


BOOK REVIEW

## Valuch, Tibor. *Everyday Life under Communism and After: Lifestyle and Consumption in Hungary, 1945–2000*

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In this study, Tibor Valuch, a scholar of the social and cultural history of Hungary, delves deeply into the political, economic, and social transformations of Hungary in the second half of the twentieth century from the perspective of everyday life (*Alltagsgeschichte*). It is rare that this exciting historical period is captured so expressly, and it is a joy to read. The book is a synthesis of Valuch's research on everyday life—published so far mainly in Hungarian and German—but it also draws heavily on sociological, demographic, and ethnographic literature in addition to Hungarian historical works on the period; in other words, it summarizes Hungarian literature on the socialist era using an interdisciplinary approach to illustrate the continuities and discontinuities of lifestyles in Hungary. Valuch has a bottom-up perspective, focusing not on politicians or activists but on “ordinary people”—consumers, property owners, the propertyless poor, those living in various types of housing, or personalities from the Budapest fashion world. He draws on a wide range of sources to nuance his analyses in a way that makes the book and its arguments of interest to all scholars of postwar Central European culture and politics.

In each thematic chapter, Valuch relates the socialist era to the interwar (1930s) and post-socialist periods (up to the 2010s) while analyzing the changes and continuities within and across the socialist era. His narrative shirks conventional periodization, describing the transition to a market economy as a process that transcends the socialist era while also looking for the roots of the market economy that emerged in the 1990s in the Kádár era. The long-term perspective allows us to understand the socialist era not only in itself but also as part of a longer historical trajectory—and even as a precursor to the social transformations that followed the regime change of 1990. This makes the book particularly useful for researchers of the post-socialist period.

The first chapter introduces the reader to the literature and rich sources of the history of everyday life in Hungary. It sets out the book's objectives, one of which is to interpret the everyday traces of the correlations between lifestyle and social transformation. Chapter 2 focuses on transformations in everyday life and consumption through changes in official income statistics, wages, and consumer prices, while taking into account the limitations of the statistics. The author notes that “both legal (second jobs, part-time jobs, household farming) as well as illegal (moonlighting [*fuszizás*], services provided without a business license, shopping tourism, exchanging foreign currency, the black market) solutions for acquiring alternative sources of income continued to expand.” Moreover, these “oddities of wealth accumulation did not escape public attention,” which was also an essential form of public discourse on social inequalities and wealth accumulation (72).

Although the real value of incomes increased constantly during the socialist period, the state-regulated distribution system, particularly the redistribution of housing, led to very unequal income growth levels across various social groups. An essential finding of the subsection on poverty is that the social composition of those experiencing poverty was constantly changing: while in the 1970s, the majority of impoverished people came from rural households, by the late 1980s, urban employees made up the majority of the poor (67). Although Valuch bases his essential claims on household statistics that measure consumption, he points out a crucial methodological problem in

that these statistics largely refer to those who were continuously employed and only rarely to those who worked sporadically.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the changes in consumption and housing relations in the socialist period, with particular emphasis given to informal forms of housing distribution, which played a crucial role in determining social inequalities in everyday practice. The share of food in household consumption fell until the change of the regime and then increased again, which was experienced by most social groups as a form of impoverishment. The increase in social inequalities is also revealed by a detailed analysis of expenditure on clothing and food (chapters 5 and 6), as social inequalities were most strongly expressed in the ownership of clothing as a status symbol.

Valuch convincingly demonstrates that high levels of inequality were present throughout the period, and that consumption, especially from the 1960s onward, became “one of the most important means and realms of social representation and distinction” (475). Accordingly, the book provides a more nuanced understanding of socialist-era consumption, housing, clothing, and dietary habits. It is essential reading not only for scholars of the socialist era but also for those who want to understand the experience of social transformation and regime change in Central and Eastern Europe after 1990.