

Book Review

Tibor Valuch. 2022. *Everyday Life Under Communism and After: Lifestyle and Consumption in Hungary, 1945–2000*, Budapest: Central European University Press. 508 pp., 17 tables, 68 figures, ISBN: 978-963-386-376-3 (Hardcover), € 88.00

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Tibor Valuch's publications have been key sources for many of us studying everyday life in Hungary, especially under state socialism. With CEU Press issuing an English translation of the 2013 Hungarian original, this rich collection of a variety of data and accompanying social analysis is now available for a wider, international audience that it clearly deserves.

Everyday Life Under Communism is best described as a historical survey of three key areas of individual consumption—food, homes, and clothing—spanning seven decades, rather than the shorter period suggested by the subtitle. It is important for Valuch to include several years preceding the end of World War II and to approach the present, in some cases up to 2009, to give a fuller answer to his key question concerning the relationship between radical social transformations—the transition to state socialism in the late 1940s and the advent of capitalism in the late 1980s—and consumption. That said, the most space is dedicated to state socialism, and particularly to the 1950s.

This relationship appears to be two-directional, as

certain political systems and events affected quality of life differently: at times, political conditions enforced limitations that led to noticeable alterations in both lifestyle and the manner in which daily life could be conducted or arranged. In essence, however, social habits, tradition, expectations, value systems, and individual creativity determined how innovations were accepted or developed and the trends that defined Hungarians' quality of life. (4)

Indeed, the author provides many examples of these from-below limitations on ideological dictates or macroeconomic shifts from above, such as making do with lesser materials, skirting dress norms, the emergence of many subcultures that were expressed in clothing and home décor, or just the sheer perseverance of culinary and architectural traditions.

The book builds on a great variety of sources: archival research, conducted in municipal as well as institutional (party, state, trade unions, enterprises) archives;

estate inventories; popular magazines; statistics; secondary data sources; and photographic evidence. I applaud the author especially for his consistent inclusion of the countryside, in contrast to much of the consumption scholarship's urban bias.

While it can be taxing for the reader to wade through the wealth of quantitative data and the qualitative details concerning the minutia of fashion items, home-building materials, or meal ingredients, fans of material culture will find much of the book fascinating and will be assisted by the index. However, most readers will probably wish for a clearer organization of the material and more thematic and chronological guideposts. Valuch admits that the structuring of the book presented a challenge, and indeed there are repetitions and overlaps, especially between the first chapter on the macroeconomic history of Hungary and the subsequent consumption-themed chapters. If the author had been able to deliver on the academic promise of the book, one might overlook such problems, however without an explicit theoretical contribution, the issues of organizing the empirical material are likely to be seen as the cause of the conceptual shortcomings. Let me turn to these.

First, Valuch takes issue with the characterization of late state socialism as consumerist (92), but provides neither a definition of consumerism that he rejects, nor a sustained argument against this view. Perhaps a recognition and a more detailed explication of the unique regime of consumption that central planners tried to establish and the from-below tweekings by consumers would have helped the author to define a different modality of consumerism or at least of consumption. Instead, having to read between the lines, it appears that he rejects the term consumerism because of the well-known shortcomings of central planning: chronic shortages, the restrictions on personal consumption for ideological and economic reasons, and the low quality of goods.

Second, while Valuch explicitly argues that his analysis is not economic in nature, in many places the analysis adopts economists' views of certain areas of consumption, for example when he derides the low efficiency of household food provisioning, or the heavy subsidization of food, ignoring social considerations and only briefly mentioning the micro-rationalities involved. Indeed, his very definition of consumption betrays a narrow economic view that underlies much of the book. Reducing consumption to individual or household consumption ignores vast areas of provision, that might be categorized as collective consumption—that is, the fulfillment of needs through collective distribution, either because the goods in question cannot be consumed individually, as is the case with roads, the electric grid, schools, or hospitals, or because the central distribution and subsidization of certain goods follows certain social or political principles, for example to attenuate social inequalities. This latter consideration

was especially relevant in centrally planned economies, where a lot of goods that are individually consumed in market economies were transformed into collective consumer goods, such as vacation, culture, or housing, to the extent that they were provided by the state, the party, the trade unions, or state enterprises. For this reason, analyses in the book that compare the price of goods to individual income or that juxtapose this ratio to Western Europe's are misleading, as consumers in the latter had to pay out of pocket for many of the goods and services provided by the state under socialism. It is not just that the significance of collective consumption is ignored, but that when some aspects are mentioned they are only presented in a negative light or as a distortion of a putative objective economic reality. The former is the case with housing as well as workplace and school cafeterias, which are evaluated as substandard or as unequal, without acknowledging their contribution to providing a secure livelihood for the vast majority of the population. The following quote is an example of the latter:

Income ratios were distorted by the fact that a wide range of benefits and allowances could be accessed irrespective of output, meaning that anyone employed by the state could or did receive extra forms of income other than their wages. Income conditions during this period were further influenced by the system used to determine prices; the asking price for products and services sometimes significantly deviated from their actual value and cost, thereby placing low-income customers in a more favorable position. (54)

Instead of treating these phenomena as devious manipulation, irrational planning, or yet further evidence of state socialism's poor record in comparison with Western capitalism, they should be evaluated in the *sui generis* context of the effort to build an alternative to capitalism. These criticisms notwithstanding, the rich research foundations of *Everyday Life Under Communism* will make it a key source for scholars of consumption in Eastern Europe.