

Consumption in Europe as Americanisation of Europe?

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Surrounded by a landscape of consumer articles that, from Sevilla to Stockholm and from London to Leipzig, predominantly look alike, it is hard to talk about the way in which technological processes push forth European integration, without talking about consumption. Talking about consumption as an integrating force in Europe however, is talking about (supposed) Americanisation. The United States have played an exemplary role in “the global traffic in values as well as commodities” (De Grazia), which most of us recognise as the nucleus of the ‘global consumer society’.

But although it is generally assumed that 1) the United States have played a central role in the history of the realization of the European consumer society, and that 2) this had given rise to a process of ongoing European uniformity, relatively little is known about the ways in which specific American consumer goods and practices found their way to Europe. And since (anthropological) research – both on consumption and on the role of the global mass media – makes clear that the same clothes, soap operas or cars may occupy a completely different place and acquire a completely different meaning in people’s everyday life in different countries, there is reason to be very cautious when writing about processes of alleged ‘Americanisation’. Having studied the rise of the consumer society in East Germany myself, I know, however, that the unwarranted use of this term is just one of the most eye-catching predispositions and prejudices that hinder the study of consumption.

When it comes to the way in which biases come to play a role in academic debate on consumption, the recent joining of the countries of the former socialist Bloc in Middle and Eastern Europe to the global consumer society, is a case in point indeed. Most people remember vividly how East Germans, during the joyful autumn of 1989 when the Wall fell and they were finally able to enter the Western consumer society, were crying with joy. Their happiness is usually interpreted as an implicit critique on the communist society in which they ‘were forced to live’. This interpretation not only confirms some obstinate prejudices about life in the communist Bloc, it is also clustered around specific pairs of oppositions that have for a long time dominated the study of consumption. First of all, there is the supposedly insurmountable difference between the socialist East versus the capitalist West, also translated as a difference between sparse versus abundant. And whereas consumption in the capitalist

West is usually studied without seriously paying attention to (semi) state controlled organisations, consumption processes in the communist East are usually regarded as the simple outcome of a state-determined policy. Both assumptions are short-sided and lazy.

Whereas it *is* true that the sphere of consumption in socialist countries *was* primarily organised by state-related commissions and organisations, this does not mean that the actual processes of consumption as they took place in the socialist societies, followed this state-prescribed path. On the contrary: concrete consumption processes in the GDR appeared to have been much more the result of individual activities, efforts and personal contacts, and far less of state prescribed politics of consumption.

And whereas one of the main prejudices with regard to the inhabitants of communist societies and their extremely high hopes with regard to Western life holds, that this expressed an implicit form of critique on, and aversion to the communist politics of consumption, I show in my forthcoming work that this interpretation is too simplistic. The fact that most East Germans simply equated the visible marks of Western affluence with a happy and fulfilled life was fully in line with the scenarios which the East German state had offered them – scenarios in which the prospect of future happiness (both in terms of material abundance *and* in terms of social togetherness) was firmly tied up with the economic and material reorganisation of society. In this respect, East German expectations' of Western consumer society as fulfilling and blissful, simply echoed state-socialist promises.

Both examples make clear that the influence of state politics on the domain of consumption was far more complex than it might seem at first sight. And whereas Lizabeth Cohen has highlighted in her recent work that the relations between state and citizens / consumers in the USA are constantly changing and highly complex, the same also holds for the countries in the socialist Bloc – be it in different ways.

One of the conclusions I therefore draw in my work on the former GDR is, that East German desires for the affluent West had relatively little to do with the nature and characteristics of Western consumer society as such. They followed from (and spoke of) the specific circumstances and problems of East German society and existence. In my opinion, East Germans' collective fantasies about the West German consumer society covered up and hid from view problems within the social texture of their own society – a line of reasoning which

(although mainly inspired by Lacanian thinking) echoes older (predominantly Marxist inspired) interpretations, that could also be applied to Western societies.

Furthermore, with regard to the basic assumption that the relationship between the capitalist West and the socialist East during the Cold War was predominantly characterised by hostility and a firm and almost insurmountable border: throughout the Cold War the two Blocs maintained close economic relations. East Germany, for instance, produced a significant part of West German consumer goods, allowing the cheap produced goods to nevertheless be labelled as ‘made in Germany’. A bitter detail in the history of inter-German relations: some of the GDR-produced-but-exported-to-the-FRG goods, were packed in the FRG, and then as ‘West German’ goods ‘exported’ to the GDR, where they were sold as ‘Western’, with prices that matched this description. The example once again raises the more general question what we are in fact talking about, when we refer to ‘imported goods’....

Whereas I used the East German case to point to a number of general pitfalls and challenges with regard to the history of the European consumer societies (mainly with regard to the role of the state and the relationship between citizens / consumers and the state), this certainly does not mean that we should neglect the important differences that characterise consumption politics and experiences in socialist and capitalist countries. With the end of the Cold War, the inhabitants of Central and Eastern Europe have for the first time been introduced to semi-institutionalised, openly expressed and socially accepted forms of social-economic differentiation, being articulated through consumption. Although their indignation about this seems to be so distressing for us, that we sometimes prefer to regard them as our “contemporary ancestors” (Fabian 1983) who are not yet used to ‘our postmodern play with different identity positions’, it might be more interesting to take their disapproval for what it (also) is: a critical voice with regard to our supposedly ‘common’ celebration of living a consuming life. This form of critique has a long tradition in Europe, probably deriving its evocative power partly from a combination of deep-seated Christian frugality and social democratic values.

However, no matter how we interpret recent developments in the former socialist Bloc, I hope to have made clear that it is extremely important to include these countries in our future research on the ways in which consumption has played a role in processes of European integration *and* differentiation. Because apart from the eventual historical similarities and

differences, the most important lesson that the East German example brings forward is, although well-known, important to stress again: the desire for, and acceptance of, objects or technologies that have been developed elsewhere can only be understood within the local context. This again makes clear how difficult it is to use terms such as ‘external influence’ too easily. The fact that concrete material goods or technologies are transferred, doesn’t tell us much about the place they acquire in people’s lives, the ways they are used, the meanings people attach to them, in short: to the way in which they become embedded in the receiving society. Lengthy processes of contestation, negotiation and appropriation precede the domestication of goods. Concepts such as ‘Americanisation’ often serve to describe an economic ideology or a technological promise, rather than an innovation process that has actually taken place (Oldenziel 2004), or to ascribe less favourable developments in people’s own society to someone or something else. Reticence and scepticism are therefore needed in describing and analysing international processes of technological transfer in terms of ‘external influence’ versus ‘local acceptance’ and/or as a process in which one party actively offers, whereas the other passively adopts.

Since so little is known about the ways in which specific American consumer goods and practices found their way to Europe, new research should examine these developments in more detail. I would propose to investigate a limited amount of (clusters of) American consumer goods and follow their European biography (Kopytoff) in order to reveal hidden processes of European integration *and* differentiation. This could firstly offer a more precise and differentiated insight in the nature of transatlantic technological interaction. The second reason why I think this to be a very fruitful domain for further research is that ‘the’ European consumer society is usually considered to be one of the most telling icons of increasing European integration. Since the same cardigans, cars and canned foods are being sold in the most remote places at the European continent (a development often described as increasing uniformity), consumption would be a perfect site to investigate whether indeed European technological developments point towards growing integration and uniformity. Furthermore and related to that is the assumption that if historians would focus on the (international) use of technologies, this would lead to a readjustment of the historiography of European processes of integration and differentiation. Even during the Cold War, for instance, when political contacts between the East and the West were reduced to a minimum, international gas and electricity networks still functioned smoothly.

Clusters of technologies that lend themselves really well for such an investigation are, for example, the idea *and* practice of the American kitchen and kitchen technologies (cf. Oldenziel and Zachmann i.p.) and/or supermarkets. Since the supermarket and the kitchen ‘meet each other’ in the refrigerator, it would be interesting to add this object in our future research, thereby bringing in another icon of ‘Americanization’ in the form of the (American) food chain. Buying deep frozen hamburgers not only presupposes a refrigerator to store them at home, but the habit of buying frozen food only becomes popular when people are able to shop large amounts of goods in advance – that is: in supermarkets.

After the Second World War, American corporations have made considerable efforts to export American kitchens and supermarkets to Europe. Both technological systems play an important symbolic role as icons of the American consumer society – and the same of course also goes for the (content of the) fridge. Since these objects, in terms of usage, are so strongly interrelated, one can expect them to further have played an important stimulating role in the invention and development of new technologies – frozen food, pre-packaging, mass scale production, labelling, et cetera (see Hamilton 2006, Van Otterloo 2000, Scarpellini 2004).

It would be wrong, however, to think of Americanisation as a one way transatlantic process. Ever since the 1890s, representatives of European businesses have been travelling to the United States in order to find out more about the precise workings of, for instance, systems of self-service that had already been developed in the United States. Moreover, European actors were keenly interested in sales- and consumption practices that had been developed in the United States. And although the American kitchen was praised by its American representatives because of its unparalleled functionality and its outspokenly modern looks, it remains a debatable point whether the functionality and looks of for instance the *Frankfurter Küche* (developed in Germany in 1926) were inferior to its American counterpart, thus making clear that, even if the American kitchen eventually became a success, it had had its European pioneers. But even the success of the American kitchen in Europe, as current research suggests, turns out to be in dispute. The American kitchen was more a technological promise and a spectre raised than an actual practice.

Following the precepts of Zeitlin et al. (2000) on the limits of ‘Americanization’ and De Grazia’s (2005) recent argument on America’s advance in Europe, it seems that both the development of European supermarkets along American lines and the American influence on

European kitchens and kitchen-related technologies, have been the result of the combined activities of American and European business representatives, and of consumers and their representatives. And all in all, both kitchens, supermarkets and American refrigerators (with their contents) offer enough leads in order to critically investigate processes of so-called Americanisation and, as far as these have actually taken place, to disentangle the push and pull factors that have played a role in their implementation.

In order to study the history of (these three, or other) specific (supposedly American) goods in Europe, it would be most fruitful to focus explicitly on the (consumer) organisations and social groups that were actively concerned with the introduction thereof. Such a focus would not only correct the old fashioned dichotomy of producers (actively) making, and consumers (passively) taking in technology, but it could also transform the dominant perspective on consumption as an allegedly individual activity. Within social science and historical research on consumption, the focus has usually been on the (collective) behaviour of individual shoppers who supposedly freely choose to participate, according to their financial capacity, in the attractions of the market. Up till recently, far less attention has been paid to the ways in which cooperative, social and statist organisations have tried to negotiate the introduction of the objects that were to be offered for sale. I fully agree with the organisers of this round table that it is time to break with this tradition and refocus on what they call ‘the mediation junction’ – that is: the ways in which the production of new technologies is realised not only by corporate control and individual consumers choices, but also by the negotiation of (the representatives of) consumers and other social groups. By doing so we can show that (transatlantic) technological exchange is a process of ongoing negotiation, modification, domestication and reconfiguration. And as Matthew Hilton has made clear in a recent article (in press), by focussing on all those who were actively engaged in the European (politics of) consumption, we could also partly rewrite the politics-dominated historiography of European history.

In order to successfully investigate the European biography of one or several American (or American inspired) consumer goods or clusters of technology, it is very important to cautiously choose in which countries the proposed research should be carried out. In my opinion, it goes without saying that one of the countries should be of the former socialist Bloc (Rumania? Poland?). And since one of the academic stakes is to seriously pay attention to the role of (semi) state-related organisations, it seems promising also to include one of the

Scandinavian countries – Finland might be most interesting, because of its position on the border of the former Soviet Union. Furthermore, I would opt for one of the northern-middle countries (UK? Belgium?) and for one in the south (Italy?). Research questions that should be put central stage, are for instance the following:

What groups and organizations –in the United States, in different European countries and in international European cooperation – have tried to negotiate, in what ways, the introduction of American consumer goods and practices on the European market? What were their main interests, for and on behalf of whom did they say to be working? Did they cooperate internationally and/or did they refer to each other's work and activities, in other words: was there a European network of actors who were actively engaged in the introduction, reception and distribution of American consumer goods in Europe? What discourses did they use, which platforms did they choose and how did their activities differ from or were similar to each other (anti-U.S.? national identity? European cooperation / identity formation?). How did the different national material and consumptive landscapes, in which the American goods had to sweep the market, look like? In what ways did the American goods differ from, or were identical to, their European 'competitors'? What cultural scripts were or could be projected on both categories of goods? What effects did the activities of all the parties that were working on the European politics of (American) consumption have – how did their efforts influence and change the original technologies?

Focussing on international similarities *and* differences, the proposed research will probably invite us to further theorise about questions like:

Is consumption in this specific historical context to be considered an internationally homogenising or differentiating factor?

Did it, in social-economic terms, play an equalizing (democratising) or, on the contrary, a differentiating / distinguishing role?

What role does 'culture' play in these processes, as compared to social and economic factors? And, coming back to the East German case with which I started this paper: what in fact do we talk about, when we talk about 'Americanisation' when the goods in question are produced in China and other low-wage-countries?

How is it to be understood that consumption occupies such a central place in present day (Western) life, whereas this pivotal position is at the same time so often criticised? The situation in East Germany (with high hopes before and bitter disappointment after the *Wende*)

may be more outspoken than elsewhere, but in my opinion it merely highlights a fundamental antagonism with regard to the way in which people relate to consumption in general. Especially in Europe, there is a long tradition of critique on the importance of consumption which, as I suggested before, may very well turn out to be one of the factors integrating European citizen-consumers – in ambivalence.