

The post-revolutionary consumer generation: ‘mainstream’ youth and the paradox of choice in the Czech Republic

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Since the collapse of the communist regime in the former Czechoslovakia in 1989, there has been an increasing recognition that the experience of young people in the Czech Republic offers a useful indicator of changing social, cultural and political trends. Although drawing upon theories of risk and individualisation, social scientific research on the post-revolutionary Czech generation has tended to focus on unemployment, education, generational conflict, gender, ethnicity, demographic behaviour and changing values. Young people’s experience of consumption as a response to social transformation has not been given sufficient attention and is usually confined to the domains of media representation and marketing. Any conception of young consumers in the Czech Republic tends to dismiss them as a materialistic, hedonistic, egocentric and conformist generation. This article challenges these stereotypes arguing that an empirically informed understanding of young people’s relationship to consumption provides a means of understanding the social and cultural implications of post-socialist transitions. Drawing on a series of focus groups and semi-structured interviews with young people aged between 15 and 27, we analyse young people’s experience of consumption in the Czech Republic, as a means by which contemporary youth actively navigate their way through a life experience that appears to offer choice and yet simultaneously constrains it. The notion of the ‘mainstream’ provides a particularly useful means of understanding the conflicting nature of young people’s choices in a risk society *in extremis* whilst providing an alternative approach which challenges many of the assumptions underpinning the sociology of youth’s conception of consumption.

Keywords: consumption; identity; lifestyles; risk; youth culture

Introduction

Empirical research in post-communist countries (Roberts 1995, Roberts *et al.* 2000, Richter 2002, Ule 2005, Čeplak 2006, Roberts 2009) indicates that changing social, cultural and political trends are underpinned by processes of individualisation. This is particularly the case in the Czech Republic (Machonin 1997, Macháček 2004, Petrusek 2006, Potůček 2002). Research has thus focused on how processes of individualisation are reflected in the transformation from ‘really existing’ socialism to ‘really existing’ capitalism, and the extent to which such a transition has redefined the way in which young people grow up in the Czech Republic. According to Beck’s individualisation thesis, the structural deterioration of traditional institutions

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liberates people from conventional roles and constraints (class, gender and family relationships), but at the same time engenders new forms of dependency (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). People become the agents of their own identity making, but this is not a choice. It is an indispensable condition of social integration in late modernity. In this sense, the process of individualisation is paradoxical in its very nature. It offers freedom to choose who to be, but this choice becomes increasingly reliant on a new standardisation based on the individual's dependency upon uncertain labour and changeable consumer markets. This article will examine the changing experience of Czech youth in the context of processes of individualisation, paying particular attention to the emergence of a mainstream of consuming young people in the Czech Republic, and will consider the implications of this experience for the evolution of youth cultural studies.

Macháček's (2004) work on Czech youth provides a useful starting point in helping us understand the contemporary post-revolutionary generation. Macháček argues that in the past Czechoslovakian youth was highly dependent on reciprocally entwined systems of paternalism, state care and parental support. Communist youth lived in a society with limited choices, not only in terms of consumption, but also in most aspects of their lives, and yet were reassured by the security of a predictable future. In comparison to their parents, young people in the Czech Republic now live in a society where individual performance, as well as the diversification and individualisation of lifestyles have increasing importance (Macháček 2004). For contemporary Czech youth there is a much greater range of options to choose from, in the context of education, work or lifestyles, for example. This in turn creates a situation in which the risks associated with such choice falls upon their shoulders (Macháček 2004). New choices and freedoms are compromised by new pressures and uncertainties for young people.

Reflecting the above developments, the individualisation of young people's biographies and its sources and consequences have become key issues in contemporary youth research in the Czech Republic. Most research of this kind points towards the contradictory nature of the freedoms and constraints offered by an increasingly diversified and de-differentiated modernity as considered in the work of Beck (1992), Beck and Bauman (2001) and Beck-Gernsheim (2002). Drawing upon Beck's (1992) notions of risk and individualisation and Giddens' (1991) theory of reflexivity, social scientific research on the post-revolutionary Czech generation focuses predominantly on unemployment, education, gender, ethnicity, demographic behaviour and changing values (Sak 2000, Rabušic 2001, Sak and Saková 2003, Macháček 2004, Sak and Saková 2004, Fialová 2005, Tomášek 2006, Macek 2007, Bartošová 2006, 2009, Lukášová *et al.* 2008), whilst neglecting the cultural contexts in which young people conduct their everyday lives. Although many of the key characteristics of late modernity identified by Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) are centred on consumption and lifestyles, young people's experience with consumption as a response to social transformation has not been given sufficient attention and tends to be confined to the domains of media representation and marketing. Any conception of a 'consumer generation' leads to a deep scepticism and frustration that young people's exposure to consumer lifestyles will somehow cause their moral corruption. Current state youth policy reflects the public discourse on the characteristics of Czech youth:

...the development of young people's value orientation points to hedonism and pragmatism accompanied by the diminishing importance of global and social values. The mainstream within the young generation is adapted to society and identifies with it. Mainstream media are an important instrument of social conformity (...). The mainstream of the young generation is to a large extent manipulated by the media and accepts the opinions and positions generated by them. (State youth policy conception for the years 2007–2013 2007, p. 4)

The picture that emerges from the above discourse is of a generation of young people incapable of reflexive thinking and who are easily manipulated. In this article we suggest that this tendency to write off a whole generation of Czech young people as a materialistic, hedonistic, egocentric and conformist generation represents a grossly normative misunderstanding of young people's relationship with consumption that is devoid of empirical foundation. We argue that an empirically informed understanding of young people's relationship to consumption provides a means of understanding the social and cultural implications of post-socialist transition. Drawing on a series of focus groups and semi-structured interviews with young people aged between 15 and 27 years, we analyse young people's experience of consumption in the Czech Republic as a response to social change. The focus on 'mainstream youth' offers a particularly useful means of understanding the conflicting nature of young people's choices in a risk society, whilst also providing an alternative approach that challenges the tendency, evident in much sociology of youth, to deem consumer lifestyles as inconsequential, or to assume an unreflexive and passive engagement of young people with consumption.

Mainstream youth and the paradox of choice

Social scientific research has traditionally focused on 'melodramatic expressions of youth' rather than on ordinary, mainstream young people (Miles 2000, 2002a, p. 131, Pyšňáková 2007). Of particular concern is the tendency to frame youth consumption as a manifestation of young people's manipulation and exploitation by leisure and media industries (Côte and Allahar 1994, Furlong and Cartmel 2007). Furlong and Cartmel argue that young people's freedom and creativity gained through modes of consumption creates a false impression of their individuality and classlessness. While it is true that consumer lifestyles often highlight social inequalities and differentiations, it is also true that they serve as a means of social integration. Moreover, framing young consumers as victims of 'consumerism which blinds them to the underlying realities which conditions their social existence' (Furlong and Cartmel 2007, p. 73) points to an assumption that young people are passive and not capable of reflecting upon the circumstances they are exposed to. There are numerous studies of young consumers showing that young people are not cultural dupes but active, sophisticated, critical and ambivalent consumers of advertising, media and leisure industries (Nava 1992, O'Donohoe 1997, Miles 2000). As Nava (1992, p. 180) argues: 'They do watch the ads. But they do not necessarily buy'. Willis' (1990, p. 85) study of mainstream culture in particular shows that young people 'don't just buy passively or uncritically'. Willis offers a living picture of the symbolic and creative work at play in the everyday activities of ordinary young people, who are quite capable of assessing critically what consumer culture offers them.

If we argue that a focus on the fringes of young people's experience has served to over-utilise extreme and therefore unrepresentative manifestations of youth experience, the notion of the mainstream becomes particularly telling. The concern here is thus with young people's ordinary experience of consumption, which we argue offers a useful lens through which we can understand the post-revolutionary generation in general. In a Western European context in which the control of institutions over individual choices appears to have been eroded in favour of a social context that privileges individual choice, young people are under increasing pressure to be in control of their own lives (Evans 2002, Ule 2005). This is also the case for contemporary Czech youth living in a culture where, in stark contrast to the pre-1989 period when young people lived in a more communal social context, they have to take responsibility for their own decisions and their own future. In congruence with Furlong and Cartmel (2007), we argue that young people are increasingly personally accountable for their own futures based on their individual choices and that this accountability is constantly institutionally reinforced by the market, the media, schools and family. Yet rather than seeing young people's choices as illusory we perceive them as paradoxical. In order to understand young people's relationship to social change and the paradox of choice in what appears to be an increasingly individualised society, it is necessary to pay as much attention to young people's cultural experiences as to wider structural factors (Miles 2000, 2002b, 2003). Based on our research, we argue that consumption plays an important role in helping young people to deal with the post-socialist shift towards individualisation. We propose a sociological perspective on young people's consumption not only as an arena of self-expression that was previously unavailable to them, but also as a means by which contemporary post-socialist youth actively navigate their way through a life experience that appears to offer choice and yet simultaneously constrains that choice.

Data

Our study draws on a series of focus groups and small group semi-structured interviews with a total of 61 young people (35 women and 26 men).¹ The participants were selected through a recruiting questionnaire which mapped their socio-economic background, disposable income (pocket money, earnings), age, gender and attitudes towards consumption. The majority of the participants were middle class, metropolitan young people who were living, studying or working in the city. The research focused on the role of consumer lifestyles in the context of social and cultural exclusion and inclusion. Special attention was paid to the meanings young people attached to brands as a means of ensuring their own inclusion, following Bourdieu's (1990, p. 132) contention that: 'nothing classifies somebody more than the way he or she classifies'. Three key points emerged from the data collection. First, consumption clearly plays a significant role in these young people's lives; not in the sense that consumption is their most important daily activity, but that it is a ubiquitous element of their everyday lives and plays a particularly significant role in how they relate to their peers. Second, consumption was understood as a means rather than as a source for facilitating who it is they are. In other words, these young people neither fulfilled the role of the passive victim of the consumer society nor did they rebel against consumerism. Rather, they actively used consumption as a means of establishing, maintaining and negotiating their place in the social world. Third,

their perception of the mainstream was ambivalent. On one hand, they considered themselves to stick out from the monolithic mass, which they described in terms of 'herd-like' or 'sheep-like' behaviour, and on the other hand, they did not consider themselves to be rebels or radicals. In general, they considered themselves to be normal, yet not in any way 'average'. In order to discuss the above data in more depth we shall now focus on the tensions between the normative demands of individualisation and the ways in which mainstream youth endeavours to maintain a sense of its own autonomy whilst dealing with the new constraints rising from the obligation of individually made choices and decisions.

Freedom to choose

Processes of individualisation affect how people feel and think about themselves, their situation and the conditions in which they live. As a result, individualised circumstances involve people thinking about and reflecting upon their personal biographies in order to build chosen futures and to fulfil their plans (Giddens 1991, Beck 1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). In arguing that the study of young people's consumption is relevant to broader issues of social change in the Czech Republic after 1989, and that notions of conformity in discussions around mainstream youth do not account sufficiently for young people's reflexivity, we wish to introduce an alternative take on this issue. We will do so through a discussion of conformist non-conformity, youth consumption and processes of individualisation.

Contrary to the official view of the State youth policy conception for the years 2007–2013 (2007) cited above, many of the young people we interviewed were critical about the influence of the media and about the impact of marketing strategies. The predominant attitude amongst the respondents was 'I know what is going on'. Those who did not know were labelled as 'conformists':

Šárka, 17 years: Well, (some young people) need to feel they are cool and in. This is a general expression, but I would suggest that it means they need to fit in and they accept only what has been given them on a silver platter right under their very nose. And so they go to Palace Cinemas. And basically they just excessively consume what they consider to be attractive and trendy.

Interviewer: Who are those who serve all these ideas on a silver platter?

Šárka, 17 years: Media. MTV for example, and consequently everybody wants to be a hip hopper.

According to Šárka, in order to be popular, many young people are seduced by images used by advertisers to construct imaginary and heavily idealised worlds or 'lifestyles', which they subsequently crave. The most critical perspectives on conformity were articulated in terms of 'herd-like' or 'sheep-like' behaviour, an expression describing a mass of ignorant and mindless followers:

Jan, 18 years: What came to my mind is foolishness and ignorance. Because a certain group of people sets some trends and indoctrinates and infects with their ideas the rest of society. And this part of society takes it. Because they fear that they won't be in. And they wanna fit in.

Interestingly, both Šárka and Jan were active consumers, but in their view, conformists are those young consumers who do not act or think on the basis of their own desires, but rather, according to ideas that have effectively been forced upon them. During discussions we noticed that, despite the fact that many of the focus groups participants would seem to be more or less aware and critical of cultural and structural influences, they were mostly dressed in brands and designer clothes. However, much like Šárka and Jan, they also refused to be conformist. In order to better understand this contradiction, we started to pay attention to the senses in which the young people we interviewed considered themselves to be non-conformist:

Adam, 17 years: I think everybody is affected. We are influenced by brands. We are brand-conscious [laugh]. Sometimes we don't want to be, but the brands are everywhere – on TV, in commercials, everywhere.

Magda, 16 years: But you can choose between brands and it is not just clothes. It can be food, cell-phones or electronics.

Ivana, 16 years: Yeah, when I go shopping, it doesn't mean I must necessarily buy something. It depends whether I like something or not. If there is something I like, I check the price. If it suits me, and I look good in it, I might buy it. If not, I choose something else or I leave a shop and don't buy anything, especially if it is too expensive.

The important point here is that it is not only consumption that has become a ubiquitous part of young people's daily lives, but also the ubiquity of choice has become normalised. Moreover, the nature and extent of this choice represents a key means by which young people relate to the social transformations implied by a post-revolutionary Czech Republic.

Choice as a norm

Young people in our research project did not equate their non-conformity to rebelliousness against or antagonism towards consumerism, but instead related it to notions of *individual choice*. Consequently, they associated conformity not so much with a lack of rebelliousness but with an absence of individuality. This attitude was extremely strong in discussions both on the image of a brand and on the notion of a fashion conformist, which invoked many negative connotations. Fellow consumers were portrayed as being manipulated, lacking personality or being followers, and as uncreative, superficial and shallow people:

Karolína, 25 years: A brand-devotee is a person without fantasy and individuality. He consumes whatever is set out for him. He consumes prefabricated stuff. He does not need any fantasy or inventiveness. Therefore he cannot be himself without these brands. Brands are the means by which he builds his identity.

In general, young people participating in the project were well aware of the pressures on them to conform and their perspective on the role of consumption in their lives was undoubtedly a sophisticated one:

Zdena, 27 years: I think that people (brand devotees) are sufficient evidence in themselves of materialistic values in contemporary Western society. So the emphasis is

for example on individualism, performance, fame, power and prestige. And there is increasing pressure on being yourself. Sometimes I think that these kinds of people are not very self-confident. And some of them use brands as a sort of compensation.

Despite her critique, Zdena was also an active consumer and someone who appeared actively to use elements of a consumer lifestyle to reinforce aspects of her identity. Many of the young people we interviewed seemed to suggest that despite the fact that consumerist values in general are devoid of deeper meaning, this does not mean that the strategies they deployed in their own consumer activities were necessarily superficial. The following quotations reinforce this logic:

Pavla, 24 years: Brands don't bother me. I am interested in brands only if I want something really original and unique. I don't know, for example better cut, something I can't buy in regular shops, something I know nobody will have, something that has creative, original design. And if I discover something that is not ordinary I am ready to pay a fortune for it.

Magda, 16 years: My friend buys clothes only in the second-hand shops. It is a matter of her principles. She is talented, creative and colourful. She invented her own style this way. You can't see any logos on her clothes, but she is a trendsetter anyway. For example, recently she came up with idea of wearing beads in her hair. The fact is that she can't afford to buy expensive brands, but she makes no effort to do so anyway. Her look is so different.

Interviewer: What is important in her life?

Magda, 16 years: Freedom. Freedom is extremely important to her. And not being on the leash. And school, I mean education, so she can make something of her life.

This onus on 'freedom' offers a key insight into what it means to be a young person at this point in the Czech Republic's history. At first glance, Karolína's, Magda's and Zdena's comments seem to criticise values in a consumer society, yet careful reading indicates otherwise. All of these extracts demonstrate not only an awareness of norms and dominant values in contemporary society, centred on individual freedoms and rights, but also their acceptance through having and making individual decisions and choices. Therefore, to understand Magda's sympathies towards her creative and individualistic friend, why Pavla's choices are so demanding, and why Zdena's and Karolína's criticism of brand-devotees implies an acceptance rather than a rejection of dominant values, the above examples must be seen as demonstrations of a negotiation between structural conditions and the individual (Giddens 1984). In order to explain this argument it is necessary to embed the research participant's view on consumption in the broader context of late, high modernity (Giddens 1991, Beck 1992, Beck *et al.* 1994, Bauman 2001).

Bauman (2001) suggests that consumer choice represents the basis of a new concept of freedom in contemporary society, and that freedom of the individual is constituted in the individual's role as a consumer. In comparison to the former Czechoslovakia, contemporary young people in the Czech Republic experience far more choice than any previous generation. One could argue that it is simply a quantitative change, but sometimes quantitative changes can also mean a transformation of values, norms and beliefs. Many of the young people we interviewed equated freedom with the possibility of making an individual choice. The possibilities of personal freedom were

fundamental to their belief in their own non-conformity, despite the fact that they were active consumers. Their personal investment in notions of freedom is expressed through their active critique of the very behaviour in which they themselves were engaged:

Interviewer: What would you do if you could not buy your favourite brands? Would it change your lifestyle?

Marcela, 26 years: Not much. I wouldn't care. I could find other brands.

Karel, 26 years: If my favourite brand disappeared from the market, it wouldn't make a big deal to my lifestyle. There are still many options from which I can choose. If one or two brands disappear I'll find another one.

David, 26 years: Yeah, there are loads of brands. If one brand was not available on the market anymore, I wouldn't go crazy. No panic. You can always find a substitute.

These characteristically individualistic consumer experiences reflect the core individualistic values of contemporary Czech society. In this sense we concur with Beck (1992), who points out that freedom gained through individual choices becomes highly dependent on the individualised market, and is thus highly standardised. As such, the market is a key arbiter of the post-revolutionary youth experience of freedom. Despite the young people in our project perceiving their consumption patterns as an expression of choice and hence of non-conformity, on the contrary, these patterns were a demonstration of an acceptance of dominant values and norms. Our argument is that what appears to be non-conformity is actually conformism:

Interviewer: Imagine you would lose all your clothes and could not buy anything else for three weeks. You would have only one pair of plain jeans and a white t-shirt. No more options, no more choices. Would this situation change your lifestyle?

Jana, 26 years: I don't know, I think I'd lock myself in my house, and wouldn't go out at all. Goodbye. I know, it might sound superficial, but I'd be off-colour. I can't imagine this situation. What an absolutely horrible idea.

David, 26 years: It would restrict me. I wouldn't go to clubs and to a city centre so often. But I can't be without people, so I'd buy something else as soon as I could.

Interviewer: But you could buy nothing but another pair of plain jeans and a white t-shirt. No other option.

David, 26 years: Well, if everybody wore the same I wouldn't care.

Interviewer: Everybody else would have many choices. But not you.

David, 26 years: Then I'd stay at home. But anyway this is such an improbable situation, so I can't really imagine it, and I don't know what I would do.

This extract demonstrates that the contemporary young generation is certainly encouraged to think about self-chosen consumer identities as an important aspect of their personal projects. It seems that consumption plays a key role in young people's

lives not because they can 'buy' ideal prefabricated identities, but because they feel they are able to construct their own identities as active consumers. As Giddens (1984, 1991), Beck (1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) and Bauman (2001) point out, identity has become increasingly reflexive and is now actively constructed through privatised patterns of consumption. Freedom exercised through individually made choices is taken for granted by many of our interviewees, who see it as a natural part of their daily experience to such an extent that some of them cannot even imagine living in a world without choice. This emphasis on individuality and individualism through consumer choices therefore points to a high degree of individualisation in contemporary society in general; as each individual's life becomes a unique narrative, it is to be expected that people will become more in tune with their own sense of individuality (Roberts 2009). The point is that when individualisation is high, choice becomes an obligation, a means of social integration and a demonstration of acceptance of dominant values in contemporary society. Today, for young people in the post-revolutionary Czech Republic, choice is not an option but a norm.

Identity as a matter of choice

Young people in the Czech Republic live under circumstances which offer them significant options in domains of life where there used to be no options: what to buy, what kind of education to get, what kind of job to have, whether to marry or have children, all these issues become a matter of a personal choice. Indeed, not only can people now choose, but also they are encouraged to do so. Young people are encouraged to be, or at least to believe they can be who they want to be. We can debate how far that choice is genuine but it is nonetheless certain that this represents a dramatic shift in the experience of contemporary young people in the Czech Republic. With something as fundamental as identity becoming a matter of choice and of belief in choice, any notion that the arena of consumption is trivial must be rejected insofar as this arena of choice appears to have emerged as a key source of identity for the young people we interviewed in the context of their everyday lives. Our research shows that young people equate freedom with choice, and we suggest this is one of the reasons why consumption plays such an important role in young people's lives. For many young people the practice of playing with the meaning of images is not a superficial practice but one that lies at the heart of self-determination and autonomy:

Pavel, 15 years: I have two groups of friends, the hoppers and the scouts. The scouts wear shabby clothes: the hip hoppers are the total opposite, handsome, big sized jeans, everything clean. So, when I go out with the hip hoppers, I'll mix a shabby no-name t-shirt and camouflage trousers, and they joke about it. But I don't care and I take it easy. If I go out with the scouts I'm dressed up as a hopper. Clean, flexa cap, stylish. I do it on purpose, twice a month. It is a kind of sabotage, but it is just for fun.

Pavel clearly shares at least some values with his scout and hip-hop friends. However, what is hidden behind Pavel's 'playful sabotage' is the statement: 'I have some beliefs, I like this kind of music, I hang together with this kind of people. I am a scout, I might be a hip-hopper, but above all of this I am Pavel'. From this perspective, Pavel did not perceive his playing with image as a shallow form of sub-cultural

stylisation. A key issue here is that Pavel refuses any notion of sub-cultural membership, yet he perceives his use of style as non-superficial in nature. For him it constitutes a statement of who he is. As Sweetman (2004) argues, such an example provides more support for Giddens' (1991) interpretation of the reflexive project of the self as an attempt to provide stability and coherence to the individual's chosen narrative, as opposed to a notion of inconsistent sub-cultural playfulness. Hence in reflexive modernity, the condition in which post-revolutionary youth apparently find themselves, identity is perceived as increasingly ambiguous. But most importantly, it must be achieved and worked at by the individual:

Interviewer: Would you consider yourself to be the brand-devotees?

Lenka, 21 years: Definitely yes! I love brands. But I don't buy any special hip hop brands. I prefer more commercial ones, such as Nike and Adidas, but I always mix them in a way that makes me look like a street dancer. So I buy t-shirts and trousers in XXL size. I am definitely not into brands that are popular in hip-hop culture (. . .) I like a kind of extravagant look, but I hate to be one of the crowd. I mean, I hate to look like every second girl.

This discussion raises some important issues. First of all, what is at stake is an individual attitude and the need for autonomy. None of our interviewees could be said to be fully emancipated from consumption; rather, to different degrees their identities are mediated through their consumer choices. At the same time, these young people by no means behave like unreflexive consumers; their demand for authenticity (in this case given to products through experimentation with a look) was one of the primary criteria underlying their taste preferences, whilst also helping them to judge their contemporaries. Such complexity of meaning presents a genuine challenge for the marketing and leisure industries. Therefore, we suggest that despite incorporation into the mainstream, young people in post-revolutionary Czech society are relatively reflexive in how they experience the paradoxes of a consumer lifestyle. What are the consequences? An individual learns to become fully responsible for his or her choices. Some of these choices are inconsequential; others are extremely consequential, but most importantly, they are perceived as a personal success or a personal failure. From this perspective it can be said that many young people experience the implications of processes of individualisation through their consumer choices. As such, any choice of group membership or personal identity becomes fraught with risk, entailing open and therefore uncertain consequences. Several times our respondents mentioned that consumption, and brands in particular, offered them a degree of compensation that counter-balances some of the less desirable elements of young people's life experience in the Czech Republic:

Anna, 17 years: It also depends on how old you are. As far as I know, most of my friends studying at high school don't earn their own money. They get it from their parents and spend it on clothes. It is not down to them that they can afford expensive clothes. They include fit in everywhere without any effort. And everybody takes them as 'Lords' (. . .) It's all about money.

While consumption serves as a prime focus for young people's everyday realities, being who they want to be is not so simple. As Roberts (2009) suggests, living in an

individualised society does not mean that socio-economic origins have become irrelevant. Anna's comment supports this argument by demonstrating that having a family with financial and social resources makes a significant difference, at least as long as young people are economically dependent on their parents. More generally, young Czech consumers experience a world of contradiction: one in which consumption plays a key role because it liberates them as individuals, but on the other hand, in which their experience as consumers reflects the broad reality that in order to be an individual one is dependent on external institutions. Nevertheless, young Czech people are by no means passive. They grow up in a society which encourages them to be who they want to be, and in this context there is considerable pressure upon the individual to make the appropriate choices and to adopt the right strategies to that end through, for example, the calculating use of brands to demonstrate adherence to a particular lifestyle. Indeed, a young person lacking economic capital may compensate for such a disadvantage through a surfeit of cultural capital:

Věra, 21 years: Some young people use brands in order to present themselves in a particular way. In a way they want. Or in a way they hope will impress others. I mean, it's like... when you meet somebody in a Lacoste t-shirt, you would think he is rich rather than poor. I have a friend; he is a professional second-hand shop hunter. He exclusively looks for Lacoste clothes, so the girls would think that he's rich and that he's got a car. He figured out that it looks more convincing that he lives this particular lifestyle when he is wearing Lacoste. He uses the Lacoste look because he wants to fit into that upper class. It's a calculation on his part.

Such an approach reflects Giddens' (1991, p. 28) contention that 'living in the risk society means living with a calculative attitude to the open possibilities of action, positive or negative, with which, as individuals and globally, we are confronted in a continuous way in our contemporary social existence'. It is in this sense that a young person's experience of consumption is founded upon the uncertainties of risk. Young people in the Czech Republic learn to live and deal with the consequences of a risk society. Living with a calculative attitude exposes young people to the potential hazard that their calculation will be unsuccessful; they may be perceived, for example, to be 'inauthentic'. In the case of Věra's friend, this risk is engendered by the fact that brands can serve as a visible, but not always reliable marker of one's personality. As such, unpredictability and uncertainty make young people more cautious about others and for many of them it is the broader context of a consumer lifestyle that serves as the most reliable indicator of what a person is actually like:

Jan, 18 years: I mean, if somebody wears a particular brand which is associated with a particular lifestyle, but does not live like that, it can be difficult, because people will expect something from him. And if that person fails, for example because he behaves inappropriately, he will look like a total idiot.

According to our respondents, if a person did not centre his or her life around a particular lifestyle, his or her image alone could not be accepted as authentic. The inability to maintain such meanings on the right side of authenticity would result in a situation where the individual is labelled as a 'poser', 'shampoo', 'superficial' or a 'faker'.

Common biographies

Life in contemporary consumer society is likely to represent an extremely disorientating experience for many young people in the post-revolutionary Czech Republic, particularly when these experiences are so different from those of their own parents at the same age. Today's young people have no, or very limited, personal experience of life under socialism, but they are told about what it was like. They know that living 20 years ago would have meant having little choice or control over their lives. Today, they live under circumstances offering them comparatively unlimited choice, but this does not mean that they have genuine control over their lives. At one level at least, the ability to choose might be argued to be a positive thing, but is too much choice detrimental to young people's life experience? Our contention is that the ubiquity of choice and the need to take full responsibility for their choices can be as potentially traumatic an experience for many Czech young people today as having limited choice was for their parents under socialism:

Petr 26, years: I buy brands, but I am not a typical brand-devotee. I buy brands because I know I won't make a mistake. I have no personal taste, so relying on myself would be a tragedy. I rely on brands, they guarantee me quality.

Eva, 17 years: I agree. I have a couple of brands I like, because it makes my life much easier. I don't have time for shopping every day, or money for trying all the different brands I can choose. Going to my favourite shops is safe. I know where to go when I want to buy what I need.

In this sense, many young people are attracted to consumption for its apparently positive and therapeutic effect. One explanation for this could be that in a society that Giddens (1999, p. 3) describes as 'increasingly preoccupied with the future', young people begin to appreciate the feeling of being secure. This should not imply that young Czech people simply accept the nature of the consumer society in which they are apparently complicit. However, despite the fact that most of the young people we interviewed were critical about consumption and its ideological implications, they used consumption as a means of dealing with aspects of social change. It seems that a rebellious approach to consumption would jeopardise their own sense of integration into a society that in many ways fails to make them feel that they belong. Rather, they use consumption as an arena within which they can express a degree of choice and autonomy that isn't otherwise available to them:

Lenka, 21 years: But in many respects I think I fit into the group of consumers. Well, I spend an awful lot of money on clothes, brands and cosmetics. But you know, it is a matter of the heart. Actually I haven't realised how much I am dependent on shopping until this year. Shopping comforts me. It's my relaxation, my addiction, and I like it, and Nika likes it as well.

In contemporary Czech society, consumption is increasingly an arena within which emotions and rationality are combined. As Lenka also pointed out, however, short-lived the experience of pleasure in a consumer society might be, for young people in that moment such a pleasure is not illusory; it feels real and, as such, it is real. The general feeling among our respondents was that, though they want to be independent individuals, by no means do they prefer living in isolation; on the

contrary, friendships play a key role in their lives, and in this context, consumption serves as an arena of shared experiences and feelings:

Eva, 17 years: I think friends are really important. They influence us in everything, not only in brand choice, but on the other hand it is still possible to have one's own individual style. I have a very good friend and we really understand each other, despite having totally different taste and style. When we go out I take my jumper, jeans and trainers and she goes in her high-heeled shoes and mini-skirt, but we get along with each other perfectly. Sometimes we argue about our styles, but it's a part of our friendship. We actually respect each other's style. Yeah, we truly get along with each other perfectly, even through brands and clothes.

However much young people feel the need to differentiate themselves, they are united through the common biographies made available to them through consumption, and in this sense they are emotionally connected to others through consumption. This connection provides an invaluable means by which young people in post-revolutionary Czech society can negotiate a period of rapid social change.

Conclusion

Consumption provides an important means by which young people face the challenges inherent in the emergence of an increasingly individualised culture. The circumstances under which Czech young people live have in recent years become increasingly tenuous and the uncertainties of that existence are played out through young people's consumer experiences. Social scientific research on the post-revolutionary Czech generation has tended to focus on unemployment, education, generational conflict, gender, ethnicity, demographic behaviour and changing values. But the limited scope of such themes is inherently problematic. First, although such studies acknowledge the need on the part of young people to have equal access to opportunities and freedom of choice, and to develop strategies to enable young people to reconstruct their biographies in the light of changing life experiences, they are mostly interested in a structural conception of what it means to be a young person and hence incorporate groups of young people with particular sets of experiences. Concepts such as 'delayed motherhood' (Bartošová 2009), 'singles' (Tomášek 2006, Bartošová 2007), 'emerging adults' (Macek 2007) and 'urban tribes' (Bennett 1999, Tomášek 2007) are used by Czech researchers in order to capture the implications of changing structural patterns in young people's lives. However, these concepts focus on too small, too specific and too marginal groups of young people to be valid for coming to any kind of conclusion about the impact of post-revolutionary life on Czech young people. The aim here has therefore been to demonstrate the need to prioritise efforts to understand the experiences of mainstream post-revolutionary youth in the above context. In a world in which young people's structural experiences are changing (Reimer 1995), consumption seems to provide them with a space where they can, at least to a point, successfully deal with the normative demands of individualisation whilst maintaining a sense of their own autonomy. We suggest that the concept of the 'consumer' should be propelled up the youth research agenda in the Czech Republic. More broadly, in a context in which young people's experience of consumption appears to have had limited impact upon the recent trajectory of youth studies as a sub-discipline, we argue that the notion of 'mainstream' youth is particularly useful. By focusing on 'ordinary',

'normal' young people and their relationship with consumption, we hope to have demonstrated that although contemporary Czech youth appears to accept the dominant values and norms of post-revolutionary Czech society, influenced by the processes of individualisation, mainstream youth is by no means passive. Despite the fact that contemporary Czech young people seem to conform to cultural norms, it is in the context of their consumer practices that they actively negotiate and deal with the circumstances and conditions to which they are exposed. As such, an examination of mainstream youth's relationship with consumption in the Czech Republic aims a spotlight according to which the complexities of the everyday experience of rapid social change in Europe and beyond can be better understood.

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1. All names have been changed.

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