role by distancing Estonia from the Baltic identity by asserting its 'Nordic-ness'.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Analysis of the discourse of young and critical consumers shows that Western consumer goods carry very ambivalent meanings. The retrospective construction of meaning about Western commodities is intertwined with simultaneous but contrastive connotations ranging from collectively shared ethno-romantic ideals of a free Estonian nation state to very individualistic striving for distinction. We argue that one of the fundamental reasons for present-day criticism and the relative disillusionment expressed in Estonian mass media, academic discourse and the texts of the more educated and critical youth, is the fragmentation of the myth of a unified Estonian nation state into many separate worlds. The commodities that were believed to carry both the individual meaning of social position and the ideal of a free nation of self-determining citizens at the beginning of the 1990s are today mostly signified as status markers. They increase the gulf between people who are believed to have operated in a mythic unison and harmony in the days of the Singing Revolution.

The creation of the new habitus – amongst other things, the habitus of a competent consumer – has proved to be complicated. Commodification of the self (Giddens, 1991) has offered many rewards. On the one hand these include feeling 'like an international shopper', being 'European', being part of the free world as an equal partner as well as the satisfaction of one's individual need for differentiation from the coercively created homogeneity of the mass. On the other hand 'freedom from' oppression has not automatically taught people 'freedom to' (see Fromm, (2002[1942]),

meaning an ability to be individually responsible, take risks and re-arrange one's life strategies once the 'nanny state' is gone and Estonia is open to the whirlwind of globalizing media culture while faced with the formidable task of rebuilding the nation-state. The students' portrayals of the consumerization of Estonia are ambivalent. They are very critical as they have sufficient educational resources to understand the processes in society coupled with having inadequate material resources; but they can also be constructively optimistic or sometimes nonchalant.

Our data reveals a nascent understanding amongst young people that the individual's connection to society and its 'rules of the game' is pre-determined to a large extent. There seems to be no viable alternative to the consumer culture largely fed by the Western trends that come to Estonia mainly through the mass media. Estonians' attitude towards the West has become more critical. Both essays and interviews carry a central narrative of coming of age (a child growing up), which can be interpreted in both personal and national terms. Simple black and white schemes and 'pure' emotions (admiration, desire etc) have been replaced by ambivalent feelings where criticism exists side by side with acceptance and acknowledgement. Our informants realize that being free is complicated and things have a multitude of meanings.

As argued above, in Estonia parallel influences are at work producing the co-existence of opposite value orientations. The first of these influences is the modernization of society, which entails the creation and development of an institutional framework for a modern nation state, involving developing a free market economy accompanied by the emergence of a vertical, predominantly wealth-based status hierarchy. This is coupled with the so-called 'post-modern' influences of, for example, the international 'image culture' (Jansson, 2002), which can be 'transgressive, boundary breaking' or even 'all-eroding' to use Bauman's epithets (2000). Also, one should not underestimate the influence of the Nordic countries – most post-materialist of all in their value orientations according to Inglehart (1997) – which, as represented in Estonian public discourse, are important models of development.

We assume that owing to these often conflicting forces, the sign system of goods and practices forming the structures for tastes and a foundation for the new habitus, is in transition and sometimes 'messy'. This is reflected in several ways. Different value systems cannot be clearly 'disentangled' in discourses about consumption. As argued by Featherstone, a reflexive, late modern or 'post-modern' consumer would presumably very easily switch gears between the two worlds: one with rigid control and social norms, where scarce commodities are status markers within the prestige economy, and one which is 'de-controlled', where signs and symbols can freely be used to conjure up fantasies, dreams and to re-create the self as one pleases. According to this theory, in contemporary consumer culture these two sets are not alternatives, but exist in parallel; they are equally legitimate and can be used situatively. However, our data seem to reveal that in a post-socialist context this switching between two sets of values is ridden with problems. Even more ironic and playful lifestyle references can be interpreted as rigidly normative and hierarchy-centred. 'Post-modern' consumption is even seen as a rather hopeless attempt to create a web of meanings in a situation where there is no responsive audience. Shopping is not an aesthetic private enjoyment for the individual only, the pleasure of the contemporary urban *flâneur*. Rather, it is a chance to show oneself and one's family to others, to demonstrate one's ability to shop in up-market malls or supermarkets. So, although

truly self-centred hedonistic consumption practices and discourses about them definitely exist in the young Estonian consumer world, consumption is often seen by these young people as a complicated social labour of status and category marking – or even social exclusion where there is little room for the carnivalesque, and the spectacles of signs. The insecurities and hardships of constructing social classes and lifestyles in the new and formerly classless society seem to be causing the focus in the ‘ordered disorder’ that is symptomatic of contemporary Western consumer culture, to shift clearly onto the side of ‘order’ rather than ‘disorder’ or spectacle (see Featherstone, 1991).¹²

On the other hand, archaic references to purity and traditional peasant culture are nicely commodified and packaged, particularly in Estonian food products under the campaign ‘Prefer Estonian!’ or used (definitely by a more educated, reflexive and wealthy minority) as a tongue-in-cheek resistance to Western cultural dominance. This exists in tandem with a genuine ‘return to premodernity’ where some families claim that poverty has dragged them back to a barter economy where everything is grown on the farm or exchanged with neighbours. Indeed, the majority of the people cannot afford to purchase their desired status – not to mention participate in the global ‘post-modern’ identity game. This feeds overall embitterment, also termed ‘transition stress’ (see Kutsar, 1995).

Given this background we can hypothesize the emergence of a new consumer identity among the younger and more educated segments of Estonian society. Their historical experience, richer than that of the average Western consumer, and their critical stance make them at least hope to recover from the ‘children’s disease’ of excessive consumption. The Soviet experience plays an important part in the construction of this new guise of ‘out-smarting’ the West.

One could certainly argue that these sentiments exist mainly in words and not so much in actual consumption habits today. But throughout our study we have proceeded from the assumption that discourse, words used in the everyday construction of meaning, are as real as physical acts of shopping or using certain goods. We are convinced that these young people’s verbal reflections are as much a part of their identity as their actual choices between shopping malls and smoke saunas. To find out if this consumer identity or ‘lifestyle enclave’, which is today a small number of scattered individuals, has any potential to develop into a true ‘lifestyle community’ as theorized by Scott Lash (1994) and what its symbolic influence might be in society as a whole, requires extensive future research.

Notes

- 1 *Defitsit* goods were goods that were very rarely and sometimes never officially sold in shops but circulated unofficially. For the acquisition of these goods one needed acquaintances among either influential, privileged people (e.g. state officials or party functionaries) or among salespeople in shops who distributed these goods ‘under the counter’, as was the local expression.
- 2 Note that Bauman clearly differentiates between the producer and consumer phase of capitalism. The Western world of late modernity is characterized by consumer dominance. Being a consumer as one of the basic roles for a person in his identity construction and self-realization differs from the earlier phase, when the status and value of the individual was determined by his thrift and accomplishments in the field of work.

- 3 We do not intend to go into the very complex, and perhaps by today's standards somewhat outdated, debate about the postmodernization of society. Instead we use the term 'post-modern' (deliberately in quotation marks) as an aggregate descriptive label encompassing cultural features and values as described primarily by Mike Featherstone (1991) and Ronald Inglehart (1997), for example denial of fixed status codes, eclectic mixing of local and global values, hedonism and valorization of self-expression. Whenever the label is used we point out the particular shades of meaning we refer to.
- 4 'Singing Revolution' refers to the years from 1989–1991 when Estonia strove for and gained the re-establishment of its independence. Since it was a non-violent process of change with large popular rallies – held in the Song Festival Ground in Tallinn and involving tens of thousands of people singing patriotic songs – it has acquired a metaphorical name: the Singing Revolution.
- 5 For a study of 'imaginary consumption' in today's Russia, also based on student essays, see Oushakine (2000).
- 6 The other abbreviations used are M – male student, F – female student. The specialities of students are shown with the following abbreviations: Eco – economics, PR – public relations, PA – public administration, SO – sociology, Germ – German philology, Eng – English philology, Psy – psychology, JRNL – journalism, Math – mathematics, Arts – fine arts, NS – natural sciences. The years of writing the essay or conducting the interview are marked with 00 (2000), 01 (2001) and 02 (2002).
- 7 Kommunaar was a footwear company in Soviet Estonia.
- 8 Although both were Soviet-produced cars, the Volga was considerably more expensive and very difficult to acquire. The Estonian text used the word 'sapikas' for the Zaporozhets which was a humorous diminutive nickname.
- 9 Marat was (and is) a hosiery company in Estonia. The brand names in the extract are deliberately misspelt, to denote 'pirate' imported goods from, for example, China or Vietnam. This relatively cheap merchandise was more widespread in the early 1990s than now, its reputation having declined considerably due to the official 'anti-pirate' campaigns conducted by the Estonian police, as well as the general increase in consumers' purchasing power and knowledge about foreign brands.
- 10 *Kroonika* is a weekly tabloid magazine, which has the widest circulation of all Estonian magazines.
- 11 Muhumaa and Kihnu are small islands on the Estonian West coast, Põlvamaa and Võrumaa are provinces in South Estonia (close to the Latvian border and furthest away from Tallinn).
- 12 It is interesting to note that the newest political party, Res Publica, has chosen 'Elect Order!' as its slogan for the parliamentary elections to be held in March 2003.

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