

Syllabus of Record

Program: CET Prague

Course Code / Title: (PR/CEST 361) Socialist Consumer Culture

Total Hours: 45

Recommended Credits: 3

Primary Discipline / Suggested Cross Listings: Central European Studies / Sociology, History, Cultural Studies, Anthropology, Business

Language of Instruction: English

Prerequisites / Requirements: None

Description

This course seeks to explore the specifics of consumption culture in the former socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe. Stemming from the perspective of *Everyday* and *Cultural history* the seminar is analyzing how ordinary citizens influenced state policies through their practices and vice versa. Ultimately, the course strives to create a deeper understanding of consumption in socialism while giving special attention to similarities and differences within the "socialist bloc". Topics being addressed include the specifics of the command economy, the moral dimension of socialist consumerism, informal shopping practices as shown in the socialist black marketplace, the competitive relationship of capitalist and socialist economies and the rocky transformation to Western consumerism after the fall of socialism. Overall, the course strives for a deeper understanding of economic, social and cultural differences between command and market economies.

Objectives

In this course, students:

- Understand theories of consumption practices
- Understand and apply consumption as a historiographical category
- Familiarize themselves with findings in the field of consumption studies
- Think critically and articulate issues related to consumption in state socialism
- Engage in thoughtful and respectful discourse around important consumption practices
- Deepen their understanding of differences between Western consumerism and consumption policies during socialism in Eastern Europe
- Develop discussion questions and facilitation skills that foster their participation and the inclusion of multiple perspectives
- Deepen the understanding of the differences between socialist command economies and capitalist market economies

Course Requirements

Active participation is essential in this course. Students are expected to attend each class and field-based components, as outlined in the CET Attendance Policy. Students are expected to come

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prepared with questions, topics for discussion, and personal reflections relating to the assignments. Students are strongly encouraged to contribute thoughtfully to class discussions with the willingness to explore different ideas. Reading assignments are generally 30-40 pages per class session. Graded assignments include:

- Participation
- Oral presentation: 10-15 minutes, with 5 minutes for questions, using an element of the local context to illustrate concepts discussed in an assigned reading
- Mid-term in-class essay exam: 3-4 pages on a topic determined by the faculty member
- Final paper: 8 pages on a topic determined in consultation with the faculty member

Grading

The final grade is determined as follows:

- Participation: 30%
- Oral presentation: 10%
- Mid-term in-class essay exam: 20%
- Final paper: 40%

Readings

Berdahl, Daphne. *On the Social Life of Postsocialism. Memory, Consumption, Germany*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

Douglas, Mary and Baron Isherwood. *The World of Goods. Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*. New York/London: Routledge, 1979.

Fehér, Ferenc, Ágnes Heller and György Márkus. *Dictatorship over Needs: An Analysis of Soviet Societies*. New York: St. Martin's press, 1983.

Kornai, János. *The Economics of Shortage*. Amsterdam: North Holland Press, 1980.

Pittaway, Mark. *Eastern Europe 1939-2000*. London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2004.

Sayer, Derek. *The Coasts of Bohemia. A Czech History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.

Stearns, Peter N. *Consumerism in World History. The global transformation of desire*. New York/London: Routledge, 2001.

Communism Unwrapped, Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe, edited by Paulina Bren/Mary Neuburger. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption, edited by Frank Trentmann. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

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Outline of Course Content

Topic 1 – Introduction into consumption as a historiographical category

Topic 2 – What is consumption and how do we differentiate between capitalist and socialist consumerism?

Topic 3 – Modern times? Consumption and the Cold War as exemplified in the kitchen debate

Topic 4 – Scarcity in state socialism and why the command economy produced queues

Topic 5 – Shopping across borders: Buying for being a tourist, or being a tourist to buy?

Topic 6 – Shortages: getting goods through the informal economy

Topic 7 – Advertising: How to pitch consumer goods in a world without competition?

Topic 8 – The concept of luxury centered around the question: Has the socialist economy produced desirable products?

Topic 9 – Hard-currency shops and the symbolic meaning of Western products

Topic 10 – How the capitalist West took over: The technology gap of the 1980's

Topic 11 – The stumbling transformation to Western Consumerism in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990's and beyond

Topic 12 – Nostalgia: the meaning of Communist-era products today