Domesticating Consumer Goods in the Global Economy: Examples from Vietnam and Russia

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Abstract In this article, I compare findings from my own research on consumerism in Ho Chi Minh City to the research of others in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and consider why shoppers in Vietnam and Russia worry about the origins of the products they encounter in their newly marketized economies. Consumer anxieties in both countries reveal a shared crisis of ‘locality’ – a common concern about the movement of goods between spaces designated as ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign;’ at the same time, however, they point to different constructions of these categories in the context of market reform. In conclusion, I argue that, through their consumption practices, shoppers in Vietnam and Russia are reframing socialist and neoliberal notions of self, society, and the market.

Keywords Vietnam, Russia, postsocialism, global capitalism, consumerism

In my research on consumption practices in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, in 1999 and 2000, I found that shoppers were extremely interested in issues of locality. The question that frames nearly all interactions between buyers and sellers in the city’s markets and shops is *nuoc nao?*, or ‘which country?’ This is a shorthand way of asking, ‘in which country was this product manufactured?’ In Ho Chi Minh City, ‘which country?’ is an essential question for anyone hoping to make sense out of the incredible quantity and variety of consumer goods in the city’s markets, shops, and shopping malls. After years of product shortages, long lines, and what many considered to be poor quality local goods, Vietnamese welcomed the refilling of once-bare market stalls and store shelves. Nonetheless, many feel anxious about the goods that are now available locally, and they worry about their own abilities to successfully navigate this new market abundance. In particular, they are critical...
of the ways in which new production strategies blur boundaries between domestic and foreign goods that once appeared clear and distinct.

Shoppers in Ho Chi Minh City are not alone in their concerns about the goods they encounter in shops and markets. Scholars of post-Soviet Russia have described similar sorts of consumer worries. In this article, I compare findings from my own research in Vietnam with three studies in Russia: Caroline Humphrey’s (1995) analysis of consumerism in Moscow in the early 1990s, Melissa Caldwell’s (2002) discussion of food shopping in Moscow between 1995 and 2001, and Jennifer Patico’s (2001) examination of consumption practices in late-1990s St. Petersburg.

My motivation to pursue this comparative study developed out of conversations with friends and colleagues whose research is centered in Russia and Eastern Europe. Previously, I had looked almost exclusively to other countries in East and Southeast Asia for points of comparison with my own research findings in Vietnam. Not surprisingly, ethnographic studies from both socialist and non-socialist Asia (e.g., Brook & Luong 1997; Davis 2000; Gillette 2000; Hefner 1998; Watson 1997) have been essential to my understanding of consumption practices in reform-era Vietnam. Nonetheless, I was intrigued by the parallels that colleagues working in other parts of the socialist and former socialist world, particularly Russia, noted between my ethnographic accounts and their own observations in the field, especially since comparisons with studies of East and Southeast Asia have so far not revealed these sorts of similarities. Although there has been little effort within anthropology to compare the experiences of contemporary Russians and Vietnamese, the shared socialist histories of these countries, including Vietnam’s strong political and economic ties to the Soviet Union, motivated me to take these anecdotal accounts seriously. I was further encouraged by ethnographic comparisons, such as those by Geertz in Muslim Indonesia and Morocco (Geertz 1983, 1995), that successfully crosscut, rather than adhere to the geographical and cultural boundaries delimited by traditional area studies models. I see this kind of broader, comparative perspective as a much needed addition to postsocialist studies, which, to date, has largely taken the form of a kind of area studies of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.¹ I anticipate that a more geographically and culturally inclusive postsocialist studies will not only contribute to our knowledge about everyday life in particular places such as Vietnam, North Korea, and Cuba, but enrich our understanding of how a history of socialism and its contemporary decline are informing people’s everyday experiences around the world.
In this article my aim is to show how Russian and Vietnamese consumer discourses about, and consumption of, domestic and foreign goods can inform our perception of reform-era and postsocialist experiences of global capitalism. As I will discuss, ethnographic accounts of consumption practices in Russia and Vietnam seem to describe a common concern, on the part of consumers, with the influx of foreign goods that followed upon market-oriented reform in each country. In broad terms, this concern takes the form of shifting consumer allegiances between foreign and domestic goods. However, this is not merely a discussion about consumer preference for goods in a ‘global’ economy. Rather, it reflects more far-reaching apprehensions about how production is organized, the integrity of the nation and of national boundaries in the context of transnational capitalism, and the position of each country within a global hierarchy of economic development. As I will show, although these countries share a socialist past and developed similar plans for economic reform, they have become different kinds of players in the global capitalist economy; while the Russian economy has shifted its focus from domestic production to the consumption of imported goods, Vietnam has become an important overseas manufacturing site. This crucial distinction has shaped the way Russian and Vietnamese consumers value foreign and domestic goods, with Russians seeking out domestic goods and Vietnamese desiring foreign ones. Thus, by talking about and purchasing either foreign or domestic goods, Russians and Vietnamese — in various ways — critique and attempt to reshape the global economy and their place in it.

**Economic Reform in Russia and Vietnam**

In 1986, at the Soviet Union’s Twenty-Seventh Party Congress, Mikhail Gorbachev introduced *perestroika* (‘reconstruction’), a program aimed at social, political, and economic restructuring. That same year, the Vietnamese government initiated its own reform policy termed *doi moi*, or ‘renovation.’ Paired with *glasnost*, Gorbachev’s policy to promote a climate of social and cultural openness, *perestroika* was meant to reinvigorate socialist society in the USSR by addressing a range of political, social, and economic issues (Gorbachev 1987). By contrast, Vietnam’s *doi moi* was not a proposal for political or social reform; indeed, Vietnam remains a socialist state under the leadership of a single-party communist government. *Doi moi* was designed to preserve the socialist political and social system while addressing Vietnam’s economic ills through the introduction of market-oriented policies (Förde & de Vylder 1996; Taylor 2001:59–63). Although *doi moi* was a far more modest reform effort...
than *perestroika*, the economic goals of these plans were quite similar: both sought to revitalize their economies by decentralizing industry, introducing market mechanisms, and encouraging foreign investment and trade.

The pre-reform socialist economies of Vietnam and the Soviet Union had been characterized by centralized, state-run manufacturing industries (de Vylder 1995; Pike 1987). In each country, the ruling Communist Parties had promoted a popular vision of the nation-state as the manufacturer and supplier of goods for its citizens. The vision, however, did not always match reality: throughout the late 1970s and much of the 1980s, Vietnam and Russia were bilateral trade partners in the Soviet-led Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), and both countries suffered from regular shortages of consumer goods, including food (Gates & Truong 1995). Nonetheless, both governments promoted a vision of production as a national and a nationalist enterprise, one that, at least in theory, was contained within the nation’s borders and provided its people with the things they needed. Further, Soviet and Vietnamese citizens were encouraged to draw associative links between themselves and their own labor on the one hand, and consumption and goods, on the other, the idea being that, although individuals did not personally produce all the goods they consumed, goods were produced for the nation by fellow citizens (Humphrey 1995; Malarney 1998). At the same time, both governments downplayed the virtues of consumption and consumerism in favor of those of production, labor, and workers. In particular, they strongly discouraged conspicuous consumption among their citizens, especially of foreign goods, which were considered harbingers of capitalist imperialism and therefore threats to the integrity of the nation and the socialist enterprise (Humphrey 2002; Taylor 2001).

Economic change in postsocialist Russia has not been limited to the way that manufacturing and production are organized (e.g., state or private, centralized or localized) but has involved a more profound shift in emphasis from production to consumption (Patico & Caldwell 2002:285). Since *perestroika* and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, state-run manufacturing generally has not been replaced with private and/or foreign manufacturing, and has slowly eroded. As a result, Russia produces fewer and fewer of the goods its citizens consume. There are exceptions, of course. For instance, some transnational food corporations have established production sites within Russia (Caldwell 2002:296). But in general, the Russian economic sphere, which was once dominated by physical manifestations and narratives of socialist-style production, has been largely reconfigured as a space of
consumption. And importantly, the goods that Russians consume are more likely to be made elsewhere than not.

Despite the many similarities between the impetuses and aims of *perestroika* and *doi moi*, Vietnam’s economic path since 1986 has been very different from that of Russia. Not long after the Vietnamese government announced its plans for economic ‘renovation,’ foreign and multinational corporations were clamoring to invest in what they anticipated would soon be a Vietnamese ‘free market.’ As was the case in Russia, and throughout the former Soviet world, corporations saw Vietnam as a huge and untapped consumer market. But companies also recognized Vietnam as a new source of cheap labor. Like many of their East and Southeast Asian neighbors, Vietnamese workers now manufacture goods, such as Colgate toothpaste and Honda motorbikes, in foreign-run factories and special economic zones (*sez*) that are devoted largely to production for export. This local manufacture of foreign-branded products has transformed production in Vietnam. Increasingly, state-owned enterprises find themselves unable to compete with foreign-run and joint-venture operations (Hill 2000; *Vietnam Economic Times* 8/30/2001). As in Russia, many Vietnamese state factories have closed their doors (Flórde 1999). But market-oriented reforms in Vietnam have not led to a general shift away from manufacturing. Indeed, Vietnam’s status as a producer of goods — for the foreign as well as for the domestic market — has grown rapidly over the last couple of decades (Chan & Nørlund 1999:210).

These transformations in the manufacturing industry have also contributed to the quantity and variety of consumer goods available in the shops and markets of Vietnam. From the end of the US-Vietnam War in 1975 to the early 1990s, consumer goods — even household staples — were hard to come by in Vietnam. Most of the goods that were available were manufactured domestically and distributed through state channels. Foreign goods, and especially luxury items from Europe, the US, and Japan, were accessible only to those in power, or through risky black market trading networks. These days, thanks in large part to market-oriented economic reform and international trade, local markets and shops are practically, and sometimes literally, overflowing with goods. Like Russian shoppers, Vietnamese now find themselves surrounded with things to buy.

Still, the economic changes and consumption patterns in Russia and Vietnam are notably distinct; a decade and a half after the beginning of economic reform, Russian shoppers struggle to find anything except foreign-made goods, while Vietnamese shoppers say that foreign, imported goods are disappearing from
markets and store shelves. This claim, and the sense of isolation and localization it engenders, seems strange given Vietnam’s market-friendly reform policies, its newly forged trade relations with capitalist countries, and the abundance of foreign brand-name goods in local shops and markets. Yet it is reflective of the particular ways in which production has been refigured in Vietnam. Although most of the goods produced in foreign-run factories and SEZs are destined for foreign markets, many of them are made for and marketed to local consumers. In other words, many of the consumer goods that now fill Vietnamese markets and shops are ‘domestic products’ – by virtue of their domestic manufacture – not imports. As I will discuss later, this fact has profound implications for how Vietnamese shoppers interpret economic reform.

Before discussing my own research with shoppers in Ho Chi Minh City, I will briefly describe how notions of ‘foreign’ and ‘domestic’ have shaped consumption practices in Moscow and St. Petersburg in the 1990s. I am interested in how a shared history of state socialism may heighten consumer concerns about so-called foreign and domestic goods. Yet, my aim is not to propose that there are universal, or even pan-socialist consumer experiences or consumption practices. Rather, as I will show, this comparison seems to reveal as many differences as it does commonalities.

**Humphrey: The Shift from Foreign to Domestic in Moscow**

Let me begin this comparative effort with Caroline Humphrey’s (1995) study of consumption practices in Moscow. Humphrey tells us that, from 1990 to 1992, shoppers in Moscow rushed to buy imports that were largely inaccessible in the Soviet economy. However, by 1993, Muscovites had become wary of these once-prized foreign goods, and began to favor Russian products instead. In a description of one family’s household budget, she writes: ‘with the exception of one piece of imported butter, nothing in [the budget] was foreign. “American butter” was regretted and bought only because “our fatherland butter” was sold out. The cigarettes were Russian and so were a door-lock and a pair of child’s skis. It was as though the global influx of goods to Moscow had never taken place’ (Humphrey 1995:54–55). And yet, as Humphrey explains, the global influx of goods to Moscow had taken place; Muscovites might have preferred domestic goods, but local shops and markets were full of foreign, imported goods.

Humphrey draws on Russian concerns about ‘speculation’ to frame this shift in consumption practices from foreign to domestic goods (1995:61–64). She explains that, within Soviet ideology, sellers of foreign goods were
viewed negatively as speculators, ‘people who profit by buying and re-selling goods without adding any value by means of their own labour’ (Humphrey 1995:61). Humphrey argues that this negative view of traders has its roots in the Marxist claim that ‘true value is created by labour’ (1995:61). In other words, ‘speculation’ was antithetical to the Soviet ideology that linked people to goods through the production process rather than through commercial trade. As Humphrey explains:

Soviet ideology ... insisted on the citizen’s conscious identification with the activity of the state. Virtually all industrial and manufactured goods, and most agricultural ones, were produced by state enterprises and distributed through the Union according to state plans. This meant that, although the vast majority of products and images were consumed by people who had not created them, it was ideologically enjoined that people feel them nevertheless to be ‘ours’ (nashi) (Humphrey 1995:43).

Humphrey argues that this association between goods and citizens, in which Soviet people were understood to be producing their own goods, was simultaneously internalized and resisted by Soviet consumers. There was a popular notion that the goods they consumed were in some sense ‘theirs.’ At the same time, however, the socialist ideological link between production and consumption was often undermined by the realities of lived experience in Soviet Russia. Many people responded to these discontinuities between Soviet ideology and practice by actively seeking out ‘speculators’ and the foreign goods they sold. In this context, consuming foreign goods became a form of resistance to the Soviet regime.

By the early 1990s, the social and political connotations of acquiring foreign goods had shifted in important ways. In the context of market reform, foreign goods came to signal a willingness to be duped by a new class of ‘speculators,’ mafia-controlled traders and the so-called ‘New Russians’ who had gained dominance in the foreign goods market. Humphrey posits that, in response to this negative association between foreign goods, mafia trade, and the New Russians, shoppers in Moscow refigured domestic goods as superior to foreign goods, superior, at least, for Russian use. By 1993, Muscovites were shunning foreign goods in favor of goods they perceived as more down-to-earth, more ‘Russian,’ and which they referred to as ‘ours’ (nashi) (Humphrey 1995:57–58). Humphrey argues that, in an increasingly unstable market, Russian things became valuable because they offered shoppers a sense of familiarity and security.
Caldwell: Buying Russian Food in Moscow

Melissa Caldwell (2002) interprets the growing Muscovite taste for domestic goods, and especially food products, as an expression of a more widespread, postsocialist Russian nationalism. Her research findings from 1995–2001 in many ways parallel Humphrey’s from the early 1990s. Like Humphrey, Caldwell found that Russian shoppers employed a *nash/ne nash* (‘ours’/‘not ours’) dichotomy to distinguish between and evaluate foodstuffs. And she agrees with Humphrey that shoppers have come to privilege goods they categorize as ‘ours,’ or Russian, over the foreign-made, imported goods that they negatively designate as ‘not ours.’

Where these two interpretations differ is in the motivations they find behind this new appeal of domestic goods. As I discussed in the previous section, Humphrey recognizes the move towards domestic goods as an application of socialist models of production and consumption to the contemporary economic context; as she sees it, the problem Muscovite shoppers have with foreign products is that they are part of a deceptive and exploitative system of speculation that is now dominated by the New Russians. Caldwell also sees Muscovite shoppers employing socialist-era values and practices in their engagement with present-day marketplace activities. However, and in contrast to Humphrey, Caldwell explains this preference for domestic goods in terms of a more active and purposeful consumer agency. More specifically, she argues that the appeal of domestic food products draws on a surging nationalist sentiment that includes nostalgia for things ‘Russian’ (Caldwell 2002:307).

Caldwell posits that Muscovites value domestic foods because they represent and presumably enable the preservation of a ‘pure’ Russianness, free of ‘polluting’ foreign elements. As once exotic foreign goods and other cultural forms are now commonplace in Russia, many Muscovites worry that the presence of these foreign elements is having a negative effect on local culture. Such fears of external influence extend beyond the commercial sphere, but, as Caldwell’s ethnography shows, they are made explicit in the context of consumerism.

One striking by-product of these trends has been the growing appeal of a specialized niche of commodities that draw on Russian linguistic markers and historical-cultural allusions in order to cater to the notion that Russians share a unique set of tastes and values that is not satisfied by imports or other transnational products. The growth of this commercialized nationalism has found popularity among consumers who carefully calculate the extent to which the foods and other items that they
buy reflect the specifically Russian values and attributes they espouse. Through the shared consumer experience that emerges from the careful manipulation of these products, these shoppers publicly situate themselves within an imagined national community (Caldwell 2002:297).

This ‘commercialized nationalism,’ expressed through the consumer tendency to classify food products as ‘ours’ or ‘not ours,’ has been promoted by Russian officials and local producers and retailers. During Caldwell’s field research, Russian officials launched a ‘Buy Russian’ campaign aimed at encouraging shoppers to buy domestic foodstuffs and other goods. What Caldwell outlines for us is a kind of collaborative effort between government officials, manufacturers, sellers, and consumers of goods to ‘fuse brand loyalty with national loyalty’ (2002:307).

**Patico: Foreign Things and Domestic Food in St. Petersburg**

In her study of consumption practices among teachers in St. Petersburg in the late 1990s, Jennifer Patico (2001) found Russian shoppers relatively ambivalent about the significance of labels like *nash* (‘ours’) and *ne nash* (‘not ours’). Like Humphrey and Caldwell, Patico argues that the initial rush to buy foreign goods was followed by an active search for domestic goods. However, Patico makes a point of saying that this taste for domestic goods is limited largely to foodstuffs, and that, when it comes to other goods, shoppers continue to prefer foreign, and especially ‘European’ things (2001:129–130). Nonetheless, she concurs with Humphrey and Caldwell that nationality plays a central role in consumption practices among the St. Petersburg teachers with whom she worked.

Shoppers in St. Petersburg say that domestic foodstuffs are tastier and fresher than imported foods. By contrast, they worry that the foreign foodstuffs they buy will be of poor quality, or more seriously, expired, spoiled, or even poisonous. These fears are fueled by the suspicion that foreign countries are sending Russians their cast-offs and leftovers, rather than their best goods, and they heighten consumer concerns about knowing when and how certain food products are made. Patico interprets this preference for domestic over foreign foods as part of a more general Russian anxiety about their place in a global hierarchy of nations. As she explains it, Russians fear that the changes they are experiencing may be transforming them into a ‘Third,’ rather than a ‘First’ world country (2001:135–136).
This ambivalence and its impetus can be summarized by recognizing that economic ‘globalization’ … shows two faces to Russians in their role as consumers – one of a sort of Europeanization or westernization and another of ‘Third-Worldization.’ Often, by noting the country from which a particular commodity has originated, and sometimes by formulating explicit comparisons of their own lifestyles to ‘European’ luxury or ‘Third World’ poverty, people try to assess both goods and selves properly and prudently (Patico 2001:128).

Patico’s interpretation of how teachers in St. Petersburg employ the nash/ne nash distinction stands in contrast both to Humphrey’s image of a postsocialist disjuncture between production and consumption and Caldwell’s depiction of ‘commercialized nationalism.’ While Caldwell interprets nash and ne nash as expressions of nostalgia and nationalism by consumers, Patico attributes less weight to their use by shoppers in St. Petersburg. As she explains, ‘In the way people use the term (in the consumer context), it seems so familiar as to be rather value-neutral; that is, people apply it without seeming to express any pointed opinion about domestic production as an issue of politics and patriotism’ (Patico 2001:130). Thus, in contrast to both Humphrey (1995) and Caldwell (2002), Patico views the use of these terms in the commercial sphere as primarily descriptive, rather than evaluative.

Despite these significant differences, however, there are noteworthy similarities that unite these three ethnographic studies of consumerism in postsocialist Russia. Of special interest to me here is how Russian shoppers foreground national boundaries, places, and conditions of manufacture. Although Patico does not, as Caldwell does, see the use of the terms nash and ne nash by shoppers as expressions of nationalist sentiment, she does note a general ‘disposition to highlight geographical origins’ (2001:130) of products on the part of shoppers and sellers; consumers express opinions about the quality of goods based on their geographical point of origin, and retailers display goods according to country, or, in some cases, particular Russian cities (2001:130).

**Refiguring the ‘Domestic’ in Ho Chi Minh City**

I’d like to return now to my own research, and to the ways in which production and place are informing Vietnamese consumption practices. In 1999–2000, I conducted ethnographic research among shoppers and sellers in Ho Chi Minh City. Much of this work took place in markets, shops, and shopping malls, where I learned about commercial transactions from those selling goods as well as those looking to buy them. As part of my research, I accompanied people on their shopping trips, including regular visits to
markets and shops for everyday products, as well as those rare excursions when families shopped for big-ticket items, such as televisions, kitchen appliances, and motorbikes. I also conducted a series of more in-depth interviews with shoppers and sellers in their homes and mine, where relative privacy and ample time allowed us the opportunity to discuss how changes in the marketplace reflect and shape much of contemporary life in Vietnam.

As I mentioned in my introduction, I found that the question that frames buyer–seller interactions in Ho Chi Minh City is, ‘which country?’ Among other things, this question is used to distinguish goods made in Vietnam from those made elsewhere. Interestingly, and in contrast to what Humphrey (1995), Caldwell (2002), and Patico (2001) describe in Russia, shoppers in Ho Chi Minh City rarely use the term ‘domestic’ to talk about foodstuffs. This may have to do with the fact that local companies produce most food products sold in Vietnam. Regardless, knowing whether other types of goods like clothing, cosmetics, and electronics are ‘domestic’ is of great concern to Vietnamese shoppers.

Although Vietnamese are, like Russians, very interested in where and under what conditions goods are made, their use of the term ‘domestic goods’ is quite different from that of the Russian word nash, or ‘ours.’ In Vietnam, the term hang noi dia (‘domestic goods’) refers specifically to the products of local joint-venture operations and foreign-run factories. The word ‘domestic’ (noi dia) in this term brings attention to the fact that, regardless of the foreign brand names and logos these products carry, they are manufactured locally, in Vietnam. Further, the term hang noi dia identifies a negative absence of foreignness. By contrast, the Russian term nash carries a more positive meaning by designating membership in one’s own group. As Caldwell explains:

> The concepts of ‘nash’ and ‘ne nash,’ or ‘ours’ and ‘not ours,’ respectively, are important concepts of social inclusion and exclusion in everyday Russian life … [P]eople distinguish between friends and strangers, or between co-nationals and foreigners, by classifying them as either belonging to or outside of a group known as ‘nash’ (2002:309).

In referring to the products of foreign-run and joint-venture operations in Vietnam as ‘domestic,’ Vietnamese shoppers are highlighting the role that factory workers and the manufacturing process play in producing consumer goods, but they are not linking these products to themselves, to the nation, or to cultural heritage in the way that Russian shoppers appear to do with the goods they call nash.
As I have discussed elsewhere (Vann 2003), Vietnamese consider ‘domestic goods’ – those manufactured in foreign-run factories and SEZs in Vietnam – to be poor substitutes for ‘source goods’ (hang goc), products made in the home country of a corporation. Shoppers in Vietnam seek out information about where and how products are made because they believe that the conditions of manufacture largely determine the quality of a product. That place of manufacture is more meaningful to shoppers than brand markers was made evident to me in a series of interviews I conducted with shoppers in the early stages of my research. In response to the question: ‘Before you decide to buy a product, is it more important to know its brand or where it was manufactured?’, 43 of 46 respondents said that place of manufacture was more important than brand. Binh, a 34-year-old office worker, explained why he would rather know a product’s country of manufacture than its brand: ‘There’s no point in knowing the brand of a product, because a lot of companies will rent out their brand name to factories in other countries in order to make a larger profit. The brand name has nothing to do with the quality of a product. You can only determine that by knowing where it was manufactured.’

The links that Binh draws between place of manufacture and quality on the one hand, and between brand name and outsourcing on the other, are commonplace in Ho Chi Minh City. This is because shoppers believe that high quality goods can be produced only under the control of corporate headquarters where research and design teams are able to monitor the manufacturing process, and, when necessary, offer guidance to factory managers and workers. Vietnamese shoppers express these production-related concerns in explicitly national terms; despite their awareness of flexible production practices, they believe that the strength of corporations – and of their products – lies not in their furthest reaches, but in their central headquarters, which are thought always to be located in, and closely tied to, their home countries. Conversely, production outsourcing – a practice that distances workers physically and structurally from corporate headquarters – is thought to seriously jeopardize the quality of goods, since it effectively severs communication between those who design products and those who manufacture them.

The differences between ‘source’ and ‘domestic’ goods were obvious to Chi, a 50-year-old teacher who often invited me to accompany her on shopping trips. Standing over a glass-fronted display case containing both ‘source’ and ‘domestic’ Japanese-brand electronics in one of Ho Chi Minh City’s new, air-conditioned shopping malls, Chi lectured me on the dangers of buying ‘domestic goods’:
If you don’t know where it’s manufactured, you may buy a product of inferior quality. If a product is manufactured in the mother country, then you can have more peace of mind than if its place of manufacture isn’t clear … Goods manufactured at the source are the best; those that come from joint-venture projects are of lower quality. Before you choose something to buy, you must try to learn where it was manufactured. If you know this, then you know how long the product will last, how durable it will be.

This production-based understanding of consumer goods, and the distinction it engenders between ‘domestic’ and ‘source’ goods, has serious implications for how Vietnamese shoppers evaluate the products of global capitalism. First, it establishes a hierarchical distinction – between ‘source’ and ‘domestic’ goods – that is denied by most corporate producers and marketers. From a corporation’s perspective, the fact that its products may be made in multiple sites around the world has no bearing on the authenticity or quality of those goods. For instance, the Nike corporation upholds the notion that ‘authentic’ Nike shoes can be made in Vietnam, Indonesia, or Mexico as long as they are manufactured under their (Nike’s) authorization. By contrast, Vietnamese insist that when corporations outsource the manufacture of their goods, they are creating a distinct and inferior tier of products. Second, because Vietnamese consumers see labor and the production process as determinative of product value and legitimacy, they consider it impossible for ‘foreign’ goods to be made outside of their home countries. This is because the status of goods in Vietnam – as ‘domestic’ or ‘foreign’ – is based not on brand markers, which link them to their corporate owners, but on their place of manufacture. Thus, foreign brand name products manufactured in Vietnam are considered ‘domestic’ products.

In Vietnam, the categories of ‘source’ and ‘domestic’ inform buying patterns for everyday household goods as well as big-ticket items, such as televisions and motorbikes. In many family social gatherings I attended, conversation turned to the topic of consumer goods. While an American family might debate the merits of different brands of products, families in Ho Chi Minh City are more likely to discuss the relative value of ‘domestic’ and ‘source’ goods. In many instances, the contested issue was whether it is ever a good idea to buy ‘domestic goods,’ given that they are almost always cheaper in price than ‘source goods.’ Although a few people concluded that ‘domestic goods’ could sometimes be a reasonable choice – especially if the shopper simply could not afford or, just as likely, could not acquire the comparable ‘source good’ – the general consensus was usually that production out-
sourcing had created a situation that benefited foreign corporations at the expense of consumers in places like Vietnam. In one such situation, several family members compared the quality, durability, and aesthetic appeal of ‘Sony Japan’ and ‘Sony Vietnam’ televisions. Although both products carried the official name and logo of the Sony company, they were classed as very different types of product – the former as a ‘source good,’ and the latter as a ‘domestic good.’ While one family member argued that the lower cost of the ‘Sony Vietnam’ television might make it a reasonable purchase choice, the rest of the family insisted that even the significant price difference could not make up for the fact that the Sony televisions manufactured in Japan were far superior in quality to those manufactured in Vietnam.

The criticism that shoppers in Ho Chi Minh City level at ‘domestic goods’ reflects the value they place on production, and particularly on what they consider to be a disarticulation of corporate management and manufacturing activities in situations of outsourcing. The problems that shoppers associate with overseas manufacturing are evident in their responses to Head-and-Shoulders shampoo, which is manufactured in Vietnam for Procter and Gamble. However, the mere presence of the Head-and-Shoulders label has not been enough to convince local shoppers of the legitimacy or quality of a bottle of shampoo. For example, Thuy, a 24-year-old secretary, offered her own experience as evidence of the importance of production sites in evaluating product quality: ‘When you wash your hair … with Head-and-Shoulders manufactured in America, it will cure the dandruff,’ she explained. ‘But if it is made in Vietnam, it will not.’ Thuy’s negative evaluation of this domestically made, foreign branded product was typical of those I encountered during the course of my research. And it was offered as empirical proof of what Thuy and others consider a self-evident point – that as a ‘source good’, American Head-and-Shoulders is an entirely different product than ‘domestic,’ (i.e., Vietnamese-made) Head-and-Shoulders, because the two products are made in different countries, under different conditions, and by different workers.

When the Vietnamese government began pro-market economic reforms, shoppers generally assumed that foreign ‘source goods’ would once again fill local markets. Hoa, a woman of 81 years, was one of many older people who had, in the early days of *doi moi*, predicted that the era of market reform would be much like that of the pre-socialist era, but she had since reevaluated the effects of the new economic policies on daily life:

Before 1975, foreign goods were everywhere! Everyone liked American, Japanese, and French goods … [But] after 1975, people had to buy Vietnamese goods, many
of which were of poor quality. But at that time there was no choice ... And now, there appear to be foreign goods everywhere, but I don’t think people are fooled. Really, these are just Vietnamese [domestic] goods disguised as foreign goods ... There is certainly a lot more to buy in the markets these days, but it’s not clear how much has really changed under doi moi. I think people in Vietnam are still waiting for foreign goods to return to the markets.

Those, like Hoa, who personally experienced commercial life in Saigon prior to 1975, as well as younger generations, who have heard stories of life before socialism from their parents and grandparents, anticipated that market reform would largely restore a prior set of economic conditions, in which Vietnam would serve as a marketplace for goods from around the world. This understanding of the potential effects of market reform enabled shoppers to interpret the socialist era as an interruption in what would otherwise have been a continuation of capitalist enterprise, market abundance, and cosmopolitan trade. The fact that market reform has been matched by a decline in the availability of ‘source goods’ has led many to wonder whether economic reform has really done much to restore market capitalism to Vietnam.

The relative absence of ‘source goods’ and the growing presence of ‘domestic goods’ serve as powerful markers of the state of global capitalism, and of Vietnam’s place in it. After a few years of receiving ‘source goods,’ markets and shops are now filled with ‘domestic goods,’ which shoppers consider inferior in quality, style, and durability. And shoppers interpret the local absence of ‘source goods’ and the proliferation of ‘domestic goods’ as a direct result of Vietnam’s relative political and economic status in the world. They say that production outsourcing to Third World countries is a tactic that foreign corporations use to produce inferior versions of their products and then sell them to naïve local consumers. High-quality products, they assume, are manufactured in a corporation’s home country and sold only to consumers at home or in other wealthy countries.

**Divergent Market Paths, Common Consumer Concerns**

The similarities and differences between Russian and Vietnamese consumption practices that I have outlined here raise a number of questions about how people in each of these places are experiencing and responding to market reform. First, given Russia and Vietnam’s shared socialist past and similar economic reform plans, how is it that Russian consumers have come to prefer Russian-made (nash) goods, while Vietnamese consumers continue to desire foreign-made, ‘source goods’? At least a partial answer to
this question seems to lie in the different positions Russia and Vietnam now occupy in the global economy. Although both _perestroika_ in Russia and _doi moi_ in Vietnam aimed to increase foreign investment and trade, the response to these two policies by foreign and multinational corporations has been rather different. Even though some foreign corporations have set up manufacturing operations in Russia, the net effect of foreign enterprise in Russia does not seem to have equaled or surpassed the system of production that existed under socialism. In other words, compared to the socialist era, fewer of the goods that Russians consume now are made in Russia, by Russians. Instead, contemporary local consumption relies on imported goods.

In Vietnam, foreign and multinational corporations paid close attention to economic reforms, and especially to the government’s efforts to facilitate the manufacture of goods for export. Despite the fact that many foreign corporations have experienced difficulties working with the Vietnamese government and doing business with local companies and entrepreneurs (Hill 2000:290), Vietnam continues to draw foreign investment, especially in the consumer goods industry (AP 11/14/2000). This is due in large part to the fact that labor in Vietnam is cheap compared to that in Russia and even to that in many neighboring East and Southeast Asian countries (Gumbell 2004). Increased foreign investment and corporate outsourcing of production have made Vietnam a major world producer of consumer goods (Phan, Nguyen, & Phan 2003). This has had the effect of increasing the amount of goods manufactured in Vietnam since the beginning of economic reform.

What do these different corporate responses to economic reform in each country have to do with consumer concerns about where and how products are made? At a materialistic level, Russian and Vietnamese consumers are desirous of goods that are scarce. In Russia, declining domestic production and a growing consumption-oriented society mean that _nash_ (‘our’) goods have become a rarity; shoppers find that they must now buy goods that are _ne nash_, or ‘not ours.’ In Vietnam, production of consumer goods for foreign and multinational corporations has meant a dramatic increase in the quantity of goods available in the local marketplace. Although many of these products are marked with foreign corporate names and logos, shoppers consider them ‘domestic goods’ because they are manufactured in Vietnam, by Vietnamese workers. As more and more foreign-branded products are made in Vietnam and marketed to local consumers, the number of ‘source goods’ in Vietnam has declined sharply. Thus, while Russian shoppers long for Russian goods but find themselves surrounded by goods that are ‘not theirs,’ Vietnamese
shoppers lament that economic reform has decreased their access to ‘source goods’ and instead, filled local shops and markets with ‘domestic goods.’

It is important to note that the very goods which Vietnamese consumers call ‘domestic,’ are, by Russian standards, ne nash (‘not ours’), or foreign. While Vietnamese class them as ‘domestic’ because they are manufactured in Vietnam, Russians would categorize these famous label products manufactured in Russia as ‘not ours’ because they are marked with foreign corporate brand names and logos. And yet, despite the fact that Russian and Vietnamese shoppers define these goods using relatively opposing terms, they offer little appeal to shoppers in either country.

This brings me to a second question raised by this comparison of consumption in postsocialist Russia and reform-era Vietnam: given the transnational structure of corporate manufacturing practices and marketing tactics, why are Russians and Vietnamese so interested in knowing whether the goods they buy were manufactured in their own countries or elsewhere? It appears that both Russian and Vietnamese shoppers are attempting to reinscribe national borders onto a world increasingly described as transnational, and even borderless. In Russia, the concern with nations and national boundaries takes the form of patriotic consumption, cultural nostalgia, and a new appreciation for pre-reform, socialist economic patterns. Russian shoppers, it seems, are intent on securing, and perhaps even closing, Russia’s national boundaries, which have become blurry and permeable in the post-Soviet era.

Like Russians, Vietnamese shoppers appear motivated to realign nations and goods. The category of ‘source goods’ is predicated on a direct link between corporations, products, and nations. As more and more companies choose to set up manufacturing centers in Vietnam, ‘source goods’ have become increasingly scarce and valuable. In their negative evaluation of ‘domestic goods,’ shoppers are criticizing the unraveling of this presumed relationship through corporate practices like production outsourcing. Nonetheless, Vietnamese shoppers are far less interested than their Russian counterparts in closing their national borders to trade. In fact, Vietnamese shoppers lament that market reform and global capitalism are actually causing those borders to close. As ‘source goods’ are replaced by foreign-branded, ‘domestic goods,’ globalization has come to feel very much like an isolating and localizing process to people in Vietnam. Conversely, Russians now feel overwhelmed by the presence of non-Russian goods in local markets, and they fear that market forces are destroying boundaries – such as those of the nation and of Russian culture – that once seemed secure.
Another point of convergence between Russian and Vietnamese shoppers is that both interpret the kinds of goods sold locally as markers of their own position in the world. Shortly after reform, shoppers in both countries began to worry about the effects of market transformations on their own lives. Russians now wonder whether they are becoming wealthier and more Westernized, or underdeveloped, in which case Russia is at risk of becoming a Third World country (Patico 2001). Vietnamese, on the other hand, experience far less uncertainty about their status in the world. They are acutely aware that their country is poor and relatively powerless. As a result, shoppers in Ho Chi Minh City are only somewhat surprised to find that pro-market policies and new trade relations have reaffirmed their position of relative inferiority to wealthy foreign countries and corporations. Meanwhile, the goods that are available locally – ‘domestic goods’ – serve as reminders that, unlike people in wealthy countries, Vietnamese must manufacture the foreign-branded goods they consume.

Conclusion

Although the policies of perestroika and doi moi were designed to rejuvenate the socialist economies of Russia and Vietnam, their effects have reached well beyond the sphere of macro-economics. Market reform has led not only to the privatization of industries, market competition, increased foreign investment and trade, and the rise of product marketing and advertising; it also has encouraged people in Russia and Vietnam to begin thinking about themselves and about their relationship to the state in radically different, and increasingly neoliberal, terms. Neoliberal thinking likens society to an economic ‘free market,’ in which self-governance is presumed to flourish in an environment of liberty and individualism, concepts that are modeled on economic notions of market competition and consumer choice. Adopting neoliberal logic means coming to see the self as an autonomous, rational, and self-regulating individual who governs her or himself (and, by extension, society at large) through market-style, choice-making behaviors (Miller & Rose 1990). As this comparative study suggests, however, people in reform-era and postsocialist countries do not necessarily act as ideal neoliberal citizen-consumers. We might then ask: to what extent has neoliberal logic come to inform everyday social and economic life in contemporary Russia and Vietnam?

In socialist-era Vietnam and Russia, the state occupied a structural position of control over both economic activities and the actions of its citizens. In
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socialist ideological discourse, this relationship was expressed as one in which citizens worked for the good of society, and, in turn, society (through the vehicle of the state) provided for the needs of its citizens. Within this conceptual framework, production was emphasized and valued over consumption, and people were encouraged to think of themselves as worker-citizens, not consumer-citizens. Nonetheless, states played an active role in consumption by defining what consumers’ needs were and establishing themselves as the sole provider of those goods (Verdery 1996). Thus, people in socialist countries were encouraged to think of themselves both as the producers of the goods they consumed and, at least somewhat paradoxically, as the rightful recipients of goods distributed by a paternalistic state.

Research in postsocialist Eastern Europe has shown that people simultaneously resisted and internalized this socialist articulation of the relation between self and society (Verdery 1996; Humphrey 1995, 2002). They resisted it by, among other things, rejecting the state’s definition of people’s needs, and by actively seeking out and consuming the very things that the state said people did not need, and more seriously, should not have (e.g., American blue jeans). At the same time, however, people internalized the socialist model of economic governance in a number of ways. They did so by recognizing that the goods produced and distributed by the state were ‘theirs,’ by virtue of the fact that they were manufactured by fellow citizens (Humphrey 1995:43), and by accepting the socialist proposition that consumption (at least of those goods required to satisfy basic needs) was the ‘right’ of all citizens (Verdery 1996:28).

As socialist states have withdrawn from many of their regulatory roles, the relationships between consumption and production, and citizen and state that were relatively well-defined in the pre-reform era have largely unraveled. In Vietnam, as in Russia, the state no longer presumes what people ‘need,’ nor does it identify itself as the provider of goods for its citizens. At the same time, foreign and multinational corporations (along with local leaders who share their views and goals) have attempted to transform the economic landscapes of these and other reform-era and postsocialist countries into ones more amenable to Western-style market practices. Toward that end, people in Russia, Romania, Poland, China, Vietnam and elsewhere have been encouraged to refashion themselves as neoliberal employees and consumers through the introduction of a range of techniques such as privatization, worker retraining, and consumer education (e.g., Dunn 2004; Gillette 2000; Verdery 2003).
Much of the evidence from my limited comparative study could be used to argue that, since the beginning of economic reform, Russians and Vietnamese have come to think of themselves – and to act – in increasingly neoliberal terms. For instance, it could be posited that, by insisting upon the relevance of production sites to the value and legitimacy of consumer goods, Russians and Vietnamese are, in the absence of state regulation, actively ‘governing’ the market through consumer choice, and thus facilitating and reinforcing their own autonomy as well as that of the market. Thus it would appear that, in the face of declining state participation in and control over manufacturing and trade, many Vietnamese and Russians have taken on the role attributed to them within the cultural logic of neoliberalism: that of individual consumers who are rational (within the framework of the market), responsible, and self-regulating.

However, as much research on postsocialism has shown, change in former and reform-era socialist countries is often uneven, unpredictable, and contradictory (Berdahl 1999; Dunn 2004; Humphrey 2002; Taylor 2001; Verdery 1996, 2003). In many cases it has spawned new, hybrid political and economic forms that bear little resemblance to the monolithic models of Western-style civil society and market economy that many predicted would follow the reform efforts across the socialist world. The diversity and complexity of actual postsocialist experiences serve as reminders that we must approach with caution simplistic conclusions that equate market-oriented economic change with the growth of neoliberal notions of self. We might instead view the consumer ideas and practices I have described in this essay as, at best, incomplete neoliberal projects that are deeply informed and problematized by socialist and postsocialist concerns.

That Russian and Vietnamese shoppers stop short of fully embracing a neoliberal understanding of the market and of themselves is evident in the ways they link their consumption practices to the construction of personhood, or what Foucault has called ‘technologies of self’ (Foucault 1991; see also Burchell 1996; Martin, Gutman, & Hutton 1988). Although the Russians and Vietnamese I have described in this essay do appear to have adopted, at least to a modest degree, a sense of themselves as citizen-consumers – that is, as active decision-makers – this new form of personhood seems to be informed less by a sense of personal, autonomous identity than by one of collectivity and sociality. This kind of socially-oriented reasoning is evident in, for example, Russian shoppers’ use of the terms *nash* (‘ours’) and *ne nash* (‘not ours’) to describe and distinguish between goods. What is noteworthy
about these terms is that, although they express possession, they do so outside a framework of individualism. Instead, they connote a sense of shared, social identity, of membership within or exclusion from a group or community. The use of these terms by shoppers serves not only to differentiate between Russian-made goods and foreign imports, but to identify shoppers as part of a wider, and specifically national, community.

In Vietnam, the terms *hang noi dia* (‘domestic goods’) and *hang goc* (‘source goods’) do not carry a comparable possessive connotation. But, like *nash* and *ne nash*, they do imply an understanding of consumers and consumption that is far more socially-embedded than that found in neoliberal thinking. As I have noted, the differences between what Vietnamese shoppers call ‘source’ and ‘domestic’ goods have to do not only with where goods are made, but with the social relations of production. The high value that shoppers place on ‘source goods’ reflects what they consider to be an essential component in the proper production of goods: the spatial and structural coordination of people, knowledge, and things within a single nation-state. Manufacturing foreign-branded goods in places like Vietnam compromises the quality and legitimacy of ‘source goods’ because it severs what shoppers see as vital social ties between workers, managers, research and design teams, and corporate owners. By insisting that ‘source goods’ are distinct from, and better than, ‘domestic goods,’ Vietnamese shoppers are interpreting both production and consumption as fundamentally social, and to a large degree, national activities.

We might say, then, that shoppers in Vietnam and Russia conceptualize and practice consumer choice not so much (or at least not primarily) as an expression of autonomous individualism, but as a social act that binds citizens to nations through processes of production and consumption. From this vantage point, these accounts of everyday consumer practices in Russia and Vietnam serve less as narratives of how the tandem projects of neoliberalism – creating free market societies and individualistic consumer-citizens – have failed in contexts of socialist reform, than as examples of how the projects themselves are being refashioned across the socialist and former socialist world to reflect common concerns about the relationship between society, economy, and government.

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Notes

1. See Hann (2002) for an exception to this trend.
2. See James (1996), Miller (1998), and Orlove (1997) for discussions of how consumers use these terms in other ethnographic contexts.
3. I am grateful to Jennifer Patico for encouraging me to consider how the differential impact of production outsourcing may be influencing consumption practices in Russia and Vietnam.
4. The contrast I am drawing here between production and consumption is simplistic and potentially misleading. Scholars of postsocialist Russia have offered competing explanations of the importance of consumption during Soviet times. For instance, Humphrey (1995) contends that Soviet-era Russians were not consumers in the Western sense, because they did not rely on consumption as a vehicle for establishing difference and constructing identity. Caldwell (2002), however, argues that the general scarcity of goods, combined with pre-determined but profoundly inequitable state systems of distribution, fueled consumer desires and consumption practices among Soviet citizens.
5. The idea that domestically produced foodstuffs are fresher or better tasting than imported food products is not self-evident. As Dunn (2004) shows in her discussion of quality management in a baby food factory in Poland, positive or negative qualities may be associated equally with domestic or foreign goods. Further, it is worth noting that in Russia, ‘domestic’ does not necessarily mean ‘local,’ since domestically produced food products may be shipped hundreds or even thousands of miles before reaching their sites of consumption.
6. The importance that Vietnamese shoppers give to place and conditions of manufacture in the context of market reform does not appear to be shared by consumers in reform-era China (Davis 2000:11).
7. Although counterfeiting is widespread in Vietnam, all the products described in this article are made under the authority of parent corporations, which recognize and mark them as authentic.

References


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