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CONSUMING SOCIALISTS: CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND THE STATE
IN POSTWAR POLAND

CONSUMATORI E SOCIALISTI: BAMBINI, FAMIGLIE E STATO
NELLA POLONIA DEL SECONDO DOPOGUERRA

Based on ordinary people's life stories, the article discusses the relationship between children and consumption in 1960s and 1970s Poland, exploring the different meanings attributed to child consumption, at the crossroad of private and public narratives. The article treats children as important economic actors, of crucial importance for our understanding of the meaning of consumption. As the narratives discussed in the article show, in socialist Poland children provided a privileged terrain for the negotiation of private desires and public expectations. Far from representing merely an 'extra expense' or an addition to the household budget, children's consumption represented an essential dimension of the renegotiation of the relationship between state and citizens that took place in socialist Poland, informing the way in which both parents and the state articulated their responsibilities and roles.

Utilizzando le storie di vita pubblicate in Polonia fra gli anni '60 e '70, l'articolo discute la relazione fra bambini e consumo in un momento di profonda trasformazione politica e sociale. L'articolo esplora i diversi significati attribuiti al consumo infantile, sia all'interno della sfera domestica che nel discorso politico, guardando ai bambini come a importanti attori economici, essenziali alla comprensione del consumo e del suo significato in diversi contesti sociali e politici. L'articolo dimostra che il problema di come integrare il consumo nello sviluppo di una educazione socialista capace di garantire lo sviluppo sociale della Repubblica Popolare Polacca divenne un tema centrale della politica degli anni '60-'70 e del tentativo di elaborare un nuovo rapporto fra cittadini e stato che si svolse in quegli anni.

Key words: consumption, childhood, family, education, state, Poland, real socialism.

Parole chiave: consumo, bambini, famiglia, educazione, stato, Polonia, socialismo reale.

Both children and consumption are inextricably associated with normative stances and moral judgements. As a variety of actors, from parents and teachers to psychologists and priests, typically have an opinion on what is good or bad for young people, what children consume and how rarely goes uncontested.

The moral values according to which children's relationship with consumption is understood are ingrained in the social relations intrinsic to everyday life and vary depending on the historical context (Cook 2005; Linn 2004; Pugh 200; Sparrman, Sandin and Sjoberg 2012). The ways in which the position of children in relation to consumption is interpreted, therefore, cannot be separated from the specific value system in which interpretations and judgements take place.

This article explores the relationship between children and consumption in 1960s

and 1970s Poland. This is a rich and complex historical context, in which both the notion of childhood and that of consumption carried multiple and contradictory meanings.

Based on ordinary people's life stories, the article explores the different meanings attributed to child consumption, at the crossroad of private and public narratives.

It is argued that the question of children's consumption offers a key perspective for the understanding of the political and social transformations that took place in postwar Poland, and that conversely, the specific framework provided by the People's Republic forces us to rethink some strong assumptions about the nature and meaning of consumption in the postwar era.

I suggest that children's consumption represented an essential dimension in the renegotiation of the relationship between state and citizens that took place in socialist Poland, informing the way in which parents articulated their responsibilities and roles. Furthermore, children's consumption highlighted the transformations taking place within Polish families, both in the relationships internal to the household and in those taking place between households and society. Far from looking at children as mere "extra-expenses" or as «little bodies, nagging purchase requests», this article looks at children as important economic actors, of crucial importance for our understanding of the meaning of consumption (Cook 2008, 222).

In Daniel Cook's words, putting children into the picture «disrupts individualistic assumptions about economic action». Within this article, children are looked at in the context of what could be thought of as "family consumption", an approach that underlines how the purchasing of goods and services answered not only individual needs and desires, but also collective expectations.

Throughout the article, consumption is discussed not only as an economic matter, but also as a political and symbolic affair. As consumption assumed a growing political relevance in '60s and '70s Poland, what children consumed and why became an important indicator not only of their parents' spending capacity, but even more of their ideological stance and of their achievements as educators. At the same time, children themselves became part of the way in which postwar couples measured their achievements in life. Similarly to material goods, children marked the attainment of particular life stages and allowed parents to write their stories into a desirable/normative collective narrative of growth.

Recovering children's and parents' voices

While the history of childhood has reassessed the role of children as social members and actors in society, and while consumption has occupied an increasingly important space in analyses of postwar Eastern Europe, the specific position occupied by children in socialist societies, particularly in relation to consumption, has only recently started to attract the attention of historians (Cunningham 1995; Hendrick 1990; Prout and James 1990; Jenks and Prout 1998; James and James 2004).

This article contributes to this exploration taking as its main source a particular type of ego-document, located at the intersection of private and public discourse, and crossing both private desires and public expectations.

The ego-document discussed in the article are the solicited life stories collected and published in large numbers throughout the 1960s and 1970s, in the context of different editorial competitions (in Polish *konkursy*). This type of memoir (in Polish *pamiętniki*) could be considered as a specific genre, used in Poland since the beginning of the twentieth century as a privileged means of sociological investigation, thanks to the pioneering work of Florian Znaniecki. (Markiewicz-Lagneau 1976; Miller 2000, 6-12; Thompson 1979).

The *pamiętniki* collected and published in the 1960s and 1970s provide a precious source of information on family life, as well as on individual desires and aspirations. Collected in the context of different research and editorial projects, the *pamiętniki* dealt with several aspects of family life, from marital and gender relations in the home, to parenting and the economic role of women. Interestingly for our perspectives, the voice of young people was sometimes captured in the life stories too, also through occasional initiatives specifically dedicated to their experience.

What renders the postwar *pamiętniki* a particularly interesting source, is both the content of individual life stories and the very nature of their production. Not only the memoirs were written in response to specific research questions, but their publication was the result of a selection process aimed to highlight a particular path of social transformation. Collection after collection, the *pamiętniki* combined the subjective value typical of ego-documents with a public and pedagogical function: they did not only describe family life in socialist Poland, but also taught (or sought to teach) Poles about desirable ways of living. From sexual relationship to domestic hygiene, gender relations and parental practices, the cumulative (selected) experiences narrated by ordinary Poles provided a guide to a desirable socialist domestic and public life¹.

As Donna Haraway showed, all knowledge is situated in a particular context and cannot be properly understood without taking that context into account (Haraway 1991). In the case of the *pamiętniki*, the material collected had the explicit aim of gaining information on ordinary people's life in post-war Poland. The sort of knowledge they produced, however, is inseparable from the particular political and institutional framework in which the *pamiętniki* originated. While telling us about individual desires and expectations, the *pamiętniki* also remind us that no life story can be separated from the collective narrative of which it is part.

In relation to consumption, the *pamiętniki* give us a glimpse into the materiality of

¹ Three main themes stood out in the collections of life stories published in postwar Poland. The first is the role of new social and professional groups, such as doctors, miners, nurses and teachers. The second, concerns social relations in the new territories acquired by Poland after WW2, namely in Upper Silesia and Warmia and Masura (the former East Prussia region), which is in the so-called "recovered lands". The third major theme is the transformation/modernisation of domestic relationships; it is from this third group of publications that most of the material used in this article originates. The titles of the collections give a sense of the attention given to transformations taking place in different aspects of family life: *My parents*, *My children*, *My childhood*, *Myself as a Husband*, *Myself as a Wife*, *My grandparents*, *My Family*, *Then and Now*, to quote only a few.

family life, as well as into values and expectations.

As Sanding and Sparrman noted, «studying children's positions in markets, as well as their relations to consumption, gives rise to discussion and understandings of the notions of children and consumption, but more importantly to discussions on how the two are related» (Sparrman and Sandin, 10). This applies also to societies that constructed themselves in (at least theoretical) opposition to the very notion of market. As the *pamiętniki* show, in socialist societies as in capitalist ones, children and consumption stood in a crucial relation; the character of such relationship depended on the specific contexts in which it took place.

Socialism, consumerism, and the state

Similarly to its Eastern European sisters, the People's Republic of Poland constructed its postwar socialist identity in antithesis to the model of capitalist consumerism of the west. Anti-consumerist rhetoric (also a shorthand for anti-americanism) accompanied and supported an economic strategy dominated by investment in heavy industrial production at the expenses of services and consumer goods.

In the 1940s and 1950s, the efforts put into the rebuilding of infrastructures devastated by the war and the tight ideological control exercised by Stalinist leaders managed to put forward an idea of progress (and modernity) independent from consumption. By the 1960s, however, the shortcomings of the planned economy had become difficult to hide, as empty shops and recurrent shortage crises regularly reminded Poles of the inefficiencies of the system. In Poland, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the impossibility to buy much needed or much desired goods rapidly became a daily source of frustration for most ordinary people. This had significant political consequences. In an atmosphere of growing disenchantment with the promises of real socialism, the inability of the socialist state to provide goods and services testified the state's broader failure to respond to its citizens' needs and expectations, including those of the young families on which the future of the country rested.

In the history of postwar Poland, the years between 1956 and 1970, are usually seen as a period of relative liberalisation; a long decade during which the country left behind the worst of Stalinist repression to embark on a "national road" to socialism, under the leadership of Władysław Gomułka. The concessions to popular demands that marked the Polish thaw included the recognition of an independent Catholic Church, the abandonment of land collectivisation, and the introduction of a political pluralism of sort. In the economy, however, Gomułka pursued a strategy of austere self-sufficiency, which could do little to offset the growing disappointment of ordinary Poles.

The unsustainable political cost of economic and industrial policies that condemned the country's living standards to a frustratingly slow rise had become obvious by the end of Gomułka's reign. In 1970, the new party secretary Edward Gierek tried to counter political turmoil by abandoning the self-sufficiency goal pursued by his

predecessor and substituting it with a bold plan for economic modernisation based on large-scale import of foreign capital and technology. While the recipe would prove fatal on the long run, the immediate result was a wave of 'fake prosperity' engineered from the top and based on raised wages and freezing food prices.

As the Polish state started to realise the political dangers posed by its stale economy, new narratives about consumption also started to appear. Rather than rejecting the very notion of consumption as a capitalist perversion, growing attention started to be given in the 1960s and 1970s to the development of a notion of 'socialist consumption' in which people's changing needs and expectations could be channelled into an appropriate model of socialist transformation. The *pamiętniki* can be read both as testimony of the shortcomings of the socialist economy and as a map of how to achieve a successful life in the given conditions.

Families and children played an important role in the effort to put forward an approach to consumption able to keep together socialist ideology, economic constraints, and the unstoppable appeal of the rising international consumerist culture. By the 1960s, the first Poles who had reached adulthood in the aftermath of WW2 were forming their own families, bringing up the first generations of children born in the People's Republic. On the behaviour of these young parents and their children, including as young consumers, the state could measure its ability to forge new socialist citizens.

In Poland as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, and to an even greater degree in the Soviet Union, the socialist state tended to place children's matters at the core of its political legitimacy. The state not only claimed the expansion of education and health care as the centre pieces of the socialist revolution, but it also boasted the merit of having allowed children "to be children", guaranteeing them the possibility of remaining "non-productive" members of society for expanding parts of their lives. In countries in which child labour had been common and widespread, providing child care, health and education could be presented not only as a question of public welfare, but as part of a programme of social modernisation that saw children as a key component (Kelly Kirschenbaum 2001; Rodden 2002).

The centrality of the child to socialist modernisation programs determined not only the nature of children's consumption but also the changing value of the child.

In a classic book published in 1985, Viviana Zelizer argued that children's values changed in the US between 1870 and 1930 because of a rationalisation of the labour market that rendered children's labour redundant. No longer economically valuable, children acquired an emotional value, which in turn led to the establishment of a new market value of the emotional child (Zelizer 1985).

The reassessment of the social role of children and of their position in society and in the family accompanied the tumultuous economic and social transformations undergone by Poland in the aftermath of WW2. As a largely agrarian country rapidly morphed in an industrial one, the economic value attached to children in the rural household gave way to a redefinition of childhood as a time for learning and play. In the postwar rhetoric, the hardship endured by the peasant children of the pre-war

years was set against the modernity of the new era, in which the benevolent socialist state guaranteed the right of the child to be a child. The transformation of children's value from an economic to an emotional one brought with it a strong political dimension. To be children in postwar Poland meant the right/duty to pursue an education and enjoy good quality play. The guarantee of a 'non-productive' time in life was as an investment, expected to deliver the well performing socialist workers and citizens of the future.

Investing in children's right to be children had a very strong relevance in terms of the educational policy pursued by the postwar Polish government. As the new communist leaderships quickly understood that no radical project of social transformation could thrive without the participation of the youth, the creation of new generations of citizens educated in the values of socialism became a primary goal for the state since the early postwar years. New curricula and study programmes were introduced since the late 1940s, often in open competition with the traditional educational outlook pursued by the Catholic Church. Their explicit aim was that of forming a new socialist personality, able to understand the value of the collective and to contribute to it, through hard work and the adherence to appropriate moral and political values. Against the dogmatism of the Church and the obscurantism of pre-war parents, the new educational mantra advocated young people's emancipation through love of learning and scientific enquiry. Both of which should bring them to see the superior values of the current political system.

Children's value: economic, emotional, and political

For the generation born in the 1930s, the parents of the children born in the '50s and '60s, poverty and work had been common childhood experiences.

«My life, like that of thousands of other children was to sweat in agricultural work», remembered Krystyna Malinowska, who had been put in charge of the family small stock of poultry at the age of five, before «graduating to look after the [neighbours'] cow» when she turned seven (Malinowska 1977, 22-24).

Although already an adolescent in 1945, Krystyna described the possibility of finally going to school in the aftermath of the war as the real beginning of her life, starting with the recovery of her «previously denied» childhood. Throughout her memoir, Malinowska presented a common narrative of hard work, deprivation, and lack of communication between parents and children. No sense of nostalgia is to be found in Malinowska's early childhood memories. On the contrary, she unambiguously celebrated the socialist state as the father-saviour, which, through dedicated teachers and student grants, had recognised and promoted her intellectual ambitions and abilities. A gifted student, she had graduated in pedagogical studies and had gained a specialisation in sexual education, in itself a marked sign of "modernity" in postwar Poland. Educating children and young people had informed her private and professional life.

As an adult, Malinowska had gone through two painful divorces. While recalling

them as very difficult times, her memoirs indirectly paid tribute to a legal innovation introduced by the socialist government, which had allowed her and her two children to escape unloving and potentially abusive environments. Against the considerable social stigma that accompanied divorce in postwar Poland, Malinowska emphasised that her single mother household had offered her children a more supportive home than the formally “complete” family of her childhood. The quality of the relationships that bound the members of the family, she held, carried a far greater value than its institutional/legal form.

Against a traditional preoccupation with the integrity of the family as an institution, strongly supported by the Catholic Church, Malinowska’s narrative put forward a vision of family life that privileged emotional ties, in an implicit answer to the ongoing battle over divorce engaged by Catholic authorities since 1945.

My children did not have a normal family, in the sense of having always mother and father with them. Their father loved them only in theory, and kept no real contact after divorce. He was not missed in the family. My second husband, on the contrary, wanted to love all and could be very kind, but he had other problems, so that the children experienced a difficult atmosphere in the home. However, I never gave up the effort to give them a supportive environment (Malinowska 1977, 24-25)

Malinowska’s story provided an alternative pedagogy to that traditionally offered by Catholic authorities. Although based on different principles, her narrative was also informed by a central moral aim: to bring up her children to be «good citizens and workers», passing on «a socialist morality as a good start in life».

At the core of Malinowska’s parenting philosophy laid the conviction that children should be involved in all aspects of domestic life. By sharing in domestic work and being involved in decision-making, they would become aware of what running a household entailed, therefore gaining a skill that any conscious and responsible citizen should have.

Consumption represented a central part of her children’s education. Remembering how her parents’ poverty and lack of interests had made her feel lonely and misunderstood, Malinowska had taken care to include children’s consumption in her family budget. Moreover, she had tried to foster common interests with her children since their earliest age, engaging them in discussions of «films and books», as well as on current political matters. Finally, Malinowska had made sure that her son and daughter felt comfortable talking to her about any matter, including when asking «questions on intimacy and sexuality», which she made a point of answering «seriously and naturally», never giving the impression that this was anything out of the ordinary. The emphasis put by Malinowska on the near perfect harmony of the relationship she had with her children did not leave any space to discuss the extent to which children themselves had agreed to the consumption choices that she had made for them. In Malinowska’s account, they fully shared and appreciated the education they received and quickly developed a love of books, the most common present that she bought for them.

Unsurprisingly, here as in several other accounts, books represented the object considered most essential to children's virtuous upbringing.

Anna Filek, who had herself worked hard to overcome male prejudice in order to gain an engineering degree while pregnant, adopted "a Spartan attitude" towards her son, but went to a great length to answer his curiosities and questions. Seeing education and the cultivation of children's interests as the most valuable element of their upbringing, Filek made a point of answering «seriously and responsibly» any question her son posed. When she herself did not know the answer, Filek did not hesitate «to go out to buy books». In their daily routine, moreover, she used any available opportunity to «teach him how to look out for information, from books, TV, radio, film, posters». At the same time, she tried «to teach him how to distinguish between good and bad», making sure to turn daily event into an educational opportunity (Filek 1977, 53).

In the pedagogical project represented by the *pamiętniki*, not even the most difficult material circumstances, should prevent parents from pursuing an education that made their children «physically and morally healthy, giving them a love of learning». Zbojniczka (The Trouble Maker) had brought up three daughters alone in a remote mountain area after the early death of her husband; although striving for material subsistence, she had nonetheless found resources to buy «books of psychology and pedagogy, dedicated to the education of children». Similarly to Malinowska, she had involved children in domestic work, which in her case involved rural activities.

I gave each of my children a duty to help in the home. The eldest, from the age of 8 helped me with the farm, looking after the geese, and the cows... the middle one started the fire, prepared the food and looked after the youngest daughter (Zbojniczka 1974, 46).

If to the reader, those tasks could appear not so different from those that the young Malinowska had so resented, the context made all the difference from the point of view of the writers. In postwar accounts, domestic and even rural duties were presented not as exploitative work, but rather as part of a civic and political education, which included an appreciation of domestic responsibilities.

Moreover, unlike in the pre-war households, in the postwar home no amount of material hardship could justify slacking standards in education. Despite the material struggle that she had to confront every day, "Zbojniczka", who was herself a primary school teacher, had found time to teach her daughters to read even before they started school, and «helped them with homework from the first to the third class». Her efforts paid off, as from then on she «never had to ask about homework, because they attended to it as soon as they got home» (Zbojniczka 1974, 46).

Children as markers of modernity in family life

We have been married for ten years, with much love. We are both well-adjusted to marriage, we have already an apartment, a television, an electric floor polisher, and a coffee maker, as well as a seven year old boy, who is in the first year of school (Piotr 1976, 10).

Piotr, a 35 year old doctor from Warsaw, married to another doctor of the same age, could be seen as the perfect example of a new urban socialist “middle class”, characterised by high professional status, an equal marriage, and a certain spending ability.

Piotr’s memoir touches one of the central themes of postwar social modernisation, which is the transformation of the model of family and matrimonial life. Several Polish sociological studies published throughout the 1960s and 1970s tried to map the transformation from an agrarian society, in which the patriarchal/rural household characterised by rigid gender roles and high fertility had been prevalent, to an urban society, distinguished by the predominance of equal marriage and lowering reproduction rates. A study conducted in the new industrial town of Nowa Huta in 1970 found that having two children had become the norm even among workers with relatively low levels of education, while younger and more educated couples showed an even lower propensity towards reproduction. Several interviewees explained the decision to have no more than two children with the greater importance they had acquired: «once upon a time, the child was nothing in the family. Now, it is everything; no one cared for us the way we care for our children» (Adamski 1970, 31). For most interviewees, economic considerations and the fear of being unable to make ends meet guided their reproductive decisions.

Economic considerations were also paramount in the autobiographical narratives of the new educated urban middle classes; the fear of a life of poverty was given here a positive spin and presented as the desire to be able to satisfy children’s ever-growing needs and expectations. Taking care of children’s expanded desires and needs was not a purely materialistic matter. In the good-socialist-parent narrative, paying attention to children’s wishes was the mark of a “modern” parent-child relationship. Against the authoritarian and distant model that had dominated in the homes of their childhood, postwar parents presented themselves as the vanguard of a new type of intergenerational relationship based on communication, mutual respect and the desire to fulfil children’s potentialities.

The same logic also justified the acquisition of goods destined not directly to children, but to the improvement of “quality family time”.

Although motorbikes and cars did not constitute children consumption per se, they figured highly on the list of goods that young families wished to acquire for the good of the children, providing a good reminder that much of children’s consumption needs to be understood in the context of family consumption.

In a memoir published in the mid-1970s Nina recounted the long struggle she and her husband had fought to secure a «comfortable life» to their family. The transition from what Nina described as a «very basic» life style to a comfortable one was marked by some key purchases for the home - a modular kitchen, a Polar-80 fridge, and a carpet - all bought on credit. Having achieved the modern home that Nina had long wished for, the couple had decided to spend another 10,000 zloty to buy a second-hand motorbike. This Nina saw as the sign that the family had finally achieved some much desired quality free time. As she pointed out, the motorbike was used for two

main purposes: taking the children to the lake on Saturdays and Sundays and, by her husband alone, to go fishing. The latter, Nina saw as a «privilege» that he had gained through his good performance as father and husband: he was «a good and helpful man, who help[ed], g[ave] all the money [to the family], and absolutely [did] not drink».

Zbojniczka, was even more open as to the pedagogical value of quality recreational time. Her daughters «got presents for good behaviour» and the mother made sure to choose objects likely to stimulate her daughters' interests and skills: «once a camera, Druh, once a projector Bajka and some movies, and most often books with a dedication from their mum» (Zbojniczka 1974, 46-47). Unable to afford the money and time to take the girls on long holidays, she made sure to invent mini-vacations for them, usually taking them on Sunday trips to the near ski resort of Zakopane, where they would watch skiing competitions and eat a «nice meal, little cakes, or ice creams».

Similarly determined to feed her children's abilities, Kamila choose presents that would fit her family's musical interest. From a young age, her children received musical instruments and records; in their free time, the family would get together to play the piano and the guitar, would listen to the music collection assembled by the parents or would attend concerts. Kamila's husband, on the other hand, passed to the children his passion for photography, giving them a camera and teaching them how to take and develop pictures. Kamila noticed that this was «a somehow complicated hobby, because they have to use the bathroom as dark room, but the satisfaction is great» (Kamila 1974, 200).

For the holidays, Kamila took the children camping in the Tuchola Forest, a lake region in northern Poland. Here, Kamila and the children spent a month fishing and enjoying the good air of the region. «The children love to go fishing; we then eat together with great appetite, sitting under the tent». Her husband, who had to continue working through the summer, joined them at the weekends.

The value of things - or the continuum between children and objects

In all these narratives, consumption appear as an integral part of children's development, and as an important part of family life.

In some cases, children appear not only as consumers, but also as part of the «goods» acquired by the family. They are written into a narrative of family growth and consolidation in which both children and «things» come to represent markers of prosperity. With two children, a renewed home, and some money to spend in quality recreation, the picture of the desirable modern urban family seemed complete.

«Now, we had everything – wrote a satisfied Nina – a beautiful two-room apartment, nice furniture, beautiful, healthy children».

At first sight, Nina's juxtaposition of children and furniture might appear strange, even perhaps a devaluation of the former. In fact, her remark is a reminder of the importance occupied by objects in the construction of individual narratives and iden-

tities (Appadurai 1986; Miller 2005, 2008). Both children and desired objects allowed Nina to rejoice in a successful family life and to express her relief that the adventure started as a very young woman had turned out well:

Today, when I look back, I must recognise that we were not ready for marriage. I had not yet finished agricultural school, I had one dress, I was 18 years old and four months pregnant, of which we were very happy. I came from a poor family, on whose help I could not count and from whom I did not receive anything. Lukasz was 18 and had a guitar, from which he never parted, and a great heart, which was the most important. [...] We started from nothing, or rather from a son, but we were full of hopes and plans that after ten years of marriage have come through (Nina 1974, 26-27).

The juxtaposition of children and objects in narratives of material and personal growth is a recurrent theme in the *pamiętniki*.

Discovering a pregnancy was often the reason for a couple's first common purchases.

Nothing was new or prepared in the apartment so, based on our modest means, we had to prepare something. We bought a few furniture and a new big wardrobe. I was very proud of those new things, and when after a few days I opened the door of the wardrobe, I found my name burned into it - a sign of love from my husband. I was speechless, despite all the other signs that he loved me, it made me happy (Kamila 1974, 198).

The significance that parents-to-be attached not only to the purchase of the few objects directly destined to children, something most parents had to reduce to the very essential, but also to the decorating of the home in which the child would be born, remind us that a child's consumer life usually start before its birth (Clarke 2004).

For the many couples who started a married life at a young age, not rarely while still at university, the arrival of a first (often unplanned) child marked a brusque passage to adulthood. Being able to buy at least essential daily items represented both a practical necessity and a sign of independence. By redecorating a home or adapting makeshift dwellings to the needs of a new-born, parents created not only environments more suitable to the need of a child, but new family spaces, in which a new existence (of the family as well as of the child) would take place.

The arrival of a second child, especially when planned, marked in many narratives a further move from a condition of precariousness to the stability expected of adults. The determination to «give our sons a full, calm, family home» motivated purchases that although costly seemed worthwhile and necessary. As Kamila explained, it was the determination to create a home free from the sense of want and insecurity that she and her husband had experienced as young people that made them happy to incur in expenses, and to buy on credit. Together with reading stories from books and answering any questions children might have, providing good material surroundings and quality time was essential to good parental practice.

The very existence of children, moreover, could provide the necessary (if not always sufficient) condition for the family's achievement of a home of their own. In a country plagued by housing shortage and with large part of his housing stock man-

aged by the state, the size of the family very often determined the size of the apartment. As couples planned their families' size, their awareness of social policy norms represented an important matter (Czeczterda 1969; Adamski 1977).

Expanding and reducing the size of the household, not only by having or not having children, but also by inviting in-laws and other family member to share an apartment, represented an important aspect of the negotiations taking place between citizens and the state. TP illustrated with lively irony the negotiation and banter that could take place around the very serious issue of housing. Having lived with unwelcoming in-laws for several years, TP and her husband only managed to get access to independent housing in the aftermath of the birth of her first child.

In May 1963, we finally found an apartment in a new building. Beautiful. For sure, everyone wonder why two rooms for three people. At the beginning there was with us my mother, and after her death my mother in law. When they told me that with only one child I had no right to such apartment, I assured the official that for sure I will give birth to other five children, is they only let me have the apartment (TP 1974, 112).

The idea that material comfort increasingly defined "normal" family life found confirmation in the few testimonies of young people who admitted to live in poverty. This was for instance the case of Ola and Marzena, two young sisters, who in 1967 described their family as «atypical from a material point of view». The illness of their mother meant that the household could not enjoy the modern comforts associated to the two-earner family model: «we have none of the things that are normal in today's homes – wrote Ola and Marzena – we don't have a fridge, nor a television, nor a washing machine» (Ola and Marzena 1967, 34-35). The two sisters admitted that many of their consumption aspirations were incompatible with the socio-economic conditions of their family. Having had to contribute to the running of the home since an early age and with little money to spare, they had 'missed out' on social life and on the fun enjoyed by their friends. Although the state was not mentioned in the memoir, their testimony provided a heartfelt reminder of the inability of the socialist welfare to intervene in cases of need. Ola and Marzena's warm words for the loving atmosphere of their home and the educational efforts of their parents was only partial compensation for their implicit critique of the shortcoming of the state.

The dangers of consumption

Not everybody subscribed to the idea that consumption played an important and positive role in the life of contemporary Polish families.

A father from southern Poland sent his memoir for a competition entitled *The Contemporary Man as Father and Husband*, under the pseudonym of Odmienec (Proteus). Having grown up in a «traditional family» dominated by his father's silent presence, his childhood memories were not much different from those of several other writers. Despite admitting to the shortcomings of his own upbringing, however, Odmienec

criticised the «lenient progressive» approach to children's education that seemed to dominate in contemporary Poland. It was an attitude, he noticed, that verged «on the border of absurd», particularly as consumption was concerned. Contemporary parents, were unable to say no to their children, and their own «snobbism» made them want to buy for their offspring «all the most beautiful things, especially those that none of their friends still had». One of his colleagues, after having searched for a pushchair for his son «in all the shops of the main cities of the country» had ended up importing one from abroad, just to make sure that he bought something «worth the admiration and envy of his friends» (Odmienec 1976, 26-27).

Even more astonishingly, another acquaintance had let his son play with his watches and break two of them; far from being upset, he had simply declared that «the child was dearer to him than those watches».

«Is giving in to every whims of our children prove of our love?» wandered Odmienec. This seemed to him to be the prevailing mood among contemporary parents, who wished to give their offspring all the things they had themselves not had as children. The consequence was that contemporary kids were getting «everything they want[ed], if necessary, even recurring to blackmailing». It could therefore happen that a woman worker had to ask for financial help from the state company for which she worked, because the request of her children were driving her to bankruptcy (Odmienec 1976, 28).

Although in less dramatic terms, Marta, a professional woman of 38, also offered a glimpse of the tensions that could rise between parents' financial possibilities and children's expectations. Writing in 1967, Marta observed that her two children had «everything they need and maybe more: bicycle, guitar, camera, a record player». Still, they were not satisfied: «Agata says that any girl must have at least four pair of stockings [...] Pawel dreams of a scooter [...] when we tell them to be patient, they tell us that it's our fault, that other parents are more resourceful» (Marta 1967, 12-13)

Marta read the different appreciation of goods between her and her children in generational terms: the youth of today had no memories of hardship and had not experienced the war, therefore they could not appreciate the contemporary material comforts in the way their parents did.

In Odmienec's eyes, on the contrary, the problem laid mostly with contemporary parents, who not wishing to replicate the educational model of their families were nonetheless unable to find an alternative way of rising their children. While he agreed that there was nothing to be missed in an upbringing based on «sour fathers, rigidly hierarchical family structures and from time to time the belt», expensive objects did not provide a viable alternative. Rather, Odmienec advocated greater involvement in children's lives, and constant dedication to their moral upbringing. In his own home, he had broken conventional gender roles in order to take the lead on children's education since their very early age. He had «put up entertainment for them, making sure that I never dominated the play, but always made it into a real partnership». He had helped them with homework, but always in a way that promoted their independent and autonomous thinking. In every occasion, he had strove to teach the children

«what they could and could not ask for, and why» (Odmienec 1976, 29).

Odmienec's search for a new way of bringing up a family reflected the dilemma of the new Poland in which he lived. He and his wife, as many of their contemporaries, struggled to combine new social and economic roles and unchanged duties of care, largely left by the state in the hands of families. As many other couples, they both had taken up shift work «to ensure that the children did not have to stay without care for a long time».

Both Odmienec and Marta, moreover, confirmed what the sociologist Franciszek Adamski described as the «frequent paradox» of the modern industrial family, in which «in order to buy goods to be used in their free time, such as cars and TVs, people limit[ed] their free time» by taking up extra work. In a country characterised by low salaries and rising living costs, providing the family with material comforts forced parents, and fathers in particular, to reduce the time spent with their children. Moreover, observed Adamski, after long shifts in heavy industrial work, all people wished for when they finally returned home was «some holy quiet». This was a legitimate desire, noted the sociologist, but hardly conducive to the “quality time” that families were supposed to spend together (Adamski 1970, 31).

Consumptions and gender roles

At the basis of Adamski's observation were a series of interviews conducted in Nowa Huta in the late 1960s. A model new industrial town built in the 1950s to house the workers of a newly built steel mill (the very symbol of postwar economic strategy) and their families, Nowa Huta was a microcosm of the new Poland. The city, in the proximity of Cracow, was largely composed of workers who had migrated from the countryside in order to take up industrial work; its population was characterised by a high percentage of working women, and by a broad distribution in terms of both age and education. As a new town, moreover, Nowa Huta represented an interesting test of what the state had been able to achieve in its effort to provide a suitable environment for the new socialist generations (Lebow 2013).

Crucially, Nowa Huta provided precious material on the critical question of how women's work influenced family relations. As the inquiry published in 1970 confirmed, this remained a sore issue in many families, as working class men adamantly refused to take up new duties within the home, and in many cases declared themselves hostile to their wives working outside the house. Moreover, while a minority of the youngest and better-educated women declared to consider work essential to their development as individuals and citizens, the majority of women saw working only as a means «to ensure the survival of the family» or to «increase its standard of living». Providing for children's needs figured as one of the main reasons for taking up work. Adamski had to conclude, that while there were signs that the «traditional model of wife as domestic worker» was transitioning towards the “contemporary model” of female emancipation through work, it was nonetheless evident that «the participa-

tion of married women to professional work [could not] be treated solely as a sign of women's progress in the People's Republic of Poland» (Adamski 1970, 60-61). Consumption played a greater role in encouraging women's work outside the home than their desire for emancipation.

The *pamiętniki* confirmed the fears and resistances created by changing gender relations and the growing expectation that husband would share in domestic chores, as well as the strong connection that linked consumption and changing gender roles. As many life stories highlighted, the purchase of certain objects not less than the roles that men, women and children assumed within the home, delineated a specific idea of family life and a particular understanding of society.

While sociological studies pointed out the slow progress made in Polish households towards a more equal division of domestic tasks, several respondents used the *pamiętniki* to proclaim their adherence to the new "equal marriage" ideal. Even positive tales of social and familial success, however, could do little to hide the anxieties and tensions produced by social and economic transformations, including the new encouragement to spend that confronted the Poles in the 1960s and even more in the 1970s. The already mentioned Piotr adamantly described his marriage as a prototype of modernity: two young successful professionals, living in the capital and enjoying the full comfort of available domestic appliances. His recollection of a small domestic drama having children as main protagonists, however, perceptively captured both changing cultural norms and the conflicts that accompanied the transformation.

Coming back from work one evening, Piotr found his seven year old son playing husband and wife with a girl of the same age.

I realised that it was morning and after the ceremony of breakfast and goodbyes, the little girl left the room, saying that she was going to work. My son, instead, busied himself beating something, mixing, and talking to himself. «Don't you go to work?» I asked him; «No, I prepare lunch», he answered calmly. «But do you work at all?», «No, Ania works, so there isn't anyone to look after the child» he said, indicating a teddy bear, who, as it became clear, played the role of the son. «So, you see, I have to stay with the child», he added with a sigh. I told this to my wife. She smiled and said that really we are bringing up a contemporary man. Her light-heartedness irritated me, and this was the beginning of a long discussion on marriage and marriage roles (Piotr 1976, 11).

In his account, Piotr consciously stressed the idea that he and his wife represented a prototypical couple in contemporary urban Poland, «identical» to many others in the same social bracket, which is the educated professional sector, in terms of life style and material circumstances. Their consumption patterns as much as their adherence to the principle of a systematic and equal division of domestic duties and parenting roles, defined their self-proclaimed modernity. Still, Piotr could not agree with his wife that the gender roles played out by his son and his friend were wholly unremarkable «and that there was nothing to comment about it». Piotr saw in the play a powerful reflection of the remarkable transition that had taken place during his life span. The objects with which contemporary children played also highlighted the transformation. Piotr could not remember instances when he played with his sister's

dolls, nor «her with my soldiers and pistols»; on the contrary, «if there was a moment when I started to play with her things, my mother or my father would intervene saying that those were not for boys».

In Piotr's recollection of growing up in what he called a "traditional family", common play between boys and girls was limited to either gender neutral activities, such as paper cut outs or drawing, or to games in which they could play different and well delineated roles. For instance, he would play «Indian, fighter, explorer, soldier», while his sister would be «the wife of the Indian, the cook, the nurse, the porter». In Piotr's own words, when he and his sister played together «there was always a clear difference in function, responsibility and prestige» (Piotr 1976, 11-12).

Although not elaborating on the types of toys that he and his wife bought to their son, Piotr's narrative highlighted the importance of objects and their use in the construction of identities.

The objects that surrounded children's play, as much as the caring relations that took place around them, marked the complicated renegotiation of gender boundaries that was unfolding in postwar Poland.

Conclusions

In a defining contribution to feminist scholarship, Barrie Thorne argued in 1987 that the invisibility and marginality to which both women and children were condemned in most social analyses was not coincidental, but stemmed from the same structures of power that made them marginal in society (Thorne 1987; Oakley 1994). Women and children have often shared social destinies and conceptual treatments, both when they have been marginalised and ignored and in the rarer cases in which they have been studied as a necessary protagonist of social processes. In fact, some of those who have more strongly and persuasively argued for the need of bringing children *and* mothers into the picture, have sometimes done so at the risk of further reinforcing the essentialist idea that children *are* women's matter. This has been the case also in much consumption literature².

Both women and children occupied an interesting and ambiguous position in postwar Poland. They stood at the centre of a narrative of social transformation that found in women's economic activation and in the protection of childhood by the state two defining themes. As such, women and children stood at the centre of one of the longest lasting tensions generated by socialist transformations, which is that between the new economic position of women and unchanged expectations around care work. Such tension informed the relationship between citizens and the state, consumption, and gender relations within and outside the household.

² Daniel Cook, for instance, has strongly emphasised that putting children into the picture necessarily bring mother in too, since «as dependent beings», children rely «usually, but not exclusively, on mothers – for almost everything in their lives. It is largely mothers' work that provides for them – materially, socially and emotionally» (Cook 2008, 231).

While in capitalist societies, caring work immediately brought into the picture the marketplace, where both goods and services are largely purchased, things were more complicated in socialist Poland. While the socialist revolution did not manage to wipe out market dynamics, both the availability of private goods and services and the financial ability to buy them were in short supply.

Far from detracting from the significance of consumption, the increasingly obvious inability of the state to deliver made the issue of purchasing a matter of great political relevance.

It was within the family and in relation to young children that most of those tensions played out. As women's newly found economic independence questioned traditional male authority and started to challenge deeply held assumption about care, families became the place in which new roles and expectations had to find accommodation. When the Polish state tried to revive its ailing economy through the promotion of consumer spending, the question of what should be bought, how and by whom, became important cultural and political questions. Was investing into the pleasures of an increasingly comfortable home detrimental to the political collective engagement that postwar mobilisation had advocated? Was taking up two jobs or working extra-time a commendable worker's effort or the dangerous sign of a greedy acquisitive culture? Was it better to be less at home to pay for children's growing demands and expectations or follow the path of socialist austerity? None of those questions had easy answers and the solutions found depended on ideological and political stances as much as on material possibilities. As the *pamiętniki* show, as "socialist consumers" Poles had to mediate between different and contradictory messages.

What Poles' experiments with consumption showed, however, was that consuming was not the simple activity of single social actors, but the outcome of multiple and potentially conflicting interests. Far from telling us about individual needs, desires and economic possibilities, Polish consumption suggested complicated patterns of obligations and reciprocity, which engaged individuals, families and the broader society of which they were part.

As the narratives discussed in this article show, children provided a privilege terrain for the negotiation of private desires and public expectations. In relation to consumption, children did not represent merely an 'extra expense' or an addition to the household budget; on the contrary, they were integral in creating the meaning that surrounded "the world of goods" from which familial and national narrative depended.

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