

## Oksana Shmulyar Gréen

**Jennifer Patico. *Consumption and Social Change in a Post-Soviet Middle Class*. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008. xvii + 244 p. ISBN 978-0-8047-0069-6.**

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The book under review is an ethnographic study exploring how people in Russia have experienced and made sense of the economic and social transformations of the 1990s through the prism of consumption. Published in 2008, the book's major focus is on the previous decade and especially the issue of the "changing consumer landscape" (2) that took shape at a critical juncture between the two types of economic and social systems: a collapsing socialism and an emerging market economy. The author was particularly interested in identifying the symbolic and cultural markers of how people, caught in the midst of a transforming society, "interpret and construct the interrelationships between materiality and morality; between wealth and social standing; and between resources and respect in the course of their commodity consumption" (8). The objects of Patico's study—consumption in the post-Soviet landscape, as well as a particular social group: schoolteachers of two publicly funded schools in the city of St. Petersburg—were chosen with care. To begin with, post-Soviet consumerism and its rituals render themselves as a value-laden space, where continuing legacies of socialism, with its shortages and consumption restrictions, still serve as moral lenses through which Russian people frame and legitimize social inequalities within the new, marketized post-Soviet society. On the other hand, by telling the story of a changing society from the perspective of teachers, who themselves were heavily affected by the disintegration of the state and degradation of their own professional worth, Patico reveals complex interrelationships between material (money, wealth, consumption) and moral (social standing, moral rectitude) indices of value. The shifting *logics of value*, or the changing standards according to which schoolteachers legitimized their own and others' consumption, represent a set of key organizing ideas that inform the analysis of ample empirical material collected by the author.

The book is based on fieldwork and interviews with twenty-four teachers employed at two publicly funded schools, situated close to the city center of St. Petersburg. The book also provides some illustrative material, such as statistical data on declining incomes and subsistence levels caused by the 1998 crisis, as well as photos of the city and its popular consumer sites. The author's first visit to St. Petersburg took place in 1998–1999, the time when many of the hopes of Russia's economic and social boom were dashed in a great financial collapse. Female teachers comprised the majority of Patico's respondents both due to the fact that teaching

was a predominately female domain in Russia, but also because of the ways that consumption, as a gendered and classed phenomenon, frequently becomes a female responsibility. It is through a close observation of the teachers' everyday life, interaction with colleagues, celebrations, routine grocery shopping, and friendly chat that the author unveils "the bigger issues" of middle-class belonging, gender, social inequality, and social in/justice in post-Soviet Russian society.

The book consists of seven chapters, each one dealing with the historical, cultural, and symbolic ramifications of the logic of value. The first chapter sets the scene by introducing its research questions, theoretical framework, and empirical sources, as discussed above. Chapter two examines teachers' subjective experiences of expanding and diversifying commodity markets, fluctuating prices, and incomes, and a gradual process of disorientation and sneaking doubt about one's own social standing in postsocialist society. The chapter also provides a historical sketch that traces the origins of the middle-class identity of teachers, and other Soviet professionals, to the Soviet ethos of *kul'turnost'* (culturedness), *vospitanie* (upbringing), and meritocracy as the key elements of their own sense of worth, which helped them to negotiate consumer access in a stratified Soviet society as well as serving as a moral compass in the new consumer landscape of the 1990s. The third chapter concentrates on further analyzing "culturedness," but now both as a means of measuring one's worth and identity, and as a critique of the rapidly growing class of *nouveau riche* who were seen as lacking sophistication. Through everyday encounters with pupils of wealthy parents, as well as the quotidian references to the so-called New Russians—in particular to their consumption patterns depicted in imaginative and often exaggerated terms—this chapter brings to the fore a fundamental discrepancy between the social value of the teaching profession and the lack of recognition of their contribution to society, in which, it seemed, the new rich were considered more deserving of higher living standards. Chapter four provides an insight into new consumer dilemmas that most Russians, and particularly schoolteachers in the study, had to deal with on a daily basis. These dilemmas were related to issues of quality, prestige, and affordability of consumer goods that since the early 1990s could be purchased not only in state-owned shops, but also at open-air and street markets and kiosks, as well as in fashionable boutiques which only the select few could afford. Ranking a product according to its country of origin—domestically produced or imported—was seen as the most reliable way of determining quality during Soviet days. In the 1990s, however, when the Russian market was flooded with globally sourced commodities and everyday items, teachers became distressingly aware of the global hierarchy of production and consumption in which Russia had difficulty competing on equal terms. In the fifth chapter, post-Soviet consumerism is analysed within the realms of work, domesticity, and leisure, which are both gendered and classed. Compared to the Soviet period, when being a good hostess was a matter of pride which women could achieve by relying on particular skills of *dostavanie* (acquiring things that were in short supply), in the post-Soviet landscape femininity was much more dependent on financial resources and material privilege, now attainable only to women who did not actually deserve it—according

to schoolteachers, the wives of the proverbial New Russians. Lacking such resources, the teachers in the study were struggling “to strike a modest balance between the extremes of careless inattention and garish extravagance” (167). Chapter six explores what the author calls “signs of attention,” including gift giving, sociability, reciprocity, and other modes of informal exchange in the changing economy. The argument is made that the logic of value in informal exchanges is now determined by cost rather than by access to desirable goods. Still, the care with which gifts are chosen and exchanged in Russia indicates the importance of moral legitimacy and personal worth in exchange-based relationships. In the seventh and final chapter, the key themes emerging from the book are brought together in a discussion of the ambivalence and flexibility characterizing Russian people’s responses to the market economy, especially in their need to strike a balance between social in/justice and the consumerist plenty of the post-Soviet landscape. The chapter also contains the author’s reflections after revisiting the same schools in 2003, when the economy and society were rapidly recovering from the crisis. Yet what she found was that several of her respondents had left teaching for other occupations in search of a larger income. But even those teachers who continued in their jobs were less likely to attribute their hardships to an unjust society, beginning to accept the idea of personal responsibility for their own financial success.

One of the main contributions of Patino’s book is that it provides a close insight into the social and symbolic stakes behind consumption as one of the elements of “the ongoing flow of life” (26). Carefully observing and listening to ordinary people in the midst of a changing society, the author grasps the historical roots, symbolism, and dynamics of consumption, which is a particularly useful locus for analyzing wider issues of emerging capitalist culture in Russia. The question that inevitably rises, however, is whether the struggles for self-respect schoolteachers had to face in the aftermath of the 1998 crisis bear any resemblance to the struggles going on in Russia following the global crisis of 2008. This question is, of course, purely hypothetical, and it invites further research on the shifting logics of value in transitional societies.