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Consuming Socialism: Domesticated Socialist Shops in the Slovak Village

Zuzana Búriková

When commenting on shopping in super- and hypermarkets on web pages concerned with consumption¹, urban Slovak shoppers frequently use comparisons between socialism and the present economic system. Like shoppers in rural Estonia (Rausing 1998, 2002), the users of these pages conceptualize present-day “Western-like” retail practices as “normal,” opposing them to those remembered from socialism. This concept of normality usually operates as an aspiration, since the commentators mostly express frustration with the commerce that should be, but still is not, normal. For instance, one comment was that a supermarket “Kaufland stinks like a socialist shop”; the author advises us to use the chain *Carefour* instead since it is “more normal.” Frequently impolite or unwilling behavior of shop assistants also is

¹ All quotations below come from online comments on www.sme.sk, or www.konzum.sk/forum.phtml. www.sme.sk is the online version of the Slovak daily SME, which is also publishing supplement “*Bargain Advice*” (*Výhodný nákup*) on weekly basis; www.konzum.sk focuses on information and advice in shopping, advertising bargains and sales in several chains of super and hypermarkets. In its forum, the users comment, advice and complain over shopping in various outlets. As internet is not highly widespread in Slovakia, users of these pages are predominantly urbanites or people employed in and/or shopping in bigger cities.

commented on as “socialist-like.” Many discussants are annoyed by the continuation of practices perceived as socialist: they mention a particular branch of hypermarket selling spoiled groceries or food with inaccurate expiration dates, another store charging customers full prices instead of those advertised or labeled as bargains, or other practices deceiving customers. Appeals for consumers’ responsibility and their active and critical approach also appear, such as one warning that, if people do not start to complain and act publicly, “everything will be like during communists.”

This conceptualization is not reserved for Slovak online fora, but is rather general, and also can be found in ethnographies of other postsocialist countries. For instance, Czech journalists commenting on economic transformation see capitalism and the free market as *natural* and *normal* in comparison to a centrally organized, *abnormal* socialist economy (Holy 1996). Similarly, looking at postsocialist fashioning, furnishing, and renovation of bathrooms and kitchens, Krisztina Fehérvári (2002) has found that Western ways of living set standards for what is considered *normal* in Hungarian middle-class households, in opposition to the *abnormality* of the socialist period.

However, this was not the case at my field site, a village in Northern Slovakia. Unlike the users of online fora, my informants did not perceive current imperfections in commerce or material culture as residues of socialism they should fight against. Insufficient supply of certain stock, inconsistent opening hours, or messy displays in village shops were not seen as the legacies of socialist practices, nor as something wrong or amoral. Instead, they were generally perceived as something typical and normal for village shops. When comparing present-day and socialist-era shops, people instead talked about their continued incapacity to buy, mentioning reasons for this incapacity after socialism that were the reverse of those during socialism. Whereas during socialism they had money, but there were not many desirable things in shops, now they feel there is much to be bought, but they cannot afford it. Similarly, my informants never mentioned shops, scarcity, or poor quality of goods when criticizing socialism itself, but rather talked about the traumatic collectivization of land (describing it as theft) and persecution of faith, especially of priests. In fact, many of my informants – especially my older informants – expressed a strong nostalgia for socialism when talking about consumption, seeing socialism as the time of relative plenty, social security, and equality.

In this paper, I will try to explain why my informants perceived socialist shops rather positively, unlike discussants on the Slovak on-line fora. I will argue that the reason for the positive way of remembering socialist commerce was the particular

experience of postsocialism, the successful implementation of the socialist modernization project concerning in consumption, and the specific character of socialist village shops, which mixed abstract features of commerce owned by the state with personalized relationships in a small community.

This paper draws on broader ethnographic research concerning household consumption in the northern Slovak Roman Catholic village referred to as Pekárka². The ethnography combined participant observation of retail shopping and homes, and interviews with both retailers and customers. Data on history come from the local monograph (Mlynarcík 1997), the village chronicle (*Kronika*), and collected oral history. Fieldwork took half a year in 2002. My particular choice of an ethnographic site does not highlight the most typical features of the Slovak countryside, but rather represents an atypical case, which can exemplify some more specific aspects of social life.

Pekárka

Pekárka has about 1,500 inhabitants, many of whom are unemployed³ or working as migrant laborers, mostly in the Czech Republic and German-speaking countries. From the late 1960s, the whole region has known the village by the name of “The Holy Land,” since a number of priests and nuns come from there, and for the zealotness of its inhabitants.

In comparison with other places in rural Slovakia, Pekárka has been characterized by an extremely late collectivization of land, which took place in 1978. Facing the break-up of the former state enterprises in the region (especially of the large television factory) and consequent unemployment, inhabitants of the village eagerly returned to farming in the early 1990s. Agricultural production is still a significant part of a household’s subsistence, although it is always combined with income from other occupations, especially commuting work within the region and migrant labor. An increase of unemployment in the last ten years also has resulted in the proliferation of small trade. Small enterprises do not require big starting capital: retailers usually do not need to rent space, and used their own accommodation or inherited small wooden houses instead. Also, female retailers do not have to commute, which

² The name of the village and of all informants have been changed to secure informants’ anonymity.

³ In Pekárka, the unemployment rate was approximately 39% during the time of my fieldwork. However, the official data do not completely correspond with the actual situation, since many officially unemployed people worked illegally either in Slovakia or abroad.

helps them to combine their job with other domestic responsibilities. In fact, the opening of a small shop has become one of the very few possibilities for self-employment in the village: there were 12 shops in Pekárka during my fieldwork. The outlets were small and the atmosphere informal—people connect shopping with chatting. Shoppers and retailers usually know each other, and frequently are tied by various kinship, friendly, or exchange relationships, which make the village shops very different from the rather anonymous and abstract urban super- and hypermarkets.

Socialist shops and the story of progress

In general, the private market and trading activities were illegal in many socialist countries, and state ideologies considered them immoral (Mandel and Humphrey 2002). The immorality of private trade consisted of a parasitic enriching of an individual at the expense of the producing collective. Anthropologists focusing on trade and consumption note that this official image was almost universally shared by ordinary people (Mandel and Humphrey 2002:1, Pine 1993, Stewart 1993). In various transformed forms, this attitude frequently continued after the fall of socialism (Holy 1992, Holy 1996, Humphrey 1995, Kaneff 2002).

Though private market activities were perceived as immoral, marketing, trading, and employment within the state shops was depicted positively. Within the project of the modernization of the countryside, the socialist state focused on mass consumption, particularly the establishment of shops, and the increase in the amount and choice of commercial goods. Success in this realm was presented as the success of socialism and ways to combat capitalism, backwardness, and poverty.

After 1948, village shops were collectivized and replaced by one general shop. Following the collectivization in 1978, another general shop was built in the upper part of the village. A bigger shopping center was built and formally opened in the center of the village in 1979. There was a grocery, butcher, chemist, clothing and shoe shop there, together with a pub, cultural hall, and a collective canteen. When the center opened, the general shop in the upper part was transformed into the stationery and toy shop. All these shops facilitated the life of villagers, who now had access to a wider range of goods and did not need to commute to the central village or the close city for shopping, and so practiced the ideals of socialist progress.

Even the construction of the shop's building was related to the project and rhetoric of modernization, as villagers themselves built the shopping center during the

so-called *Akcia Z*⁴. *Akcia Z* was a widespread event officially planned by the Communist party and paid for by the state, particularly city or cooperative farms, but organized on local levels. It was formally an activity of volunteers, although the participation of locals was rather expected. The activities done during *Akcia Z* intended to support some communal benefits: mostly roads, water supplies, shops, schools, and nurseries were built in this way. Since in Pekárka, *Akcia Z* adopted patterns usual in pre-socialist collective works (e.g., maintenance of roads and village pastures) and the whole community profited from the results, it was a rather popular and cheerful event: in several family albums, I saw pictures taken during the work or during drinking when the work was done. Also, the mayor showed me pictures in the album placed in the municipality as evidence of the village's modernization, the cooperation of the village community, and, of course, of his successful leadership.

This project relating the building of shops and the increase in consumption with the ideals of socialist progress shows the significance of consumption and material culture for the policy of the socialist state, which was also presupposing the idea of the right for a certain level of consumption (Verdery 1996:19-38). In fact, both the socialist chronicle (*Kronika*) and the postsocialist village monograph (Mlynarcík 1997: 121) are duly repeating how many of various kinds of goods were sold and bought during particular years in particular village shops,⁵ presenting changes in consumption as a gradual progress in the modernization of the Slovak countryside and, consequently, as the success of socialism. The oral history of my informants proves that this project was both rather successful and internalized. During socialism they experienced a sudden increase in consumption: for the first time they could afford commercial clothes, several pairs of shoes, and other items, such as meat or sweets. Suddenly they had radios; later, they also had washing machines and televisions. The optimistic socialist myth of progress itself played a significant role, which is revealed in interviews comparing the period of socialism and the present. For instance, once I was drinking coffee and talking about increasing prices with unemployed, 40-year-old Peter and his almost 70-year-old mother. Peter concluded our discussion: "Mum, the life is much worse now than before, but not be-

⁴ Meaning an *Event or Activity Z*, Z standing for *Zadarmo* ("for free").

⁵ Especially food products are mentioned, increase in consumption of meat and commercially baked goods, also the variability of other food products. Then, especially later, consumption of clothes, radios, televisions, and washing machines was mentioned. Also issues relating to the material culture of the home were crucial, such as the building of brick houses, bathrooms, and flushing toilets.

cause of prices. Whereas you could believe everything would be better in the end, we can not believe this anymore. And this is bad.”

Thus in Pekárka the socialist shop is not remembered as negative and humiliating, but rather as a positive and progressive institution, related to the particular village community. This strikingly opposes cities, which during socialism experienced the end of a long tradition of private trade and persecutions of middle classes involved in trading before 1948 (e.g., Vrzgulová 1997).

Alienated, but domesticated, shop

I would argue that the positive image of socialist shops also was caused by the fact that the specific character of the socialist shop omitted both the negative qualities of not-producing and profiting trade, as well as the moral inappropriateness of economic transactions within a group tied by kinship and friendly relations (Bourdieu 1977, 1998). At the same time, through the emphasis on informal economy and personal relationships, shop assistants' behavior denied the alienated character of the state shops.

The traditional morality of peasants accepted the sale of one's own production. In turn, trading things that were not produced by merchants themselves was seen as amoral (Danglová 1992b, Gudeman 1990). The economy of a paternalist, socialist state was based on the central redistribution of goods, which were owned, controlled, and, according to the ideology, also produced by the very same state (Verdery 1996:19-38). In this respect, the state played the accepted role of the producer selling its production. As Humphrey notes for the Soviet case: “The Soviet person was ideologically constituted as legitimately producing and consuming only within the state sphere. Thus consumption was in theory non-alienated” (Humphrey 1995:65). In the representations provided by state ideology, producers were also “all working people” (*pracující lidé*), meaning almost everybody. Also, this image was to a certain extent shared by the public. Especially when talking about the quality of socialist Czechoslovak factory production, my informants used expressions like, “We produced such good things, which were exported and used everywhere in the world and now factories are in such decay.” Thus, keeping the role of the producer selling his own production, the state, and consequently the state-owned shops, also followed the patterns of traditional morality related to trade.

State ownership and the central organizing of shops also solved the moral problem caused by the personal relationship between the local shop assistant and clumsiness, and the abstract character of asking for immediate monetary payments from

relatives and friends: As state-owned shops and commodities, people were not paying the shop assistants tied to them by the bonds of kinship and friendship, but were paying the impersonal state. Actually, from the viewpoint of the villagers, the past shops were historically interlinked with otherness, embodied either by the Jewish shop and innkeepers or by the socialist state. Here I am building upon George Simmel's *Stranger* (1971), who points at the significance of the traders' otherness for the existence of trade. In fact, it is exactly the objectivity and marginal situation of a stranger who is not bound by roots, kin relations, or friendship, and a special "borderland" way of participation that enables trade (Simmel 1971).

The "strangeness" and alienation of shops owned by and related to the state is also notable in Humphrey's ethnography of consumption in Moscow, where even after the fall of socialism, "people said that goods were there to buy because 'they' (the authorities) had given them out. 'What are they giving (dayut) in GUM today?' people would ask" (Humphrey 1995:47). It is a paradox that precisely during communism customers experienced the alienation described by Marx (1976) for capitalism: shops became alienated and stayed beyond the control of ordinary users because of their ownership.

Furthermore, peasants in Central and Eastern Europe have traditionally seen the state as an alienated power trying to deceive citizens and also being legitimately deceived by its citizens. Frances Pine's writing about Górale living in the neighboring region on the Slovak-Polish border is completely true for Pekárka: "villagers tend to view the state, and any other outside force which exercises power over their beings and above all their mobility and their labour with hostility and suspicion" (Pine 2002:77). There is evidence of the longer continuity of this attitude towards power (Danglová 1992a, 1992b, 1992b, Kandert 1983, 1990). In particular, Jozef Kandert (1990) notes that, as people were stealing socialist property, peasants were stealing from the nobility during the Austro-Hungarian Empire and from rich owners of large estates (*Velkostatok*) during pre-war Czechoslovakia.

Hence, the socialist state, like Jewish shopkeepers in the previous period, played the role of an alienated stranger (Simmel 1971), a trader who could ask for money from anybody and under any circumstances. Thus, the special position of a stranger made anonymous and impersonal relationships inevitable for abstract monetary transactions, and facilitated refusal of the symbolic economy (Bourdieu 1977, 1998) of the reciprocal exchanges typical for groups tied by the bonds of kinship. However, retailers' bonds with customers frequently were rather more important than the state's presupposed impersonality: a seller in a hardware shop told me that she also was selling on credit during socialism since she could not refuse this service

to people from the village (“you could not do otherwise in the village, you know”). If there was an unexpected stock-taking, she herself usually had to pay money missing from the cashier due to the credit given to her friends and neighbors, which consequently made them pay back their debts more quickly.

The state-ownership shops also had another dimension, especially from the perspective of retailers. In Pekárka, being the shop assistant was considered one of the best jobs for a woman; oral history frequently mentioned the desire for, and various strategies used to get this job. This occupation was much less physically demanding than the work in the factory or in agriculture, at the same time being slightly better paid than both former jobs. At the same time, a female working in the local collective farms was related only to the peak seasons, and women were expected to seek another occupation in winter. This work also kept in line with a more traditional understanding of the female’s role and labor in catering, services, nursing, and especially dealing with consumption matters. Significantly, women employed in retail did not have to seek employment out of the village and commute. Furthermore, being a shop assistant also offered access to a larger amount and larger choice of goods, also allowing their further distribution within the informal economy: shop assistants were first to be in contact with scarce goods coming into the shops, and had a possibility to distribute them as they wished. Thus this occupation was economically and socially very advantageous.

The dualism between private and public spheres was recognizable in socialist Czechoslovakia, with people rather effectively pursuing their private economic and social interests at the expense of their official occupations within the public sphere. As in other socialist countries, the most important economic endeavors were concentrated in activities seeking the well-being of families (Kaneff 2002, Pine 2002, Verdery 1996); in Czechoslovakia, they were also explicitly expressed and acknowledged by popular sayings, such as, “Who is not stealing from the state is stealing from his own family” (see also Holy 1992, 1996:16-33, Mozný 1999), or, “there is no blood dripping from what’s owned by the other” (Danglová 1992b: 249, Ratica: 1992: 29).

Neglecting official employment and stealing from or otherwise deceiving the state were common practices. The fact that a particular work performance was not affecting salary, and that many commodities could not be purchased in an official way, made this practice fully legitimate (Holy 1996:25-26), as did the traditionally suspicious attitude towards the state power. Thus, it was usual that shop assistants withdrew physically from the public sphere, closing shops earlier or being officially on sick leave when they needed to do important field work, repaired or built their

houses, did their own shopping, or any other work which did really matter. At the same time, the shop's cars were used to transport private building merchandise, which also could – and frequently did – come from some public resources.

As the supply and the actual choice of goods were quite unpredictable, goods frequently were distributed informally. It was usual for shop assistants to set aside scarce goods for networks of relatives and friends or as a favor for someone belonging to carefully built nets of acquaintances. The goods thus were not sold on a first-come-first-served basis and could be sold out of the official shop, but were normally paid for. The later practice was not regarded as bribery (see also Ledeneva 1998, Pine 2002:83-4), but was explained by informants as a necessary *help*. With this kind of *help* shop assistants were breaking the official anonymity, though consequently also the equality, of customers. This usage of personal relationship in gaining access to (especially scarce) goods was taken for granted as providing this reciprocal *help*. My next interview with a former hardware shop vendor describes the practice of this *help*, particularly the ways in which sellers tried to get scarce products:

“And there were things you could not get normally. Like washing powder, that used to be scarce at some point, but more stuff like bikes for children and washing machines or refrigerators. And these were things I did not get frequently in the shop. Maybe one piece in three months or something like that. There were some norms for that, for numbers of washing machines my shop should have had. This was a village shop, not a big one. So when I got a washing machine and knew about someone who was asking about it before, I set it aside for him....Also, when I knew someone who needed a bike or something else, I asked a stores manager to give me some or order it if there was nothing on hand. Many times I had to give him chocolate or 50 crowns in his pocket, though mostly a homemade jar of preserved blueberries.... I told people afterwards when I had to pay something, so they could give me money back, or they did something else for me instead.”

Here, oral history draws a line between the abstract and anonymous state, responsible for the lack of goods and insufficiencies of commerce on the one hand, and the understanding and helpful retailer united with customers in an endeavor to get scarce goods from the alienated and unreliable state not able or willing to supply sufficient stock, on the other. Also, as villages were much smaller than cities, the shop environment was much less anonymous, and almost everybody was involved

in networks unofficially redistributing stock. Consequently, neither the shop assistants nor the shops were seen as anonymous and hostile, as would be the case in cities, where the possibility that one would not be involved in particular network was much higher.

Another former seller told me that it was usual to put aside goods for shop assistants from other shops, as they could not turn up whenever a queue in front of a shop appeared (suggesting that some scarce products had arrived) *helping* their colleagues in this way. Also, this kind of help assured that they would also get access to products when they appeared in other shops before regular and non-privileged customers rushed to get them.

However, customers tried both to get as much acquaintances with shopkeepers as possible, as well as to control this informal distribution, since its growth might decrease their chances to buy something without being related to the retailers. For example, some scarce products (e.g., exotic fruits, washing powder, or better-quality sanitary napkins) were not sold in larger amounts, though there was no such official rule coming from above: shopkeepers did not sell to one family more than, let's say, two kilograms of oranges, as an unlimited sale would decrease others' chance to get scarce products, too. However, vendors could and did distribute some additional amounts informally. For instance, more family members could queue for scarce products, and a retailer could either not notice that or just not object. Similarly, some of the goods did not enter the official space of shops at all, and were set-aside for the retailer's relatives and friends. This potential for unequal and unfair distribution, and both potential and actual abuses of retailers' access to goods, reappeared in interviews with both shoppers and sellers.

My next interview points at distrust, suspicion, and conflicts over either possible or actual unfair distribution. The interviewed retailer mentioned that she had asked the mayor to distribute some scarce products instead of her, to stop possible accusation of unfairness, protectionism, or individualism:

“You know it was not always easy. For example, I got washing powder. And there were some women who had money and would have preferred to buy much more, to make stockpiles, because you could not know when there would be a good washing powder in the shop again. But I could not let them, since then there would not have been enough for everybody. So they got annoyed. And it happened sometimes, once I had very good pans, and then some women started to shout at me: “You see, you have taken some, you have bought some just for yourself! Bring them back and sell them to people” So, when I

did not have enough of some products, I just asked the mayor to come to the shop and distribute it instead of me. So he came and sold the washing powder to the women. Then none of them dared to protest. The mayor was my brother. That's why he came."

Here, the official representative of the village stays as the guarantee of an equal and fair distribution. At the same time, since he was the political authority and a Communist Party member, women could not really protest. However, his family relation to the retailer makes this endeavor for equality and anonymity only formal and even futile, pointing at the impossibility of non-personal and abstract commerce relationships within the village at that time.

By the regulation of distribution of goods, and through the usage of informal networks, retailers broke the possibly anonymous and impersonal character of the state's shops and stressed their own sociality towards community. Hence, they drew the line between the impersonal, anonymous, and alienated character of the state's "stranger's" (Simmel 1971) shops, consequently making commerce social and particular. Similarly, the retailers' neglect of their work in shops favoring private business related to family, farming, and home was very close to the highest values of the community.

Discussion

This paper suggested some connections between the constitution of shops and consumption in the socialist era and the present understanding of commerce.

There is a twofold relation to socialism in the online fora commenting on consumption. On one hand, there are hypermarkets being compared to socialist shops, being seen as alienated and amoral institutions beyond the control of individuals. By equating amoral commercial practices with socialist ones, socialism is implicitly criticized and the "normal" present is separated from the "abnormal" past. On the other hand, as socialist customers frequently cooperated in exchange for information on shopping (i.e., where and how to get scarce goods), a community of shoppers fighting the insufficiencies of the present – although they were similarly alienated – created commerce through the exchange of information, complaints, and advice about bargains and the anomalies of commerce. Consequently, shopping and the morality of commerce are not seen as the concern and activity of separated individuals, but rather of the community.

However, there is not the same image of an alienated and estranging socialist shop in Pékárka. There, the socialist shops functioned as an objectification of both

progress and the cooperating village community. Furthermore, in Pekárka, the socialist shop successfully combined both abstract and particular characteristics: the alienation and strangeness of the state owner allowing functional trade and avoiding possible moral conflicts over monetary relationships within the small community on one hand, and the social character of shop assistants' practices of redistribution of goods, keeping shops particular, and belonging to the community on the other hand. Also, the character of the community, where people were tied by a large number of various relationships, did not allow abstract relationships, and consequently made the image of the socialist shop positive. As with the online fora, commerce is very much the concern of morality. However, particular concerns have not drawn the line between shoppers and the institution of shops perceived as alienated, but rather focused more on relationships within the community in general. In particular, they focused on ways in which to integrate possibly abstract commerce relationships into the full sociality of the village.

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