

Policing a Better Life. Ambiguous Practices of Social Well-Being during the 1950s in Romania*

MARA MĂRGINEAN

BY THE second half of the 1950s, the foreign observers based in Romania documented a steady improvement in the standard of living in urban areas. Their statements corroborated the official economic data with personal evaluations of the quality, diversity and abundance of consumer goods, the appearance of shop windows and product price. While such progress was apparent throughout the socialist bloc in the years after Stalin's death, the Romanian case was somewhat different since this interval coincided with a paradoxical political strategy that blended the Soviet-inspired development of heavy industry, the gradual crystallization of national communism and an opening to the West. What were the repercussions of such a shift now, after many years in which the regime had been fully committed to the heavy industry? I hypothesize that commodities became a means to forging a new political legitimacy by delineating the symbolic value of goods and setting up hierarchies of needs and social practices.¹

In this article, I propose to examine approaches to well-being during the 1950s Romania by looking at how advertisements in the national mass-media built on the officially sanctioned understandings of social needs. In this way, the paper aims to contribute to the emerging scholarly debates on everyday practices within the socialist bloc.² It looks at how political regulations attempted to shape the private sphere, and questions to what extent the Cold War influenced the making of the socialist consumer in terms of knowledge, trust and the autonomous decision to buy various products and services. In this way, this paper looks at the relationship between revolutionary change, economic programming and the human nature, and unveils the part played by material goods in this process. My goal is to present what appears to be a surprising discourse on commodities. On the one hand, advertising not only disseminated information on new products—often luxurious or expensive given the financial resources of the general public—to stimulate the consumers' appetite within a truly Western-inspired communication strategy, but, paradoxically, revived many modernist concepts about product functionality and utility, which led to a new aesthetic

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and ideological approach to socialist urban lifestyles and needs. On the other hand, however, references to food, clothes or furniture mirrored a paternalist approach to commodities, as often the discourses of abundance were meant to point out and condemn marginal commercial behavior like the proliferation of black market networks or illegal handicraft workshops. Such ambiguity is further deepened by the complicated political context. At the time, Nikita Khrushchev's policies towards domestic liberalization reconfigured the private space as well.³

Drawing on materials published in the Romanian national and local newspapers, the paper aims to answer some crucial questions: To what extent did commodities serve the regime's aspirations towards collective values and how did this impact upon the economic aspirations of socialist modernization and growth? Who were the actors involved in articulating this mass consumption project? What does this tell us about social status in a socialist country? In order to do that, I have structured my paper in three distinctive parts. First, I will discuss the ideological value of material goods and services within the socialist system by tying the concept of new man to economic programming. Since after the completion of the First Five Year Plan the Soviet regime had to consolidate its legitimacy by appealing to the newly urbanized population, the everyday practices of the so-called "cultured" socialist inhabitants took a traditional turn. The paradoxical coexistence of revolutionary aspirations with the differentiated provision of material goods not only stressed the increasing tendencies of social stratification, but fleshed out the bones of the institutional effort of the socialist bloc's countries to construct a valid statement of well-being that would accommodate ideological constraints and practical approaches to consumption. Accordingly, the paper concludes with an overview of the discursive strategies of the Romanian press by unveiling a growing tendency of the national authorities to blend ideological constraints with Western models of communication, which produced the premises for social stratification.

A modern project?

IN THE early '30s, a new phrase made its way into the public Soviet discourse, whose authorship is attributed to Joseph Stalin himself: "The writers should become engineers of the human soul." Emblematic for the political regime's transformative aspirations, this phrase summed up excellently the role of aesthetics within the industrialized and urbanized Soviet society. In Marxist terms, if economic progress was the basis, culture was the superstructure. Thus, literature and other arts had to depict life in its true revolutionary development, but also had to educate people in the spirit of socialism and "free all mankind from the yoke of capitalist slavery."⁴ Soviet leader's belief that "souls are more important than tanks" assigned the creators an important task in the making of the "new man," who had to be active, energetic, determined, and familiarized with the latest technical findings. Accordingly, the planned economic developments would grant not only material advancement and benefits, but would also induce a new code of behavior and values that would be shared by all. In this respect, the new man would represent a superior version of the individual, who would relate to the new economic developments as a cultural experience as well.⁵ The goal of creating a new persona soon became one of the obsessions of Soviet ideologists. It also shaped numerous social and economic programs designed to speed up the absorption of the East-European states into the Soviet sphere of influence. Such strategy was fueled by the idea that socialist modernization implied tying the population's identity to the planned economic program.

However, the concept of "new man" was not an invention of the Soviet Union, but was an expression of the modern state and involved a high degree of social control. While its roots went back to the Enlightenment rationality project, it also crystallized in countries like Nazi Germany

or Fascist Italy⁶; yet, its semantic valences were profoundly altered following the Great Depression of the '30s. At the time, the main challenge of the modern states consisted of achieving economic recovery without weakening their control over the population. Such disciplinary mechanisms consisted of legislative regulations, producing knowledge about communities such as censuses, surveys, or investigations, as well as employing material goods for formative purposes in what seems to be a genuine “social engineering” program.⁷

The last aspect raises some important questions related to the ideological value of goods and needs, as well as about the part played by market mechanisms in this process. Thus, as long as rising the predictability of people's behavior could not be achieved through coercion alone, sensitizing the population about particular achievements of the national industry required alternative measures, often articulated through negotiations and adjustments, seduction and persuasion. Advertisements served exactly this purpose. A new media discourse gradually crystallized in a typical “consumer engineering” strategy that aimed to transform the masses into active consumers. In order to increase their chances of success, authorities began to be more concerned with understanding the desires and emotions of various socio-professional categories; their goal was to identify the relationship between change, economic programming and the human nature, as well as the part played by material goods in the attempt to replace old ideas with new ones. Similarly to one of the central principles of modern marketing—“The customer does not know what he needs, but we have to tell him!”—decision-makers became increasingly concerned with shaping people's choices. Yet, unlike the European states that targeted specific customer conduct and economic outcomes, the Soviets employed this strategy to endorse an official understanding of needs as cultural experience. In this way, the new man would share ideological sanctioned values, which was tantamount with the regime's concern for the soul.⁸

However, handling emotions for economic purposes through educational and formative projects questioned the limits of the modern states' authority and opened up new inquiries on how individual manifestations produced at the margins of society weakened the centers of power. Recent studies, inspired by the concept of high modernism coined by James C. Scott, have shown that theories of supply and demand can only partially forecast the prospects of growth in household consumption within a socialist system. For instance, the implementation of social analysis programs approached consumption by highlighting the products' qualities and benefits for a rational consumer. However, the acceptance or rejection of goods and services, or a particular behavior in relation to the products available on the market, is not only the result of actions of mass persuasion, but also of the selection practiced by consumers as a result of individual choices. In other words, despite efforts to create rational consumers, consumption itself is an emotional experience of pleasure, which, as Susan E. Reid and David Crowley have recently pointed out, can be neither fully predicted nor historicized.⁹

The tension between rational planning and emotional choice will be further analyzed in the remainder of this article. It becomes important to place individual options within the broader frameworks of making the new socialist persona by outlining the relationship between rationality and desire and unveiling the extent to which mass consumption could occur within a socialist state. This could further unveil the nuances of East-European modernization program in terms of Marxist Orthodoxy, particularly since Stalinist representations of the new man unveiled traditional aspirations that were quite different from the austerity specific to the “classical” socialist depiction of life.¹⁰ In this respect, one could address the making of the new persona in postwar Romania in terms of the ambiguous coexistence of official norms and unpredictable outcomes, and could further revisit the implications of consumption narratives in the making of a national identity.

A rational approach to everyday needs

DURING THE 1950s, the communist regime in Romania was little interested in mapping peoples' desires. Building on a Taylorist approach to everyday life, authorities imagined individual behavior as being rational, organized and predictable. Both at the workplace and in private life, clearly stated rules would organize practices, similarly to the functioning of a mechanism. The rhythm of daily life implied strict regulations about labor effort, free time activities, rest and recreation, or the need for material goods.¹¹ Furthermore, any deviance from the official norms of conduct would be illustrative of a so-called bourgeois immorality. The regime employed these categories to develop ample programs of social reform like housing projects, industrial development, or consumption strategies.

Although ideologically constructed, such approaches to everyday were based on thorough investigations on social practices, conducted by social scientists; yet, the making of this discourse unveiled the negotiations and adaptations of such a process. In Romania, for instance, issues related to the general well-being became more visible in the public space by the mid 1950s. After the ration card system was abandoned, the regime had to identify new ways to distribute goods to the population. To a larger extent than before, it became important to establish the amount and types of products that one person should receive in order to lead a proper socialist life. Justification, and one might say even inspiration, arose from Stalin's claim that incomes should be differentiated based on class and the type of work done. Industrial workers should earn more than other employees, while steel workers and miners would be positioned at the top of the pay scale. The provision of material goods and services should also follow this differentiation.

Accordingly, initial research was conducted on the shop floor. Interdisciplinary research teams consisting of professors from the largest universities in the country were sent to document the social implications of automatization.¹² Then, the research agenda was widened so as to shed some light on the complexity of the daily experience of industrialization. The National Directorate for Statistics, the Central Planning Committee and the Institute of Economic Research of the Romanian Academy of Sciences initiated research campaigns in various industrial locations in order to stress workers' individual needs.

As a result of these actions, in 1956 and 1958 respectively, the Council of Ministers devised two strategies about workers' material needs. Although both were based on extensive social research, there was a substantial difference between the two. In 1956, the Romanian government showed particular concern for identifying the minimal daily needs of industrial workers. Two years later, in 1958, some officials argued in favor of the replacement of the concept of "minimal needs" with that of "necessary needs." Claiming that "minimal" was nothing else but a conceptual framework of the Western social science's methodologies, the Romanian ideologues argued that the domestic approaches to everyday had to be re-conceptualized in socialist terms.¹³ In this respect, I suggest that the regime's effort to articulate the everyday context of work and labor is most visible in the means it used to construct new standards of daily life informed exactly by the changes occurred in the relationship between labor and consumption goods.

Searching for the minimal. The official representation of everyday needs

SUCH CONSIDERATIONS did not remain behind closed doors, but were shortly converted into an official rhetoric widely disseminated throughout the national media. The Romanian authorities aimed to articulate a new perspective on everyday life by tying material provisions to a complicated ideological reading of individual and collective needs. As Yurckack has recent-

ly pointed out, in the years following Stalin's death, one could easily identify steady trends towards a "hyper-normalization of the authoritative discourse." Accordingly, the discursive sequences employed for constructing public narratives about well-being became increasingly repetitive and predictable. They depicted daily life as a sum of rituals performed in the public space in a way that greatly resembled industrial automatic actions. Furthermore, this new rhetoric consisted of a binary representation of the world; not only was the socialist East depicted as highly different and superior to the capitalist West, but aspects related to the quality of life and general well-being articulated an offensive campaign of building a national prestige. In this respect, goods became central pieces in the making of a "cultured" approach to lifestyles in socialism by tying demand to visual practice.¹⁴

For instance, approaches to material goods meaningfully stressed the conversion of international tensions into domestic social programming. "From oil" became the leitmotif of the press discourse immediately after the outbreak of the oil crisis in the Middle East. Beginning with the mid-'50s, Romanian magazines were flooded with articles on how the chemical industry could improve the population's everyday life. Young and smiling faces, captured in various everyday poses, were depicted enjoying quality products like handbags, shoes, textiles or household appliances. Made from vinyl or synthetic fabrics, these new achievements of the socialist industry would stand out as valid examples of a peaceful use of technological progress. As a rule, graphic representations of mass consumption products were accompanied by meaningful slogans: "Creative labor!," "New victories!," "Food science."¹⁵ Furthermore, editors published not only advertisements about new products, but also depictions of armed conflicts, fought in far corners of the world, so that the readers would grasp the advancement of the socialist regime and the decline of the capitalist West.¹⁶

While in many respects this strategy borrowed practices previously employed by the virulent Stalinist peace campaigns of the late 1940s, the regime had seen in it an opportunity to reconfigure pragmatic goals as well. Beginning with the mid 1950s, advertisements employed anti-belligerent topics that particularly targeted the female audience. While war was generally a masculine domain, the "chemical invasion" of the domestic space would prove beneficial for the regime's plans to integrate women on the job market. Bringing women to the forefront of public rhetoric coincided with the legalization of abortion in 1957 and other changes in family legislation; it also echoed the authorities' increasing concern to regulate the private sphere by devising rules of conduct that would engender new individual and collective values. In this respect, the media message focused on certain keywords, which would reconsider feminine identities.¹⁷

Thus, the first graphic advertisements depicted women as de-individualized, while little attention was paid to the representations of motherhood. This strategy was apparent in the graphic techniques used to promote fashion products. For instance, ads for feminine clothing transmitted sensuality by simple references to body parts like legs or hands. In this way, such visual constructs were meant to emphasize not only the products' qualities, but also to communicate the fact that they were accessible to a larger audience. With some exceptions, the message was generally directed towards a wider audience, which made it very difficult for the reader to distinguish the professional or social status of the target group. Thus, as recent theories on image construction have showed, body cropping was usually used to erase any reference to identity and individuality.¹⁸

In this respect, the graphic artists intermediated the making of a new public taste by converting political projects into a culture of rational conduct, suitable for the new socialist women. Magazines like *Femeia* or *Flacăra*, traditionally designed for a feminine audience, published on a regular basis numerous ads that invited buyers to pay particular attention to functionalism and minimalism. For instance, products presented by the Romanian press met some mandatory qualities—cheap, hygienic, durable and simple. The advertisement included shoes, clothing, cos-

metics, domestic goods, as well as food products. It was a modernist endeavor, quite distinctive from the socialist realist values apparent throughout the early 1950s. Looking at products in this way was very much similar to the governmental efforts of the time to identify the everyday needs of various social categories. Surprisingly however, in spite of the authorities' goal to outline projects for various social categories, the minimalist advertisement message aimed to reconsider the boundaries between private and public by stimulating mass consumption and reducing the disparities between the social classes.¹⁹

However, I argue that such public displays of rationality had pragmatic objectives as well. In fact, the new rhetoric was constructed around one of the key ideas of the regime: socialist morality. Due to the steady proliferation of alternative illegal commercial practices, the press materials comprised numerous normative references against the so-called bourgeois lifestyles: theft, robbery, etc. Carefully selected from numerous complaints of the population, such articles were meant to convince the workers that the regime was aware of the difficulties of daily life, and furthermore that solutions for improvement were being searched. Central in this respect was the increase in the accessibility of goods, including through a comprehensive strategy of mass instruction, which could be easily regarded as a transitory measure.²⁰ This produced effects in two directions.

On the one hand, repair advice, adjustment, transformation, reconfiguration, and multifunctional became the new language in the printed media. For instance, the organization of the kitchen was discussed in terms of scientific norms. Then, old clothes could be adapted to the new fashion trends. Yet, this austere conduct that was apparent from the minimalist aspirations fitted perfectly with the so-called "repair society."²¹ Building on many minimalist ideas like simplicity, necessary, or moderation, articles published in the Romanian press had to provide readers with hands-on solutions to everyday shortages. Multitasking, transformation, adjustment became key words in the new discourse, which was perfectly blending with the ideological constructions of minimal needs.²²

On the other hand, since the level of payment of urban workers was nevertheless quite low, the authorities developed a credit system, which would help workers purchase expensive products. Such lines of credit opened in April 1957 in all industrial centers of Romania. While in other countries such a measure was initially adopted to facilitate the purchase of radios, TV sets and other domestic appliances, in Romania the first products to be sold on credit were textiles: woolen suits and jackets, mostly with complicated cuts, as well as smaller items like shirts and silk blouses. Sold in special locations, one person could not purchase the equivalent of more than one's monthly income. Publications for women and weekly magazines were flooded with references to the benefits of such buying.²³

From products to brands

THE RHETORIC of austerity had been gradually abandoned by the late 1950s. By then, the economy was showing some evidence of improvement and the increase in wages had been accompanied by lowering of some products' prices.²⁴ Moreover, authorities articulated a new approach to the population's everyday needs, which revolved around the recently adopted term "necessary needs." In this respect, conceptualizing daily practices raised questions related to the identity and agency of the actors involved in distributing material goods to the population, as well as to the social implications of the new discourses of well-being.

In fact, by the late 1950s, one could easily identify changes in the representations of products in the Romanian national press. Shopping was no longer depicted as a necessity, but as an experience, which involved emotion, individual choice, and in some respects, pleasure. This was achieved by replacing body cropping with representations of whole figures, while photographic images

outnumbered graphic sketches. Unlike the previous years, advertisements focused on how the products were experienced by potential buyers. Sensory perceptions would be transmitted by means of tactile or olfactory interaction with new products. For instance, one could easily find representations of smiling women wrapped in new synthetic fabrics, young females trying hats or shoes and matching handbags, or groups of women enjoying an afternoon in a department store.²⁵

This conversion was best visible after 1957 when more and more newspaper articles addressed issues related to the making of a new socialist customer. The floor experience would therefore become particularly important. The seller was not only responsible for handling the products, but with understanding the buyers' desires and educating the client in the new political meaning of quality and need. In this respect, authorities became more concerned with window dressing, which had to attract customers and enchant them with colorful settings, sophisticated arrangements, and abundant displays of products. Accordingly, the governmental offices began special programs to train painters and designers to create compositions suitable for the new commercial practice. Specialized classes were organized to coach sales personnel in this activity as well, while the Ministry of Commerce periodically edited manuals for individual instruction and regularly organized national contests to award the best solutions to window dressing.²⁶

Furthermore, paying a closer look at the shopping experience led to systematic changes in the stores' internal organization. The counter began to be seen as an obsolete object that made more difficult the direct contact with products. Self-service would allow customers to make autonomous decisions when buying. The national newspapers, including *Comerțul socialist*, published numerous investigations and advice about the benefits of shopping in this way, and warned sales employees that the inability to meet the new trends would illustrate a lack of ideological assimilation into the new socialist realities.²⁷

It was no coincidence that around the same time, products stopped being simple goods but brands, while quality and prestige became a defining element in shaping the customers' choices. For instance, shoes were no longer just some items produced by the consumer cooperatives, but the outcome of the skilled work done by the Janos Herbak shoe factory of Cluj, or by the sports equipment producer in Medias. Synthetics were designed by Adesgo, silk ties by manufacturer Ilie Pintilie of Bucharest, clothing by "Imbrăcămintea Sibiu" or Icomregiocoop Baia Mare, glassware by the Mediaș factory, china by Iris Cluj, and Nivea cosmetics by a factory in Brașov. While months earlier stores had been presented as having a fine wine selection, now the first restaurants were mentioned. All these later became renowned national producers.²⁸

Furthermore, one could easily notice significant changes in discourse construction. After 1957, potential customers were urged to "trust," "buy," "enjoy," "taste," or "use" various items produced by certain enterprises. A classical strategy in advertisement, touching upon the subjective nature of buyers resembled nevertheless the Western practices of marketing. For instance, setting up a dialogue with the customers implied that buyers would be persuaded to purchase some products to the detriment of others, which opened up questions on the regime's involvement in selecting and promoting some enterprises.

In spite of the collectivist values underpinning the official rhetoric, the visual constructs of the late 1950s stressed individuality and socio-professional status, and articulated a message resembling middle class aspirations. Not only did well-being become a newspaper headline that tied the quality of life to industrial labor productivity, but the regime was concerned to articulate an image of plenty that was quite similar to a consumer society. An article published in the *Flacăra* magazine described how a young couple living outside the capital city visited Bucharest for their honeymoon. A shopping session in the Victoria department store revealed numerous instances of impulse buying. Shoes, clothing, cosmetics and domestic appliances were purchased without much thinking. In addition, products like wool, silk, leather, jewelry etc., were admired and bought as well.

This was not a singular example. Families of technical staff were frequently depicted as enjoying a growing quality of life; the regime claimed that products like motorcycles, fine china, towels and modern furniture could be affordable to any person with an average income. Such strategies carried a consistent weight of utopian thinking or at least unrealistic approaches to everyday life under a regime that greatly resembled a “dictatorship over needs.”²⁹ For instance, one could easily find in newspapers articles promoting the purchase of readymade food, as well as complete services of phone shopping and home delivery. By the late 1950s, it was obvious that commodities could articulate social status and prestige. For instance, the women’s magazine regularly published not only fashion sections dedicated to the latest trends within the socialist bloc, but also solutions to imitate—more or less accurately—the creations of famous London and Paris designers including Chanel and Dior. Furthermore, the same magazines included recipes specific to a “rational” French cuisine.³⁰

Conclusion

THIS PAPER aimed to investigate the making of official representations of well-being in Romania during the 1950s. Drawing on press articles and archival materials, I have stressed some of the strategies employed by the Romanian authorities to create the new socialist customer. While the point of departure was the concept of “new man” that was closely linked with the modernity of the 1930s, the postwar developments opened up the basis for a novel approach to everyday life practices based on the ideological limitations and economic opportunities emerged as a result of the gradual liberalization achieved by the late 1950s. Of course, the making of the new customer implied numerous side-manifestations including the opening of the so-called special shops designed to accommodate the needs of the party nomenklatura. However, viewed within the broader framework of economic development, the 1950s saw the emergence of some paradoxical outcomes. Not only did the discursive strategies constructed around the concepts of well-being shed light on the revival of modernist ideas, but more and more aspects resembling traditional values gained visibility. In this respect, this article sees such changes within the broader framework of the political effort to widen popular support. Thus, paying particular attention to the specific needs of the industrial employees allowed the regime to reevaluate its basis of popular legitimacy based on the workers’ support. This would prove essential in the early 1960s when the Romanian leadership demanded the industrial workers’ support while conducting a massive program of industrialization in spite of Moscow’s opposition, coupled with a growing distancing from the Soviet Union.



Notes

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Abstract

Policing a Better Life. Ambiguous Practices of Social Well-Being during the 1950s in Romania

This article examines approaches to well-being during the 1950s Romania by looking at how advertisements in the national mass-media built on the officially sanctioned understanding of social needs. It looks at how political regulations attempted to shape the private sphere, and questions to what extent the Cold War influenced the making of the socialist consumer in terms of knowledge, trust and the autonomous decision to buy various products and services. In this way, this paper looks at the relationship between revolutionary change, economic programming and the human nature, and unveils the part played by material goods in this process. I present what appears to be a surprising discourse on commodities. On the one hand, advertising not only disseminated information on new products—often luxurious or expensive given the financial resources of the general public—to stimulate the consumers' appetite within a truly Western-inspired communication strategy, but, paradoxically, revived many modernist concepts about product functionality and utility, which led to a new aesthetic and ideological approach to socialist urban lifestyles and needs. On the other hand, however, references to food, clothes or furniture mirrored a paternalist approach to commodities, as often the discourses of abundance were meant to point out and condemn marginal commercial behavior like the proliferation of black market networks or illegal handicraft workshops.

Keywords

well-being, advertisement, socialism, Cold War, Romania