

NORMALITY, CONTROL AND THE STATE. REVIEW OF
*BALKAN BLUES. CONSUMER POLITICS AFTER STATE
SOCIALISM*, BY YUSON JUNG, BLOOMINGTON:
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Fake products, a lack of control, consumer access to goods and a longing for “normality” – these are some of the central issues touched upon in a recently published book by American-Korean anthropologist, Yuson Jung. Although *Balkan Blues* deals with post-communist Bulgaria, many conclusions and observations can be applied to other post-communist or post-socialist countries, not only those in the Balkans. The book deals with consumer politics after state socialism and discusses the ways in which people engage in daily consumer practices (shopping, using services), how they understand their rights as consumers and how they demand responsibility from the providers of specific goods. The author looks at unequal access to goods and, contrary to many other studies on the topic, she looks not only at the agency of consumers but also at their vulnerability. Furthermore, Jung proposes an understanding of consumption as a site of civic engagement. Bulgaria is one of the poorest countries in the EU, and balancing between choice and access is an important consumer concern.

I started reading this book from the appendix – and I recommend readers do the same. We only meet the author – a young woman, raised in South Korea and Germany, who graduated in the US – in this last part of the book. Without knowing the author’s positionality and personal embodied experience, it would be more difficult to understand her relationships with people in the field and her trials in understanding post-socialist reality. Yusun Jung did “classic” long-term fieldwork in Sofia (1999–2016) focusing on the everyday consumption practices of Bulgarians at a time of transformation from a centrally planned economy to a consumer society with a market economy. She volunteered at the BNCA (Bulgarian National Consumers Association), observing and taking part in events and carrying out expert interviews. She also lived with families (12 she got to know very well), sharing their consumption practices and everyday activities.

Consumption practices and activities in post-socialist Bulgaria need to be understood in relation to the previous system: state socialism. Although this period was marked by shortages of goods, basic needs were guaranteed by the state (e.g. food, water, housing and basic services, including seaside holidays). At the same time, the distribution of goods was irregular, and citizens neither had any choice nor could they impact on the distribution of goods. At the same time, people came to expect that the state was controlling what was available on the market, and even though certain products were sometimes of low quality, they were accessible to almost everyone; and they were neither “garbage” nor “fake”. The word “almost” is of the utmost importance here: the dire lack of many products and the absence of higher quality products led people into developing the habit of using their informal connections (*vruzki*) in order to access some goods. In the late 1960s, goods from the West were sold at a hard currency store, and later at a chain of stores called CORECOM. The name is an acronym from the French *Comptoir de Representation et de Commerce*, usually referred to in short as *korektsiya na komunizma*. CORECOM is understood by Jung as a marker of memory of consumer activities during socialism, juxtaposed with the experiences of long lines or hoarding that were common consumer strategies at that time: “As the state could not completely fulfill the necessities it defined, it had to correct its own agenda by creating stores like CORECOM that not only tacitly acknowledged the failure of the system on the one hand but also showed how the state took accountability in addressing that failure on the other” (p. 50). In the early days of CORECOM, only a few could shop there: the right document was required, along with hard currencies (dollars or marks). This was the reason why people relied on connections and on networks through which things were acquired in informal or even semi-legal ways.

These informal relations and strategies of getting things done while avoiding official bureaucracies are well described in the literature on post-socialist / post-communist practices¹, and it is a pity that the author does not devote more space to this in the book. One example of such of a strategy is the concept of *kombinowanie* which Nicolette Makovicky analyses on the basis of her research in Poland. This term literally means “to sort out”, but is used to describe “a range of activities and (moral) dispositions, from economic and political corruption, to academic plagiarism, to do-it-yourself house refurbishment” (Makovicky 2018: 4). The same strategy is applied by Bulgarians, and using informal networks and practices that “involve illegal activity, or, more commonly, activities whose legality is ambiguous” (Galbraith 2003, 6) may also be analyzed as a much older cultural legacy than simply a socialist one. Tanya

1 There is no room here for the discussions of the category of post-socialism or post-communism itself. It is however important to remember that the category of post-socialism was introduced by Western scholars, while in the region itself the term “post-communism” tended to be used (cf. Skalnik 2002; Cervinkova 2012).

Chavdarova notes that such practices have a long history in Bulgaria and that in the aftermath of state socialism they are related to poverty and unemployment:

The shortages of goods and services that typified the socialist economy were replaced by shortages of money, jobs and trustworthy partners. Compensating for these deficiencies became a highly significant and widely spread factor in *vruzki* exchanges. Recurrent exchanges of favors have shaped expectations and rules of behavior. The rules implicitly postulate that utility is expected to increase when impersonal relationships become personal (Chavdarova 2018, 66).

Furthermore, according to Ilkà Thiessen (2007), an anthropologist who conducted research in Skopje in the 1990s, these kinds of practices fit into the discussion about Europe and the Balkans or about East and West. “We don’t have a normal life like the Europeans”, says one of Jung’s research partners (p. 85), where “Europeans” mean citizens of the “old EU” (cf. Petrovic 2011). A “normal” life means anxiety-free (*spokoino*), and it is related to a “normal” state. During communism, it was the state who “took care” of citizens by providing them with jobs and goods, and even by organizing or facilitating holidays. Today, the state is still perceived to be responsible for the protection of consumers and the control of products on the market. “The state”, writes Jung (p. 7), “can be understood [...] as a conceptual and cultural category associated with control (especially over product quality and safety) and accountability (ensuring the legal and electoral systems to guarantee this control work)” or as “an abstract cultural category shaped by state socialism and reproduced through everyday consumption practices even for those consumers who did not have first-hand experiences with state socialism” (p. 40–41). This concept is similar to that presented by Anna Malewska-Szałygin, based on her research among Polish Highlanders: the state and the authorities are referred to as “they” (rich people who are in power, living somewhere in the capital city), and believed to be responsible for citizens’ poverty, unemployment and chaos (Malewska-Szałygin 2017). In Bulgaria also, after socialism, the state is perceived to be absent. People distrust the post-socialist state and rely mostly on their own networks and informal strategies.

The book begins with a vignette about low-rise shops in Sofia, known as *kneel shops*, in one of which the author notices a fake (*mente*) Fanta. I remember similar situations from my fieldwork in Macedonia. In the sunny summer of 2000 or 2001, I bought some batteries for my voice recorder at the crowded Stone Bridge in Skopje. It was only when I got back to my rented room that I realized that I had bought a fake product: the brand read “Somy” instead of “Sony”. My landlady started to laugh, and showed me a very well forged bottle of “Coca-Cola” and a pair of trousers labelled “Elvis”. All the logos looked original at first glance. *Mente*, as Jung rightly writes, is an important term meaning not only fake products, but also corrupt politicians and greedy businessman. In the other words, *mente* stands for “everything that was not

right in the aftermath of socialism” (p. 1). *Mente* is a term that serves as a socio-cultural critique against new forms of power. Although in the post-socialist era there are plenty of goods, consumers either cannot afford them or do not trust them. Because purchasing power in Bulgaria is still much lower than in other EU countries, consumers should always balance between access and choices. Although Bulgarians were afraid of buying *mente* products, they were often not in a position to afford originals. The Sofians, with whom Yusun Jung did shopping, carefully examined products from the top and bottom shelves to find the best (value for money), and some would eventually choose the cheapest, being aware of the possibility that they were *mente* products.

The 1990s saw the emergence of a magazine titled *Mente i Originali (Fake and Originals)*: a guide for consumers on how to recognize *mente* and shop sensibly. The magazine also showed that even original brands like Coca-Cola have different recipes for different markets and that, for example in Greece, it tasted differently than it did in Bulgaria (it is worth noting that according to Bulgarians’ mental maps, Greece is part of the West). The magazine served as a kind of consumer advocacy forum, before consumers’ organizations started their activities and before the implementation of a law on consumer protection. However, consumers did not want to buy a magazine and pay for information about tests on products. Also, they showed disbelief with regard to successful activities of NGO advocacy and no understanding of the goals of NGOs. Instead, they requested free information and protection from the state. Even in 1998, when a consumer protection law was introduced (the Law of Consumer Protection and Trade Rules), people did not trust it: it was widely believed that the law existed only on paper so that Bulgaria could join the EU, but that nobody applied or respected it. In fact, the law was a direct translation from relevant EU laws, with no reference to the historical and social experiences of Bulgarians.

The contemporary consumption strategies analysed by Jung are still based predominantly on trust and social networks. Since 2013, despite the opening of new chain supermarkets popular all over Europe, many people still prefer going to “old” neighbourhood stores they trusted. They did it even when the sellers were rude. Jung calls this “inverted power relations”, and understands the position of seller over buyer as a socialist legacy. The answer to the question “why do they still go there” was that “[a]t least they do not sell *mente* products” (p. 63). The buyers know sellers and sellers know buyers, so – as Sofians explained – they cannot cheat. It would be interesting in this context to see how Jung would analyse “do-it-yourself” strategies. Other publications regarding Bulgaria and other post-socialist countries have dealt with the significance of homemade food (cf. a paper about yogurt in Bulgaria, see Yotova 2018), food preserves during the socialist “scarcity economy” and the various informal economic practices that emerged later (Chavdarova 2002; Polese, Rodgers 2011).

Heating problems were one such example of the informal practices of Sofians that resulted from the fact that their needs were no longer cared for by the state. Thanks

to long-term participant observation, Jung could herself experience cold Bulgarian winters without central heating in the block of flats where she rented a room. She was also able to understand how the issue of *parno* (heating) is important for Sofians, although rarely explicitly expressed. During communist times, heating, water and electricity were provided by the state and were accessible to everybody. In the aftermath of socialism, central heating was provided by a private (privatized state) company operating in the neighbourhoods and was no longer affordable for everybody. Thus, many people would turn off the heating and either suffer the cold or look for alternative, illegal methods, because the state “doesn’t care”. One of Jung’s befriended families installed by themselves a wood-burning furnace so as to avoid freezing, because they could no longer afford central heating. This was an informal practice and informal strategy used not only by Jung’s research partners. Heating problems were both private and public as they were widely commented on, and alternative heating strategies were a kind of civic engagement. Another example is that of affordable housing and a summer vacation. Jung found it difficult to understand that local people saw saving for at least a few days of holidays as a “need”. Later on she learned that during socialist times it was “normal” for everybody to have their summer holidays at the Black Sea guaranteed by the workplace and that the working class right to leisure time was perceived as a part of “normal” life. People sought this “normality” also after communism, but affording a flat or travel was a lot more difficult than it was during communist times.

Balkan Blues. Consumer Politics After State Socialism by Yuson Jung is a good contribution to post-socialist and Balkan studies, showing well that the concept of post-socialism can still be useful not only in the context of Central and Eastern Europe, but also in the Balkans (cf. Bielenin-Lenczowska 2017). The book is based on long-term, deep ethnography and is well written. What it lacks is more focus on informality and local networks (connections or *vruzki*) – something that has been important in other post-socialist or post-communist countries. Still, I recommend it to anyone who wants to try to understand social, political, and economic differences in Europe and everyday practices related to the (imaginaries of the) state.

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