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# Media Images of »Conspicuous Consumption« and Private Entrepreneurs in Post-communist Poland

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This essay discusses which insights could be provided through a study of media coverage of »conspicuous consumption« of an emerging class of private entrepreneurs into the public understanding of the change of cultural values during the system transition of the year 1989 in Poland.<sup>1</sup> Here I argue that the media imagery of this new income elite, which spends disposable income on »conspicuous consumption«, played an important role in the communication of knowledge regarding the cultural values of capitalism. The following discussion aims to outline what media images of businessmen and their luxuries tell us more about the socio-economic dimension of capitalism *in statu nascendi* in post-communist Eastern Europe. The essay focusses on the two most significant meanings of, as called in the media, »conspicuous consumption«, which strongly promoted the ideology of capitalism. First of all, I show how particular luxury items and consumption patterns were discussed not merely as a caprice of the new »leisure class« but rather as a reward for undertaking a process of self-development which resulted in a personal transformation from an employee of a state enterprise into a private entrepreneur. Secondly, I illustrate how success stories of private entrepreneurs featured luxury commodities not only as objects of consumption but also as tools of trade used to communicate the personal integrity of a respectful businessman. While discussing success stories of businessmen who eagerly talked about their favorite cars and watch brands I attempt to grasp the process of production of knowledge about capitalism not as an abstract economic system with stock market exchange, market competition and private ownership, but also as a socio-economic order built and maintained by individuals – virtuous entrepreneurs.

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During the post-communist system transition two buzzwords: *sukces* (success) and *kariera* (career) indicated the ongoing socio-economic change. In this particular historical context both terms referred to quitting poorly paid job position in a state enterprise and taking fate into one's own hands by establishing a private company which could flourish in the new free market environment. However, *sukces* and *kariera* referred not only to the process of establishing a profitable company and achieving personal wealth but also to the personal self-development and the individualized lifestyle expressed through certain consumption patterns. Here I focus on the symbolic meanings of practices of selecting, purchasing, owning and showing off particular commodities as material artifacts which indicate the being a man of success. By referring to Frank Trentmann's essay, I shed more light on the interdependence of »things, practices, and politics« among the members of the new class of private entrepreneurs in the context of controversies over the legitimization of the new economic order.<sup>2</sup> In order to explain the imagery of private entrepreneurs' »conspicuous consumption« it is necessary to outline the historical background and to discuss the changing media image of this class and the process of redefining the figure of *człowiek sukcesu* (a man of success) which took place during the last years of the communist regime in Poland.

In his column in the leading economic weekly *Życie Gospodarcze* (Economic Life) the Polish sociologist Andrzej Rychard, who conducted extensive research on the system transformation, grasped the cultural dimension of the decision to pursue an entrepreneur career: »Free market does not emerge in a vacuum. People create it. In Poland in the early 1990s a decision to start a business activity on one's own was not merely an economic decision. After more than forty years of the actually existing socialism, engagement in the private economy was also a decision with a cultural aspect, a decision that changes lives of individuals.«<sup>3</sup>

The current case study offers an insight into the aforementioned cultural dimension of the decision to pursue a career and to gain wealth as a businessman in post-communist Poland. In his paper on the trends and drawbacks of consumption culture studies Frank Mort argues for more detailed surveys on »the impact of the expanding world of goods on his-

2 Trentmann, Frank, »Materiality in the Future of History: Things, Practices, and Politics«, *Journal of British Studies*, Jg. 48, H. 2 (2009), S. 283–307.

3 Rychard, Andrzej, »Od rynku do państwa« [From Market to the State], *Życie Gospodarcze*, 03.09.1995, S. 6 [translated by P. W.].

torically specific aspects of social identity and subjective experience.<sup>4</sup> Here I provide such historical investigation concentrating on the rapidly expanding world of luxury commodities and the group of those who had disposable income to purchase them – and appropriated these goods to express their social identities.

This essay is structured as follows: In the first section, I outline the interdependence of practices of consumption, high politics and ideologies in Eastern Europe during the state socialism and during the post-communist system transition. Further, I examine the historical background by discussing core values of personal success and morality of affluent consumption in the socialist Poland. In the next section, I discuss changing media imagery of the emerging class of private entrepreneurs in the 1980s. Subsequently, I show the public controversies over the role of »conspicuous consumption« as an element of this class' social identity in the context of the post 1989 free market reforms. Further, I explore the two most significant features of media imagery of »conspicuous consumption« of private entrepreneurs, namely buying luxury commodities as a way of realizing a certain passion and as businessman's tools of trade. As a research for this essay I analyzed the content of selected influential news, economic and cultural magazines in the time frame 1980–1995. I also refer to selected television series, newsreels and social opinion polls as supporting research material.

### Making profits, luxuries and morality in the state socialism and capitalism

The Eastern Bloc regimes attempted not only to enforce the policy of building classless societies by limiting possibilities of getting rich, but also by limiting the ways in which one could express social identity through consumption patterns. However, at the same time those governments enforced a policy of building systems of privileges and distribution of commodities with limited access in order to stimulate the loyalty and work efficiency of the members of the state apparatus and particular occupa-

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4 Mort, Frank, »Paths to Mass Consumption: Historical Perspectives«, in: Peter Jackson/Michelle Lowe/Daniel Miller u.a. (Hg.), *Commercial Cultures: Economies, Practices, Spaces*, Oxford 2000, S. 8.

tional groups. Such policies substantially influenced local consumer cultures and the meanings of luxury in the society. The specificity of the meanings of consumption in autocratic states with centrally planned economies is excellently grasped by Don Slater in *Consumer Culture and Modernity*:

»In the absence of a market system disciplined by consumer sovereignty [the state controlled practices of consumption] in increasingly undemocratic ways, taking on the economic, political and ideological power to enforce on its people only those needs it found convenient to satisfy. The norms and character of consumption were therefore established technocratically and as part of an attempt to balance problems of political stability with technical economic requirements, rather than in response to the dynamic of cultural reproduction. The latter was to be managed through political or politicized institutions (the party, youth and cultural organizations, public spectacles) that colonized everyday life in ways unimaginable within a market society.«<sup>5</sup>

This conceptualization shows how state agencies attempted to control not only the distribution of commodities but also the cultural meanings of consumption. In his book on the rise of commercial culture in Yugoslavia, Patrick Patterson observes that one of the focal points of centrally controlled cultural reproduction was to enforce that citizens ground their identities not through consumption but rather through active participation in the system of production.<sup>6</sup> As I will further discuss, Patterson's remark on building identities as consumers and producers can shed more light on the shift of meanings of »conspicuous consumption« before and after 1989. Despite such attempts to limit and control cultural meanings of luxury, they had a life on their own in the socialist states. In *Pleasures in Socialism*, Susan Reid and David Crowley show how the imaginary luxury was produced in the conditions of Soviet-style socialism and that its meanings were the results of »the dynamic relations between ideology, policy and the material environment, on the one hand, and the range of practices that characterized the consumption of leisure and luxury, on the other.«<sup>7</sup> The authors in *Pleasures in Socialism* and more recent in *Communism Unwrapped* explore several examples of the social life of commodities considered as luxuries and practices of »conspicuous consumption« in Eastern Europe

5 Slater, Don, *Consumer Culture and Modernity*, Cambridge 1997, S. 36.

6 Patterson, Patrick Hyder, *Bought & Sold. Living and Losing the Good Life in Socialist Yugoslavia*, Ithaca/London 2011, S. 3.

7 Crowley, David, Reid, Susan E., »Pleasures in Socialism?«, in: David Crowley/Susan E. Reid (Hg.), *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc*, Evanston 2010, S. 3–51, here S. 8.

before 1989.<sup>8</sup> However, it is worth noting that studies of continuities and discontinuities of consumption patterns in Eastern Europe before and after 1989 are still under-represented.<sup>9</sup>

In order to understand media images of private entrepreneurs in post-communist Poland it is necessary to go back before 1989 and explain negative occupational stereotypes of wealthy *prywatniarze* (derogatory »private entrepreneurs«). In the public opinion, their »most spendthrift consumption« was the burden and disadvantage in their struggle for privilege and prestige.<sup>10</sup> In further sections I will discuss how the relations between ideology and the imagined »conspicuous consumption« before 1989 provide a historical background for the understanding of patterns of »conspicuous consumption« by private entrepreneurs in the post-communist era.

Authors of the *Capitalism without Capitalists* volume, which covers social and cultural aspects of the emergence of the capitalist economy in the post-communist countries, argue that »the social attributes of actors, their class capacities, and the historically contingent outcomes of struggles between them, are likely to be decisive for explaining the particular kind of capitalism which is being built in Central Europe«.<sup>11</sup> Further, by referring to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of »cultural capital« they claim that the »Post-communist society can be described as a unique social structure in which cultural capital is the main source of power, prestige, and privilege. Possession of economic capital places actors only in the middle of the social hierarchy.«<sup>12</sup> Aside from the struggle for cultural capital another important key to understand the images of »conspicuous consumption« in post-communist Poland is the notion of morality. In their study *Market and Moralities* Ruth Mandel and Caroline Humphrey grasp the new market as a particular form of emerging moral order. As they observe, the communist regimes

8 Bren, Paulina/Neuburger, Mary (Hg.), *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*, Oxford 2012.

9 The rare exception is Sredl, Katherine, »Consumption and Class During and After State Socialism«, in: Russell W. Belk/John F. Sherry Jr. (Hg.), *Consumer Culture Theory*, Oxford 2007, S. 187–205.

10 Zagrodzka, Danuta, »Prywatna przedsiębiorczość« [Private Entrepreneurship], *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 24.05.1987, S. 1–2, here S. 1. For a discussion on occupational stereotypes in Eastern Europe during the system transition see: Hunyady, György, *Stereotypes during the Decline and Fall of Communism*, London/New York 1998, S. 169–218.

11 Eyal, Gil/Szelényi, Iván/Townsley, Eleanor, *Making Capitalism Without Capitalists. Class Formation and Elite Struggles in Post-Communist Central Europe*, London/New York 2000 [1998], S. 3.

12 Ebd., S. 6. Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction. A social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London 1984.

made most of private trade and possibilities of making high profits not only illegal but also immoral. As a consequence ordinary people widely shared the belief in the immorality of money making through private enterprises.<sup>13</sup> As they further show, the public understanding of making money and free market rules as a legitimate and moral set of practices was one of the substantial elements of the system transition. Further, I refer to the notions of »cultural capital« and morality as important frameworks that help to situate the images of luxury in the broader perspective of the re-definition of economies and societies in post-communist Eastern Europe.

### A man of success in socialist Poland

The emergence of a distinctive class of well-educated urban professionals who did not experience the atrocities of the Second World War was one of the socio-economic currents in the Eastern Bloc from the late 1960s onwards. This class participated in the process of the modernization of economy and infrastructure not because of ideological commitments but rather because of promises of being rewarded with a high standard of living. An urban professional living in an affluence became a popular media figure in the 1970s during the era of the party leader Edward Gierek (1970–1980), who introduced the policy of the »consumer socialism«. One of the biggest hits on Polish television in the 1970s was *Czterdziestolatek* (Being Forty), a comedy drama about the everyday life of Stefan Karwowski, a man of success of the Gierek's Poland.<sup>14</sup> He was a forty-years-old engineer working on the construction site of the Central Railway Station in Warsaw, a symbol of the modernization of the Gierek era. Karwowski had a responsible and highly prestigious job, was living in a cozy apartment with his attractive wife and two children and owned a Maluch car (Polish Baby Fiat). Aside from his personal problems of coping with his status of a middle-aged man, several episodes show how Karwowski benefited from the state policy towards »consumer socialism«. For instance, in one of the episodes he had a dilemma if he should drink Georgian brandy, a recent import from the

13 Humphrey, Caroline/Mandel, Ruth, »The Market in Everyday Life: Ethnographies of Postsocialism«, in: dies. (Hg.), *Markets and Moralities Ethnographies of Postsocialism*, Oxford/New York, 2002, S. 1–16, here S. 1.

14 *Czterdziestolatek* [Being Forty], dir. Jerzy Gruza (1974–1977).

USSR considered as a drink much more sophisticated than Polish vodka, chilled or not.

We can read *Czterdziestolatek* as an encapsulation of cultural values propagated by the socialist regime and as a model of a Polish middle-aged male that definitively achieved a personal success. Because of his devotion to the process of modernization of Gierek's Poland, Karwowski was entitled to access everything that was offered through the politics of consumption in the country. According to Don Slater's quote, *Czterdziestolatek* provides a normative model for cultural reproduction of consumption patterns in the state socialism. Karwowski was living in affluence but he cannot be considered a wealthy man. In media texts from that time we can find figures of wealthy people and images of luxuries virtually only in media stories on recent crackdowns on the «economic underground» and crime dramas populated by criminals, black market operators, scammers and hoarders.<sup>15</sup> Here I can quote an instance of such imagery, a short press notice on the crackdown on the owners of the «illegal fortunes».<sup>16</sup> Among several shady figures this text discussed sentencing of a man who was stealing machinery from a spinning mill where he had worked, and used this income to purchase Volvo and Toyota cars. A second figure was *straganiarka*, a female greengrocer who owned two detached houses, referred as «villas».

During my recent research on consumption patterns of electric appliances one of my respondents remembered a colleague whose family could afford buying a Soviet made Rubin color TV set, the first available in the Polish retail trade. She explained why this family could afford it: »Her mother was a director of a meat shop, but they [she and her husband] were also travelling to Turkey and traded with gold [laugh]. Oh yes, she was rich [laugh]!»<sup>17</sup> This short vignette provides an insight in the popular imagery of rich in the socialism. In popular imagination both aforementioned occupations were the source of substantial income. The income from smuggling gold during excursions to Turkey needs no further explanation, but it is worth explaining that according to occupational stereotypes a director of a

15 In his book about the black market and private entrepreneurship Jerzy Kochanowski provides an extensive imagery of affluent lives of *prywaciarze* and criminals. Kochanowski, Jerzy, *Tłymi drzwiami. Czarny rynek w Polsce 1944–1989*, [Through the Back Door. «Black Market» in Poland, 1944–1989], Warszawa 2010.

16 »Nielegalne fortuny« [Illegal Fortunes], *Życie Warszawy*, 12.05.1982, S. 3.

17 Interview with H., January 2014, Wrocław [translated by P. W.].



meat shop was particularly prone to the large scale corruption to sell highly desirable meat under-the-counter.<sup>18</sup>

In virtually all media texts until the mid-1980s wealthy people are shown in highly negative light. The most notorious images of wealthy criminals and informal economy operators can be seen in the very popular television crime drama series *07 zgłoś się* (07 Come In, 1976–1987), in which the intelligent and handsome Lt. Borewicz regularly penetrated rings of profiteers and exposed dark secrets of *prywatyzę* similarly to his counterparts in the East German *Polizei* 110 and Czechoslovak *Tricet případů majora Zemana* (Thirty Cases of Major Zeman) television series. However, *07 zgłoś się* included an exception – a positive image of a Polish millionaire. In one of the episodes from the year 1981 Lt. Borewicz, a cynical womanizer, had an affair with a beautiful stewardess in the Polish Airlines LOT. While sunbathing by a swimming pool, the stewardess claims that during her next flight to Bangkok a handsome millionaire waits for her with a dinner. Lt. Borewicz answers: »I can also take you to a dinner to a millionaire here. [...] He's got his own stables, a detached house with a swimming pool, tennis court and sauna.« The skeptical stewardess asks: »What exactly this millionaire manufactures with plastic: pens or heels?« [she makes a reference to a popular stereotype of *prywatyzę* who owns a manufacturing plant which makes low quality plastic accessories]. Lt. Borewicz explains: »He's got two university diplomas, and developed few clever things from which the state earns a lot of money in hard currency.« This description is a reference to a real person, a chemist and businessman Mieczysław Wilczek (1932–2014), the famous »socialist millionaire«. »The clever things« that provided hard currency earnings mentioned in *07 zgłoś się* were some of Wilczek's highly successful patents of formulas for detergent and cosmetics. In a striking final of this episode Wilczek himself appeared in a cameo role. In the last scene Lt. Borewicz plays tennis with Wilczek on his private tennis court and the camera shows all aforementioned luxuries: a lavish detached house, swimming pool and sauna.<sup>19</sup> Because of the media coverage of Wilczek's patents as highly successful high-tech export products, Wilczek was definitely a recognizable figure – although his name is

18 For a discussion on popular imagination of income of the personnel of meat shops, see Mazurek, Małgorzata, *Spółeczeństwo kolejki. O doświadczeniach niedoboru 1945–1989* [Society in the Line. On the Experiences of Shortages 1945–1989], Warszawa 2010, S. 71–106.

19 *07 zgłoś się* [07 Come In], episode *Wagon pocztowy*, dir. Krzysztof Szmagier (1981) [translated by P. W.].

not mentioned on the screen. This scene is remarkable since it is plausibly the only scene which shows a legitimate and deserved wealth in Polish cinema before the year 1989. In 1992, Wilczek gave an interview to the monthly *Sukces* (1990–1995) where he presented himself as an individual who didn't hesitate to express his social identity by showing his wealth.

Q: You never attempted to hide your wealth. You even allowed 07 zgłoś się camera crew and showed your private tennis court and indoor swimming pool to the whole Poland...

A: I always lived with an open curtain. I thought then and now that there is no shame to be rich. There is nothing to hide when you make your own wealth through your own work.<sup>20</sup>

According to Patterson's remark, his wealth was legitimate according to communist political principles because he actively contributed to the benefits of the state since his high tech chemical patents provided not only hard currency earnings but also helped to strengthen the propaganda image of Poland as a modern industrial power. Thus, his wealth was moral according to socialist political principles, but he was also praised as a man of success in *Sukces* magazine, discussed below, which praised the values of capitalism. The appearance of Wilczek in a television series in 1981 was definitely an exception at that time, however, we can see more appearances of positive figures of businessmen and their legitimate »conspicuous consumption« in media from the mid-1980s.

### Private entrepreneurs of the 1980s and their lifestyles

From the late 1970s, a distinctive class of private entrepreneurs emerged as a result of a less hostile state policy towards opening private businesses. Previously, the communist regime allowed the existence of a small number of private services such as tailors and cobblers. The first small scale private companies which manufactured and traded commodities were allowed to operate in the 1970s, although only in the 1980s the private sector grew rapidly along with the liberalization of the harsh policy towards the private

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20 »Seks i pełna kasa. Rozmowa z Mieczysławem Wilczkiem« [Sex and the Full Wallet. Interview with Mieczysław Wilczek], *Sukces*, October 1992, S. 16–18, here S. 17–18 [translated by P. W.].

sector. This sector was boosted in 1977 by the acceptance of foreign investments under the legal framework of *firma polonijna*, a joint venture company with foreign investment from Polish emigrants in the West, known as Polonia. Until the mid-1980s state media presented virtually only negative images of affluent lifestyles of *prywatyzatorzy* and directors and managers of *firma polonijna*. In such a context the members of new income elites were reluctant to manifest their wealth, but at the same time eager to distinct themselves from other social strata. A social critic who discussed changes in Polish elites in the 1980s excellently grasped this dilemma: »Financial elites felt into a peculiar neurosis. It is dreadful to show your wealth to the poor. However, not showing it means that you will be considered as the poor yourself.«<sup>21</sup>

Media attitude towards private sector has changed in the mid-1980s. In press from that time we can find elaborate discussions and commentaries of economic experts, officials and social critics on the possible legitimacy of new ways of making money as well as discussions on the legitimacy of using this income for »conspicuous consumption«. An article from *intelligentsia* weekly *Przekrój* (Cross-Section) with a subtitle »the capital forced to consumption« (*kapitał skazany na konsumpcję*) elaborated on the structural trait of the class of private entrepreneurs – very limited legal possibilities of further investment of their income, which causes that their only way to spent disposable income is to consume.<sup>22</sup> Several press articles from that time showed this class as people who make their living in a decent way and contribute to the polish economy by paying substantial taxes and developing commerce. Along with the more positive media attitudes to this social group, new buzzwords like *success*, *career* and *prestige* were used to discuss the lifestyle of new income elites. The harbinger of new models of *career* and *success* was *Pan* [The Gentleman, 1987–1992] formatted as a Polish counterpart of *Playboy*. For the first time a Polish magazine included centerfolds with full frontal female nudes, but it also brought other *Playboy* style content. This magazine was addressed to men eager to learn how one who makes career and achieves success should express his economic and cultural capital. For instance, the cover of the first *Pan* issue (Oct. 1987) defined the interests of a man of success: »Career, Cars, Video, Sport, Thrill

21 »Gdzie ta elita?« [Where's the elite?], *Przegląd Techniczny*, 05.05.1991, S. 4–5, here S. 5 [translated by P. W.].

22 Bętkowska, Teresa, »Docent w kantorze« [University Lecturer in a Currency Exchange Store], *Przekrój*, 25.09.1988, S. 8–9, here S. 9.

»Sensacja«, in this particular context »thrill« referred primarily to reading novels by Alistair MacLean and Frederick Forsyth, and press stories about mercenaries in Africa, American mafia and Colombian drug traffickers], Sex.«<sup>23</sup> In the spotlight of this issue, an article on career-making referred to careers as a participation in a competition and success was defined as being wealthy.<sup>24</sup>

In the late 1980s even media which actively took part in the process of cultural reproduction of the communist ideology presented more favorable voices on private entrepreneurs. For instance, the monthly *Magazyn Rodzinny* [Family Magazine] promoted values of communist youth organizations, published a series of reportages about rich people with a rather positive approach:

For several years those who made money [...] were very reluctant to admit to their wealth. A stereotype about the impossibility of making money in an honest way persisted in the public opinion at that time. [...] So what can be said about those who invest their money and skills in several sectors of economy (services, trade, manufacturing and market gardening). They earn much more than an average salary in state enterprises. [...] What exactly Polish wealthy men really are and how they appear in the opinion of the whole society?<sup>25</sup>

One of the reportages in this issue shows the life of an owner of a private manufacturing company, an owner of a detached house, a Mercedes car and »several durables considered by the public opinion not as an indicator of high standard of living but rather wealth«.<sup>26</sup> Further, the author concludes that »obviously, money is important [...]. One can use it to build a house, to buy a car and a yacht. [...] It gives a sense of independence. [...] Above all, it enables the realization of hobbies and passions.« Another reportage shows an owner of a body shop: »Wacław B. has very high earnings, he secures a high standard of living for his family. His wife is the most elegant woman in the whole housing estate. His children have a Video Cassette Recorder, tropical fruits and splendid holiday.«<sup>27</sup> The former quote pictures an entrepreneur as an individual who does not waste his

<sup>23</sup> *Pan*, Oct. 1987, cover page.

<sup>24</sup> Aleksandrowicz, Piotr, »Kariera«, *Pan*, Oct. 1987, S. 6–8.

<sup>25</sup> »Być bogatym« [Being Rich], *Magazyn Rodzinny*, Jan. 1988, S. 1 [translated by P. W.].

<sup>26</sup> Orzechowski, Tomasz, »Z dużą forszą« [Owning a Lot of Money], *Magazyn Rodzinny*, Jan. 1988, S. 2–4, here S. 4 [translated by P. W.].

<sup>27</sup> Kafarska, Ewa, »Milionerzy miliarderzy« [Millionaires, Billionaires], *Magazyn Rodzinny*, Jan. 1988, S. 4–6, here S. 6 [translated by P. W.].

money but rather actively pursue his long-time passions. The latter quote illustrates how a VCR (see also fn. 40) and tropical fruits, considered as luxuries in Poland of the 1980s, were brought to picture a *prywatniarz* not as a wasteful consumer but rather as a person who actively creates his private world and takes care about his family.<sup>28</sup>

While referring to practices of consumption among informal economy operators in the Eastern Bloc, Don Slater outlines similarities to Western figures of heroic entrepreneurs, when he lists their core cultural values: »enterprising individualism, rejection of authority in everyday life, autonomy defined as self-creation, private domesticity as the locus of meaningful social life.«<sup>29</sup> The above-mentioned article published in a monthly that strongly supported normative lifestyles, belongs to a broader media genre of texts that somehow positively discussed the idea of making money and spending it on luxury commodities as a way of expressing legitimate »success« but also self-development and building a legitimate meaningful life in the context of socialist society.

Here it is worth to bring a voice of the Catholic media on the morality of the emerging class of private entrepreneurs. A columnist of the Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* emphasized that the uncertainty of the state policy towards the private sector caused that entrepreneurs primarily spend money on »invisible consumption« since »this uncertain situation determines his [private entrepreneur's] strategy to make a quick profit and to spend it on luxury consumption that annoys surrounding people, favorably the most spendthrift and »invisible« such as vodka and entertainment.«<sup>30</sup> Here the word »entertainment« (*rozrywka*) was plausibly a euphemism for prostitution. This voice is critical towards the state policy which had a

28 For a discussion on a VCR as a status symbol in Polish society, see: Wasiak, Patryk, »The Video boom in the state-socialist Poland«, *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung*, Jg. 61, H. 1 (2012) S. 27–50.

29 Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* [wie Anm. 5], S. 36.

30 Zagrodzka, Danuta, »Prywatna przedsiębiorczość« [Private entrepreneurship], *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 24.05.1987, S. 1–2, here S. 1 [translated by P. W.]. The Polish sociologist Piotr Glišński has published an essay in the influential *Unplanned Society* volume which outlines Polish society on the verge of the system transition. He described a popular restaurant named *Acapulco* near a poshy town of Konstancin (20 km south of Warsaw), a place of residence of both party leaders and wealthy private entrepreneurs, as a symbol of such »invisible« consumption. Glišński, Piotr, »Acapulco near Konstancin«, in: Janine Wedel (Hg.), *The Unplanned Society. Poland During and After Communism*, New York 1992, S. 144–152.

demoralizing effect on this class, but entrepreneurs are also blamed for the lack of moral values in both making and spending money.

In their paper on the social impact of the system transformation, David Stark and László Bruszt used the notion of »playing capitalism with non-capitalist pieces«, a reference to playing the Monopoly with pieces of a Hungarian adaptation of this game appropriated to be in order with the communist ideology. As they note, »the ruins of communism were not a tabula rasa, and so the new hybrid game was played with institutions cobbled together partly from remnants of the past that, by limiting some moves and facilitating other strategies, gave rise to a bricolage of multiple social logics.«<sup>31</sup> In 1990, *Życie Gospodarcze* which presented rather ambivalent opinions towards the economic transition published a lengthy piece titled »A new class is born«. This report covered changes in patterns of »conspicuous consumption« among Polish private entrepreneurs. This paper excellently illustrates the notion of building Polish capitalism without those who had a taste of Western-style capitalists:

»The race to capitalism began even before the Balcerowicz reform (the free market reform named after Leszek Balcerowicz, the Minister of Finance in the first non-communist government) which could be proved by the existence of a new class of owners – Polish »bourgeoisie« (*derogatory* »burżuazja«). Along with the rise of this class new customs are born and new patterns of behaviors, which differ from previous coarse behavior, are established. They are frequently copied from kitsch video movies and commercials in Western magazines.«<sup>32</sup>

The consumption patterns of Polish private entrepreneurs discussed here as attempts to emulate the Western life as seen in video movies and glossy magazines could be viewed as an attempt to play a capitalist game without capitalist pieces of proper taste and knowledge how to express one's social and professional identity through consumption patterns.

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31 Stark, David/Bruszt, László, »One Way or Multiple Paths: For a Comparative Sociology of East European Capitalism«, *American Journal of Sociology*, Jg. 106, H. 4 (2001), S. 1129–1137, here S. 1130.

32 Turska, Anna; Wieczorkowska, Anna, »Rodzi się nowa klasa« [A New Class is Born], *Życie Gospodarcze*, 23.12.1990, S. 1, 3–6, here S. 1 [translated by P. W.]..

### Controversies over »conspicuous consumption« after 1989

One of the first public opinion polls on the new economic order carried out in 1990 by the *Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej* (or CBOS, the Center for Social Opinion Research). Leading Polish pollster drew an important conclusion: »A willingness to work on one's own is an important and more and more socially accepted way of solving the problem of the potential threat of individual unemployment.«<sup>33</sup> This conclusion could be corroborated with a research survey carried out by sociologists in 1992 which showed that 6 per cent of all respondents declared themselves as owners of private businesses.<sup>34</sup> However, this number primarily illustrates attempts to be independent by establishing small business, such as a stand on a local bazaar or a small grocery store. The conclusion of an article in the leading weekly news magazine *Polityka* titled »Appetite for Money. Giants of Polish Business, Their Origin and Paths«, shows that starting a business was merely a beginning of a career. »Many have entered the path to the capitalist well-being. For now, only few managed to get there.«<sup>35</sup>

A social opinion poll »Rich in society« carried out by the CBOS in 1993 gives an insight into the popular imagery of both the source of income of those who »managed to get there« and the ways in which they spend their money. While asked »who is rich in Poland?« about 80 per cent of the respondents answered that the source of income of the rich is running a business, such as ownership of a factory or a trade company. Few respondents claimed that the source of income of the rich are scams and swindles (6 per cent), another small number claimed that company directors and managers could be rich (5 per cent), and 4 per cent claimed that the liberal professions could be the source of wealth.<sup>36</sup> While asked what exactly rich people own, 46 per cent of the respondents answered: »investment goods, companies, factories, retail stores.« 42 per cent claimed that rich people have consumer goods, and could afford services that constitute

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33 CBOS, *Kształtujący się ład gospodarczy w społecznych opiniach* [The emerging economic order in social opinions], Warszawa 1990, S. 10, [http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/1990/K\\_095\\_90.PDF](http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/1990/K_095_90.PDF) [17.07.2015, translated by P. W.].

34 Beskid, Lidia/Milic-Czerniak, Róża/Sufin, Zbigniew, *Polacy a nowa rzeczywistość ekonomiczna* [Poles and New Economic Reality], Warszawa, 1995, S. 65.

35 Szemplińska, Ewa/Sarzyński, Piotr, »Apetyt na pieniądze« [Appetite for Money], *Polityka*, April 1993, appendix Eksport Import, S. 3 [translated by P. W.].

36 CBOS, *Bogaci w społeczeństwie* [Rich in Society], 1993, S. 13, [http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/1993/K\\_016\\_93.PDF](http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/1993/K_016_93.PDF) [17.07.2015, translated by P. W.].

»conspicuous consumption«. Free choice answers for this question included: »lavish consumption, luxury consumption, expensive detached houses and apartments, ownership of several houses, villas, palace with a swimming pool and a sauna, expensive, luxury cars, possibilities to travel around the world, lavish life.« Only 10 per cent of all respondents claimed that rich people own money and securities.<sup>37</sup> This poll gives us an insight into the popular imagery of Polish capitalists. However, it is worth noting that the vision of palaces with swimming pools was plausibly heavily influenced by *Dynasty* screened by the Polish television at that time.<sup>38</sup> For the sake of brevity of this article it is impossible to discuss a surprisingly low number of respondents which believe in scams and swindles as a source of wealth if we consider the media coverage of white collar crimes in the early 1990s (cf. fn. 43).

Aside from articles on the contribution of the rising private sector to the national economy and coverage of large scale swindles and tax evasion schemes, media also covered distinctive lifestyles of Polish businessmen. The aforementioned article from *Życie Gospodarcze* (fn. 32) on the evolution of the lifestyle of private entrepreneurs gives an insight into the discussion on the tastes and the civilizing process of this group.<sup>39</sup> One of the vignettes from this article illustrates the imagery luxury and spendthrift consumption characteristic for the late 1980s.

»A wealthy man was spending few days with his girlfriend in a luxury hotel. They wanted to watch a porn on a video cassette, but, unfortunately, their hotel room was equipped only with Japanese color television. So he went downstairs to a Pewex retail store. Pewex was a chain of hard currency stores customarily located in premium hotels. He bought a VCR, they watched a movie together and he finally gave the VCR to his girlfriend as a Christmas gift. Such gestures indicate belonging to the class of the richest.«<sup>40</sup>

This vignette offers a vision of the luxury specific to the late 1980s when a VCR was a luxury commodity, and arguably the most recognizable symbol status in Polish society. It is also worth noting that a Japanese color TV set was an indicator of a »luxury hotel«. Not only after the year 1989 a VCR became an ordinary electric appliance in Polish households, but also virtually all

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<sup>37</sup> CBOS, *Bogaci w społeczeństwie* [wie Anm. 36, translated by P. W.].

<sup>38</sup> See also Anne Kurr's essay in this volume.

<sup>39</sup> Elias, Norbert, *The Civilizing Process. Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, Oxford 2000 [1978, 1982].

<sup>40</sup> Turska/Wieczorkowska, »Rodzi się nowa klasa« [wie Anm. 32], S. 4 [translated by P. W.].



hotel rooms in respectful hotels were equipped with color TV sets. Thus, this image of luxury was rapidly outdated along with the system transition.

Another vignette from this article offers a picture of changes in the consumption patterns of Polish income elite after the year 1989:

»According to our observation of this group [...] the most prevailing custom is the ostentatious collection of consumer goods. It seems that this an abreaction after years when – while owning money – one has to be quiet as a mouse before the tax office, the accounting department of the communist party. [...] Recently eating French cheese becomes more popular. Our bourgeoisie [derogatory »burżua«] eat those cheeses and wince. [...] Their throats [are not used to] the French sophistication. The subtlety of the taste will come but no sooner than after few generations. [...] It is very funny to see the changes in criteria of judgment dictated by fashion from Western catalogues [that is mail order catalogs such as *Burda* and *Quelle*] and video movies which show the lifestyle of the upper crust (and are watched by lower classes). Such movies are the most desirable products in video stores such as American TV series *Dynasty*.«<sup>41</sup>

The notion of shaping consumption patterns after *Burda*, *Quelle* and *Dynasty* was not merely an accusation of being prone to bad taste in seeking inspirations for their lifestyles. This accusation also referred to the broader discussion on the superficial embrace of Western cultural values by new elites. A Czech social critic grasped this controversy in his remark on the embrace of the American dream: »The unfortunate truth is that as the former subjects of the Soviet empire dream it, the American dream has very little to do with liberty and justice for all and a great deal to do with soap operas and the Sears catalogue.«<sup>42</sup>

An article in *Polityka* in 1995, which itself regularly laughed on the taste of *nouveau riches*, provides an interpretation of media stories about businessmen taste in consumption by situating them in the struggle for cultural capital and prestige with the *intelligentsia* which declined as a social elite after the year 1989:

»One can become a rich man in Poland but it is difficult to become a positive rich man. Too often the further path from a palace leads to a jail. [...] Despite such losses on the way [that is jailing of several high profile businessmen involved in scams] this class won't disappear, but rather it will become more civilized and

41 Turska/Wieczorkowska, »Rodzi się nowa klasa« [wie Anm. 32], S. 1; 3; 4 [translated by P. W.].

42 Kohák, Erazim, »Ashes, Ashes...Central Europe After Forty Years«, *Daedalus*, Jg. 121, H. 2 (1992) S. 197–215, here S. 209.

more noble in the next generation. Nevertheless, money which Polish rich ostentatiously showed, had changed social psychology, caused the *intelligentsia* customs and lifestyles to disappear, and put everyone into complexes and reverie. One can still laugh at them for some time, tell jokes about their marbles, Japanese swimming pools and lavish name day parties.<sup>43</sup>

Browsing Polish press from the first half of the 1990s shows that laughing on the bad taste of nouveau-riches declined and the approach towards private entrepreneurs has changed. For instance, »A new class is born« article published by *Życie Gospodarcze* in 1990, supposedly based on claimed »personal observations«, shows a typical voice of Polish *intelligentsia* towards *nouveau riches*. Three years later *Życie Gospodarcze* published a much more distanced piece on the ownership of consumer durables among businessmen:

»One of the measures of the standard of living of businessmen was a survey concerning the ownership of cars and high class consumer electronics. Car brands undoubtedly indicate high standard of living of their owners. 150 entrepreneurs (n – 405) owned Mercedes, Volvo, BMW or a Japanese car. One forth owned Renault, Lada, Skoda, or Wartburg. Luxury cars were primarily owned by owners of manufacturing companies. [...] At the same time [...] circa 33 per cent purchased satellite television receivers [...] 39 per cent TV sets, 21 percent a VCR.«<sup>44</sup>

This article significantly differs from the one published in the same periodical four years before. Instead of using stereotypical images of the consumption of the new class, this one merely quotes data from a research survey without commenting it. As *Polityka* columnists noted, one can laugh on nouveau-riches only for some time. In the mid-1990s practices of consumption of the new income elite slowly disappeared from mass media while the social structure which has emerged after the system transition was taken for granted as a natural socio-economic order. It is also remarkable to note that this survey offers a diverse picture of this class with Soviet Ladas and East German Wartburgs rather than Rolls-Royces.

43 Ostrowski, Marek/Władyka, Wiesław, »Młodzi, piękni, bogaci« [Young, Beautiful, Rich], *Polityka*, 15.04.1995, S. 3 [translated by P. W.].

44 Wiszniewski, Edward/Zielińska, Zofia, »Biznesmeni'92« [Businessmen'92], *Życie Gospodarcze*, 11.04.1993, S. 16 [translated by P. W.].

## BMW as businessman's passion and a tool of trade

The aforementioned voices illustrate public controversies over the lifestyle of new income elites. Aside from highly positive voices on the system transition *Polityka* and *Życie Gospodarcze* extensively covered the bleak side of the transition such as unemployment and bankruptcies of large industrial state enterprises. But at the same time two other highly popular magazines explicitly praised capitalism with buzzwords: *success*, *marketing*, *dealers*, *management*, *advertisement*, to name the most notorious elements of such a vocabulary. The main ideology explicitly expressed by two periodicals *Businessman Magazine* (1990–onwards, further *BM*) and *Sukces* (1990–1993) was, to quote the economic jargon of the époque, the »public acceptance of a capitalist culture«.<sup>45</sup> Here I discuss the imagery of consumption presented in the opinion survey »The Image of Polish businessman«, ordered by *BM* in 1992, and examples of success stories from the series »Who and why has succeeded?« in *Sukces*. Both magazines enthusiastically depicted the elite of Polish business and extensively covered »conspicuous consumption« as a set of highly meaningful practices embedded in cultural values and work ethic of this social class. Stories of lavish lifestyle and goods possessed by those who »managed to get to the top« aimed to show the possibilities of upward mobility through entrepreneurship. The *BM* editors, while introducing to the aforementioned survey, have asked: »Is the stereotype of Polish businessman which cruise in their Western cars, dressing in the most expensive fashion houses and spending free time in casinos and on banquets, at least partially well-founded?«<sup>46</sup> As we will further see, the aim of the survey was to contradict such image of spend-thrift businessmen and communicate the values which lie behind the purchases of luxury commodities.

Here I can quote a typical presentation of a Polish businessman's lifestyle on the case of Andrzej Czarnecki, the chairman of a manufacturer of medical equipment High Tech Lab, who regularly appears on lists of the 100 richest Poles to this day. »He drives his dreamed two year old BMW car, he measures time with Baume & Mercier watch, he uses French cosmetics from Armani and wears suits from Italian designers. Favorably he

45 Quelch, John A./Joachimsthaler, Erich/Nueno, Jose Luis, »After the Wall: Marketing Guidelines for Eastern Europe«, *Sloan Management Review*, Jg. 32, H. 2 (1991), S. 82–93, S. 82.

46 »Wizerunek polskiego biznesmena« [Image of Polish Businessman], *Businessman Magazine*, Dec. 1992, S. 88–90, here S. 88 [translated by P. W.].

visits the Belvedere restaurant in Warsaw Łazienki Palace [the most famous snobbish restaurant in Poland at that time], he spends his holiday in the Alps where he can pursue his favorite hobby – skiing.<sup>47</sup> This picture may look like a generic description of a contemporary wealthy businessman. However, in post-communist Poland in 1992 it was a relative novelty to have such an image of a businessman who fully embraced Western lifestyle of this class. The basic difference between the aforementioned imagery of businessman from *Polityka*, *Przekrój* and *Życie Gospodarcze* and this story, is that here he is shown not as a person who, to quote Norbert Elias, undergoes a civilizing process, but who already fully embraced new system of values and express a personal integrity of a Western-style businessman. Here the image of a businessman also includes a hint on the individualized lifestyle expressed through carefully selected brand of his watch and pursue of his personal dream – a BMW car.<sup>48</sup>

Another success story shows how the pursuit of a personal dream drives the entrepreneurial spirit and finally provides an ultimate reward. An article about Ryszard Bogucki, the owner of »High Life«, a Polish dealer of luxury brand cars, illustrates this feature of media narratives. In the early 1990s, Bogucki was the main sponsor of the »Miss Polonia« beauty contest. He also regularly appeared in media with his flashy cars and girlfriends which he has chosen among pretenders to the »Miss Polonia« title.

»The impressive Ferrari Testarossa, one of the most expensive cars in the world, is parked on a hotel parking lot. Testarossa's brand color is red, however his Ferrari is black. Only thirteen cars were manufactured in this color [to] commemorate the death of Enzo Ferrari. [...] This purchase somehow contradicts modesty declared by the young businessman. However, modesty and dreams are two different things. »I dreamt about such Ferrari for a long time. It is a realization of a dream from my youth.«<sup>49</sup>

This quote shows two important features of ideological message of *Sukces*. Firstly, making business enables an ordinary man to successfully pursue his dreams. Secondly, it shows those who get to the top as individuals with

47 Ebd., S. 90 [translated by P. W.].

48 For a discussion on expressing individualized lifestyles through consumption, see: Bell, David/Hollows, Joanne (Hg.), *Historicizing Lifestyle. Mediating Taste, Consumption and Identity from the 1900s to 1970s*, Aldershot 2006.

49 »High Life«, *Sukces*, Aug. 1992, S. 12–13 [translated by P. W.]. It is worth to note further Ryszard Bogucki's story. After some of his businesses had failed, he lost his fortune and, using his criminal connections, pursued a career as a hitman. Currently he serves 25 year sentence for the assassination of one of the leaders of Polish organized crime in 1999.

cultural and social capital, such as knowledge about Ferrari brand identity and skills to get this »limited edition« car.

Another motif of success stories was the downgrade of »conspicuous consumption« by claiming that this is merely a side effect of making business, which is a passion itself. We can find such claim in an interview with Janusz Leksztóń, nicknamed »the king of the Coast«, who founded high profile EL-GAZ trade company in the port city of Gdansk.

Q: While talking about success, have you already achieved it?

A: If we will measure a success with a number of press articles about EL-GAZ, then yes, I guess so. However, I don't measure a success in terms of consumption, quick profit making, the number of owned cars. [...] For me a success is the possibility of investing my earnings into further enterprises. We have only one stomach and unlimited possibilities of having goals to achieve.<sup>50</sup>

The second intrinsic element of media texts about Polish businessmen was making »conspicuous consumption« meaningful by showing luxuries as necessary tools of trade. One of the standard elements of personal success stories and reportages on businessmen were claims on the role of practices of consumption and lifestyle of the owner as an integral part of company's image. A commentary to the *BM* survey provides readers with a hint on the importance of the lifestyle of a businessman.

»Company's director personal image strongly influences company's perception among clients and business partners. In highly developed countries thousands of gags has been written on this subject. [...] Patterns of behavior of businessmen and their fashion is being slowly »smuggled« to Poland from the West. Do local entrepreneurs pay attention to the positive personal image of their firms?»<sup>51</sup>

The article with the result of this survey extensively discussed businessmen taste in clothing and cosmetics, named as an »inappropriate subject« since the lack of personal hygiene was an element of negative stereotype of Polish entrepreneurs at that time. The most favorite brand for Polish businessmen was Hugo Boss (39 per cent answers) and further Dior, Van Gils and Pierre Cardin. Favorite cosmetic brands were Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, Pierre Cardin, Chanel, Guy Laroche and Giorgio Beverly Hills. Obviously, such report also covered watches. Businessmen mentioned Omega, Tissot and Rolex as their most favorite brands. Two businessmen who »proudly

50 »Janusz Leksztóń. Król Wybrzeża«, *Sukces*, Oct. 1990, S. 4–5, here S. 4 [translated by P. W.].

51 »Wizerunek polskiego biznesmena« [wie Anm. 46], S. 89 [translated by P. W.].

own a masterpiece made by Philippe Patek» were even mentioned with their names.<sup>52</sup> Aside from clothing and watches also discussions about cars included elaborate claims of the role of premium cars in businessman's lifestyle. For instance, another success story of a businessman from the meat processing industry shows a car as a necessity:

»He invests everything he had earned in a new meat processing plant. [He owns] a BMW 524 but he has to own it because this is his tools of trade. He has to drive to make business. In this business you cannot sit by your desk.«<sup>53</sup>

Here it is worth to mention the public controversies over the definition of luxury in post-communist Poland. Before 1989 the imposition of different turnover tax rates for different products, one of the methods of enforcing state policy towards consumption, contributed to the image of some highly taxed products as luxuries.<sup>54</sup> After 1989 the new government replaced the turnover tax with the VAT tax with one single rate for virtually all industrial goods. However, for some time policy makers discussed the possibility of the imposition of another tax on the awkwardly named »external indicators of wealth« (zewnętrzne objawy bogactwa) such as premium cars, swimming pools and satellite dishes. This was a somehow desperate attempt to tax grey area incomes. Since policy makers had difficulties with taxing income in this sector, they considered imposing tax on easily spotted luxuries bought with such income. This idea was almost unequivocally criticized by media as an attempt to go back to the communist times. For instance, *Polityka* columnist discussed premium cars not as a fancy but rather businessman's tools of trade.

»Do self-respecting businessman who wants to drive safely and to start business negotiations refreshed after several hours of driving, would replace a Mercedes with a Polonez [popular Polish car]?«<sup>55</sup>

To summarize it is worth to quote another success story titled »I Never Dreamt About Having Two Ferraris«. While discussing issues of running business and stabilization of life the interviewer asks:

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52 Ebd.

53 »Przesłuchanie« [Interrogation], *Sukces*, Sept. 1990, S. 4–5, here S. 5 [translated by P. W.].

54 See Wasiak, Patryk, »Debating Consumer Durables, Luxury and Social Inequality in Poland during the System Transition«, *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung*, Jg. 64, H. 4 (2015), S. 543–565.

55 Wesola, Anna, »Luksus nie tuczy« [Luxury Doesn't Make You Fat], *Polityka*, 10.07.1993, appendix *Eksport Import*, S. IV [translated by P. W.].

Q: So, do you think that there is time for luxury in your life?

A: I live in a luxury for a long time and not much can be add here. I always wanted to be well-dressed and own a good and fast car. I always managed to make it. I did it for myself, but it also helped me in making businesses. Such image is necessary. When in the Netherlands I observed that everyone inspects what brand of watch you are wearing, I bought myself a Rolex. As an owner of a premium car I was always credible for my contractors.<sup>56</sup>

A further respondent extensively discusses his taste in cars and lists technical parameters of his Ferrari 348 TS and Ferrari Testarossa. Elaborate explanations on technical parameters of owned cars or the knowledge about brand identity, such as the aforesaid story of the black Testarossa, were intrinsic features of success stories of Polish businessmen from the early 1990s. We can interpret such claims as a way of expressing cultural capital of this class by showing that they know exactly why and what they consume.

## Conclusion

In this essay I have discussed how a study of media imagery of »conspicuous consumption« of private entrepreneurs in Poland can shed more light on the role of consumption patterns in legitimizing the class of the wealthy. This case shows the process of making consumption meaningful in the context of a new socioeconomic order after 1989. Referring to Stark's and Bruszt's comment, we can interpret this process as an attempt to »build capitalism without capitalists«.<sup>57</sup> The negative stereotype of spendthrift *prymwiarze* of the 1980s interested in »vodka and entertainment« was a burden for the class of private entrepreneurs. They not only struggled to make money in rather hostile and complex post-communist legal environment, but also attempted to express their cultural capital and show the legitimacy of their wealth. We can consider elaborate ways in which *BM* and *Sukces* presented »conspicuous consumption« and self-images of private entrepreneurs as a struggle for prestige by those who managed to secure economic capital. Aside from expressing their good taste in cars and suits, private entrepreneurs, as well as columnists writing about them, regu-

56 »Nie marzyłem, że będę miał dwa Ferrari« [I Never Dreamt About Having Two Ferraris], *Sukces*, Jun. 1991, S. 10–11 [translated by P. W.].

57 Stark/Bruszt, »One Way or Multiple Paths:...« [wie Anm. 31].

larly emphasized that such commodities are elements of their professional image, thus those are their tools of trade not a fancy. Here we can see how consumption became meaningful by showing that luxuries are not merely an indicator of belonging to »the leisure class«, as Thorsten Veblen famously named it, but they also contributed in expanding businesses, thus they help the national economy to flourish.

Don Slater notes that consumption patterns play a role for defining self-identity: »[T]he eminently modern notion of the social subject as a self-creating, self-defining individual is bound up with self-creation through consumption.«<sup>58</sup> The critical voices of the *intelligentsia* towards the ongoing awkward transformation of *prymaciarze* into businessmen and elaborate explanations of reasons behind buying BMWs, Rolexes and wearing Hugo Boss suits, provide us with an insight into the process of using consumption to define the social identity of an emerging social class. Here we can see how a particular group of consumers attempted to become »cultural experts« by appropriating consumer goods to perform their new identities. Moreover, this group successfully transgressed and established social divisions and challenged the *intelligentsia* as a social class with the highest level of prestige. The media images of *nouveau riches* in post-communist Central Europe are usually taken for granted as an intrinsic and obvious side-effect of the emergence of new economic order. However, as I tried to outline, a study of practices buying and showing off BMWs and Rolexes can reveal a deeper social logic of the ongoing substantial social change.

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<sup>58</sup> Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* [wie Anm. 5], S. 31.