

Debating Consumer Durables, Luxury and Social Inequality in Poland during the System Transition

von
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Introduction

This essay aims to discuss how cultural meanings of modern consumer durables, such as colour TVs, stereos and automatic washing machines, were embedded in the public debate towards social equality before and after the change of 1989 in Poland. In state socialism, availability of affordable electric appliances was one of the agendas of the state politics of collective consumption. Along with the system transition, affordability of consumer durables became extensively discussed within the framework of emerging consumer capitalism. At that time purchases and ownership of consumer durables became an indicator of the emergence of a new consumption culture based upon individual lifestyles in a society where social diversification and income inequality were intrinsic elements of social order.

My argument here is that availability, affordability and ownership of consumer durables were some of the most significant elements of the public discourse towards social equality, affluence and standard of living both before and after the system transition. In the late 1980s possession of such goods, especially if they were brought from the West or bought in hard currency stores, was a distinction of new income elites with a substantial disposable income. The change in the year 1989 and the emergence of free market economy resulted in such goods not only becoming massively available in private retail trade but also more affordable. The democratization of consumption in a free market economy was considered in media discourse at that time as one of the most significant positive currents in post-socialist Poland. Thus, by studying the debate on consumer durables, standard of living and social equality, we can better grasp the socio-economic dimension of the time of upheaval. This case also shows how a study of material culture could be useful for the better understanding of the course of system transition in Central Europe.¹ Frank Trentmann, while discussing ‘material turn’ in historical re-

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¹ For classic studies of the material culture, see ARJUN APPADURAI (ed.): *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge 1986; DANIEL MILLER (ed.): *Material Cultures. Why Some Things Matter*, Chicago 1998; GRANT McCracken: *Culture and Consumption. New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*, Bloomington 1990. For the discussion on the impact of the ‘material turn’ on historical sciences, see FRANK TRENTMANN: *Materiality in the Future*

search brings several instances of the seamless dependences between ‘things, practices, politics’ in particular historical contexts.² This study shows how analysis of dependences between things, practices and politics can enrich our further understanding of the legacy of the system transition that occurred in 1989.

In the historiography of the post-war development of Western Europe, scholars discuss how consumer durables became symbols of the rise in standards of living and affluence for virtually all strata of society.³ In state socialist countries, propaganda rhetoric claimed that governmental agencies and manufacturers would actively introduce a policy of mass consumption which would secure full supply of affordable consumer durables in the near future. However, in the 1980s it became obvious that such policies had failed. For Poles, who were experiencing a deep economic crisis and shortages at that time, several consumer durables such as colour TVs or automatic washing machines, which were supposed to be soon available for every Polish household, became symbols of luxury available only to a limited number of consumers with substantial disposable income and ‘connections’.

This study is inspired by a reportage published in *Pan* (The Gentleman), a Polish imitation of *Playboy* published 1987–1992, which openly promoted conspicuous consumption. In early 1989 a Pole who was about to have a vacation in Greece claimed that his holiday and a colour TV set which he supposedly owned, ‘are luxuries in our poor country and we have to acknowledge (*pogodzić się*) the fact that they are only for the chosen’.⁴ This statement excellently shows that both holidays and colour TVs, symbols of socialist mass consumption which were supposed to be available for all strata of society, became symbols of affluent consumption available only for the income elite. This statement incited me to explore how consumer durables were included as symbols of affluence in public debate towards economic and social change before and after 1989.

The statement that a colour TV was considered a luxury item shows how a consumer product which previously was a symbol of ‘socialist modernity’ became ‘commoditized’ as a product available only to a limited number of

of History. Things, Practices, and Politics, in: *Journal of British Studies* 48 (2009), 2, pp. 283–307.

² FRANK TRENTMANN: Knowing Consumers—Histories, Identities, Practices. An Introduction, in: IDEM (ed.): *The Making of the Consumer. Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World*, Oxford 2005, pp. 1–27.

³ See the special issue of *Journal of Contemporary History* 40 (2005), 2: Domestic Dreamworlds. Notions of Home in Post-1945 Europe, and VICTORIA DE GRAZIA: Irresistible Empire. America’s Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe, Cambridge – London 2005; RUTH OLDENZIEL, KARIN ZACHMANN (eds.): Cold War Kitchen. Americanization, Technology, and European Users, Cambridge – London 2010.

⁴ ZBIGNIEW CHOMICZ (ed.): Handel wakacyjny—tak, nie? [Holiday Trade Tourism—Yes or No?], in: *Pan* (1989), August, pp. 4, 38, here p. 38.

consumers who could afford it.⁵ In the vast literature on the economic and social changes of the year 1989 in Central Europe the role of material culture and on-going processes of 'commodification' of a range of products and services has been rather overlooked. One of the most interesting aspects of this complex socio-economic change is the demise of the flawed state politics of mass consumption and the patterns of consumption specific to the 'economy of shortages' replaced by the ideology of consumer capitalism.⁶ Roberta Sassatelli notes that commodities are socially constructed at the same time through a physical presence in retail trade and symbolically through advertising and media presence.⁷ Here I show how the physical presence of commodities in retail trade and their affordability influenced their cultural meanings in a particular historical context. My aim here is not to contribute to scholarship with an instance of a 'social history of commodities' in a particular time and space but to show how analysing the debate on patterns of consumption can contribute to the understanding of, as Katherine Verdery puts it, reconfiguration of 'the internal organization of these [Central European] societies'.⁸ With this paper I intend to show how the change in the notion of social equality/inequality was a continuous process which began long before the year 1989. By showing how a group of consumer products, identified as status symbols, were discussed in media discourse, the importance of elements of reconfiguration, such as the demise of the politics of mass consumption and the emergence of a market for premium goods available only for new income elites, becomes clear.

The paper is organized as follows. The first section briefly discusses the role of practices of consumption in the context of politics of mass consumption and social distinction in Central Europe in state socialism and the early post-communist period. The second section discusses several factors which resulted in consumer durables being barely reachable and affordable for Polish consumers in late state socialism despite the politics of mass consumption. The third section shows how particular electric appliances became recognized as status symbols by new income elites, and how they articulated the emergence of social inequalities in a supposedly classless society. The fourth and last chapter discusses how the democratization of consumption and the ideology of consumer capitalism after the year 1989 were interdependent with the 'reconfiguration' of Polish society. Research for this article includes content analysis of selected influential economic and weekly news magazines, market research and social opinion survey reports. Research was supported with a

⁵ IGOR KOPYTOFF: The Cultural Biography of Things. Commoditization as Process, in: APPADURAI (as in footnote 1), pp. 64-91.

⁶ JANOS KORNAI: The Economics of Shortage, Amsterdam 1980.

⁷ ROBERTA SASSATELLI: Consumer Culture. History, Theory, and Politics, London 2007, p. 132.

⁸ KATHERINE VERDERY: Theorizing Socialism. A Prologue to the 'Transition', in: American Ethnologist 18 (1991), 3, pp. 419-439, here p. 419.

series of twenty interviews with individuals who belonged to the age category of young adults in 1989.⁹

Consumption, Class and Social Inequalities in State Socialism

According to Susan Strasser, consumption should not be considered a separate field in historical studies but rather as ‘a prism through which many aspects of social and political life may be viewed’.¹⁰ Recent studies of post-war consumer culture in Western Europe significantly enriched European economic, social and cultural history by showing how production and consumption of commodities became included in policies of governmental agencies during the post-war economic rebuild.¹¹ For instance, the abundance of commodities and the strengthening of consumer purchasing power was one of the main agendas of the Marshall Plan which aimed to secure economic and political stability for West European states.¹² In particular, the subject of the politics of consumption was the working class. By raising the standards of living of the working class, governments intended to show that political regimes actively support social equality. The goal of such a policy was to hinder sympathies towards communism as a viable alternative which promised well-being for the lower social strata. Janine Clarke, while discussing Moulinex—the French household appliance manufacturer and ‘national champion’, strongly supported by the French government in the interest of the nation—explores how the state politics of consumption and corporate interest influenced the manufacturing of a range of affordable appliances.¹³

In recent years, the rise in interest in consumer culture in Central Europe has provided an insight into state socialism as a system in which peoples’ well-being was one of the crucial ideological principles of political regimes.¹⁴

⁹ My respondents were selected through snowball sampling. This group includes respondents with a background from various social strata: working class, ‘working intelligentsia’ and farmers. Interviews were conducted in Wrocław in 2013 and 2014.

¹⁰ SUSAN STRASSER: Making Consumption Conspicuous. Transgressive Topics go Mainstream, in: *Technology & Culture* 43 (2002), 4, pp. 755-770, here p. 756.

¹¹ DE GRAZIA (as in footnote 3).

¹² GREG CASTILLO: Domesticating the Cold War. Household Consumption as Propaganda in Marshall Plan Germany, in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 40 (2005), 2, pp. 261-288.

¹³ JACKIE CLARKE: Closing Moulinex. Thoughts on the Visibility and Invisibility of Industrial Labour in Contemporary France, in: *Modern and Contemporary France* 19 (2011), 4, pp. 443-458.

¹⁴ PAULINA BREN, MARY NEUBURGER (eds.): *Communism Unwrapped. Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*, Oxford 2012; MARK LANDSMAN: *Dictatorship and Demand. The Politics of Consumerism in East Germany*, Cambridge – London 2005; NATALYA CHERNYSHOVA: *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*, London – New York 2013; KRISZTINA FEHÉRVÁRY: *Goods and States. The Political Logic of State-Socialist*

Such studies show how state agencies carried on intensive, yet flawed, politics towards mass consumption and how political guidelines influenced production and distribution of commodities in centrally planned economies. One of the most important guidelines was the attempt to ‘de-commoditize’ consumer goods. For instance, Serguei Oushakine discusses attempts to minimize potential ‘exchange value’ of commodities which were supposed to have only ‘use value’ in socialist societies.¹⁵

The studies of consumer culture in the Eastern Bloc primarily focus on understanding how states tried to enforce politics of mass consumption aimed to ensure the equal distribution of goods, thereby securing social equality, one of communism’s guiding ideological principles. In socialism all members of society were supposed to have access to the quantity of particular goods that fulfilled their needs, as well as high quality products. For instance, the building of mass housing projects in the Soviet Union was driven by such a principle.¹⁶ Rossitza Guentcheva in her essay about the politics surrounding quality control in state socialist Bulgaria shows how securing high quality standards of all commodities, not only premium high priced goods, became an agenda of governmental agencies.¹⁷ Moreover, Victor Buchli points out that politics of mass consumption was supposed to contribute to the demise of social inequalities by promoting the same taste in design among all social strata.¹⁸

However, such studies scarcely explore the interdependence of patterns of consumption and severe social inequalities based upon being inside or outside the *nomenklatura*, occupational income, or ethnicity in state socialism. Despite attempts to minimize it, ‘exchange value’ of commodities prevailed in socialist societies. Moreover, several commodities became symbols of conspicuous consumption.¹⁹ In socialist societies several consumer products played a significant role as status symbols and attributes of cultural distinction of those who had ‘connections’ and the disposable income to acquire those goods. For instance, a range of products that could be labelled ‘made in

Material Culture, in: Comparative Studies in Society and History 51 (2009), 2, pp. 426-459.

¹⁵ SERGUEI OUSHAKINE: ‘Against the Cult of Things’. On Soviet Productivism, Storage Economy, and Commodities with No Destination, in: The Russian Review 73 (2014), pp. 198-236.

¹⁶ STEVEN E. HARRIS: Communism on Tomorrow Street. Mass Housing and Everyday Life after Stalin, Washington – Baltimore 2013.

¹⁷ ROSSITZA GUENTCHEVA: Material Harmony. The Quest for Quality in Socialist Bulgaria, in: BREN/NEUBURGER (as in footnote 14), pp. 140-163.

¹⁸ VICTOR BUCHLI: Khrushchev, Modernism, and the Fight against ‘Petit-bourgeois’ Consciousness in the Soviet Home, in: Journal of Design History 10 (1997), 2, pp. 161-176.

¹⁹ SUSAN REID, DAVID CROWLEY (eds.): Pleasures in Socialism. Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc, Evanston/IL 2010.

the West' played such a role in the Soviet Union in the 1980s.²⁰ In some cases, communist officials themselves were the agents who started to promote such patterns of consumption along with 'the spirit of capitalism', as part of a new approach towards the increase in work ethics in state economy.²¹

In late state socialism, two processes of economic and cultural distinction can be simultaneously observed, in which patterns of consumption played a substantial role in creating and recreating distinct status groups.²² The first process was the petrification of *nomenklatura* which came from the upwardly moving working class. Despite the rhetoric of social equality, this class of 'consumers of privilege' belonged to an 'elite consumption network' and distinguished themselves from other strata in society through patterns of consumption.²³ For instance, the GDR political elite in late socialism appropriated 'Volvo sedans, Philips televisions, and Blaupunkt phonographs as signs of status and power'.²⁴

The second process was the rise of a class of private entrepreneurs who ran their businesses where they were allowed to by state agencies. In Poland in the 1980s this group was generally referred to as *prywaciarze*. Jerzy Kochanowski in his book on Polish shadow economy provides an excellent picture of several distinctive groups of *prywaciarze* such as greengrocers (*badylarze*), trade tourists and black market operators who began to be recognized as a new income elite in the 1980s and manifested their socio-economic status with distinctive forms of conspicuous consumption.²⁵

One of the main drawbacks of the historiography of Central Europe is the scarcity of studies on continuities in economic, social and cultural currents before and after 1989.²⁶ The importance of such continuity in consumption patterns is pointed out by Katharine Sredl in her study on social distinction

²⁰ ALEXEI YURCHAK: Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation, Princeton – Oxford 2005, chapter 5: Imaginary West. The Elsewhere of State Socialism, Kindle edition.

²¹ ANNA PARETSKAYA: The Soviet Communist Party and the Other Spirit of Capitalism, in: Sociological Theory 28 (2010), 4, pp. 377-401.

²² See also TRENTMANN, Knowing Consumers (as in footnote 2).

²³ VICTOR V. MAGAGNA: Consumers of Privilege. A Political Analysis of Class, Consumption & Socialism, in: Polity 21 (1989), 4, pp. 711-729.

²⁴ PAUL BETTS: The Twilight of the Idols. East German Memory and Material Culture, in: The Journal of Modern History 72 (2000), 3, pp. 731-765, here p. 741.

²⁵ JERZY KOCHANOWSKI: Tylnymi drzwiami. 'Czarny rynek' w Polsce 1944-1989 [Through the Back Door. 'Black Market' in Poland, 1944-1989], Warszawa 2010.

²⁶ This issue is explicitly discussed in ALEKSANDRA GALASIŃSKA, MICHAŁ KRZYŻANOWSKI: Introduction. Discourses of Social and Political Transformation in the 'New Europe', in: IDEM (eds.): Discourse and Transformation in Central and Eastern Europe, Hounds Mills – New York 2009, pp. 1-16.

and upward mobility in the 1980s and early 1990s in Croatia.²⁷ In the case of Poland, anthropologist Michał Buchowski discusses the trajectory of social and economic change among a new elite of handcrafters and private entrepreneurs before and after the year 1989.²⁸ Their patterns of consumption were included in the process of building the social distinction of this particular group of *prywaciarze* and fitting into the notions of equality/inequality in Polish society before and after 1989. This social class became a symbol of the existence of social inequality in the socialist state since their income and lifestyle caused so-called ‘subjective deprivation’ among other occupational groups. However, in about 1987 *prywaciarze* began to be presented in media discourse in a more positive light as those who contributed to economic growth with their entrepreneurial skills and hard work, thus deserving conspicuous consumption symbolized by detached houses, flashy Western cars, satellite dishes, VCRs and German or Italian household appliances. Obviously the full recognition of occupational income inequalities and conspicuous consumption came after the year 1989 when the media discourse became dominated by the language of consumer capitalism.²⁹

Consumer Durables in State Socialism: Pricing and Scarcity

Free market economy prices are substantial for the creation of cultural values of commodities.³⁰ The complex system of pricing consumer durables in state socialism also influenced the ‘exchange value’ of such commodities. The inefficiency of manufacturers and retail trade to meet the demand for consumer goods influenced *the shortage economy*. The second important factor which influenced access to commodities was the ‘cumbersome price-fixing bureaucracy’ and turnover tax rates used as an instrument in the politics of consumption.³¹ Oushakine, going beyond the simple notion of the ‘shortage economy’, explores the complexity of the socialist system of distribution of commodities which he calls a massive ‘commodity-transmitting network’. As he notes, this network included ‘multiple institutional associa-

²⁷ KATHERINE SREDL: Consumption and Class During and After State Socialism, in: RUSSEL W. BELK, JOHN F. SHERRY (eds.): *Consumer Culture Theory*, Oxford 2007, pp. 187-205.

²⁸ MICHAŁ BUCHOWSKI: *Reluctant Capitalists. Class and Culture in a Local Community in Western Poland*, Berlin 1997.

²⁹ MÉROVE GIJSBERTS: The Legitimation of Income Inequality in State-Socialist and Market Societies, in: *Acta Sociologica* 45 (2002), 4, pp. 269-285; ANDREW G. WALDER: Markets and Inequality in Transitional Economies. Toward Testable Theories, in: *American Journal of Sociology* 101 (1996), 4, pp. 1060-1073.

³⁰ DON SLATER: *Consumer Culture and Modernity*, Cambridge 1997, pp. 40-42.

³¹ ANDRZEJ KOZMINSKI: Consumers in Transition From the Centrally Planned Economy to the Market Economy, in: *Journal of Consumer Policy* 14 (1992), pp. 351-369, here p. 354.

tions, nomenclatures of things, protocols of interactions and codes of behaviour, which were supposed to manage the Soviet thing system on rational grounds'.³² One of the primary features of such a system was the heavy subsidising of foodstuff products. Such pricing policies, imposed with the turnover tax, apparently caused other commodities, primarily consumer durables, to be heavily taxed to compensate such invests. A Radio Free Europe analyst in 1973 discussed the mechanism that caused the steady necessity of maintaining a high turnover tax or even increasing it.

'In general, a high price policy has been followed in the durable consumer goods sector, because of the high tax policy adopted by various East European countries, which assumes that consumer durables goods are "luxury" items which should be subjected to heavy turnover tax and high profit rates. Ironically, the high-tax-high-price policy has encouraged consumers to continue expanding expenditures on food products, many of which are heavily subsidized through the governmental budget. As a result, the higher food subsidies required more tax revenue, and this situation encouraged the continuance of the high tax policy for consumer durables.'³³

It is important to note that in Poland, the authorities considered this element of pricing policy a critical issue in securing societal support since social unrest in 1970 and 1976 were caused by attempts to lower the subsidising of foodstuff products.

There was an apparent contradiction between such a tax policy towards durables and the rhetoric of social progress and socialist modernity. Manufacturing and availability of household appliances became a crucial part of the policy of 'catching up and overtaking the West' in terms of standards of living in the 1960s.³⁴ Most Soviet bloc states implemented a similar approach towards manufacturing and dissemination of electric appliances in the 1970s.³⁵ In Poland, Edward Gierek, the new party leader elected in 1970, began a policy of so-called 'consumer socialism' focussing on heavy investments in the manufacturing of durables which became one of the symbols of modernization of that decade.

The highly popular comedy *Nie ma mocnych* (Take It Easy) from 1974 showed a traditional Polish village under Gierek's modernization program. The movie plot is based on a love affair between Ania, a daughter of a traditional Polish peasant, and Zenek, a handsome engineer hired by a local state

³² OUSHAKINE (as in footnote 15), p. 204.

³³ HARRY TREND: Consumer Durables in Comecon's Foreign Trade, in: RFE Background Reports from 17.12.1973, p. 2, in: Open Society Archives, HU OSA 300-8-3, URL: http://storage.osaarchivum.org/low/1f/49/1f495633-9304-44c2-b38b-579f94f43d34_1.pdf (01.02.2015).

³⁴ SUSAN REID: 'Our Kitchen is Just as Good'. Soviet Responses to the American Kitchen, in: OLDENZIEL/ZACHMANN (as in footnote 3), pp. 83-112; IDEM: The Khrushchev Kitchen: Domesticating the Scientific-Technological Revolution, in: Journal of Contemporary History 40 (2005), 2, pp. 289-316.

³⁵ CHERNYSHOVA (as in footnote 14), pp. 184-201.

collective farm as a ‘mechanizator’ responsible for agriculture mechanization, a propaganda figure of a modern ‘hero of socialism’. In one of the conversations he outlines the basis of modern life of progressive Poles: ‘Necktie on your neck, vodka cooling in your fridge, and we can start to catch up with the world!’³⁶ This claim excellently outlines the ideology of Gierek’s consumer socialism. In 1980 *Życie Gospodarcze*, the leading economic weekly magazine, summarized the economic achievements of the 1970s. On this list, among the opening of new steelworks and new housing projects, we can find a claim on the manufacturing of automatic washing machines: ‘1972: The first automatic washing machine was manufactured. In 1979, 302,000 of them were delivered to retail stores.’³⁷

Despite such rhetoric on the successes of the politics of consumption, authorities kept turnover tax imposed on all electric appliances. At the same time, other goods were taxed with the ‘luxury commodity tax’ (*Podatek od dóbr luksusowych*). A list of commodities on which this tax was imposed shows the petit bourgeoisie taste of the communist party elite for imaginary luxury, for instance: hunting rifles, cameras, and high class movie cameras, watches made of noble metals, antique furniture and furniture stylized as antiques, marble and alabaster, wool carpets, crystal glass, china tableware, furs, wares made of gold, and the catering services of restaurants in the ‘Lux’ category.³⁸ A tax rate of 30-60 per cent was imposed on such goods. At the same time 15 per cent turnover tax was imposed on all household appliances and 20 per cent tax on consumer electronics.³⁹

Among consumer electronics, there was one exception—the ‘Rubin colour TV’ was taxed at 30 per cent. Imported from the USSR, Rubin colour TVs were virtually the only colour TVs available in Poland in the early 1980s. The state imposed such a high tax on colour TVs despite the fact that dissemination of TVs in all households was one of the focal points of the rhetoric of socialist modernity. Kristin Roth-Ey discusses how in the USSR during the 1960s TV became a substantial element of socialist modernity. As she notes, TV set was ‘an industrial product promising knowledge and pleasure to millions with the flick of a switch, television could stand as an emblem of the socialist “good life” and proof of Soviet competitiveness on the Cold War’s home front’.⁴⁰ In the 1970s when black and white TVs were already popular

³⁶ Nie ma mocnych, directed by Sylwester Chęciński, Poland 1974.

³⁷ Polska lat 70 [Poland of the 1970s], in: *Życie Gospodarcze* from 10.02.1980, p. 4.

³⁸ Ustawa z dnia 26 lutego 1982 r. o opodatkowaniu jednostek gospodarki społecznej [Act from 26 February 1982 on the Taxation of State Enterprises], in: *Dziennik Ustaw Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej* (1982), 7, poz. 55, URL: <http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/Download?id=WDU19820070055&type=2> (02.02.2015). Cf. REID/CROWLEY (as in footnote 19).

³⁹ Now stawki podatku obrotowego [New Turnover Tax Rates], in: *Życie Gospodarcze* from 07.02.1982, p. 5.

⁴⁰ KRISTIN ROTH-EY: Finding a Home for Television in the USSR, 1950-1970, in: *Slavic Review* 66 (2007), 2, pp. 278-306, here p. 279.

in Polish households, colour TV became a new symbol of high standard of living which would bring new dimensions in delivering knowledge and pleasure to citizens of socialist society. Polish national broadcaster Telewizja Polska started colour broadcasting in 1972. At that time, the government started a large scale project of manufacturing Polish colour TV sets with the newly established Polkolor state enterprise near Warsaw. However, most colour kinescopes made in Polkolor were exported to obtain badly needed Western currency since domestic demand could be met with a large number of imported Rubins.⁴¹

From the early 1980s the critical attitude towards the pricing of durables became one of the significant issues raised by the consumer movement Federacja Konsumentów [Consumers Federation] established in 1982, and the magazine *Veto, tygodnik każdego konsumenta* (Every Consumer's Weekly) published 1982-1995.⁴² As a *Veto* columnist stated, despite propaganda rhetoric, high tax imposed on consumer durables led to commodities such as automatic washing machines or colour TVs becoming 'standard luxury'.⁴³ Similar critical voices could be found in other magazines. A columnist in the influential illustrated weekly magazine *Przekrój* claimed that there is actually no difference between tax policies in state socialism and capitalism since Polish authorities impose tax on all goods for which there was a high demand. He pointed out an obvious contradiction between propaganda and actual tax policy and claimed that turnover tax imposed on consumer durables was cynically used by authorities as a 'luxury commodity tax'. 'The tax is imposed on commodities which have nothing to do with luxury. [...] The barrier of unavailability is imposed on goods that are the basic achievements of the end of the 20th Century'.⁴⁴ As the most striking contradiction, he pointed out the aforementioned policy of the imposition of high tax rates on colour TV sets despite the free access to colour broadcasting.

There was another factor which resulted in electric appliances becoming recognized as 'standard' luxury in the 1980s. As Kochanowski notes, a severe shortage of electric appliances was one of the results of the economic crisis of the 1980s.⁴⁵ This shortage led to the growth of *spekulacja* (profiteering)—buying commodities in state-owned retail stores with an intention of resell

⁴¹ For the history of Polkolor and the import of Rubin TVs, see FRANCISZEK SKWIERAWSKI: *Kolorowy głód* [Hunger for Colour], in: *Ekran* from 16.02.1989, pp. 2-3.

⁴² For the discussion on the emergence of the Polish consumer movement, see MALGORZATA MAZUREK, MATTHEW HILTON: Consumerism, Solidarity and Communism. Consumer Protection and the Consumer Movement in Poland, in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 42 (2007), 2, pp. 315-343.

⁴³ For instance JANUSZ DĄBROWSKI: *Standardowy luksus* [Standard Luxury], in: *Veto* from 27.06.1982, p. 3.

⁴⁴ JERZY PIEKARCZYK: *Obszary pozornego luksusu* [Areas of Ostensible Luxury], in: *Przekrój* from 04.12.1988, p. 4.

⁴⁵ KOCHANOWSKI (as in footnote 25), pp. 91-101.

with a substantial profit margin in the informal economy. Apparently *spekulacja* contributed to the deepening of shortages in retail trade. Particularly *spekulacja* with household appliances was regularly shown in state media propaganda.⁴⁶ *Veto* editors also constantly applied more effective policies for law enforcement agencies and harsher punishment of *spekulanci*. It is impossible to estimate the scale of *spekulacja* as regards electric appliances. However, analysis of mass-media content and biographic interviews clearly shows that this phenomenon significantly contributed to the experience of both shortages and prohibitive pricing of consumer durables in the 1980s.⁴⁷

While experiencing shortages and the prohibitive prices demanded by *spekulanci*, Poles were at the same time exposed to a range of imported appliances, mostly ‘made in Japan’ consumer electronics in Pewex, a hard currency chain store.⁴⁸ Pewex was established in 1972 as an attempt to collect dollars, badly needed for the economy, from Polish citizens with relatives abroad. As can be seen in a report written by an official from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Pewex openly challenged the ideological concept of equality in socialist society:

‘Negative evaluation of commercial and Pewex retail stores [...] led to the conclusion that this is actually a diversification of society into “categories”, “castes”, “rich and poor”; those are stores for *prywaciarki*, thieves and fences. We acknowledge that it is a contradiction of socialist ideas.’⁴⁹

As Susan Reid and David Crowley observe, ‘differentiated pricing categories and classes of shops’ significantly contributed to the social construction of luxury in Soviet Bloc societies.⁵⁰ The side effect of the existence of Pewex stores was that in the 1980s Poles were exposed to Western consumer goods while not being able to afford them. Several informants claimed that they visited Pewex stores just to have a look at the imagined West. ‘In Pewex we looked at Technics stereos. [...] Everyone had Grundig [Polish stereos made with the Grundig licence] or Kasprzak [Polish electronics manufacturer]. Technics looked completely different. It had a different aesthetic. However, no one could afford it.’⁵¹

⁴⁶ For instance such propaganda was included in Polska Kronika Filmowa [Polish Newsreel]: Sprzedam pralkę [Washing Machine for Sale], PKF 83/12, URL: <http://www.kronikarp.pl/szukaj,37258,strona-5> (02.02.2015).

⁴⁷ See, for instance, an article on *spekulacja* with stereos: BOGUSŁAW NOWAK: Zarobki w stylu Hi-Fi [Earnings in Hi-Fi style], in: *Życie Literackie* from 17.06.1984, p. 5.

⁴⁸ For the discussion on the cultural role of hard currency stores in state socialism, see PAULINA BREN: Tuzex and the Hustler. Living It Up in Czechoslovakia, in: IDEM/NEUBURGER (as in footnote 14), pp. 27–48.

⁴⁹ Informacja MSW o zagrożeniach bezpieczeństwa wewnętrznego kraju, w lipcu 1978 r. [A Note from the Ministry of Internal Affairs on Threats to Domestic Security in July 1978], 07.07.1978, quotation according to KOCHANOWSKI (as in footnote 25), p. 91.

⁵⁰ DAVID CROWLEY, SUSAN REID: Introduction, in: IDEM (as in footnote 19), p. 11.

⁵¹ Interview with M. S., Wrocław, 14.01.2014.

Electric appliances, social inequalities and ‘subjective deprivation’

Along with the discussion on shortages, high prices and unaffordability of consumer durables for a large stratum in society, these commodities became embedded in the on-going public discussion on the deepening of social inequalities in supposedly equal and classless society. The history of sociology as a scientific discipline in post-war Central Europe shows that most research revealing inequalities in state-socialist societies was classified or neglected by authorities.⁵² One of the side effects of mass protests and establishment of the Solidarity movement in 1980 was the public acknowledgement of the on-going ‘social conflict’ which enabled open discussion on existing inequalities.⁵³ There were two lines to this conflict, the first one was drawn between authorities and political opposition and the second one between those who belonged to the income elites and those who experienced shortages and unaffordability of several commodities.

Social conflicts and inequalities became a subject of regular public opinion surveys conducted by the Center of Social Opinion Research (Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej, CBOS), a governmental research unit established in 1982 to provide decision makers with information on current societal attitudes. According to the ‘Material conditions of life in society’ (*Materialne warunki życia społeczeństwa*) survey from October 1984, 78.9 per cent of the ‘working intelligentsia’ respondents (a rough equivalent of white collars), and 74.9 per cent of working class respondents claimed that social dislikes and conflicts arise because of differences in ‘material conditions of life’. Political opinions as a source of conflict were acknowledged respectively by 72.7 per cent and 60.9 per cent of respondents from both groups.⁵⁴ At that time the increase in income-based social inequalities was primarily linked with the rise of the class of *prywaciarze* and *gastarbeiter*; Poles working temporarily in the West, primarily in West Germany and the UK, were considered to be groups which significantly differed from the rest of society in terms of disposable income and possibilities of conspicuous consumption.⁵⁵

⁵² Several such cases are discussed in: ULF BRUNNBAUER, CLAUDIA KRAFT et al. (eds.): Sociology and Ethnography in East-Central and South-East Europe. Scientific Self-Description in State Socialist Countries, München 2011.

⁵³ Income based inequalities were openly discussed by MARIA JAROSZ: Nierówności społeczne [Social inequalities], Warszawa 1984.

⁵⁴ CBOS: Materialne warunki życia społeczeństwa [Material Conditions of Life in Society], Warszawa 1985, in: Archiwum Akt Nowych, Warszawa (AAN) [Central Archives of Modern Records, Warsaw], Urząd Rady Ministrów [Office of the Council of Ministers], 1.5/83, pp. 39-42.

⁵⁵ For the discussion on lifestyle of *prywaciarze*, see PIOTR GLIŃSKI: Acapulco near Kostancin, in: JANINE WEDEL (ed.): The Unplanned Society. Poland During and After Communism, New York 1992, pp. 144-152.

In previous decades, consumption in state socialist Poland was considered by governmental agencies on the macro-scale as fulfilling tangible and objective needs. Research on practices of consumption in households in Poland emerged on a large scale in the early 1980s. It is remarkable that the main state research institute which carried out research on market supply and demand, known from 1956 as the Institute for Domestic Market (Instytut Rynku Wewnętrznego) in 1983 was renamed the Institute for Domestic Market and Consumption (Instytut Rynku Wewnętrznego i Konsumpcji, IRWiK). One of the IRWiK agendas was to consider not only ‘objective’ satisfaction of the basic needs of consumers but also subjective experience of standards of living and differences in practices of consumption among social classes. In the early 1980s Polish sociologists and economists who conducted research at universities and the IRWiK, introduced the term ‘subjective deprivation’. This term referred to dissatisfaction among people despite the fact that their basic needs for foodstuff products, clothing and household appliances (hand operated washing machines, radio receivers and black and white TV sets) were met.⁵⁶ In a press interview Teresa Pałaszewska-Reindl, deputy director of the IRWiK explained the agenda behind research on “subjective deprivation” and ‘subjective estimation of one’s own material conditions’ (subjektywna ocena własnej pozycji materialnej).⁵⁷ As she claimed, among other factors, such estimation included the ‘moral obsolescence’ (moralne zużycie) of consumer durables since for Poles ‘morally obsolete appliances are considered as one of main indicators of low estimation of societal position’.⁵⁸ Further, she explained why exactly this is a problem for socialist society. According to her, the deepening of such ‘subjective deprivation’ could lead to the conclusion that one would never be able to afford goods available in retail trade.⁵⁹ Thus, this person could intentionally decide to not engage in job duties. Such an attitude could have a highly negative impact on the economy and the IRWiK’s aim was to warn authorities about this significant problem.

According to the aforementioned ‘Material conditions of life in society’ survey, 51.6 per cent of ‘office workers’ (urzędniccy) possessed a colour TV, 85 per cent owned a car, and 67.8 per cent owned an automatic washing machine, all objects which were considered luxury goods (dobra luksusowe). In contrast, the percentages calculated as a result of answers given by workers

⁵⁶ LIDIA BESKID: Bodziec lub bariera [Stimulus or a Barrier], in: *Życie Gospodarcze* from 19.02.1984, p. 11. Introduction of the concept of ‘subjective deprivation’ was influenced by currents in Western research on standard of living with highly influential study of poverty in the UK: PETER TOWNSEND: Poverty in the United Kingdom. A Survey of Household Resources and Standards of Living, Berkeley – Los Angeles 1979, chapter 11: Objective and Subjective Deprivation, pp. 413-431.

⁵⁷ Wolimy ‘mieć’ czy wolimy ‘być’ [Do We Prefer to ‘Have’ or to ‘Be’?]. Interview with Dr. Teresa Pałaszewska-Reindl, IRWiK deputy director, *Życie Gospodarcze* from 18.-25.12.1983, p. 5.

⁵⁸ Ibidem.

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

relative to their possession of such goods show a much lower rate (20, 19.8 and 32.3 per cent respectively).⁶⁰

In the copy of this survey report, available in the archival collection of documents from the personal office of Prime Minister Michał Janiszewski, these numbers, among other data which illustrate social inequalities, are highlighted with a marker, plausibly by Janiszewski himself. These thick highlights and exclamation marks clearly show how seriously social conflict was considered among policy makers.

Unfortunately, no specific data on consumer durables in the class of private entrepreneurs is available. CBOS surveys and statistical data of the Central Statistical Office (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, GUS) did not include private entrepreneurs as a separate class, since they were not recognized as a legitimate part of socialist society. Here I can only quote a result of the IRWiK survey which briefly discusses this group:

‘In the years 1985-1989 there was a substantial diversification between different types of households in terms of owned electric appliances, as well in terms of standard of owned appliances. Households of private entrepreneurs [referred to as “self-employed” – “pracujący na własny rachunek”] had the highest number of owned electric appliances.’⁶¹

In the late 1980s the households of both *gastarbeiter*s and private entrepreneurs were discussed in several press articles which aimed to strengthen negative stereotypes about this distinctive occupational group.⁶² Consumer durables became included in a narrative of affluence and conspicuous consumption. Here I can bring three excerpts. The first is from an article on alienated youth from families of *gastarbeiter*s who became juvenile delinquents because of the lack of interest from parents obsessed with earning hard currency abroad:

‘A parent bitter with the ungratefulness of her own child was opening the door to a children’s bedroom, with stereos, loudspeakers and frequently computer, and had asked “is there anything else needed for a child?”’⁶³

The second excerpt shows a lifestyle of an owner of a private car workshop, a typical *prywaciarcz*.

⁶⁰ CBOS, Materialne warunki (as in footnote 54), p. 37.

⁶¹ L. PIEKIEWICZ, A. STUDZIŃSKA: Rynek dóbr trwałego użytku na tle aktualnej sytuacji gospodarczej kraju [Consumer Durables Market in a Perspective of the Current Economic Situation], IRWiK, Warszawa 1990, in: AAN, IRWiK, 661, pp. 13-14.

⁶² Cf. GYÖRGY HUNYADY: Stereotypes during the Decline and Fall of Communism, London – New York 1998, chapter 4: The Domain of Societal Categories. Perception of Occupational Groups and Class Relations, pp. 169-218.

⁶³ HELENA KOWALIK: To ja, twoje sumienie [It’s me, your conscience], in: Prawo i Życie from 17.10.1987, pp. 1, 8, here p. 8.

‘Wacław B. has very high earnings. He secures a high living standard for his family. His wife is the most elegant woman in the whole housing district, his children have a VCR, tropical fruits and magnificent holiday.’⁶⁴

In a novel based on a screenplay of the highly popular movie *Wielki Szu* [Big Shar, Poland 1983] we can find a description of a house of a *prywaciarcz* addicted to gambling.

‘The living room was decorated with scarce, however, very expensive furniture. [...] By the wall there was a complete quadrophonic stereo made by Grundig. There were four loudspeakers in a corner and a colour TV made by Sony was standing by the table.’⁶⁵

Actually, *prywaciarcze* spent their earnings on conspicuous consumption since the state significantly constrained expansion of their business operations. A private entrepreneur interviewed in a reportage about the differences in the lifestyles of occupational groups in *Przekrój* pointed out these constraints.

‘My company is flourishing ... However, I cannot build a house because I am not allowed to. I am not able to establish a second company because I am not allowed to. I have a stomach like anyone else, so I am not going to eat this money or drink it. Save money in a bank? With the current rate of inflation?’⁶⁶

The subtitle of this article ‘Capital Forced to Consumption’ (*Kapitał skazany na konsumpcję*) clearly show a social phenomenon of a new group with disposable income with several constraints on potential investments. They lacked the possibilities of the prospering businessman in the West who could invest his earnings in real estate, on the stock exchange or in trust funds. In media discourse and popular culture texts, *prywaciarcze* are those who spend their income on Western cars and consumer electronics as shown in the fragment quoted above taken from a novel.⁶⁷

In early 1989 sociologist Maria Jarosz in *Polityka*, the influential weekly magazine, points out that the deepening of income based on social conflict is inevitable. She also refers to cars, colour TV sets and automatic washing machines as indicators of ‘material and social success’.⁶⁸ It is important to briefly explain the particular meaning of ‘success’ during transition in the late 1980s. This term was used to describe the lifestyle and attitude of those who left their jobs at state companies and established their own businesses or

⁶⁴ EWA KAFARSKA: Milionerzy, miliarderzy [Millionaires, Billionaires], in: *Magazyn Rodzinny* (1988), January, pp. 4-6, here p. 6.

⁶⁵ JAN PURZYCKI: *Wielki Szu*, Olsztyn 1985, p. 149. The house with all the aforementioned goods was lost to a professional gambler, named ‘Big Shar’, during a single game of poker.

⁶⁶ TERESA BĘTKOWSKA: Docent w kantorze [University Lecturer in a Currency Exchange Store], in: *Przekrój* from 25.09.1988, pp. 8-9, here p. 9.

⁶⁷ See also GLIŃSKI (as in footnote 55).

⁶⁸ MARIA JAROSZ: O kondycji społecznej Polaków [About the Social Condition of Poles], in: *Polityka* from 07.01.1989, p. 11.

became hired as local managers in newly established branches of multinationals. Glossy magazine *Sukces* published in the years 1990-1996 was dedicated to interviews with the wealthiest Polish businessmen and showed the lifestyle of the nouveau-riche. The idea of 'personal success' was part of the emerging ideology of consumer capitalism which would dominate media discourse after 1989.

Consumer Durables and Society in Transition after 1989

In the early 1990s Polish sociologists conducted a large scale research survey titled 'Poles and new economic realities' to explore how Poles managed to adapt to new economic order.⁶⁹ One of the objects of their research was to learn how the transformation impacted household spending and the acquisition of consumer durables. Generally, the results were rather bleak. As the authors noted, in the new harsh realities with the steadily growing rate of unemployment, the lack of job security, high inflation, and the increase in prices of foodstuff products, Poles decreased their spending on almost all consumer goods and services.⁷⁰ There was only one exception. Research findings showed that Poles actually started spending more on consumer durables, especially on consumer electronics.⁷¹ The authors explained this by the steady price decrease when the free market reached equilibrium between supply and demand. However, they also argued that Poles, on a large scale, started to purchase consumer durables, primarily automatic washing machines, colour TVs, VCRs, satellite dishes and home computers, because of the high level of 'consumer aspirations' from the late 1980s.⁷²

According to a popular notion, societies in this region after the year 1989 smoothly adopted Western patterns of consumption because of the advent of multinationals with their aggressive advertising and marketing strategies.⁷³ However, the aforementioned findings on the role of consumer aspirations

⁶⁹ LIDIA BESKID, RÓZA MILIC-CZERNIAK, ZBIGNIEW SUFIN: Polacy a nowa rzeczywistość ekonomiczna. Procesy przystosowywania się w mikroskali [Poles and New Economic Realities. Adaptation Strategies in Micro-scale], Warszawa 1995.

⁷⁰ Only in the year 1990 prices increased by 260 % and the real purchasing power of the population decreased by 24 %. KOZMINSKI (as in footnote 31), p. 364.

⁷¹ BESKID/MILIC-CZERNIAK/SUFIN (as in footnote 69), pp. 91-127. See also LIDIA BESKID (ed.): Warunki życia i kondycja Polaków na początku zmian systemowych [Standard of Living and Condition of Poles during the Early Stage of System Transition], Warszawa 1992. For the general discussion on social aspirations and material culture, see ALISON CLARKE: The Aesthetics of Social Aspiration, in: DANIEL MILLER (ed.): Home Possessions: Material Culture behind Closed Doors, Oxford – New York 2001, pp. 23-45.

⁷² BESKID/MILIC-CZERNIAK/SUFIN (as in footnote 69), pp. 211-212. For the general discussion on social aspirations and material culture, see CLARKE (as in footnote 71).

⁷³ See, for instance GÜLİZ GER, RUSSELL BELK: I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke. Consumptionscapes of the 'Less Affluent World', in: Journal of Consumer Policy 19 (1996), 3, pp. 271-304.

from the 1980s is consistent with Sredl's remark that the year 1989 was not a zero year for patterns of consumption in this region.

'[C]onsumption after state socialism has much less to do with influx of forms and ideologies of Western advertising and consumer culture like brands and class as Croat consumer were participating in global consumer culture throughout state socialism and lived with local class dynamics that influenced consumption. Similar dynamics of class would continue to influence consumption after state socialism'.⁷⁴

As Jarosz notes, consumer durables were considered symbols of personal 'success' which at that time meant belonging to a class of income elite. Thus, the fulfilling of 'social aspirations' could be interpreted as a way of emulating the lifestyle of upper classes. One informant from an intelligentsia background remembered how her neighbours from lower classes were eager to buy Western colour TV sets.

'Even people I knew and who I knew had a worse economic situation than us, were buying colour TVs. I remember how surprised I was when people who had no money to pay for additional English or German lessons or to send their child on holiday, were saving money to buy a colour TV as if it was some kind of fetish. I knew what an effort it was for them to buy a TV set and how they talked about TVs, such as "I have such and such brand-name TV set"'.⁷⁵

Apparently, buying TVs did not fit in her imagery of using hard-earned money to increase children's cultural capital. While for intelligentsia an idea of upward social mobility was to invest in children's cultural capital, other people chose different strategies to emulate upper classes by buying one of the most recognizable symbols of personal 'success' at that time.

Content analysis of a weekly news magazine (*Polityka*) and influential economic magazines (*Życie Gospodarcze* and *Businessman Magazine*) shows that the general increase in the number of consumer durables owned by households was identified as a clear sign of the democratization of consumption and the significant achievement of the politics of post-communist economic reforms. Annually, *Polityka* published a report entitled 'Polityka's Shopping Cart' [Koszyk Polityki] with a comparison of current prices and Poles' relative purchasing power. 'Polityka's Shopping Cart' from 1996 includes a juxtaposition of pre- and post-1989 consumer culture.

'Our youngest readers don't remember shopping coupons, buying basic commodities with "connections" [...] buying furniture, carpets, refrigerators and TVs with so called "social lists" (*listy społeczne*) in queues where the whole family had their duty to stand round the clock.'⁷⁶

⁷⁴ SREDL (as in footnote 27), p. 198. See also the discussion on the beginnings of social changes in the mid-1980s in GALASIŃSKA/KRZYŻANOWSKI (as in footnote 26), pp. 2-3.

⁷⁵ Interview with E. H., Wrocław, 07.01.2014.

⁷⁶ Koszyk 'Polityki'. Dobry rok? [Polityka's Shopping Card. A Good Year?], in: *Polityka* from 06.01.1996, pp. 3-5, here p. 3. For the discussion on the experience of shopping

'It is interesting to discuss consumer durables in households [...] Black and white TVs [...] have almost disappeared, replaced by colour TVs. Refrigerators stand in almost every apartment. New and expensive durables, unknown before, have appeared in apartments: computers, VCRs, cable and satellite TV. On the scale of Europe, such a current is not impressive. However, it is really impressive on the scale of the post-communist states.'⁷⁷

This commentary shows how durables had a symbolic meaning of showing a tangible and impressive rise in standards of living after 1989 and fits into a broader media narrative on the success of Polish transformation in comparison with other Central Europe states.⁷⁸ Jennifer Patico uses a photograph of a couple standing next to a wall of automatic washing machines in a supermarket as a symbol of emerging consumer capitalism.⁷⁹ Similarly, Polish media regularly used a wall of TVs or washing machines to illustrate theses of articles concerning the increase in Poles' purchasing power, massive shopping and the rise in standards of living.⁸⁰

At the same time the language of research reports from the IRWiK and the CBOS started to represent the dominant ideology of consumer capitalism. A research finding from 1992 shows how the market for consumer durables represents the rise in social inequalities.

'The scale and structure of a market for household appliances will be decided by the most numerous group of consumers with low income, who declare a need for standard appliances with relatively low purchase and maintenance cost. [...] The second group of potential consumers is much smaller; however, they have a substantial disposable income and are oriented towards luxury consumption. For them the need for showing off is one of the most significant factors in making decisions on the purchase of consumer durables. They intend to purchase appliances of higher standards, modern, imported, which are novelties on our market, for instance microwave ovens.'⁸¹

Such language represents a jargon of market research replacing the normative language of research findings from the 1980s which referred to the ideol-

queues, see MAŁGORZATA MAZUREK: *Społeczeństwo kolejki. O doświadczeniach niedoboru 1945-1989* [The Society of a Queue. On the Experience of Shortages, 1945-1989], Warszawa 2010.

⁷⁷ ANDRZEJ MOZOŁOWSKI: Od nędzy do pieniędzy. Polaków portfel własny [From Rags to Riches. Poles' Own Wallets], in: *Polityka* from 06.01.1996, pp. 6-9, here p. 6.

⁷⁸ Cf. GALASIŃSKA/KRZYŻANOWSKI (as in footnote 26).

⁷⁹ JENNIFER PATICO: Consumption and Social Change in a Post-Soviet Middle Class, Stanford 2008, cover page. For a discussion on practices of consumption of Polish middle-class, see HENRYK DOMAŃSKI: *Polska klasa średnia* [The Polish Middle Class], Wrocław 2002, pp. 23-47.

⁸⁰ For instance, see KATARZYNA KLUKOWSKA, JOANNA ZIELEWSKA: Nasze wielkie kupowanie [Our Great Shopping], in: *Życie Gospodarcze* from 15.12.1995, pp. 13-16; ALICJA HENDLER: Gotowi do zakupów [Ready for Shopping], in: *Życie Gospodarcze* from 02.08.1996, pp. 24-26.

⁸¹ PIEKIEWICZ/STUDZIŃSKA (as in footnote 61), pp. 25-26.

ogy of mass consumption, with claims of ‘subjective deprivation’ and the notion of low standard of living as a social and economic problem that should be solved by governmental agencies.⁸²

Similar language could be found in the glossy *Businessman Magazine* (1990-2005) which aimed to copy the format of *Forbes*. This magazine actively promoted the knowledge of ‘marketing’ as the basic necessity for the aspiring Polish businessmen who constituted the magazine’s audience. One of the magazine’s ‘marketing gurus’ in 1992 pointed out the difference between consumers before and after 1989 in marketing jargon.

‘For a centrally planned economy the basic point of reference was an ordinary (*przeciętny*) consumer with a little diversity, who lived a historically grounded lifestyle. [...] The increase in differentiation of income [...] and the impact of mass media brings [...] a whole new mosaic of modern consumption patterns among consumers.’⁸³

For the author, the modern consumer with an individualised lifestyle based on an income bracket was a necessary element of a capitalist economy since only such an individual could became a subject of marketing strategies. While discussing the junction between consumer culture and modernity, Don Slater points out how several objects and practices of consumption are conceived as symbols of modernity: ‘this is the age of real estate, consumer credit and cars: modern appliances, bought by modern methods, paced in a modern household.’⁸⁴ The aforementioned quote from the IRWiK report on two categories of consumers shows how the segmentation of markers related to substantial income disparity was conceived as a feature of such modernity.

Similarly, in the survey reports by the CBOS, which became a private foundation after 1989, we can find a claim that ‘economic disparity’ is recognized as an intrinsic part of new society. From 1992, the CBOS started a regular series of surveys entitled ‘Consumer Durables’.⁸⁵ The introduction to the first research report from this series explained what exactly such a survey demonstrated about Polish society:

‘The possession of consumer durables in households is, along with financial reserves, [...] one of the main aspects of economic diversification of society. The CBOS aim is to register such possessions, its structure, and its dynamics in both quantitative and qualitative terms.’⁸⁶

⁸² For the sake of the brevity of this article, it is impossible to analyze in detail the language of such findings from the 1980s. A large number of such research findings is available in IRWiK archive and published in *Handel Wewnętrzny* journal.

⁸³ HENRYK MRUK, LILIANNA NOWAK: W drodze do nowego konsumenta [On the Road to a New Consumer], in: *Businessman Magazine* (1992), March, pp. 48-49, here p. 48.

⁸⁴ SLATER (as in footnote 30), p. 13.

⁸⁵ CBOS: Dobra trwałego użytku [Consumer Durables], Warszawa 1992, URL: http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/1992/K_052_92.PDF (12.02.2015).

⁸⁶ Ibidem, p. 1.

As researchers further claim, in 1992 colour TVs, deep freezers, VCRs and automatic washing machine ‘constitute social standard of household fittings’.⁸⁷ It is remarkable to note the use of the word ‘social’. There is no objective standard of ‘modern’ household which was a goal of socialist mass consumption, and the standard of household fittings is merely a social norm negotiated by market actors.⁸⁸ It is also important to note that the phrase ‘economic diversification of society’ (*zróżnicowanie ekonomiczne społeczeństwa*) used in the aforementioned report was brought to the public debate only after 1989. In the 1980s in the media we can find frequent references to some ‘differences’ between *prywaciarze* and other social strata, but ‘diversification’ as a structural feature of society was not included in media discourse on societal currents. The term ‘poverty’ (*bieda*) was absent in public discourse before 1989, replaced with the milder ‘privation’ (*niedostatek*).⁸⁹ ‘Poverty’ appeared in Poland only after 1989 along with ‘economic diversification.’

As CBOS researchers further argued, the aforementioned durables constituted a ‘desirable model of needs’ for those who did not have them.

‘The increase in the number of particular durables puts a pressure on those who do not have them yet. This pressure to own certain goods causes a pressure on higher earnings, thus it stimulates occupational activity. This causes a so called “aspirational tension” (*napięcie aspiracyjne*), which contributes to economic prosperity. However, this tension, if not lowered, could cause social and political conflicts and diversification.’⁹⁰

An IRWiK report on changes in household consumption between 1990 and 1995 claimed that ‘while considering a large income disparity in society, the diversification of ownership of modern and luxury durables in households will remain’.⁹¹ This conclusion shows how durables were used as an illustration of on-going social diversification as an intrinsic part of post-1989 realities.

Of course, the rise in social inequalities and the lack of a coherent state welfare policy was frequently criticized in media discourse. However, in my source base which includes a number of influential news and economic magazines from the early 1990s, I have not found any voices which criticize purchases of consumer durables. Moreover, poverty was generally commun-

⁸⁷ Ibidem, p. 7.

⁸⁸ Cf. OLDENZIEL/ZACHMANN (as in footnote 3); REID, The Khrushchev Kitchen (as in footnote 34)

⁸⁹ ELŻBIETA TARKOWSKA: Ubóstwo w byłych PGR-ach: W poszukiwaniu dawnych źródeł nowej biedy [Poverty at Former Collective Farms. In Search for Old Origins of a New Poverty], in: Kultura i Społeczeństwo (1998), 1, pp. 91-104.

⁹⁰ CBOS, Dobra trwałego użytku (as in footnote 85), p. 13.

⁹¹ KRYSYNA KUŚNIERZYK, LUCYNA PIŚKIEWICZ: Zmiany w konsumpcji i sytuacji materialnej gospodarstw domowych w latach 1990-1995 [The Changes in Consumption and Standard of Living in Households in the Years 1990-1995], Warszawa 1995, in: AAN, IRWiK, 411, p. 43.

cated in media discourse by showing families who only had domestically made 'old fashioned' durables: black and white TV sets and manually operated washing machines. The emergence of a free market economy and subsequent democratization of consumption resulted in 'standard' consumer durables no longer being considered luxury items. A steady increase in the number of automatic washing machines, colour TVs and VCRs was, as the quote from *Polityka* shows, one of the indicators of the success of the macro-scale socio-economic system transition. At the same time, premium goods became included in the social construction of luxury in the context of consumer capitalism as commodities for the income elites, referred to as 'modern consumers', who constituted a social elite.

Conclusion

This article discussed how consumer durables, such as automatic washing machines, colour TVs, and VCRs, were brought to the debate surrounding social equality and inequality both before and after the year 1989. The first part outlined both the rhetoric and realities of the politics of mass consumption in state socialist Poland. In the second part I argued that during the 1980s durables became linked with the experience of rising income inequality with the notion of 'subjective deprivation'. The last section showed how after 1989 discussion on the diversification of the market structure for consumer durables represented the emergence of the discourse of consumer capitalism.

Consumption, as relevant research verifies, can be interdependent with the notion of citizenship: 'Consumption has become synonymous with citizenship in many contexts during the twentieth century, both expressing individual autonomy and status within society and focusing political ideas about the obligation of the state to individuals.'⁹² My discussion on public debate towards consumer durables before and after the year 1989 shows how the context of consumption has shifted along with the system transition of the year 1989. In state socialism, provision of consumer durables to citizens was recognized as one of obligations of the state which was responsible for securing a high standard of living for all citizens. As a proud owner of a colour TV quoted in the introduction claimed, along with the on-going socio-economic change in the late 1980s, consumer durables became used as one of the basic means of articulating status within the society. Articulating personal autonomy and 'success' achieved through personal entrepreneurial skills in the late 1980s became a new form of citizenship.

⁹² SUSAN STRASSER, CHARLES McGOVERN, MATTHIAS JUDT: Getting and Spending. European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century, Cambridge – London 1998, p. 11.

By referring to Verdery, analysis of public debate towards consumer durables and standards of living illustrates the ‘re-configuration of society’.⁹³ There is need for further study into the experience of changes in everyday life in Central Europe after the year 1989 which would challenge the notion of the success of macro-scale economic change. ‘A focus on the day-to-day realities of postsocialism reveals a much more ambiguous account of the transformation announced with such fanfare by theories of modernization and of market and democratic transition.’⁹⁴ With my case-study I discussed how fitting households with electric appliances, a part of Poles’ everyday lives, was framed by economic experts, researchers and columnists as an important element of on-going socio-economic change. Analysis of debates surrounding consumer durables shows how a consumer figure was framed in both ideologies of mass consumption in state socialism and consumer capitalism after 1989. A consumer figure who could pursue his own career and choose a lifestyle, which, for instance, included possession of ‘modern’ imported electric appliances, became an element of democracy. Susan Buck-Morss excellently outlines how practices of consumption, and the notion of consumer choice were framed in the interconnected ideologies of democracy and free market: ‘Similarities of consumer styles came to be viewed as synonymous with social equality, and not merely as a compensation for its lack. Democracy was freedom of consumer choice.’⁹⁵

Despite recent studies on mass consumption in post-war Central Europe, the evolution of consumption patterns during the system transition is still overlooked. This study aimed to shed more light on the change in notions of standard of living, luxury and equality during the system transition. Post 1989 capitalist democracy not only gave denizens of Central Europe a right to vote in non-staged elections but also provided a freedom of consumer choice.

⁹³ VERDERY (as in footnote 8), p. 419.

⁹⁴ MICHAEL BURAWOY, IDEM: Introduction, in: IDEM (eds.): *Uncertain Transition. Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*, Lanham et al. 1999, pp. 1-17, here p. 6.

⁹⁵ SUSAN BUCK-MORSS: *Dreamworld and Catastrophe. The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, Cambridge – London 2000, p. 204 [emphasis in original].

Zusammenfassung

Die Debatte über Konsumgüter, Luxus und soziale Ungleichheit in Polen während des Systemwandels

Dieser Artikel beschäftigt sich mit der Frage, wie in der öffentlichen Debatte in Polen vor und nach 1989 die kulturellen Bedeutungen „moderner“ Konsumgüter wie Farbfernseher, Stereoanlagen und vollautomatischer Waschmaschinen entstanden und bewertet worden sind. Dass erschwingliche Elektrogeräte in großer Zahl zur Verfügung standen, war eines der Hauptziele staatlicher Konsumpolitik in der Volksrepublik Polen. Im Zuge des Systemwechsels 1989 erschien diese Verfügbarkeit plötzlich in einem anderen Licht. Der Erwerb und der Besitz von Konsumgütern wurden nun zu einem Symbol für das Entstehen einer neuen Verbraucherkultur, die auf individuellen Lebensstilen beruhte in einer Gesellschaft, zu deren wesentlichen Elementen soziale Diversifizierungen und Einkommensunterschiede gehörten. In diesem Aufsatz schildere ich zunächst, wie die günstige Verfügbarkeit von Konsumgütern zum Gegenstand einer öffentlichen Kontroverse wurde, die darauf hinweist, dass die Politik des Massenkonsums, die einen hohen Lebensstandard quer durch alle sozialen Schichten gewährleisten sollte, ineffektiv war. Danach beschäftige ich mich mit der Frage, wie in den späten 1980er Jahren der Erwerb von Konsumgütern zu einem Bestandteil des übermäßigen Strebens der neuen Einkommenselite privater Unternehmer nach einem höheren Status wurde. Im letzten Abschnitt zeige ich, wie nach der Einführung der freien Marktwirtschaft seit 1989 das stetige Anwachsen des Privatkonsums in der öffentlichen Debatte und in der Marktforschung als ein positiver Trend identifiziert wurde, der den erfolgreichen Verlauf des Systemwechsels belege. Auf Grundlage der Analyse wichtiger Wirtschafts- und Nachrichtenmagazine, von Meinungsumfragen und Marktforschungsberichten zeigt der Beitrag, wie man mit einer Studie über die kulturellen Bedeutungen einer Reihe von Konsumgütern die sozioökonomischen Aspekte des Systemwechsels von 1989 in Osteuropa besser verstehen kann.