

Globalization in the Postsocialist Marketplace: Consumer Readings of Difference and Development in Urban Russia

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On a cold evening in the winter of 1998-99, a middle school teacher named Ivan rang the doorbell of my apartment in St. Petersburg. I was there conducting ethnographic research on consumption in urban Russia, investigating the everyday practices and commentaries of consumers for the insights they yield about post-Soviet experiences of marketization and socioeconomic transformation more generally. Despite, or rather because of, the fact that “consumption”—which I define broadly to include shopping and decision-making, market and non-market exchanges, the reception of mass media such as advertisements, and discourses about style—is so diffuse a phenomenon, I chose to ground my research within a manageably finite social community whose members have shared certain economic and social circumstances. For these and other reasons, I worked among the teachers of two local public schools,¹ many of whom were struggling to make ends meet in the context and aftermath of the 1998 financial crisis.² I had been lucky enough to meet Ivan at one of the schools right away. He was tirelessly willing to address my curiosities and to offer uninvited observations and stories for my interest. On that particular evening, Ivan drew my attention to the “classic Russian hat” (made of fur, with long earflaps) that he had donned as protection from the cold that night; he observed jocularly that this particular “classic” specimen in fact had been manufactured in Korea. Ivan finished by adding, “I think the Koreans are sewing especially for us!”

What does the irony of a Korean-made “Russian hat” reveal about globalization as a structuring force in the everyday life of postsocialism? Certainly the reflection that Korea is manufacturing goods especially for Russia suggests the degree to which post-Soviet identities and experiences at the turn of the twenty-first century are concretely fashioned out of “stuff” that is regularly conveyed from distant locales by transnational merchants and corporations. This circumstance is not entirely unprecedented, in that goods imported either from the other socialist countries of Eastern Europe or, more occasionally, from further abroad were intermittently available in the USSR thanks to black market activity, travels abroad by elites and, to a limited extent, official economic channels—especially in the privileged capitals of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Still, the volume and diversity of products flowing into and out of St. Petersburg shops and marketplaces since 1993 have significantly transformed the physical and social landscapes. While the attitudes of post-Soviet consumers towards these artifacts of the global economy are informed by their

historically specific circumstances and social positionings, the general condition of living among and through objects of such varied origins is not, of course, unique to Russia nor to postsocialism. Indeed, as the rate at which commodities traverse national borders increases around the world, their trajectories and the consumer knowledges that accompany and define them (Appadurai 1986; Cook and Crang 1996) have in turn intrigued growing numbers of anthropologists, for they provide opportunities to observe the cross-cultural encounters through which global capitalism operates. It also offers us the chance to theorize the ramifications of these encounters for culture. In many cases, anthropologists have critiqued the popular assumption that transnational corporations such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola are steadily eroding the cultural differences among previously diverse populations, in effect homogenizing the peoples of the world. This emergent body of work has pointed, instead, to new syncretisms and to dynamic processes of cultural innovation and social differentiation that result when "local" and "global" forces interact and intertwine (Appadurai 1990; Miller 1994, 1997; Hannerz 1996; Watson 1997). For example, David Howes and colleagues have advocated a turn from portraying receptor cultures as "meaningful wholes [previously] existing in pristine isolation" (Howes 1996:2), arguing that in fact, far from losing their cultural authenticity, people in such situations "are actively employing consumer goods to express and forge their own unique cultural identities" (Howes and Classen 1996:179).

Having benefited from those insights, one goal of my analysis of consumer practice and discourse in St. Petersburg is to move beyond a preoccupation with local and national identities; I would argue that the performance and viability of "local" identity or cultural integrity may be more on the mind of the anthropologist than that of the shopper in any given instance. I prefer to pay attention to other ways in which the globalization of consumer culture affects and informs people's everyday experiences of marketization, including their perceptions of inequality at home. Starting from the assumption that commodities such as Snickers bars and Korean hats are *not* actually destroying local (whether defined as "Russian," "St. Petersburgian," or "post-Soviet") culture, I then examine the special problematics that underlie St. Petersburg shoppers' decisions, with reference to the speakers' concerns about the health of their families, about their personal abilities to maintain respectable appearances despite strained finances, and about their overall well-being and standards of living.

The schoolteachers among whom I have conducted interviews and ethnographic research are understandably ambivalent about the choices with which they are confronted in the postsocialist marketplace. This ambivalence and its impetus can be summarized by recognizing that economic "globalization," an arena both of myriad new possibilities and of many stresses, disappointments, and dangers, shows two faces to Russians in their roles as consumers—one of a sort of Europeanization or westernization and another of "Third-Worldization."³ Often, by noting the country from which a particular commodity has originated, and sometimes

by formulating explicit comparisons of their own lifestyles to “European” luxury or “Third World” poverty, people try to assess both goods and selves properly and prudently. At the same time, teachers often calculate their well-being and status by drawing contrasts between their own lifestyles and those enjoyed by others visible in society such as the infamous post-Soviet *nouveaux riches*, popularly referred to as “New Russians.”⁴ Thus the two directions of cultural development—that is, the understanding people have of their lives either *progressing* by becoming more like those deemed typical of western industrialized countries, or else *declining* towards similarity with developing nations elsewhere in the world—are juxtaposed with, and in many cases help people conceptualize and contextualize, forms of social difference that they observe not only across, but also within national borders. Consumer deliberations and strategizing frequently occasion these multilayered recognitions of inequality and negotiations of uncertainty.

Commodities and Contrasts in the 1990s

Teachers spoke of their initial rush to try as many things as possible, especially all kinds of novel food products in the earliest floods of imported goods to St. Petersburg markets in the early 1990s. These included brand-name items that quickly became famous, such as Snickers candy bars and Folgers coffee, as well as new fruits and vegetables Russians had not been able to purchase before such as bananas and kiwi. In retrospect, some spoke of this sudden influx of products as a kind of revelatory experience, it represented a shift in their perception of the progress and positioning of Russia itself. “We didn’t know that there could *be* such a bathroom!” one woman said, describing the shock of seeing luxurious bathroom appliances in store windows for the first time and the realization that the Soviet Union had been further “behind” the West than she had previously imagined. But shortly—some say within just a few months—the novelty wore off, as people gained experience and compared imports with more familiar and generally less expensive locally produced goods.⁵ This was particularly true in the case of domestic foodstuffs, which many people soon concluded were healthier, fresher, and tastier on the whole than foreign analogues (Humphrey 1995; Patico 2001).

Still, where other commodities such as clothing are concerned, “European” remains the preferred category for its quality and style. High-quality home renovations, among other items, are described in colloquial Russian as “Eurostandard” (*evrostandart*, n., or *evrostandartnyi*, adj.). The *idea* of a “European standard,” if not the exact terminology, has a long history in Russia—Westernizing efforts such as those by Peter the Great (including his founding at the beginning of the eighteenth century of a new “European” capital, St. Petersburg).⁶ In terms of material culture and standards of living, the USSR’s stated goal was to catch and surpass the West; as Caroline Humphrey (1995) has described, citizens of Soviet Russia were enjoined to identify with the activities of the state, and in particular to conceive of state-produced foodstuffs and other consumer items as *nashi*, “ours.” According to public discourses

of the Krushchev era, the USSR was supposed to be at the forefront of world development in every sphere, but occasional, disorienting images from TV and foreign visitors suggested that this might not be so. People were eager to obtain consumer goods (especially clothing) from Western and even Eastern Europe, whose products generally were considered to be more durable and stylish than Soviet ones.

In informal conversations of the late 1990s, teachers sometimes referred to commodities (including foods) produced in Russia as *rossiiskoe* (Russian)⁷ or occasionally even, rather anachronistically, *sovetskoe* (Soviet). More common labels were *nashe* (“ours”) and *otechestvennoe*. I translate the latter as “domestic,” though it could be rendered as “native” and derives literally from “fatherland.” In the way people use the term (in the consumer context), it seems so familiar as to be rather value-neutral; that is, people apply it without seeming to express any pointed opinion about domestic production as an issue of politics and patriotism (see below). Garments made in India, China, Korea, and Turkey are among those that tended to be mentioned most frequently as low in quality.

These distinctions hold a very practical kind of importance for shoppers. Given the scarcity of consumer goods in the Soviet Union, the problem of choice—that is, the process of establishing for oneself dependable criteria for judging the quality and affordability—is somewhat novel. In this context, careful consumer decision-making partly depends upon reference to the countries of manufacture as a relatively good indicator of quality and other characteristics. This is revealed in commonplace comments such as “Russian apples are better than imported ones,” or “I like only Finnish muesli...and Dutch, I think.” The disposition to highlight geographical origins is also reflected (and reinforced) by how goods are presented in shops. Fruit in an open-air stand, meat at a butcher’s counter, cheese in a dairy shop, boxes of tea, detergent, and items of clothing are all, as a rule, displayed along with prominent and often hand-written signs announcing the originating country or Russian city and price. This is not the same situation as in the United States, where garments have small tags inside that show, for example, “Made in Taiwan.” Pieces of clothing sometimes bear no name-brand or permanently attached label, but only a hand-written, pinned-on sign specifying the price and the garment’s geographical origins—a sweater tag written, “700 rubles, wool, Korea,” or the sign at a cheese counter announcing, “80 rubles/kg, Estonia.”

Thus, even when people claim that origins do not determine their choices as much as price and other factors, they are acutely aware of the fact that, in contrast to the past of a decade or less ago, goods are flowing into St. Petersburg from around the world—Finnish instant cereals, German yogurts, and Dutch fruit line some shops’ shelves, while outdoor market stalls display sweaters and leather jackets from Korea, China, and Turkey.⁸ Capitalist triumphalism aside, access to consumer goods certainly cannot be equated with the prosperity of post-Soviet Russian society as a whole. Rather, for the masses of people who appreciate most of these products only

from afar, the objects are more likely to evoke heightened awareness of how wide disparities in income and lifestyle among Russians have become in the 1990s. Over the course of the last decade, new opportunities for private business and rapid accumulation of wealth by some have been accompanied for many more by lost job security, unemployment, and the disintegration of state-sponsored social safety nets. The material rewards and social statuses associated with particular professional roles have shifted; many schoolteachers describe serious erosion in both the social valuation and remuneration of their work (see Patico 2001). In the early and mid 1990s, sociologists (Eremicheva 1996) referred to teachers, doctors, and other educated professionals who were still on state payrolls as members of a “new poor” that had suffered a drastic loss of prestige and income, which was exacerbated in contrast to the fabulous wealth of those who managed to enter private business.⁹

I was somewhat surprised, then, to find that even in the context of the hardships of the early months of the 1998 financial crisis,¹⁰ when I asked teachers to compare the contemporary (1998-99) market situation with that of the late Soviet years, few expressed nostalgia for the enforced stability provided by socialism. As one woman put it, “It’s better that there is something [in the stores], and it’s expensive, than things being cheap but nothing is there.” Even the most financially strapped schoolteachers tended to view the changes as improvements over the drab uniformity, constant shortages, and endless queues of Soviet-era shops. Sometimes they speak of these new consumer opportunities in terms of having finally learned what “normal life”—meaning life in the “West,” as opposed to Soviet life—could really be like.

At the same time, many teachers reflect ruefully upon Russia’s novice status in this world of global consumerism. Despite the USSR’s recent super-power status, Russia sometimes seems to have become just another developing country. As evidence of this, some teachers cited increasing poverty, an unstable currency, and low standards of living. They measure these factors by the poor quality of Russian goods in contrast to the expensive and inexcessive European imports. While people have a greater sense of the possibilities for achieving “European” or “Western”-style “normality,” they nevertheless bear a keen sense of Russia’s having “fallen behind”—or of its always having been “behind.”

Yet if teachers and others identify *personally* at particular moments with this feeling of having been left behind, their regret does not necessarily signal, nor is it always expressed in terms of, a patriotic or spiritual sensibility of sharing one’s fate with the long-suffering Russian people (though such associations sometimes emerge, as shown in Ries 1997). Rather, I would emphasize this regret derives most tangibly from the fact that most of these new products fall outside of the speakers’ *own* possibilities (as opposed to other citizens’). Teachers and many others denigrate the ill-gotten wealth and consumer flamboyance of local criminals and businesspeople, but they do not uniformly apply these condemnations to the various prosperous or

attractively dressed people whom individuals may encounter in their everyday lives (Patico 2000). Nor do such critiques necessarily alleviate the shame of their relative poverty as they perceive it. I do not mean to suggest that material wealth is in itself the only or primary objective of less affluent Russians' day-to-day practices and strategies, nor that what everyone really wants is to become a "New Russian." For the most part, teachers describe consumer privilege as appropriate and enviable only when it is paired with "culturedness," respectability, and professionalism—the very qualities that they consider most of today's wealthy Russians to lack. Many teachers seem most comfortable with the idea of working towards a relatively moderate but comfortable "middle class" lifestyle, pictured as similar to those enjoyed by the populations of "civilized" countries elsewhere in the world (Patico 2001).

In any case, the consumers portrayed below generally conceptualize capitalist market forces as inevitable and beyond individuals' control. At the same time, in their own ongoing practice, they are presented with a range of choices, such that the quality and value of their lives seem to some extent ameliorable through the exercise of skilled consumer discernment. In this sense, they accept partial responsibility for how far "behind" they will or will not fall.

Shopping for Quality in the Global Marketplace

One evening in the fall of 1999, Nastia, a relatively affluent English language teacher, and I were looking for a new outfit she could wear to work, maybe a sweater and skirt. First, we looked in a local *veshchovaia iarmarka*, a sort of bazaar that sells relatively inexpensive, non-perishable items such as clothing, shoes, and perfume. She did not find anything quite to her liking there, and we ended up later at a much more expensive shop featuring clothing from Europe (primarily from Italy). Though Nastia was not sure that she could justify the expense of the \$150 outfits she was trying on, she liked them so much that she commented to the saleswoman that she would not want to go back anymore to the *iarmarka* for clothes shopping. When the saleswoman suggested that there was not much difference in price between the two either, Nastia (quite rightly) contradicted her: "what are you talking about, of course [the price difference] is quite significant." The saleswoman recouped: "Well, and for that, it's not from Turkey" (*za to ne Turtsiia*). The interaction had reproduced an argument which neither woman would question; Nastia had much preferred the style and quality of these more expensive garments, and it seemed clear to her as well as the saleswoman that this difference could be attributed to the respective countries of origin. As we walked home, Nastia fretted over whether the non-Turkish outfits, which she desired in order to look more presentable and add some variety to her work wardrobe, could reasonably be accommodated by her family's budget.

Other shoppers may follow similar logics in their decision-making, though they might not be able to avoid purchasing things made in countries they believe to produce cheap, poor quality goods, since more desirable imports are often too

expensive. Anya, a 25-year old teacher, who took great care in her appearance and loved to spend the money she earned working multiple jobs on new wardrobe accoutrements, often commented that she had a penchant for Italian clothing and shoes, but that they were generally expensive. Recounting her search for a suitable new suede coat for the winter, she explained that she would have to forego the expensive Italian coat she wanted to buy another she had found which was “Turkish, but good” and less pricey. One autumn afternoon, we left school and headed to our area’s main commercial street to shop for a leather skirt for her, which she had wanted for quite a while. As we walked, she said that she would need to see how the different models available at various shops fit and decide which was cut most flatteringly. However, she had already learned that they were all roughly the same price, which was somewhat surprising given that some of them were English and German, others Indian and Turkish. If the prices were comparable, Anya reasoned, “why would I want to buy some Indian trash (*drian*)?”

In the end, however, it was the Indian skirt that fit her best and whose length was most appropriate. Anya then faced a dilemma, since she was worried that the Indian skirt might not hold up to wear. She assumed that the English and German skirts were of better quality, though she had not liked their appearances as much. When an impartial leather merchant at a different stall told her that Indian leather was fine, Anya decided to buy the Indian skirt (incidentally, at the same bazaar that Nastia had recently sworn off), if with some trepidation. A few days later, I saw Anya wearing the new skirt at school. She shone while admiring herself in the mirror, visibly pleased by how nice she looked in the new acquisition. Still, the skirt’s origin had presented a very real worry for her, and perhaps continued to nag at her; it *looked* like the quality of the leather itself was acceptable and that the skirt was sewn together well enough to last, but would she be committing an error in judgment, nonetheless, by choosing the one from India?

Such decisions present small chances for taking stock of the fact that while some may be able to purchase “good quality,” people such as teachers are more likely to be trying their luck at avoiding “Indian trash,” or reflecting self-consciously on their personal inability to do so, as when Ivan told me about a New Russian man he had seen at the local market buying an extravagant amount of fish. According to popular stereotype, the typical New Russian is quite wealthy, but uneducated and crass; he is a sleazy petty entrepreneur, security guard, or mafia operator. Ivan nevertheless guessed that the man in the market, though obviously wealthy, held some sort of more “intellectual” job, perhaps at a bank. Ivan cited the man’s clothes as clues to both his wealth and his respectable taste; he was not wearing the flamboyant raspberry-colored jacket favored by the tackiest New Russians, but a black raincoat. “And not one of Chinese manufacture, like the one I have,” Ivan finished, “but a very good one.” His observation illustrates that regardless of how particular purchases like Anya’s skirt might turn out eventually, systematic comparisons of “very good” (German, Italian, British, or other “European” and “Western” garments) with less

trusted ones (Korean, Turkish, Indian, or Chinese) provide consumers with information about where they fit into a *world* of and a *city* of goods, relative privileges, and constraints. The quality and style of the products individuals can afford and which they finally choose to buy can confirm or undermine their very personal senses of good taste, good judgment, respectability, and simply how well they are managing in post-Soviet life.

If Ivan and his colleagues rued the fact that it was Korea and China (not, for example, Italy, the United States, or Britain) that appeared to be “sewing especially for Russia,” somewhat different comparisons are formulated in conversations about food. People often claim that it is better to avoid foreign products, including those from the US and Western Europe. When it comes to ingestible goods why should they be more skeptical of imports?

The fact that contaminated or otherwise compromised foods can cause physical harm provides one rationale for the extra care many consumers take. They generally assume that labels and even brands cannot always be trusted to provide assurance of consistency; a bottle of vodka might actually contain water, vinegar, or something more lethal, and a jar of Nescafe may or may not contain tasty coffee (according to one informant, there are actually a variety of producing countries for Nescafe, which putatively lowers the quality). Thus, once again, nationality structures consumers’ senses of quality and freshness in foods. On another level, one might argue that food always holds special symbolic potency because it is incorporated into the body. Mary Douglas (1992) asserts that the permeability of the body makes it available for use as a representation for society and its anxiety-ridden boundaries (115-116). Applying this logic, it would seem that foods brought into the Russian “body” from outside its national borders might serve as particularly powerful symbols for more general social fears, perhaps regarding the compromising effects of foreign economic and political penetration on national integrity. Here imported foods would not only stand for a feared foreign domination but would, in fact, represent that domination metonymically.

Pertinent as such an interpretive framework might seem, however, I prefer not to rely on this somewhat universalizing brand of symbolic analysis to explain why food is a touchstone for contemporary Russian anxieties. It seems to me that those explanations do not do justice to consumers’ informed ambivalence about the fruits of political and economic transformation in their everyday worlds; nor do they account for the concrete ways in which those dissatisfactions are materialized in questions of food choice. Neither “European” nor domestic (*otechestvennyi*) items are desired for their symbolic merits alone; practical logics for interpreting goods’ quality rely less on assumptions about the inherent superiority or comfort of Russian products than on ideas about the paths domestic and imported goods follow before arriving at St. Petersburg markets.

Hence people speak not (or not merely) of sympathy for the “domestic,” but of the advantages of relatively local produce—milk from the nearby Petmol plant, chocolate from the Krupskaja factory of St. Petersburg. Apples and other produce items that come from nearby cooperative farms might not look as attractive as the shiny, flawless fruits that come from abroad, but they seem to have more taste, people say, and are assumed to be fresher. One does not know exactly when and how an imported, packaged roll-up cake (*rulet*) has been made (these were nonetheless quite popular for a time), while local bakery stands carry breads and sweets that one knows (or assumes) to have been baked in St. Petersburg the day before. Yet domestic goods can also fall under suspicion or derision, as a teacher commented about a not very tasty but inexpensive sausage from a provincial town on sale in the city. “It seems,” he said, “that that town doesn’t know how to make tasty *kolbasa*—so they have to sell it cheaply in St. Petersburg.” Another teacher remembered friends who became sick from Ecuadorian bananas, and others have their own stories and warnings about food poisoning. There are particular things to watch out for in any food products, but especially in imports.¹¹ Expiration dates are crucial. For instance, when several teachers discussed groceries to be purchased for a teachers’ party, one was delegated to buy packaged torts. “Should I get those ones, those imported ones?” she asked. Her superior cried, “Only don’t get those! They’re expired!” An art teacher, Dima, noted that when the imports had started pouring into Russia, “the West” had sent its expired goods that had not been eaten at home.¹²

Domestic foods are often described in St. Petersburg as tastier than imports. One man asserted that in that sense, he was “on the side of domestic” food, though he claimed not to espouse the view that “*nash produkt*” (“our food product”) should be bought for its own sake. “If our analogue [to an imported product] is good, I’ll buy it; but if not, why bother with patriotism?” This attitude was rather typical in that the teachers did not discuss buying domestic as the right thing to do for the national economy or national identity. Rather, they were looking out for their own daily interests, protecting the health of their families, sticking with what they found tasted good, and seeking out the highest quality things they could reasonably afford. In short, they do not foreswear foreign goods as such, for the sake of some threatened “Russian” identity; nonetheless, their perceptions of food quality do tend to be informed by (and in turn, inform) more complex visions of international and class politics.

In a conversation with teacher Elizaveta, my questions about how she chose what to buy from the range of goods now available in shops led to an especially powerful and telling narration of the potential dangers of imported foodstuffs. High quality imports are fine, she said, but expensive. Those of poor quality, she went on, are said to be for “Negroes,” and she added that Russia has become a Third World country. She mentioned various warnings she had heard either through the media or from acquaintances about allergenic food additives and preservatives found mainly in imported products. A student she had known had become quite ill and had been out of

school for some time, Elizaveta recounted, and as it turned out, the source of the girl's illness had been an allergy to imported foods. When I asked later for more details, such as whether the allergy had been to particular brands or ingredients, Elizaveta said she didn't know; she simply knew that the hospital's diagnosis had been "imported foods." She clarified, however, that the goods Russia received from the US, as far as she knew, were problematic because they were not necessarily the best of what that country had to offer. I asked her to explain the "Negroes" comment; was this an expression people used, "goods for Negroes?" She answered that yes, it was, and said that the association went back to Soviet propaganda that claimed one mode of systematic racism in the US had been to give blacks low quality, even harmful foods.¹³

Key in this political imagination of producers and consumers around the world are questions of power and privilege present in the minds of consumers as they weigh their options at the marketplace. At the most practical level, Elizaveta's suspicions about capitalist logics of distribution serve as guidelines for choice under conditions where unaccustomed variety can be overwhelming, miscalculation health-threatening, and reliable information scarce. One must watch out not only for expired goods sent to Russia for sale, but also for products that represent the lower end of another country's production. One should be careful, Elizaveta implied, not to purchase other countries' cast-offs, the goods foreign producers considered unfit for at least some of their own compatriots. That people such as herself should provide a new market for these items constitutes a double insult; it mirrors and amplifies the contrast between teachers and their more affluent St. Petersburg neighbors, and highlights their subordination to wealthy consumers and producers both at home and abroad.

Conclusion

Marketization in the former USSR has meant the advent of far more visible and resented gaps in privilege and security than those that were apparent in the late Soviet era. Simultaneously, variegated flows of consumer commodities from around the world have informed new visions of what "normal life" is supposed to be, while access to this "normality" remains elusive. Thus, while some Russians can afford "European" prestige, others fear they are sinking into a "Third-World" mass of consumers whose range of realistic choices is narrowing. In this sense, the globalization of Russia's consumer sector is closely connected with and emblematic of thoroughgoing local processes of social differentiation. That connection should perhaps be self-evident, but it has not been well documented ethnographically. Only by holding foremost in our minds that cross-cultural objectifications of wealth and poverty are instrumental in the construction of more immediate social relations, and vice versa, does a vivid picture begin to emerge of how global capitalism is experienced and negotiated in everyday life in the post-Soviet context.

The beliefs that “Korea is sewing especially for Russia” and that “food for Negroes” is being shipped to St. Petersburg refer, on one level, to economic and political realities “out there” and the contrasts and contests at play in the contemporary world at large. But consumers’ readings of their own positionings and possibilities, even if often understood and expressed through idioms of transnational power relations and cross-cultural comparisons, ultimately depend upon the goods that appear before their eyes every day: on other people’s backs and tables, and in shops and markets, in every part of their own city. Hence even, or perhaps especially, such mundane and deplored items as Korean hats, Chinese raincoats, and stale pastries can help lead us towards a sensitive understanding of the complex and ambiguous processes of social change accompanying globalization in the postsocialist world. For teachers, as undoubtedly for the majority of Russians, inequality and the threat of a shameful lack of respectability are brought to awareness, and guarded against, through the consumer decisions individuals make for themselves and their families. A serious consideration of consumer comparisons highlights the ambivalent, often dichotomous nature of citizens’ experiences of marketization and globalization as processes they perceive as desirable as well as unfair, as indicative of progress as well as decline, and in terms of Europeanization as well as Third-Worldization.

Acknowledgements

Research for this article was supported in part by a grant from the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the US Department of State, and the US Information Agency. Additional research and write-up support was provided by a PEO Scholar Award and a Dean's Dissertation Write-up Fellowship, New York University. The views expressed here are those of the author and not necessarily those of these organizations.

Notes

¹My choice to work with teachers at local public schools was shaped by additional factors. For example, I was interested in working primarily among women. As the infamous “double burden” carried by Soviet (and many post-Soviet) women indicates, women were expected not only to participate full time in the USSR’s public labor force but also to maintain special responsibility for the care of home and family, including obtaining food and other necessities for their families—no small undertaking in the era of shortages and networking. Hence I sought a fieldsite where women were predominant in order to have access to a manageably small group of people for whom provisioning and consumption were likely to be topics of conversation and daily concern. However, the schools in which I worked also employed men, albeit in much smaller numbers, and when they were willing to participate in my research I gladly accepted their input and integrated it into my analysis. Also, I looked to a workplace as the starting point for the ethnography because such settings

served as nodes of consumption networks during the Soviet period (Temkina 1996:228). I was interested to see how these work-based consumer mechanisms might be functioning or transforming more recently, and a school was a logical starting place because mainly women populate the field of education. Finally, teachers provide a strategic case study in that, as highly educated but still state-employed professionals, they have suffered particularly painful losses of both social position and material security as a result of the market transitions of the 1990s, as discussed briefly below and in greater depth elsewhere (Patico 2001).

²Teachers have been among those hardest hit by post-Soviet market developments of the 1990s, and they suffered fresh blows due to the ruble depreciation that began in mid-August 1998. The official salaries (including base pay, or *stavka*, plus salary for additional hours or responsibilities) of most teachers I knew were in the range of 1000 rubles per month in 1998-99; they received only very small raises for the spring 1999 semester. Meanwhile, the value of the same salary dropped from approximately US\$167 in August 1998 to about US\$42 in the winter of 1999. The correspondence of prices to exchange rates varied; prices for some food products, especially those that were state regulated such as bread, rose significantly but more slowly than the ruble depreciated. Others, especially imported products, rose at equivalent or even higher rates. In January 1999, 1000 rubles were roughly equivalent to both the average monthly per capita income in St. Petersburg and the official per person subsistence minimum as calculated by the city government. Many English teachers earned most of their monthly incomes by giving private lessons. For more information on how the 1998 crisis affected survival strategies and standards of families living in St. Petersburg, see Simpura, et al. (1999).

³Nora Dudwick and Hermine G. de Soto (2000) credit Bruce Grant with a version of this observation: “[Citizens of postsocialist countries] understand that they are going through some kind of transition—although even this has become a contested concept—but they have no clear sense of where they are headed. They feel shock and indignation at the sudden and extreme decline in their economic and symbolic status, or what Bruce Grant (personal communication) has called ‘the Third Worlding’ of the former Soviet bloc” (4).

⁴For more on the attitudes of other Russians towards their “New” compatriots, see Patico (2000), Humphrey (1995), and Ries (forthcoming).

⁵In the context of the 1998 Russian financial crisis (see Note 2), which resulted in swiftly rising prices, many food items, especially but not only imported ones, suddenly became much less accessible to teachers than they had been in the previous years of relative economic stability (roughly 1995-97). In 1998, it was commented that going to stores could be like going on an excursion to a museum, with lots of things to gawk at, but nothing to buy for oneself.

⁶For more on the enduring opposition of “Europe” and the “West” (as civilized) to “Asia” or the “East” (as backwards) in Russian thought and politics, see Bassin (1999) on imperial Russia and Fitzpatrick (1999) on Soviet deployments of the concepts.

⁷Note that “Russian” here refers not to ethnic Russians (as the adjective *ruskii* refers to the nation in the sense of a group with common history, culture, and language) but to the Russian nation-state. The adjective *rossiiskii* might modify, for example, the state, the army, citizenship, or any kind of national institution.

⁸One might protest that because multinational corporations manufacture many goods, they are not strictly speaking of any one country. Knowledge about multinationals was not a focus of my research, and though at least one informant referred to the phenomenon of “a ‘German’ product sewn by Chinese hands,” for the most part the people I knew spoke about companies/brands (*firmy*) as being of one country or another. Also, although people discussed the fact that many products come to Russia from China and Korea and generally described them as low in quality (sometimes mentioning the cheap labor that had produced them), I did *not* hear mention of the fact that well-known companies that they might think of as “Western,” such as Nike, actually set up production in Asian factories.

⁹On post-Soviet affluence, including the relationships of contemporary businesspeople to Soviet-era elites, see Krishtanovskaia and White (1999) and Silverman and Yanowitch (2000).

¹⁰See note #2.

¹¹Some shoppers are conscious of avoiding consumption of harmful food preservatives. Again, imports are particularly, though not exclusively, implicated, because of the technological complexity of vacuum-packed and other packaged foods as well as the fact of their having been transported long distances. Prime suspects include imported (and now many domestic, too) *polufabrikaty* (literally “half-made” or half-assembled) food products: frozen cutlets, *pelmeni*, soup mixes, etc. At the same time, some particular products were discussed as better in their imported versions, especially yogurts; also mentioned were imported (French, American) wines and cognacs that people could not normally afford. This latter case is a bit different from the first, as it is a clearly marked luxury item rather than an everyday family food. This might suggest that luxury goods for special occasions (and thus less integrated into daily consumption patterns) are less threatening than other imports. The fact that they are set apart from more mundane, predominantly domestic goods (bread, potatoes, beets, etc.) may even render them more appropriate for special occasions.

¹²Nancy Ries (N.d.) provides apocryphal evidence of this actually happening in urban Russia with a friend of a friend who has a frozen food business. He imports

expired product from Europe and has his employees restamp the boxes with new expiration dates; he then pays off the state inspection agents at the border so as to import his inventory without problems.

¹³It is relevant that concepts of race and nationality are closely linked to ideas about civilization (the notion of being or becoming “civilized.” I discuss the connection between discourses of “civilization,” “culturedness,” and consumption elsewhere (Patico 2001); for a more substantive investigation of representations of race, ethnicity, and culture in Russia, see Lemon (2000).

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