

**EMERGING MODALITIES OF MOTHERHOOD:  
ARTICULATING EXCLUSIVITY, BRANDS AND  
SYMBOLS AMONG CZECH MOTHERS**

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Submitted to  
Central European University  
Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology

*In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts*

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Budapest, Hungary  
2011

## Abstract

The overarching aim of this ethnographic research is to investigate the consumption practices of affluent Czech mothers, locating them within larger postsocialist and neoliberal transformation discourse as well as discerning site-specific and localized practices highlighting more nuanced trajectories within Czech postsocialist patterns of consumption, identifying how such processes inform the emerging modalities of motherhood these women are articulating. Specifically, invoking Bourdieu's discussion of taste, what mothers consume and how they classify and enfold objects and brands into their identities as mothers, women, and Czech citizens with particular regard to taste, distinction, and exclusivity, this project seeks to engage women living in and around the Prague suburb of Dolní Počernice whose lifestyles from the outset visibly indicate overlapping choices, experiences, and consumption practices.

## Acknowledgements

I thank my supervisors Daniel Monterescu and Vlad Naumescu for their guidance and support not only throughout the conceptualization and realization of this thesis project, but also for giving me the time and space to be creative with my work as well as the courage to explore uncharted theoretical territory on my own terms. I must also thank Elissa Helms and Violetta Zentai for generously helping me unpack the theoretical framework of this project before I even knew where it would take me. I cannot fully express the gratitude I feel for my colleagues in the Sociology department. It has been my privilege to work with them and learn from them throughout this academic year. Specifically, to Behice, Darren, Nicole, Sergiu, Whitney, and Zoltan, your friendship, love, and support have challenged me to be the best possible version of myself. To my informants, I shall be eternally grateful for their openness, candor, and stories. I must also thank my parents and sisters whose love, encouragement, and faith sustain me from across the ocean. Finally, I must thank the most supportive, loving, and intellectually nourishing force in my life, my partner, Pavel. Without him, this project would not have been possible.

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## Introduction

You know, when my husband's parents died we had to clean out their house, and even though they weren't rich there was just so much stuff – stuff from their lives, boxes and boxes of it and we didn't know what to do with it. It was so sad and all I could think about was how this isn't what should be what's most important to my family – that being together and just spending life together should always come first, before all of our stuff.

If you are not a mother, it is practically impossible to know how much of life revolves around stuff. Stuff for spouses and children, stuff for the house, stuff to streamline your life, stuff that allows others to make assumptions about your identity, stuff that others can understand, recognize, interpret and contextualize. This study emerged from my own curiosity about stuff. Specifically, the stuff I was seeing everyday on children and mothers at a kindergarten where I taught English, the stuff they all seemed to share, as well as the patterns and infrastructures that, over time, became discernable around this stuff. While my questions about stuff originated within the context of this school, they radiated outward into the community where the school was located. Dolní Počernice, a neighborhood on the northeast edge of Prague, while within Prague proper, could not more starkly contrast with the city center. Instead of cobblestoned streets, “eclectic style” apartment buildings, and intersections crowded with trams and pedestrians, Dolní Počernice is much more suburban: harder to access with public transport, buildings, homes, and malls separated by fields and parks, and no blocks of flats<sup>1</sup> on the horizon. It is here that most families whose children attended the school where I taught lived.

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<sup>1</sup> Blocks of flats, or *paneláky* in colloquial Czech, are communist-era housing structures, generally uniform in design and typically aggregated together as housing estates. The buildings themselves are tall and imposing and constructed from concrete. The flats within these structures are virtually identical in layout throughout the entire building. Generally constructed on the periphery of Czech towns and cities, *paneláky* currently house about a

While the people I spoke to all either live or work in Dolní Počernice, this study focuses primarily on the affluent members of this community whose children either attended the kindergarten where I taught, or who I connected with through the networks of parents I met who sent their children there. This is an investigation into existing networks of friends, neighbors, and acquaintances within a particular community who share similar backgrounds stemming from childhoods lived under socialism, focusing specifically on how they are articulating and rearticulating their identities through patterns of practice centered around materiality. While this ethnographic research engaged affluent mothers, all of whom grew up during socialism, this is not exclusively a study of postsocialist economic anthropology, emerging postsocialist class structures, femininity, or motherhood, although all of these theoretical strands figure largely into my work. Rather, my goal here is to unearth the ways these networks of mothers are ascribing meanings to particular brands and objects, both foreign and local, enfolding them into their own priorities and identities as mothers, focusing on the ways they use these objects to make themselves feel distinct and “unique” while simultaneously constructing mutually recognizable symbols of emerging values and particular kinds of lifestyles. I argue that these women, within their own community, have the freedom to, piecemeal, reconfigure modalities of motherhood, a process which, among these women, is largely calibrated against their own experiences under socialism and their desire to retain what they believe are the positive attributes of their heritage as Czechs while also exploring what is effectively for them, the nearly limitless frontier of etic objects.

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third of the country’s population. In this study, I shall use the terms “blocks of flats” and “*paneláky*” interchangeably.

## Chapter 1: Context, Theory, and History

The primary argument of my ethnographic study among some mothers in Dolní Počernice is that due to their level of affluence, these women are in a position to articulate and rearticulate symbols of distinction in a piecemeal fashion, cultivating new modalities of motherhood by handpicking as well as discarding objects and patterns of practice from their own childhoods in addition to integrating new objects and symbols that have become accessible following the end of socialism in 1989. This approach to motherhood has resulted in the creation of mutually recognizable symbols connoting distinction within this community, and in spite of the inherent tensions of a process simultaneously individualistic yet collective, these women are constructing new pathways to distinction, locally redefining their own identities as well as what they believe Czech motherhood is all about.

The analytical categories I'm delineating here will be twofold, although both will be engaged through the lenses of distinction and postsocialist economic anthropology. The first will be centered around branding, specifically, how and why mothers and families brand and rebrand objects and practices as exclusive or distinct in addition to the ways they ascribe meanings to branded objects as etic categories they are acquiring from outside their local contexts. The second analytical level of this study will engage motherhood, focusing on how these women cultivate motherhood as a system of practices informed by their own childhoods during socialism as well as the ways in which they are engaging conflicting historical and emerging aspects of femininity and gendered parenthood. Most importantly, both analytical categories are configured around the agency these women possess in articulating the priorities and management of their families.

## ***On Bourdieu and Branding***

Bourdieu's notion of taste as something which classifies the classifier, the focus of his text *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, has a great deal to offer postsocialist studies confronting patterns of consumption within emerging capitalisms. One of the primary goals of this ethnographic research has been to untangle the priorities of the women I spoke to as mothers, consumers, Czech citizens, and survivors of economies of shortage, looking specifically at how they presently utilize branded objects to construct and define their identities along these lines. Alongside Bourdieu's theories as outlined within *Distinction*, this discussion shall also refer to Bourdieu's habitus as a structured, structuring structure as well as examine his notions of social topography, legitimacy, education and class, relating them specifically to the Czech mothers within this study who, having had to discard many of their ways of being as they existed during socialism, are now faced with the challenge of rearticulating and renegotiating social spaces and practices and social reproduction through family and children.

Bourdieu begins his discussion of taste in *Distinction* by indicating how social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, specifically between that which is necessary, base, or natural and that which is refined, cultivated, or sublimated, effectively legitimizing and rendering superior the latter group to the former (Bourdieu 1987:6-7). Bourdieu describes how of all objects available to consumers, none are more distinguishing than legitimate works of art because as they are in their nature distinguished, innumerable distinctions can be extracted from potential divisions in style, genre, period, and producers (Bourdieu 1987:16). From all this we can discern a legitimacy gradient predicated on differential proximity of the individual to legitimate works through differential levels of scholastic assets which prefigure significant differences in



knowledge and preferences (Fabiani: 5). In the case of the mothers with whom I spoke, this notion of distinction with respect to art acquires an especially unique quality if applied to branded objects, especially those largely unavailable within their local contexts. As I shall elaborate on in a later chapter, the deliberate pursuit of foreign brands is described by these mothers as a pathway to uniqueness. These women are seeking brands for which there is, at most, a limited legitimacy gradient within their own milieu. Specifically, they are aggregating etic objects for which there are no socially entrenched “scholastic assets” that would give them any inherent or universally recognizable meaning.

While art is the realm in which subjects are most capable of asserting themselves through distinction and taste due to the largely lofty quality of its content, there are no areas of practice where this is not possible (Bourdieu 1987:5). Nothing is more distinctive than having the power to confer aesthetic status on that which is banal or common or the ability to apply the principles of a ‘pure’ aesthetic to everyday things (Bourdieu 1987:5). The ability, or lack thereof, to distinguish between superior and inferior tastes is mediated primarily through implicit learning, or knowledge acquired through one’s social origin, although it can also be mediated through education (Bourdieu 1987:4). Social origin and education are the primary vehicles through which individuals acquire social and cultural capital, resources which can assume tangible and intangible forms including dispositions and habits acquired through the socialization process, the accumulation of valuable cultural objects, and formal educational qualifications (Anheier, Gerhards, and Romo 1995:4). The close relationship linking cultural practices to educational capital and social origin is complicated by a “fact” established in Bourdieu’s text that at equal levels of educational capital, the weight of social origin as an explanatory force within systems of practice and preference increases as one moves away from the most distinguished areas of culture (Bourdieu 1987:13). Bourdieu

positions actors within a social field, or topography, according to economic, social, and cultural conditions – those actors occupying similar or neighboring positions are posited as more likely to develop similar dispositions, and habits (Anheier, Gerhards, and Romo 1995:860).

In their pursuit of non-local brands for items like clothing and household objects, these women are effectively conferring aesthetic status on everyday things. These things they obtain for their families through a variety of pathways are not luxury items used only on special occasions, nor are they treated with any particular reverence regarding how they are worn, used or cared for. Parents often sent their children to school wearing Gap t-shirts they had ordered on the internet or sweaters from Abercrombie and Fitch they had asked friends to bring from the United States with the knowledge that they would almost certainly be soiled by the end of the day. They confer status on the banal through the lengths they go to obtain the locally unavailable for everyday use. Further, because there is no widespread implicit knowledge to contextualize these branded objects, parents are in the position to articulate meanings for them, integrating them into their identities alongside other emerging mechanisms of exclusivity.

The portrait of brands in ““Our Beer”: Ethnographic Brands in Postsocialist Georgia” by Paul Manning and Ann Uplisashvili is an interesting case of brand analysis to consider alongside Bourdieu’s notion of distinction and my own case. Emerging out of the Soviet context which privileged needs over desires, and materiality over symbolism, and in which brands were attributes of a collectively imagined “West,” brands have since transformed into points of intersection for postsocialist expectations and disappointments (Paul Manning et al. 2010:626-627). As Manning and Uplisashvili indicate, the transition from socialism to capitalism did not herald a seamless transition from brandless to branded

products – while the post-socialist economy did certainly witness an explosion of brandedness, socialist production also disappeared, along with socialist brands, and brands which had previously served as icons of an imagined west suddenly became commonplace (Paul Manning et al. 2010:626-627). The end of socialism rendered existing hierarchies of qualitative orders of goods null as socialist brands could now actually be compared to Western ones – the ‘West’ as imagined through what were previously distinct and inaccessible brands now appeared alongside and not in contradistinction to socialist brands and production (Paul Manning et al. 2010:628).

In this case of Georgian beer brands, a “dual lineage” seeks to trace tradition and modernity into its products – connecting post-socialist Georgian beer brands to European modernity is equally important as connecting them to a sovereign and independent Georgia (Paul Manning et al. 2010:629). The brand becomes part of a language, a unit within a system of meanings, ascribing particular values not only to the agents which produce them, but to the subjects that consume them (Paul Manning et al. 2010:631). Dual lineage confronts the opposition between Western goods produced within capitalist frameworks and local goods emerging from a legacy of socialist production, creating a space where the two can fuse ‘Western’ and local traditions, enabling the reclassification and reimagining of objects and people within a nation undergoing transformation (Paul Manning et al. 2010:631). This notion of the “dual lineage” will be especially relevant in a later section where I will discuss how mothers are pursuing new modalities of motherhood that are undeniably Czech while at the same time looking abroad for objects to mark them as distinct.

Bourdieu offers the habitus as a system through which structured and objectively unified practices are transposed among generations within particular cultures, classes, and social groups (Harker 1984a:120). Habitus is culture as internalized by the individual in the

form of dispositions that are the basis of behavior, enabling them to view the world with the same perspectives as previous generations (Harker 1984b:124). However, in conditions of rapid change, the material and social environments of one generation are likely to be rather different for the next. Such transformations in setting have the power to implicate dispositional changes in individuals, which in turn affect aspirations and patterns of practice, framing them within the objective context occupied by the individual (Harker 1984:120). In this way, habitus changes with every iteration very much in reconciliation with ever transforming material conditions (Harker 1984b:120). Further, the habitus is not a heritage which loses something as it passes through generations, it is something perpetually formed through the daily practices of subjects and follows no mechanistic logic – it is a system of meanings reproduced, produced and utilized. In this way, members of classes or cultures are not only performative but also creative subjects and habitus itself is effectively a mediating structure, not a determinate one (Harker 1984b:120).

I believe that these women are renegotiating, performing, and creating habitus at a local level within their own community through the specific practices they are initiating among themselves and rendering meaningful by bundling them alongside other markers of status. The mothers I interviewed all shared similar stories about their childhoods growing up under socialism, mentioning how happy they were as children partly because their mothers had become very adept at “making something out of nothing.” In spite of the two-room flats in the *paneláký* where most of these women grew up, they described all of the ways their mothers compensated for shortages of food and clothing, including self-provisioning through gardening and pickling and handmaking dresses and shirts. The explosion of available branded materiality following the end of socialism in 1989, while making these practices no longer necessary, also required families to adjust to circumstances

in which objects could be approached and accessed in new ways. Their habitus must be reconciled with the drastic transformation of material conditions they have witnessed. It is this process of rearticulation that I am investigating among these women.

### ***On Postsocialist Consumption***

Postsocialism has been characterized by the inversions, expected and actual, of socialist conditions. The notion of normalcy, during and after socialism, always calibrated against an imaginary west, reflected not what was or is commonplace, but what should or was expected to become normative following the end of socialism – nations were to strive to become what they would have been if socialism had never happened, if history had followed a “normal” course (Fehervary 2002: 371). Whereas during socialism, the consumer was “simple,” the new consumer under capitalism would be modern and “complex” – in the same way that Bourdieu classifies superior taste as that which discerns the lofty from the commonplace, shifting from economies of shortage to those of abundance was expected to automatically cultivate tastes which rejected the simple, the makeshift, and replace them with what had been missing, available elsewhere, and was now suddenly accessible for consumption (Majumdar and Chaudhuri 2006:4). This was a process very much aided by the reversal of import held by production and consumption, creating a reality in which actors feel compelled to articulate their identities through consumption, enabling the self to become marketable, customizable, producible (Majumdar and Chaudhuri 2006:4).

This is the reality presently confronting the Czech mothers whose narratives comprise the greater part of my ethnographic research. Taken alongside Bourdieu’s notion

of taste as a classifier, these women have had to renegotiate meanings embedded in nearly all the objects they consume. Following the end of socialism, previously inaccessible western brands suddenly appeared next to socialist brands, allowing for concrete comparisons between the two which overwhelmingly favored what was newly available, but effectively ruptured previous ways of being predicated on self-provisioning, frugality, and uniformity. If ever a habitus structured the lives of these women, the material transformation of their landscape they have witnessed in their lifetimes has caused them to totally transform their aspirations and patterns of practice to accommodate the drastically altered sociopolitical economic system in which they now find themselves – the iteration here has resulted in a change greater than that of a reconciliation between habitus and transformed material conditions – they straddle two realities in living memory in direct contradistinction to each other and must now, piecemeal, construct and reconstruct their identities and topographies in accordance. The task in their case seems daunting, yet these women, due to the economic capital they possess, are in a superior position to dictate standards of taste in their society where the pursuit of what is normal, modern, and “exclusive” is successfully achieved through new and still emerging modalities of consumption.

In their text “Of Diamonds and Desires: Understanding Conspicuous Consumption from and Contemporary Marketing Perspective,” Himadri Roy Chaudhuri and Sitanath Majumdar address contemporary understandings of conspicuous consumption as well as the symbolic content embedded within objects as consumable items utilized as a means of “self-realization and identification” (Majumdar and Chaudhuri 2006:4). Chaudhuri and Majumdar begin their text with a discussion of how the transition from modernity to post-modernity has been contiguous with transformations in the ways consumption has been reconceptualized as hegemonic capitalist ideologies have been asserted over socialism

(Majumdar and Chaudhuri 2006:4). Within post-modernity, consumption processes, cultures, and consumers are qualitatively different from those present within modernity. Modernity, prefaced on the pursuit of ever increasing levels of order, necessitated the construction of binaries, steeped in long existing economic structures, allowing for the differentiation between “order” and “disorder” in order to assert the superiority of the former over the latter. Post-modernity is associated with the shift in focus from production to consumption as the proliferation of capital in the post-war era created space for the emergence of new values and ways of being: the previous “simple” consumer would be replaced by a more modern and “complex” consumer (Majumdar and Chaudhuri 2006:4). This process has been enabled in part by the reversal of import held in production and consumption, engendering the creation of a reality in which individuals feel compelled to articulate their identities through consumption (Majumdar and Chaudhuri 2006:4). In this way, the self becomes something marketable, something which can be customized and produced. At the same time, products and objects acquire symbolic meanings and are consumed not only for practical usage but for their symbolic content as well (Majumdar and Chaudhuri 2006:4). The symbolic content embedded in products and objects allows individuals to outwardly express particular identities while simultaneously connecting them to larger networks of meaning (Majumdar and Chaudhuri 2006.:4).

Especially relevant within my ethnographic study are the dual notions of uniqueness and social conformity addressed by Majumdar and Chaudhari. Uniqueness, or the “snob effect” within postmodernity is an aspiration to reject dominant values and normality and replace them with personalized meanings and interpretations (Majumdar and Chaudhuri 2006:7). Social conformity within postmodernity can be conceptualized as the paradoxical alternative to uniqueness. Within societal microgroups sharing strong emotional links and a

common subculture, consumers are more likely to adopt conforming mentalities: people tend to contour themselves to the majority opinion of membership groups (Majumdar and Chaudhuri 2006:7). Particular products are adopted by people who are “structurally equivalent” to each other (Majumdar and Chaudhuri 2006:7). From this we can draw the conclusion that similar social positions are as important as differential hierarchical social standing when conceptualizing emulative patterns of consumption practices (Majumdar and Chaudhuri 2006:7). Uniqueness and social conformity are notions well suited to an investigation of networks of women who consume particular objects for their symbolic content steeped in “uniqueness” while at the same time wanting their possessions to be recognized and valued within their own milieu.

In their text “Stories around food, politics and change in Poland and the Czech Republic” Jonathan Smith and Petr Jehlička reflect on “food stories,” engaging diverse and personal responses to “transition” through food consumption which point away from linear accounts of post-socialism and essentialist postsocialist trajectories towards western normality, indicating the ways individuals have asserted agency in actively constructing their own postsocialist identities (Smith and Jehlička 2007:2). They delineate three reasons for formatting their text as food stories or biographies. The first is that it allows them to note continuities in human life experiences under drastically different political and economic systems that have been rendered invisible by larger transition narratives (Smith and Jehlička 2007:6). Second, the format highlights the lifespan of foods as they move from their origins to their final destinations (Smith and Jehlička 2007:6). Third, food biographies elucidate the non-human agents within food systems, uncovering the ways in which foods have “social lives” (Smith and Jehlička 2007:6). Along these lines, the authors also point out how discourse on postsocialist food consumption practices shows how “negotiations over



continuity, rupture, and innovation take place,” noting that existing material on this subject suggests an ever present tension between modernity and traditional practices (Smith and Jehlička 2007:6).

The text also confronts problematic notions within postsocialist discourse as a warning against the oversimplification or overgeneralization of postsocialist realities. Postsocialism is a partial and hybrid social form, irreducible to neoliberal economic restructuring, a legacy of socialism, or to the passage of transition – it encompasses all of these (Smith and Jehlička 2007:7). Further, the text refers to the perceived static political economies of Western Europe, suggesting that both they and postsocialist political economies are engaged in never-ending processes of revision and refashioning of economies, politics and societies (Smith and Jehlička 2007:8). Regarding food culture within these emerging capitalisms specifically, capitalisms in general share no underlying commonalities and must adjust to other forms of economy as much as other forms of economy must adjust to them (Smith and Jehlička 2007:8). While the authors suggest that “underlying commonalities” are more readily apparent than other forms of economy, the stories they present serve as corrective adjustments to the notion that such grand narratives are universal or applicable throughout time and space (Smith and Jehlička 2007:8). Within the Polish and Czech contexts, the authors outline three trends – the emergence of normal “western” consumption - “consuming normality,” continued practices of food simplicity - “consuming tradition,” and new forms of ecologically oriented production and consumption - “consuming ecology” (Smith and Jehlička 2007:8).

Regarding my own ethnographic research, these first two trends come into play in several different ways. The women I have spoken to thus far indicate a desire to consume western products, but the ways in which they do so may or may not be “western” (Smith and

Jehlička 2007:8). While they indicate that consuming western products allows them to feel unique, they are certainly not frivolous with money – they consume particular things if they believe it offers them something better than what is otherwise available. These women create their own pathways, often through networks of friends, allowing them obtain the items they desire in the cheapest way possible. As evidenced by the ways in which they structure their kitchens and maintain their larders, the economies of shortage these women endured during socialism are long gone as they take full advantage of the variety now available to them, associating it with the freedoms bundled with the end of socialism and the onset of capitalism. Almost all women I spoke to offered the example of now being able to purchase as many bananas as they like as indicative of this process. However, suburbanization and the proliferation of supermarkets have not eradicated traditional practices of self-provisioning and barter (Smith and Jehlička 2007:13). While many of these women feel compelled to keep their pantries full, they also feel compelled to keep their own vegetable gardens as well as seek local and seasonal products because they want to support Czech farmers and continue practices they remember fondly from childhood, such as mushroom picking, making marmalade out of seasonal fruits, pickling seasonal vegetables, and eating foodstuffs straight from their own backyards (Smith and Jehlička 2007:15). On several levels, these women implement “tactics of resistance” enabling them to live within a capitalist framework on their own terms, fashioning alternative models of consumption (Smith and Jehlička 2007:21).

### ***On Gender, Femininity and Motherhood in Postsocialism***

In her article ‘Expanding markets and marketing gender: the integration of the post-socialist Czech Republic’, Jacqui True outlines a framework poignant to our understanding

of the transition from soviet ideals of womanhood to those that have emerged under capitalism. Specifically, she focuses on the gender aspects of globalization and argues that in the aftermath of communism, gender relations as exports from the west are not indicative of the inevitability of patriarchy under capitalism (True 1999: 380). Rather, they show how gender rearticulates power relationships – both facilitating and contesting transitions, regardless of their nature (True 1999: 380).

True describes cultural processes as potent forces for global transformation due to the proliferation of symbols and reliance on ephemeral images and brands (True 1999: 362). These symbols are especially consequential in the transition to a global market-economy because products which exploit gender differences seem to have a strategic advantage in generating greater profits and market share within the Czech Republic (True 1999: 363). True cites the ubiquitous identification by Czechs and other post-communist citizens with the west, specifically regarding notions of masculinity and femininity, as one of the reasons for this development, noting that the diffusion of western culture and commodities even preceded the social and economic transformations that began in 1989 (True 1999: 363). However, while commodification of gender in the case of the Czech Republic is largely characterized by the naturalization of gender differences and their representations in media present western gender tropes in overt and exaggerated forms, this does not necessarily mean that women are victimized by this process (True 1999: 367). True argues that while western gender ideals have superseded soviet ones, women are as much empowered by this process as they are subjected to it (True 1999: 363).

While the western gender stereotypes that are now pervasive throughout post-soviet societies are certainly not egalitarian, positive responsiveness to them on the part of Czech citizens doesn't seem to be coincidental. As True describes, anthropologists attribute the

demand for western commodities to the post-communist aversion to communist identities and symbols (True 1999: 369). True quotes Dagmar Degrinova; ‘since 1989 there has been a revolution in culture, the market reacted positively to ideas and products that were forbidden...’ citing as a cause the repression of male and female sexuality under communism (True 1999: 369).

A second text by True on gender and postsocialism in the Czech Republic is framed by two structuring questions. The first is how are gender relations shaping and being shaped by marketization and liberalization? The second is do these new forms of economic and cultural globalization open spaces for women’s empowerment and feminist politics (True 2003:2)? True points out that the transition from socialism to capitalism in the Czech context has created space for new identities, including feminist ones. However, in the push to return to Europe following the Velvet Revolution, Czech citizens did not identify with an undifferentiated “West,” instead selectively adopting western masculinities and femininities which have brought new forms of empowerment alongside widespread inequalities (True 2003:2). True also refers to the parallels between socialism and capitalism, both systems within the Czech context wanting to paint themselves with a “human face” (True 2003:4).

The text describes the ways these systems failed to achieve real equality for women. In the case of socialism, it was through the highly limited definition of women’s liberation through equal representation in the workplace. In the case of new capitalism, backlash against socialism has promoted the sexual objectification of women as well as aspiring western masculinities in the marketplace (True 2003:23). Following the emasculating experience of socialism which upheld and idealized the asexual trope of the worker, Eastern and Central European men have reasserted their masculinity through their power over women in newly defined gender divisions within public and private space (True 2003:23).

While Czech male political elites seem to have uncritically adopted western models of practice, in contrast, Czech women's groups have been reluctant to wholeheartedly accept western feminist ideologies and struggles in defense of their own unique subjectivities and moderate western influences (True 2003:23). True illuminates a problematic paradox: because women's groups are critical of the gender inequalities within postsocialist societies, they are frequently perceived as importing western cultural imperialism instead of reviving "indigenous Czech feminisms" (True 2003:24). Meanwhile, western foreign investment and the influx of tourists are not perceived as phenomena of "cultural imperialism" (True 2003:24). True places great emphasis on the linkages between local practices and global forces as transformative in the dialectical process of postsocialist transformation, indicating that it can only be understood through an examination of micro and macro processes of change and continuity (True 2003:25). As postsocialist governments tout family values as fundamental to the success of economic transition and implement policies which reflect this, women are more easily able to opt out of working in order to provide care for children (True 2003:60). At the same time, market deregulation has not stabilized the housing situation for most Czechs, giving them less incentive to settle down and start families (True 2003:64). While the socialist system was beset by a crisis of production, the postsocialist market system struggles with the worsening crisis of social reproduction (True 2003:56). Within my own ethnographic project, True's emphasis on site specificity and the ways in which men and women are delineating boundaries between perceived western imperialism and their own continuities in patterns of practice will be useful tools for framing the narratives of women who are negotiating their own ways through work, family, gender inequality, and the developing Czech political economy.

True's analysis of symbols and images is highly relevant to this project because it delineates the mechanisms through which gender differences are reproduced in post-socialist societies. Further, her research informs our understanding of the location of men and women within these societies with respect to western gender stereotypes; taken alongside socialist prescriptions for the ideal behaviors of men and women, adherence to these stereotypes are ways in which citizens reject the old regime and seek to achieve individuality following an androgynous system. Part of what this project seeks to achieve is to identify these symbols and determine how women as agents are currently reacting to and coping with this reality.

"Of Gloss, Glitter and Lipstick: Fashion, Femininity and Wealth in Post-Socialist Urban Bulgaria" is a text in which Elitza Ranova confronts conflicting paradigms of femininity in the Bulgarian context which draw their structuring principles from traditional notions of womanhood as well as construct themselves at least partially in direct contradistinction to each other (Ranova 2010:30). Ranova's text discusses two paradigms of femininity prevalent in urban Bulgaria, while both reactionary to notions of womanhood upheld by socialist ideology, also construct themselves in opposition to each other. On the one hand there is "The Girl" or the *mutressi*, wealthy kept women. As for their personal style, they favor tight fitting jeans, ankle-boots with heels, short skirts and tank tops, and they believe that women achieve fulfillment primarily through men and family rather than through career or personal development (Anon 2010:26). On the other, there is the "United Colors" group which in contrast to the ultra-feminine style of "The Girl," opts for asexual clothing, "invisible make-up," subscribes to more liberal notions of wealth as a marker of merit, and defines a successful woman as one who does what she "wants to do" (Ranova 2010:31). Ranova describes how the end of socialism, previously believed by western

scholars and feminists to be an opportunity for women's liberation and the emergence of a feminist movement, instead heralded a return to traditional notions of femininity, upholding essential differences between the sexes and the reprioritization of physical beauty (Ranova 2010:28). The socialist asexual female body which suffered the "double burden" of work and family has been replaced by a re-sexualized, ultra-feminine, and definitively un-masculine idealized body that is identified primarily with the domestic sphere (Ranova 2010:28).

The two paradigms outlined by Ranova are especially useful within my own ethnographic research because they exemplify two reactionary veins of self-conceptualization within the postsocialist. Those women who would subscribe to the ideals upheld by "The Girl" fashion their identities in contradistinction to the socialist ideal of womanhood while those from the "United Colors" group fashion their identities in direct opposition to "The Girl" approach to femininity, supporting instead a women's place in society that is unconventional in the local context (Ranova 2010:30). Women from the "United Colors" group voice their disapproval of women from "The Girl" group largely through addressing their consumption practices with particular attention to taste (Ranova 2010:30). While women within "The Girl" group possess enough wealth to be able to afford ostentatious branded clothing, those within the "United Colors" group would critique them for the "tackiness" and "lack of individuality" of their personal style (Ranova 2010:30). While the appearance of women from the "United Colors" group would be branded as unfeminine by those from "The Girl" group, the former would argue that what the latter projects is not luxury or refinement, but pseudo-luxury, necessitating "a lot of money but absolutely no taste" (Ranova 2010:30). Ranova also discusses the way "average" women are perceived within these frameworks: they either aspire towards the ultra-feminine look of the kept women in all the ways they can despite their limited financial resources, or, they prioritize

family above all else, lamenting the difficulty of improving their station in life (Ranova 2010:31). In these ways, “average” women vacillate between aspirations towards mainstream idealized femininity and an alternative femininity steeped in Western notions of women’s liberation. In either case, the “average” woman fails to find a place in either paradigm, yet she is necessary for their existence: in her the socialist, traditional woman continues to live in urban Bulgaria and it is against her that new, postsocialist femininities are calibrated.

In her essay ‘The Traffic in Women: Notes on the “Political Economy” of Sex’, Gayle Rubin discusses the processes through which Marxism propagated a system where women were taken as raw materials and refashioned according to the needs of the socialist state (Rubin 1975: 28). She cites the “sex/gender system” as a habitus in this process – a structuring and structured structure, more specifically in this case, a set of arrangements through which society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity (Rubin 1975: 28). Marxism as a theory of social life is largely unconcerned with sex (Rubin 1975: 28). Within this framework, people are workers, peasants, or capitalists – whether they are men or women is of little consequence (Rubin 1975: 28).

This notion is strongly upheld by August Bebel, a German Marxist politician writing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his work, *Women and Socialism*, he adheres to the highly simplistic notion of women’s emancipation as being achievable only within a socialist system (Bebel 1988: 502). During his lifetime when suffrage was achieved for women, he believed that while they would now be represented politically, equality for women could never be achieved because the institution of marriage would still function as a form of sex slavery – the vote would do nothing to abolish the economic dependence of wives on their husbands (Bebel 1988: 496). He affirms that the solution to the woman question is identical to the solution of the social question (Bebel 1988: 502). Further, he iterates that the Socialist



Party is the only one that has made the full equality of women an integral part of its program (Bebel 1988: 502). He stresses that the social and economic independence of women could emerge only under a socialist system. “Her education will be the same as a man’s, with the exception of those deviations that are necessitated by the difference of sex and sexual functions,” (Bebel 1988: 502). Bebel describes here what is effectively a sexless society – he makes little reference to how family life would function if women were economically and socially independent. He doesn’t mention new roles of men emerging in family life and describes the differences between men and women regarding their sexes as “deviations” (Bebel 1988: 502).

Consideration of perspectives such as those held by Bebel is essential for an understanding of the implementation of policies regarding women under socialism. These perspectives are problematized by Rubin because they fail to explain why under systems where women were supposedly socially and economically emancipated, domestic duties continued to be carried out by women rather than men (Rubin 1975: 31). She ascribes these phenomena to the “historical and moral element” as described by Marx, which determine the specific needs of workers within their own cultures. The satisfaction of these needs thus propagates the labor power of workers within their own contexts (Rubin 1975: 31).

It is precisely this “historical and moral element” which determines that a “wife” is among the necessities of a worker, that women rather than men do housework, and that capitalism is heir to a long tradition in which women do not inherit, in which women do not lead, and in which women do not talk to god. It is this “historical and moral element which presented capitalism with a cultural heritage of forms of masculinity and femininity. It is within this “historical and moral element” that the entire domain of sex, sexuality, and sex oppression is subsumed...Only by subjecting this “historical and moral element” to analysis can the structure of sex oppression be delineated (Rubin 1975: 31).

We can argue that capitalist and socialist systems both have the capacity to reproduce mechanisms of sex oppression and have done so historically. However, as Rubin maintains, *any* society will have systematic ways to deal with sex, gender, and babies (Rubin 1975: 33). Such a system may be egalitarian, or it may be “gender stratified” (Rubin 1975: 33). However, it is critical to remain aware that human inclinations towards creating sexual worlds must not be conflated with the oppressive ways sexual worlds have thus far been organized (Rubin 1975: 33). The sex/gender system proposed by Rubin doesn’t assume patriarchy, rather it tells us that sex oppression is not inevitable – it is the product of the specific social relations that organize it (Rubin 1975: 33). While Bebel presents the socialist solution to “the woman problem”, Rubin’s notion of the sex/gender system offers an explanation as to why this solution is incomplete. These key ideas presented by Bebel and Rubin are crucial for our understanding of contemporary post-socialist societies, especially concerning the paths from their soviet heritage and how these have led to the development of new sex/gender systems. They also help us understand how the socialist project failed to truly emancipate women.

In their article ‘The Emancipation of Women: A Concept That Failed’, Zuzana Kiczková and Etela Farkašová discuss “sameness” versus “difference” as a central problem of feminist philosophy, and how these notions translate to women’s emancipation under socialism (Kiczková and Farkašová 1993: 84). “Equality” was interpreted as sameness within the Czechoslovak context (Kiczková and Farkašová 1993: 84). Specifically, emancipation meant that women should be self-sufficient, independent, and have equal access to the public sphere (Kiczková and Farkašová 1993: 85). Again, we can see androgyny present within the socialist definition of women’s emancipation – equality meant little more than

equal participation in socially organized paid labor (Kiczková and Farkašová 1993: 85). Differences between the sexes were dissipated within this framework.

The outcomes of emancipation are perhaps surprising considering its goals. However, if we consider the “historical and moral element” as described by Marx and Rubin, they are rather indicative of the failure of the myth of unity espoused by socialist societies (Kiczková and Farkašová 1993: 85). During the 1970s and 1980s, women comprised almost exactly half of the Czechoslovak labor force (Kiczková and Farkašová 1993: 85). Women no longer had to struggle to enter the “building” – the factory, school, institute, shop – under socialism they could do so freely (Kiczková and Farkašová 1993: 86). However, once inside the “building”, workers were “sexless”, because depersonalization came with the job (Kiczková and Farkašová 1993: 86). Further, women ceased to be active subjects and were transformed into passive carriers of the norms contained in their roles (Kiczková and Farkašová 1993: 86). As a result, doubts arose about the content, conditions, and forms of women’s wage labor (Kiczková and Farkašová 1993: 86). If outside of the “building” women assumed the roles of wife or mother, they were confronted with the “double burden” – on the one hand they were expected to cope with the increasing demands created by hyper-organization and low efficiency in the workplace, and on the other they were still responsible for caregiving in the family and maintenance of the home (Kiczková and Farkašová 1993:86). The dilemma women faced forced them to choose between a successful career and family (Kiczková and Farkašová 1993: 86).

Emancipation ultimately meant a “loss of dignity” for women – they were transformed into a cheap source of labor that could be inserted anywhere it was needed with no regard for their preexisting desires (Kiczková and Farkašová 1993: 87). This technological paradigm of unlimitedness – unlimited manipulation of nature and people, radical transformations of

social conditions, and inexhaustible conditions for transforming the self did little to help women because nearly all roles with decision making power were created by men (Kiczková and Farkašová 1993: 89). The differences between men and women were regarded as marginal problems – the masculine principle became the common human principle (Kiczková and Farkašová 1993: 86). The development of women was directed not towards individualism, but towards the overall benefit of society. Women were expected to contribute to the wellbeing of socialist society through their work, public engagement, and education of their children (Kiczková and Farkašová 1993: 90). Notions of individual dependence were replaced by those of social dependence (Kiczková and Farkašová 1993:90). When we consider these norms under socialism, it is unsurprising that younger generations of women living in Czech society largely view self-sacrifice and living for the social system in which they are entrenched as “regrettable situations” – evidence of an individual’s inability to do otherwise – an exception being self-sacrifice for one’s children (Kiczková and Farkašová 1993: 92). Presently, self-sacrifice and self-advancement are perceived as opposing tendencies (Kiczková and Farkašová 1993: 92). Further, considering the suppression of individualism within socialist societies, it is perhaps unsurprising that after 1989, when women had the freedom to choose whether to combine participation in the labor force with motherhood, many rejected the unsatisfying dual burden, and instead opted for a return to a more “feminine” space.

In her article ‘Two Steps Back – Anti-Feminism in Eastern Europe’, Laurie Occhipinti discusses normative attitudes towards women in the Czech Republic and Slovakia after 1989. She notes that nearly every researcher studying gender issues in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe has observed the development of anti-feminist movements (Occhipinti 1995: 13). Women’s organizations have emerged which are dedicated to

women's rights to choose motherhood over work (Occhipinti 1995: 17). The return of women to the domestic sphere where they can raise children and run a household is promoted by both men and women as the key to a better society (Occhipinti 1995: 13). As previously discussed, the post-1989 backlash against all things communist has resulted in a retrenchment of women's traditional roles (Occhipinti 1995: 13). While under communism, the burden of unpaid domestic work was largely ignored, presently women have the freedom to assume the role of full-time caretaker, which for many, brings status and emotional satisfaction they may never have gained at in the labor force (Occhipinti 1995: 16).

While women now have a greater range of choices regarding work and family and have rejected socialist definitions of feminism and women's emancipation, they have found little meaning in western ideas of feminist liberation (Occhipinti 1995: 18). While western feminism treats the family as a primary source of women's oppression, central and eastern European women are less likely to be inclined to share those feelings (Occhipinti 1995: 18). However, an overall restructuring process has not occurred with respect to traditional gender roles as they existed under communism. The "building" remains a masculine space, and instead of being forced to enter, women are now free to exclusively occupy "feminine" spaces. However, there has been little to no clamoring on the part of men to occupy the home and assume roles that have traditionally been carried out by women. As Occhipinti describes, "Often, the people I spoke with believed the idea of a 'househusband' was amusing; expectations for men to contribute to household labor seemed virtually non-existent," (Occhipinti 1995: 16).

As under socialism, "the woman question" remains less important than general human problems (Occhipinti 1995: 16). At the time Occhipinti was writing, there existed only one gender studies program in the Czech Republic or Slovakia. Today, out of the three

largest universities in the Czech Republic, Charles University in Prague, Masaryk University in Brno, and Palacky University in Olomouc, Charles University remains the only university with a gender studies curriculum. It seems that interest on the part of larger society in redefining equality and emancipation for women under capitalism has sparked the interest of rather few. In fact, the trappings of capitalism that have been imported from the west seem to drive post-soviet societies in the opposite direction – as previously discussed, sexual imagery and highly gendered media is extremely attractive to young people because of its association with luxury and consumerism (Occhipinti 1995: 17). The retrenchment on the part of Czech women into traditional roles is a major aspect of this project. Contemporary notions of gendered life within post-soviet societies is a final factor within the literature reviewed for this project that shall be at the crux of my research, the overall aim of which is to draw meaningful connections between the socialist emancipation of women and how postsocialist societies have coped with this heritage after the onset of capitalism with particular attention to how the women in the community where I conducted my ethnographic research position themselves with regard to home, family, and motherhood..

These texts straddle the unruly territory of postsocialist consumption, femininities, and site-specific negotiations of transformation. As the primary focus of my research is the ways in which upper middle class Czech mothers ascribe symbolic meanings to the objects they consume and by extension, cultivate and construct their own identities as well as those of their families through their consumption practices, the ways their choices are influenced and acted upon by external sociopolitical and economic forces are essential elements for the delineation of local trends and webs of meaning within which objects, products, and people are inscribed. This investigation seeks to unearth what kinds of Czech women these mothers

want to be, and how they are negotiating and consuming their ways towards their goals as individuals and as a community with shared values.

## Chapter 2: Branding and Branded Objects: Unpacking Exclusivity

Stepping into the cloakroom of the kindergarten where I worked as an English language instructor, one would see on either side of the corridor the hooks where the children left their belongings for the day. The school was brand new, so the green and red formica cubbyholes were freshly installed for the beginning of the school year and so far clean and unscratched - starkly different from the public school cloakrooms I recall from my childhood which reeked of mop water and ancient linoleum tiles. One of the most time consuming aspects of my job, which required me to spend the entire school day with the children in my class, took place in the cloakroom - assisting them as they dressed and undressed themselves, a task that varied in difficulty depending on age, which in the case of this school ranged from two to six. Almost immediately noticeable were the brands these children were wearing. Henley shirts from Abercrombie and Fitch, jumpers from Zara, t-shirts from the Gap, Converse sneakers, and indoor slippers from Crocs. At this time, I had some rudimentary ideas about the monthly salaries of Czech people, and excursions through malls and department stores informed my own notions about what qualified as expensive as well as what was available in the local context. All of this was of course initially calibrated against my own salary, which my partner informed me was rather "average," but I began to calculate the prices of objects I thought about purchasing in the hours of my life it took to earn that money. What was almost immediately obvious to me as I zipped up North Face jackets and tied the laces of Ecco shoes was that practically everything these children wore was branded, and likely expensive. But further, much of what they were wearing could not be purchased in stores located in the Czech Republic.



The school where I taught is one of many new private kindergartens opening in Prague seeking to capitalize on the emerging and growing desire of parents to expose their children to English as early as possible as well as offer an alternative to overcrowded public kindergartens, the rules of which stipulate that both parents must be working in order for the child to be eligible to attend. The school itself, while within Prague proper, is located in the neighborhood of Dolní Počernice, an idyllic and uncongested setting on the northeastern edge of Prague, the landscape of which boasts stone bridges over bubbling brooks, thousand year-old courtyards and farm buildings, as well as stables and a weekly farmers' market. Built in the early 19th century, the school building, which stands on a former orange grove, the kindergarten aptly named Orangery, is high ceilinged with wall to wall windows - functional because the building itself was formerly a greenhouse and plant storage facility in winter. The interior of the school was renovated and redecorated the year I began working there. The school's director, a Czech woman named Romana who has struggled for years to become fluent in English, and like many Czechs with the same goal, is embarrassed by her progress, described how the school was a project "she was doing for herself." She wanted to start an English kindergarten that would feel like "home." She filled the school with colorful formica furniture, hired painters to cover the walls with images of ladybirds, dragons, and flowers, outfitted the school's kitchen with new appliances and stocked the cupboards with colorful and matching sets of cups, plates and bowls. Romana, who has no background in early-childhood education, indicated that for the past few years she had undertaken several unsuccessful business ventures as well as devoted much of her time to raising her two children - after all that she wanted something that was her own. She talked about how although there were many English kindergartens in Prague she wanted hers to be the best: she had the expectation that each child would achieve fluency in English within a single

school year.

I learned early on that this school had the second highest tuition of any other kindergarten in Prague, costing around 12,000 korun, or about \$600 a month if a child was there everyday for the entire school day, and because of this, expected entrance to be competitive. There were two English language classrooms, one for children aged 2-4 and another for children aged 5-7, as well as a single classroom that operated as a Czech kindergarten. Excluding the latter case, teachers were told that virtually all interaction with the children should be in English, except of course if children were upset or crying and needed to be consoled. As specified on the school's website, there were to be no more than 6 students per teacher and two teachers per classroom - an attractive ratio considering that most parents I spoke to frequently mentioned how the public kindergartens they were zoned for averaged about 30 students per teacher. Parents as well as my Czech co-teacher described the school to me as "exclusive", or *exklusivni* - a term that would recur throughout the school-year in many different contexts and spoken to me by many different people, all of whom had different ideas of what it meant. My initial conceptualization of the meaning of the word as far as my job was concerned was an emic one, related to my own experience and understanding of exclusive education in the United States. In my mind, I linked exclusivity in this context to the expectation that the children at our school receive the most rigorous education possible – that our school should outperform every other school in the city, whatever that meant. While this notion of exclusivity was indeed held by some parents who sent their children to Orangery, it was by no means held by all of them, and certainly not by Romana.

In fact, *exclusivity* was almost always used in variations of one of two ways. The first would be in reference to money. Orangery was an exclusive school first and foremost

because it was an expensive English kindergarten. English kindergartens are themselves exclusive because they are educational institutions that parents pay for out of pocket and even children are often aware of this. Picking up her daughter one day from school, a mother told me that her four-year-old brags to her friends, "I go to the English kindergarten." I asked the mother why her daughter would say something like that, she responded, "Verunka knows it's not something everyone else can do. She knows it's an exclusive thing." My co-teachers often described the mothers who sent their children to our school as "exclusive mommies," pointing to their expensive clothing and handbags and the fact that they didn't have to work as indicators of how wealthy they were, often commenting on the jobs they or their husbands had that allowed them to have such a lifestyle or speculating about how much certain objects they owned could cost.

An informant told me that he believes Czechs are "in a moment where exclusive equals shiny." He continued, "Exclusive in a developed society means really high quality, especially aesthetically but also functionally. Here, exclusive stuff is usually big, flashy, and extremely overpriced." He delineated several things that had recently been or currently are trendy and considered exclusive. This included certain kinds of pure-bred dogs that could cost around 20,000 korun (around \$1000), state of the art electronics, designer brands of women's handbags, smart phones, some brands that arrived later following the end of socialism and/or foreign brands on which there are extremely high value added taxes, often making them almost twice as expensive as they would be abroad. He explained:

If someone has, for example, an iPhone, any other Czech person will know that it would cost nearly twice the listed price because the brand is not available locally. You would have to buy it from either a special retailer, bring it from abroad, or have someone else bring it from abroad - these things would require significant energy and investment, not to mention quite a bit of money.

As this kindergarten was the second most expensive in Prague, it seemed conceivable

that parents would also be willing to spend money on more expensive brands of clothing for their children. This leads into the second way that exclusivity was conceptualized by the people I worked with, parents who brought their children to Orangery, as well as by many of the people I spoke to who live in Dolní Počernice: brands and objects that are entirely unavailable for purchase within the Czech Republic were considered exclusive, even if in their countries of origin they do not hold this status. Many parents favored brands like Gap, Old Navy, Abercrombie and Fitch, Victoria's Secret, among others, for themselves and for their children even though they are not necessarily expensive or especially high end in places where they are readily available. If an object appears foreign, it connects the person who utilizes it to larger, external, non-local and generally Western networks of consumption, and is indicative of several other markers of distinction. Specifically, foreign objects, objects difficult or impossible to access in the local context were sought because they made their owners unique and necessitated alternative pathways to make them available, pathways which often require a great deal of financial capital to initiate in the first place, either due to travel or to occupy the same social topography as others who utilize such branded objects. When I asked several mothers why this was a priority for them, almost all of them said that it was “because of socialism.” As one mother explained to me:

When I was a kid and my mom took me to the store to buy shoes, I could be sure that when I went to school on Monday, half the girls in the class would have the same shoes. Now that I can afford it, for myself and my daughters, I want us to be unique. I want us to wear clothes other people don't have.

It is also for this reason that English language kindergartens are considered exclusive. Aside from the hefty price tags that come with many of these schools, parents who can afford it cited very specific reasons for wanting their children to attend. When asked why they wanted their children to learn English, most parents responded by voicing at least one

of the following points: that English was now an important skill to have in the workplace, while traveling, and to consume cultural objects produced in English, like books, films, and music. One parent said, "You need it for most jobs now, for traveling. It's hard to be somebody anymore in Europe without English." Exclusive English kindergartens offer parents the opportunity for their children to "be somebody" in a world that they feel is imposing new demands on them and their families.

These parents as well as many residents of Dolní Počernice are in the position to ascribe new symbolic meanings to branded objects as well as rebrand local products and services. In the same way that they seek locally unavailable brands in order to mark themselves as distinct, they are simultaneously embedding exclusivity within these branded objects by deliberately pulling them from external contexts and integrating them into new ones. Brands, like the commodities which they define, distinguish, and aggregate as collectives, are signifiers creating meanings within larger national, social imaginations: brands are "Janus faced" – at times indexing the producer, at other times the consumer (Paul Manning et al. 2010:628). One of the ways Orangery was branded as something exclusive, even as a local business, was deeply rooted in Romana's methods of engaging the parents of prospective students. Instead of having an annual or biannual orientation for the parents of new students, Romana would instead offer parents private guided tours and meetings in occupied classrooms throughout the entire school year in spite of teacher complaints that this practice was distracting to classes in session. When I asked a former colleague who had worked with Romana for several years why she engaged in this unprofessional behavior that was detrimental to the teachers and students of her own school, not to mention an impediment to her own personal goal of running the "best" English kindergarten in Prague, I was told:

Romana doesn't really care what happens in the classrooms as long as it looks nice to parents. She needs to convince as many of them as possible to pay the high tuition of her school so that she can pay back the loans she took from the bank to start the school in the first place. The way she does that is by giving parents the personal attention she believes makes them and their children feel special in that first meeting, like they're getting something here they can't get anywhere else. If she makes them feel like the school caters to their own personal needs and they're willing and able to pay her insanely high tuition, that in itself makes her school exclusive. As long as that feeling is there, and the school looks nice, she can believe it, and so can the parents. And anyway, if the kids don't learn English, that becomes our problem as teachers. We pay for that because we're the ones on the ground. Because the school looks exclusive, and Romana puts on such a nice face for the parents the few times she sees them, they never figure out that she started the school year with no curriculum, that she never checks up on the progress the kids are making, that half the time they have no crayons or paper. Sometimes it's hard for me to figure out what parents really think they're paying for – an exclusive school, or just the idea of one.

In this case, exclusivity is being negotiated through the construction of a discourse of personalization. Regardless of what her school can offer students in terms of education, what Romana offers parents is the feeling of a unique experience in the same way that foreign brands offer the same sentiment to the people who consume them. The exclusive status of the school is contingent on the kinds of parents who send their children there and inversely, parents attribute exclusivity to themselves and their families by sending their children to these kinds of kindergartens. As brands at times reference the consumer and at others the producer, an exclusive kindergarten and its clientele are in mutually reinforcing relationships, each informing and contributing to the status of the other. The steep cost of the school necessitates that the people who send their children there must be in possession of a great deal of financial capital, yet the school's director struggles to accurately delineate exactly how she wants to go about making sure that her school is the "best." Her goal is at best an amorphous one, and the fact that many parents came to us with wildly different expectations of what their children should be getting out of the experience of the

kindergarten is indicative of this. In the case of the school, exclusivity was linked to several perceptions of how it contributed to the exclusive status and social capital of its clientele and director - sometimes it was connected to the price, sometimes to the parents, at other times to the education the children were receiving and what it was expected to do for them in the long term. The school seemed to be the locus of many different definitions and expectations of exclusivity and social capital: “Social capital, while not all things to all people, is many things to many people (Fine 2001:99).” While social capital can be critiqued as a theoretical concept without intellectual responsibility due to its ambiguity and scope, it renders branding in the case of both the school and the objects parents believe make them and their children “unique” meaningful: exclusivity in this context is ambiguous, something being articulated, negotiated, and contested within this community: it means something slightly different to all of them, an issue they must reconcile within their own social topography.

### ***Pathways to Exclusivity***

While it is extremely popular among Czechs to go on all-inclusive package tours to Egypt, Turkey, Tunisia, among other destinations, the parents of the children who attended Orangery as well as other residents of Dolní Počernice favored more personally tailored holidays. The two adult children of the mayor of Dolní Počernice, Jan and Eliska Rejsek<sup>2</sup>, both of whom are only ever sporadically employed and financially dependent on their father, went on extended holidays (longer than seven days) to India, the United Arab Emirates, France, Italy, the United States, and Norway in 2010. As compared to the all-inclusive vacation packages or weekend ski trips to Czech mountains that are popular among Czechs

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<sup>2</sup> Surname has been changed to protect the identities of my informants.

of more modest incomes, the activities on holidays taken by people with the resources of the Rejsek family are much more tailored to their interests and reflective of the identities they are trying to construct for themselves. It's not enough for them to spend their time within the confines of the resort setting that is generally included within package tours. Instead, their holidays often consist of outdoor activities that require a great deal of independence such as camping, hiking, and long bicycle or road trips abroad in summer, and skiing trips abroad in winter. The siblings also frequently take monthly or bimonthly weekend trips to Berlin for shopping as well as urban exploration. Jan, a tall, slim 34-year-old man with wild curly black hair and arms covered with tattoos who favors more androgynous and "rocker type" clothing, has played in several bands, and used to own a "rock-shop" with his friends that sold band t-shirts, said:

Czech people are village people. Nobody has any style. Everything nice here is so expensive and there's so little of it. It's better to go to Germany for shopping. People there have better style, there's a better selection, and you can get all kinds of things that you could never get here.

He pointed out the Ray-Ban sunglasses and vintage leather jacket he was wearing that he purchased at secondhand shops in Berlin as examples of things he believes would be nearly impossible to find in Prague for the prices he paid abroad. He went on:

I need to visit Berlin at least once a month. It helps me clear my head, just sitting in cafes, walking around the city, meeting and talking to people. There are real neighborhoods there. Czech people are always just jealous of each other. I want to leave Počernice one day and never come back.

Jan's narrative offers an interesting perspective regarding branding, and although very alternative to those of the mothers with whom I spoke, is worth mentioning. He wholeheartedly rejects his own society as capable of providing him with what he feels he needs to be unique. His comments even suggest that his own definition of style is something unsustainable and virtually unattainable within his own context. The fact that everything



“nice” is expensive and thus not worth purchasing locally is indicative of Jan’s belief in the hopeless state of Czech materiality. Stylish, unique objects should be readily available and affordable and if they are not, it is reflective of the backwardness of a place. Jan believes that Berlin is a city where things are as they should be - he calibrates his perspectives of his own city and neighborhood against a place that he feels compensates him totally for what is lacking in his own context. He believes that exclusivity and uniqueness lie elsewhere entirely – a notion strongly rejected by many of the mothers I spoke to. I shall elaborate on this further in the next chapter.

Several kilometers down the road from Jan’s home in Dolní Počernice live Vera, her husband Pavel, and their three daughters. Vera, a former lawyer who went to law school in Germany also often espoused the virtues of shopping there. She told me: “I mean, it’s crazy. If I go to Dresden, I can get two pairs of these glasses for the price of one pair in Prague. It’s just easier this way.” Like the Rejsek family, Vera’s family travels frequently on holiday, also opting out of all-inclusive packages, instead choosing to go on biking trips with other families in the mountains, staying at the second homes of family friends, or spending time on beaches in Croatia. Vera, one of the many mothers who sent their children to Orangery dressed in Gap, Old Navy, Abercrombie and Fitch, among other locally unavailable brands, and who has a closet filled with these brands for herself and her husband in addition to items from Victoria’s Secret, Lacoste, Pepe Jeans, Espirit, and St.Oliver, delineated the pathways through which she obtains these items for her family and the ways she knows others go about this process.

Vera’s best friend from childhood, a woman named Lenka who lives nearby in Dolní Počernice, has a sister living in Los Angeles who operates a website allowing Czech people to order American brands online, something which many American retailers do not make

possible through their own websites. Her sister buys items on sale in American stores or from outlets and sells them at a profit to Czech consumers. This is how Vera and many of the people she is connected to in her neighborhood are able to fill their closets with foreign brands. However, it is not only foreign brands that Vera and others will order online. Even brands that are available locally and considered “exclusive” are often purchased from websites like these or on shopping trips abroad. When I asked why they would opt to purchase Tommy Hilfiger or Lacoste polo shirts through these mechanisms rather than buy them in Prague where they are available in stores, Vera and Lenka echoed Jan’s sentiment.

As Lenka told me:

I’d never buy Tommy Hilfiger here. There are a few of their stores in Prague, but they never have sales so it doesn’t make sense to buy it here. For the price of one of those shirts here, I could buy two in the states. I go there on holiday anyway to visit my sister so I wait until then.

It surprised me how both women, despite their respective levels of affluence seemed to value frugality. In their highly selective pursuit of branded objects, money certainly was an object and not something to be spent without consideration of value.<sup>3</sup> When I asked Vera whether or not she purchased clothing from brands that I mentioned offhand, generally perceived to be very high end, examples included Dolce and Gabbana, Louis Vuitton, and Prada, she found this amusing. “The stuff I have is enough for me,” she said. “It gives me what I want from it, it makes me feel unique. Those other kinds of brands, I just feel like it would be a waste, because the kids would destroy it. And I just don’t need it.” Another one

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, many secondhand shops throughout Prague explicitly advertise in their front windows that they sell American or British brands of clothing. An informant of mine who was getting disgruntled teaching in several newly opened English kindergartens around Prague is currently trying to open her own online store selling American brands of surfer clothing, which is extremely popular yet expensive to purchase in Prague. She hopes to find an outlet store in the United States where she can purchase clothing in bulk and sell it at a profit in the Czech Republic.

of Vera's friends living in Počernice to whom I posed the same question actually laughed out loud. She told me, "Do I look like the kind of woman who buys those things?" Interestingly, when asked how they would justify spending more money regarding any purchase, whether it be clothing or household objects, all women specifically said they would spend more money for better function and better design. Lenka said, "If I spend money on something, I want it to work. I want it to do what I need it to do. What I'm paying extra is for it to do what it's supposed to do well. The brand is secondary to that."

The same applied to the ways these women designed and decorated their homes. All of the mothers I spoke to live in houses that were built specifically for their families, and all engaged in very specific practices regarding the ways they decorated, designed, and maintained their homes. House building, a practice many of the people I interviewed described as something only wealthier people could do, including those who currently live in such homes, was ironically also framed as a frugal practice. One mother told me:

To buy a house like this would be really expensive, and this way I can design the layout how I want, everything in the house is new. You always hear a lot about how old houses just fall apart, the electricity doesn't work. We got good prices on a lot of the building materials so that's how we managed it.

This attitude was also echoed by two young, unmarried women I spoke to who are currently in the process of building houses with their current boyfriends. They both said they wanted something new, also talking about the disagreements they had with their respective partners about how they would outfit their homes. One of these women named Aja told me:

You know, I keep telling him, the tiles on the floor have to be soft so that if kids fall on them they don't get hurt. He doesn't care about that now, because he's 29 and all he cares about is football, but he's gonna care about it when his kid gets hurt. If I don't think about this stuff, he never would.

She also told me that her current boyfriend's parents are the ones paying for the construction of the home they are planning to share together. When I asked why his parents

would pay for their adult son's future home, Aja told me, "Because his father has the money and he wants his children to be happy." It became obvious that these homes were all about family: they were built for families as units, they were outfitted with the safety of children in mind, even if these children have not been born. I shall return to this topic in the following chapter, and shall focus now on what materiality in the home accomplishes for these mothers who spend the majority of their time there and what practices they are engaging in amongst themselves to cultivate distinction through and within the home.

When women showed me around their homes, all of which they either designed themselves or worked closely with an architect to design for their families, they were eager to show me the parts they envisioned specifically for their own needs or things they were especially proud of having built by hand. Vera indicated that she wanted a kitchen that looked out on the rest of the house because otherwise she would feel isolated, "I really need to be able to chat with whoever is in my house. And to keep an eye on the girls of course." Another mother, Marketa, a woman in her mid-fifties with two sons in university, described how much joy she took in decorating their home, indicating that she redecorated about every three years because she felt it allowed her to express her artistic creativity. She also built a nail salon into her home for this purpose.

I was always interested in art, but was never really good at it, didn't have a big talent for it. When we were living in the two-room flat growing up, so much of what we had was makeshift, secondhand. Now, we have the money to travel, and I like to buy things abroad for the house. I like having the freedom to fill the house with stuff I like, eclectic stuff. I get a lot of things from antique shops, but also from places like IKEA. I hand-paint some things. I like being able to make my house look unique, show my personality that way. My husband and I are really proud of it – we designed the house all on our own, without an architect. We built our barbeque, our shower, and sauna together by hand. I also built the nail salon – it lets me do so many of the things I like doing. I can talk to people, be creative with the way I do their nails, I can experiment with different styles and designs.

When I asked her about the brands of furniture and appliances she purchased for her home, Vera told me her kitchen was mostly filled with appliances from Gorenje and Fagor, she uses a Miele vacuum cleaner, but that most of her furniture, including beds, tables, and living room items were made by hand. When I asked several mothers how their less wealthy family and friends perceived the spacious homes they had built for themselves and their families, they all indicated that others were generally impressed by how new and modern they were. In discussing their now elderly parents, most mothers described how they still lived in the panelaky and did what they could to “help them out.” These women seemed to deeply regret the reality that those less wealthy than themselves lived in, noting how a lot of them had secondhand furniture, had to buy “cheap stuff” that they knew would break soon and would need to be replaced. When I asked what kinds of gifts they would buy the people in their lives who lived in these conditions, I was surprised by how expensive and purely functional the objects they named were. Satellite dishes, cameras, clothing, appliances were all things these women listed as gifts for those less well off than them. In these ways, these mothers are dictating and passing on their own personal tastes to those outside of their socioeconomic brackets, but living in close social and emotional proximity. It is important to these women to help raise those close to them to their own levels of taste. In this way, the home is transformed into the “privileged site for the experience of utopia” where families could experience “abundance, individualism, and creative self-fulfillment” through the “cyclical performance of rituals of consumption (Illouz 1997:9).

The women in this community approach branding in a myriad of ways: they bring foreign brands from abroad, they bring locally available brands from abroad, they assist each other in obtaining such branded objects through pathways they all mutually cultivate and support, they utilize their financial capital to ascribe meaning to emerging markers of

exclusivity while at the same time attributing exclusivity to themselves - as in the case of the English kindergarten, they build their own homes from the ground up in order to ensure that their individual personalities are visible in every decision they make about decoration and design, they impose their tastes on others, they regret the shortages others must cope with. These women are articulating a system of mutually recognizable symbols which are reflective of their pursuit of uniqueness as individuals and as a community, something which would not have been possible if socialism had persisted. The transformation of the material landscape these women have witnessed not only informs their identities as consumers and their individual and collective pursuit of uniqueness, but also their practices as mothers who are tracing a “dual lineage” into modalities of motherhood which are informed by their own childhood memories of their own mothers as well as the material worlds that have been opened to them since that time.

### Chapter 3: Emerging Modalities of Motherhood

A lot of mothers reject the stuff we had growing up, like everything that happened during socialism was bad. I think this is a mistake. I would say I'm a patriot. I want my kids to have the good stuff I had growing up and have the new stuff that's available now. I work hard to make sure this happens – make sure that my kids see Czech cartoons, that they hear Czech fairytales, that they learn about their culture first. Sure, I want them to learn English too, but we don't have to get rid of everything that worked well before.

In her text *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Eva Illouz describes how “Romantic love is not only a theme of contemporary culture, but also an economically autonomous cultural field with its own heroes, genres, theories, and artifacts.” The same could be said about the family lives of those who opened their homes to me. Most of the mothers I spoke to either work from home, work part-time, or have postponed their careers to care for their young children. When I asked how they felt

about this, especially with regard to how much help they received from their husbands and how involved they are as fathers, I received mixed responses. In the majority of cases, women indicated that they assumed the majority of childcare responsibilities but that this was generally considered to be “normal.” I was told by one mother: “You know, he makes all the money so I guess he feels that’s his contribution to family life. He thinks that’s enough.” Another woman told me her husband worked as a manager during the week, so his job took up almost all of his time. In addition, he was in a band, so after work and on Saturdays, he would have rehearsals or gigs. He allocated Sunday mornings and afternoons to spend with his wife and children, often expressing frustration at the state of the house or at the children’s behavior. “He’s just never around so he doesn’t know what “normal” is around here. He thinks it’s “not normal” that Barborka screams or that the kids all make a mess all over the floor.” I asked her if his extra-curricular activities bothered her or if she supported him in his hobbies. “No, absolutely not. Anything that keeps him away from his family I have a problem with.” I went on to ask if she believed her husband felt he was missing out on watching his young daughters grow up by being absent so frequently. I was told, “He’s happy to see that they can do things. That they know how to swim, how to say things in English, that they learned how to walk as babies. I want to be there for those things when they happen. I don’t want to miss them.”

Another mother told me how because she works part-time and her husband works full-time, they send their son to his grandparents’ home for three days a week because no one can be home during the day to take care of him. She feels guilty about this, but her husband feels that this as well is “normal.” She indicated that her husband does spend quite a lot of time with their son, but certainly not as much as she does because she works fewer hours per week. At Orangery, it was almost always mothers picking up children in the

afternoon because fathers were working. The first time one father picked up his daughter and arrived to find her napping, he marked the occasion by taking a photo. He said, “This is the first time I’m picking her up – I don’t want to forget it.” Further, motherhood rather than fatherhood was visually celebrated throughout and embedded within homes as well as in kindergartens. Romana liked to decorate her office with Anne Geddes photographs of infants, mothers with children or pregnant women. Most photo portrait studio walls are laden with professional pregnancy photos. Throughout most of the homes I visited, there were professional photos of naked mothers during pregnancy, mothers with children, children playing together, or individual portraits of children. Images of fathers were largely absent from the walls of homes.

While during socialism, woman were faced with the double burden of compulsory employment and home and family maintenance, as previously mentioned, the emasculating experience of socialism which upheld and idealized the asexual trope of the worker has been replaced by reasserted masculinities in newly defined gender divisions within public and private space (True 2003:23). In this way, gender divisions are reconfigured as natural, in direct contradistinction to the ways they were conceptualized during socialism, making the home a feminine space and the workplace a masculine one. However, it is not only in these visual ways that mothers are rendered dominant in home and family life. As the primary caregivers, it is also almost entirely up to them how children are raised. While during socialism, childcare was the primary responsibility of mothers who worked, in the case of these women, it is the primary responsibility of mothers who have the time and space to articulate motherhood on their own terms as women in a space demarcated for women, without the additional burden of paid labor if they so choose.



I asked all of the mothers I spoke to what practices their own mothers engaged in that they want or hope to incorporate into their own patterns of motherhood. Vera told me, “Oh, so many things. I wish I read more to my children. I do read to them, but not as much as my own mom did.” Lenka added, “I wish that I cooked more. I really loved how my mother pickled in the summer. She made marmalade. She made all the traditional dishes on Christmas. Sometimes I try to do it, but it never comes out the way she made it, and anyway it’s hard to find the time.” Vera does however keep a recipe book in the same way her own mother did, she exposes her children only to Czech cartoons and fairytales. She prevents her children from being exposed to Disney channel objects as best she can, noting how difficult it is, because the merchandise is everywhere, and so many other mothers allow their children to have them. She, and many of the mothers I spoke to still retain self-provisioning practices they engaged in during socialism. Eliska, from the Rejsek family previously mentioned, spends a lot of her time gardening, maintaining berry bushes which she harvests and turns into marmalade. She makes her own syrups for soft drinks. Mushroom and blueberry picking remain popular family activities. Czech holiday traditions are also retained in homes and in schools. Masopust, the celebration before the forty-day period of Lent, is something most parents in Dolni Pocernice expose their children to as there is a big parade that moves through the neighborhood. Christmas and Easter traditions and crafts are retained. I once entered a kitchen where a mother had young braided branches arranged in a vase on her kitchen counter. These branches are attached to an Easter fertility practice where boys chase girls and whip them. When I asked why she was interested in continuing such a tradition, the mother told me, “You know, we get Halloween and Valentine’s Day here now, we didn’t have it before. And it’s fine. I know western stuff is not gonna stop coming. But these are our Czech traditions and I think they’re nice and harmless.”

I also asked these women what they do now that they were unable to do during socialism: almost unanimously they said travel. They like having the freedom to move around as they please, they like being able to expose their children to different places – many of them noted this why they are invested in teaching English to their children. One mother told me that when she was growing up, her family always had enough of everything but there was hardly any extra of anything. Now that she can afford it, she keeps her pantry filled with backups of non-perishables. She says she hates the feeling of running out of something she may need. Most mothers mentioned simple things, like the huge selection of foods available in the supermarkets, specifically noting that they are now able to buy as many bananas as they want. One mother said:

You can't imagine what it was like, going to the store and only being able to buy one or two bananas, and it sounds silly when I say it now. I really do prefer to buy Czech products if I can, like milk and vegetables. But being able to buy as many bananas as I want, it's pretty nice.

As Illouz describes romantic love as the privileged site for the experience of utopia, I believe that in the case of these mothers from Dolní Počernice, the same could be said about the modalities of motherhood they are cultivating and the home and family life they are producing. While being deeply affected by emerging gendered capitalisms which render the public and private spheres respectively masculine and feminine spaces, these mothers are certainly not merely subjected to these transformations, but productive and reproductive agents actively rearticulating motherhood on their own terms. They are the heroes of this space, they are its performative agents, they are handpicking its definitive artifacts and attributes both from their own pasts and the present material conditions in which they now find themselves. While there is an ever-present tension inherent in the ways they are articulating motherhood with respect to the things they are doing as individuals and as a

collective, assimilating new practices and objects into their repertoires as mothers as well retaining, or failing to retain, those practices they perceive to be worthwhile, these women are reconstructing a habitus prefaced not on compensation for shortage, but on compensation for compensation.

## Conclusion

I argue in this study that these women are ascribing new meanings to etic as well as emic objects and practices, bundling them together and rendering them distinct through mutually reinforcing mechanisms and markers of exclusivity, whether it be through an institution, such as the expensive English kindergarten, the pursuit of uniqueness by consuming non-local brands, the construction of tailor-made homes as envisioned by their owners, or the hand-selection of practices remembered from socialism, yet understood by these women to be part of their unique experience as Czechs. While these women do possess a great deal of financial capital, this is not a study about how wealth allows them to obtain whatever they believe will render them exclusive or give them status. Exclusivity is not being purchased, but articulated, specifically through objects that “work” for these women. This study concerns the deeply self-conscious process of compensation for previous conditions, a process being realized in spaces that now have different meanings, yet are still laden with a socialist heritage these women are actively trying to counteract through very specific practices as mothers.

I believe that, piecemeal, these women are constructing new modalities of motherhood through objects and practices surrounding objects. They are embedding foreign branded objects into their own repertoires of materiality as mutually meaningful and recognizable symbols and mechanisms that offer them feelings of uniqueness, not primarily or necessarily calibrated against the decisions of other similar mothers in this regard, but against their own childhood experiences of material uniformity. They are also branding new and emerging local institutions in this way, engaging in dialectics among themselves as mothers as well as confronting the tensions inherent in discrepant perspectives and

expectations of what social capital is actually steeped in. These women are cultivating a dual lineage, locating themselves simultaneously within their own indigenous heritage as well as forging a niche for themselves and their families in new materiality, space, and meanings.

If time and space had allowed, it would have been interesting to gain the perspectives of the fathers in the families with whom I spent time. While I feel this study grasps well what these mothers expected and sought to gain through objects and practice, their husbands' expectations were rather elusive for me due to their relative inaccessibility: these women spent time with each other, and their husbands were almost always out of the home during my visits. It also would have been helpful to do a survey of the incomes of these families and investigate that more thoroughly. Occasionally, a mother would mention that another family has "a lot more money" than her family did, but the significance of these kinds of comments always eluded me. I believe what this study has accomplished is a portrait, albeit an incomplete one, of a community undergoing a collective and mutually reinforcing transformation of identity based in the contextualized re-articulation of the meanings of specific objects and practices. Exclusivity, branding, and motherhood while not all things to all people, are many things to many people.

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