

Book Review: Finnish Consumption. An Emerging Consumer Society between East and West

Ed. by Heinonen V. & M. Peltonen.

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The volume *Finnish Consumption – An emerging consumer society between East and West* edited by Visa Heinonen and Matti Peltonen comprises eight articles along with an introduction and afterword dealing with the question of how the consumer society in Finland has evolved during the XXth century, particularly in the second half. The common thread of all the articles and the main idea of the volume are to approach the rise of consumer society in Finland from the standpoint of an intersection between Western and Eastern influences.

The West is a typical comparative framework in consumption research, representing a symbol of modernity, progress and aspiration. The West is exemplified by the US, the UK and Sweden. For Finland, Sweden is considered a "model for modernity"; American influences are often conveyed to Finland via Sweden (p. 11, 19). The US, in turn, is regarded as a "model for modernity" for Europe in general (p. 128).

The East is mostly typified by the Soviet Union (Poland also makes appearances, along with East Germany, p. 21). The incorporation of the Soviet Union as a source of influence (through trade, consumer goods, ideological interactions, etc.) is both challenging and refreshing because sometimes scholars see this country as too different and, therefore, a difficult case for comparison with the Western world. The Soviet Union isn't approached in the book as stereotypically poor, backward, dull and full of totalitarian control (although these features were mentioned too). Instead, it often emerges as a curious place with many similarities to the Western world, sometimes even paradoxically bounded with abundance and excess in the eyes of

Finns (see Hanna Kuusi's article about consumer experience of Finnish tourists in the Soviet Union).

The dichotomy East vs. West applied as an analytical tool in the Finnish Consumption has certain limitations. First and foremost, the dichotomy makes the world rigidly bipolar and inevitably creates hierarchies. At the same time, the dichotomy is quite universal and has a relational character because many countries across the world consider themselves as being in an in-between position. Therefore, the East/West dichotomy has an explorative potential that is convincingly shown in the volume.

Nevertheless, the volume is about consumer culture in Finland. Methodologically, the authors of Finnish Consumption apply analytical tools from the humanities and social sciences. The articles relate to the subfields of cultural history, social history, historical sociology and history of mentalities. «Consumer mentality» is one of the key categories introduced by Visa Heinonen and Minna Autio in their chapter on the Finnish consumer mentality and applied in several other chapters across the volume. The «consumer mentality» is generally understood as a set of concepts, unconscious and collective by nature, related to consumption. The consumer mentality is closely linked to social structure; therefore, there is a question whether national mentality crosscuts all social strata or rather the dominant mentality is always rooted in a particular social class. The practical tool of implementing consumer mentality to everyday practices is called the «consumer ethos».

The consumer mentality and ethos form a certain type of consumer subjectivity. The Finnish consumer subject, as the authors argue, has obtained such characteristics as frugality, thriftiness, self-sufficiency, a sense of moderation, prudence, restrained hedonism and ecological ethicality. These characteristics and their changes were analysed throughout the history of Finnish consumer culture as well as in comparison with Russia and Sweden. The categories of consumer mentality and consumer ethos work well for the purposes of comparative analysis. The complexity of these categories – mentality and ethos – their rootedness in a certain class of society and the diachronic perspective, on the one hand, made analysis multidimensional but, on the other hand, introduced certain limitations to the systematic studies of all these chosen dimensions: what is studied thoroughly in the Finnish context is not always possible to fully investigate in the cases of Sweden and Russia.

The transformation of consumer mentality from scarcity to abundance, and from abundance to ecological ethicality as well as the societal context for this transformation are another thread running through the chapters. Among the societal characteristics illustrating the growth of consumer society in Finland are increasing consumption per capita, rising individualism, growing productivity, and the development of distributional channels (p. 18). Other tendencies related to the general context include modernization, urbanization, Westernization, middle-class formation, and so on. The ways these changes have affected consumption are investigated in relation to different spheres: alcohol consumption, music production and consumption, representations of consumption in newsreels, television, gambling (in par-

ticular, roulette), and tourism. Each article is devoted to a particular sphere and draws on various types of data – from video and printed materials to personal interviews.

Some spheres are particularly interesting from the point of view of Finnish welfare state control over consumption as is shown in the articles on alcohol consumption by Matti Peltonen and on gambling and legalization of roulette by Riitta Matilainen. In the course of the development of consumer society, the change here could be seen from the point of view of «the civilizing process»: from strict state control over consumer habits to individual responsibility. Other articles emphasize the role of the media in consumer socialization into a new consumer culture (see, for example, Minna Lammi's and Päivi Timonen's chapter on Finlandia newsreels and consumption imagery and Jukka Kortti's article on television and creation of the Finnish consumer). Janne Poikolainen writes about the collision of music styles (pop and tango) unfolding the meanings of this conflict as "traditional" vs. "modern" consumption. Other articles focus on practices and their meanings: Kaarina Kilpiö discusses the use of background music in retail spaces and music-listening practices, Hanna Kuusi writes about practices of Finnish mass tourism and Matti Peltonen and Visa Heinonen list practices of the current Finnish lifestyle.

Class, gender, generations, locality are the main social imperatives with regard to consumption considered in the volume. The changes in consumer mentality correspond to the shift in the dominant class of society: from peasantry to the middle class (p. 61). Working class, being often a neglected group or merely a subject of state control, appears in the volume as an agent of leisure (tourism, TV) consumption (p. 225).

In conclusion, the volume presents a valuable English-language set of cases related to the development of consumer society in Finland in the second half of the XXth century in the comparative context. The conducted analysis in the articles is nuanced and full of detail; it is supported by theory and analytical interpretations, yet it also presents certain conclusions and generalization placing Finland in the broader context of world processes. The illustrations (photographs from the archives) are a welcome addition and allow deeper immersion into the period studied. However, certain issues are missing: why were these particular spheres of consumption chosen for analysis, and not others? The last - afterword article - discusses briefly some significant phenomena of Finnish lifestyle – coffee, summerhouse, sauna, park, library, yet they were not developed into separate case studies. In some chapters more information on sources would have given a better picture and a deeper understanding of the research. All in all, the book is a successful attempt of theoretically informed empirical research of Nordic consumption in global context, and such efforts should be encouraged and continued.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Olga Gurova (PhD, Cultural Studies) holds the position of the Academy of Finland Research Fellow at the Department of Social Research, University of Helsinki. Her research interests include sociology of consumption, sociology of fashion, socialist and post-socialist cultures and qualitative methods of social research. She is the author of *The Soviet Underwear: Between Ideology and Everyday Life* (2008, Moscow: New Literary Observer) and numerous articles on culture of consumption in socialist and post-socialist Russia.