

Nila Ginger Hofman. Women and Capitalism in the Croatian Hinterland. The Practice of Labor and Consumption. Lexington Books, 2015. 174 pages. Bibliography. Index. \$XXX, hard bound.

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Consumption as a social and cultural practice and a form of economic behavior is often overlooked in research of socialism and post-socialism. Nila Ginger Hofman makes an important contribution to the topic with her “Women and Capitalism in the Croatian Hinterland,” where she seeks “to examine how women remembered the socialist era and how they participate and negotiate the capitalist present focusing on the spheres of earning and spending” (117). Hofman, whose evidence comes from interviews and participant observation, employs a “blended approach” of examining production and consumption together, rather than segregating them. This perspective, she argues compellingly, helps to reveal the normative forces that mediate women’s participation in the social spheres of labor and consumption, and to make sense of the experiences and worldviews of those who lived both in socialism and in the Croatian new capitalism.

As a part of former Yugoslavia, whose socialist regime was rather open and allowed travel and some free enterprise, Croatia enjoyed a rather comfortable life style, and Hofman captures “Yugonostalgia” for the good part of socialism with its paid vacations, generous benefits (especially for women), and the feeling of comradeship at work. Her informants fondly recollect “shopping trips” to neighboring Italian and Austrian border towns, as the consumption of Western goods, which were believed to be of better quality, was a way to express status, individuality, and group identity. At the same time, mass-produced things could be found ill-fitting and not made for “Croatian bodies,” and women who belonged to the rising urban professional class developed a desire for personal attention and boutique-style consumption. Thus, as Hofman explains, one of the peculiarities of “Yugoslav consumerism” was a “Do It Yourself” (DIY) approach. For example, customers worked together with their tailors on creating outfits, had things made to their order, and felt involved in the production process, rather than alienated from it. Another shopping trend that defined the era was “buying fresh” daily at a local downtown market. DIY, “buying fresh,” and some other consumer practices were aligned with domestic economy and a particular sense of (national) self.

Hofman argues that contrary to socialist practices, “the rhetoric of capitalist consumption is focused on the availability of choices, thereby enabling a consumer model associated with “individual choice” (38). In independent Croatia, this pattern stands for being *European*, as it came to life amidst debates and hopes for accession into the European Union, and alongside the advent of capitalism and globalization. As big supermarkets were ousting traditional grocery stores that used to sell locally grown food, women’s work schedules also changed to be in sync with capitalist business efficiency. Those shifts affected food shopping habits, meal preparation and eating rituals, as less time for family and leisure leads to different consumer experiences, e.g. on-the-go consumer practices, and the waning of “slow food” and café culture. At the same time, as it was discovered that ready-made clothes are tailored for “the young, tall, and very thin” (70), some dissatisfaction with Western mass-produced goods arrived, and many of Hofman’s

informants started missing things made specifically for them. The current capitalist market as it exists in Croatia, provides fewer options for individuation (compared to tailor services), while in the new liberal economy, DIY practices take the function of survival skills. Thus, as Hofman demonstrates persuasively, gender, labor, and consumption mutually shape and reinforce one another.

Hofman's book excels in demonstrating the change in the texture of society through emerging class differentiation on both ends of the production/consumption continuum. As masses of women moved from paid employment with state-guaranteed benefits into cottage industries (like the production of soft cheese and cream on a family farm) and service jobs, many struggle with the feeling that the old system might have provided them with more respect. Looking back, some tend to think, if realistically, that their life had a purpose and they were making a difference; having lived through a painful period of privatization and growing unemployment, they may see business as another word for stealing and think of their work as catering for the rich. New work cultures offer less community and are described as focusing on efficiency and calculability, and Hofman conceptualizes these changes as the beginnings of the McDonaldization process, as it was described by the American sociologist George Ritzer. In the new context, "buying fresh," which demands more time and effort, becomes a form of patriotism and may be associated with standing for traditional and nationalist values.

A feeling of nostalgia for the past is a form of dissatisfaction with and a way to criticize neoliberal power structures and economic disparity on the part of certain generational cohorts, who resist them through DIY and local consumption. The younger generation, though, who did not experience socialism directly, may see international shopping malls as a great convenience, as "mass produced-goods are created and marketed with the younger generation in mind" (124), and serve as a resource for looking modern and European via a particular consumption pattern. "Women and Capitalism in the Croatian Hinterland" provides an insight into the often neglected connection between consumption and production as a meaning-making process linked to identity construction and marking social status. In doing so, the book contributes to important debates about the nature of post-socialist nostalgia for the "old system" and the ambivalent consequences of trade liberalization, modernity and the inclusion in the EU. It can be appropriate for both undergraduates and graduate students, as well as social scientists researching the post-socialist region.