

**China Sets and Crystal Cups: Material Traces of the Socialist Past in
Romanian Homes**

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Abstract

In this paper I analyze the biography of china, crystal and silverware originating in the last decades of the socialist regime in Romania. I look at the trajectory of these objects in terms of their use and significance in order to determine what made them so important back then and what do they represent now for Romanians. I start by discussing the theoretical perspectives on which my research is based: the active role of material culture, the biographical approach and the specificities of consumption and the domestic sphere in socialism. In the first part of the analysis I look into the sources of acquisition and the uses of these objects. In the second part I explore the relation between these objects and the dwelling places specific to socialism and post socialism. I conclude with the idea that these domestic objects speak about larger scale changes in Romania and with the observation that they follow a path from “affordable” to “obsolete” luxury.

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1. Introduction

In Targoviste, the town where I conducted my research, there is a large advertising poster on the outside of the former universal store that says: “BOHEMIAN crystal and china. Go back to quality” (see Image 1). Also, during socialism in Romania, a joke was going around that if you visit someone’s house it is very possible that they won’t have any cups in which to serve you a drink because they only have crystal cups and these are never used. The picture and the anecdote instantiate the intriguing topic of the china and crystal sets, objects that continued to be cherished in the Romanian homes over the years. But why these objects in particular? And do they signify the same now as they did 30 or 40 years ago?

By and large, the purpose of this paper is to study changes happening in the Romanian society through the lenses of material culture. It looks at the social life of things (Appadurai, 1986) by constructing *the biography of china, crystal and silverware* acquired during the socialist decades. More specifically, it explores the particularities of consumption and the meaning of good taste in the socialist and post socialist context of Romania. I do this by looking at how the use and significance of these objects have changed throughout the decades, by inquiring into the reasons they were so important back then and what do they represent now in Romanian households.

So far the sociological and anthropological literature written on socialism and post socialism focused on the scarcity of consumer goods, the secondary economy and the constant surveillance of the population during socialism (Campeanu, 1994; Chelcea, 2002; Manolache, 2003; Stan, 2009; Verdery, 1996). Other authors emphasize the enchantment of Western goods in the post socialist decades (Burrell, 2010; Fehervary, 2002; Humphrey, 1995) and a significant amount of research has been dedicated to the domestic sphere as a site of ideological interventions (Boym, 1994; Buchli, 1999; Crowley and Reid, 2002). Thus, by looking at the consumption of goods produced *within* the Eastern Bloc, I reach an unexplored

side of this field on inquiry and – hopefully - I open up a new path of research that could talk to the existing ones and contribute to the bigger picture.

Before proceeding with the discussion of the topic I believe that a clarification of the historical context and a description of the porcelain and crystal industry at that time are necessary in order to understand the discussion that will follow.

After the soviet troops withdrew and the communist leader Nicolae Ceausescu acceded to power in 1965, Romania entered a period of continuous economic evolution. The standard of living increased, various branches of industry developed, there was an ample program of building blocks of flats as well as restaurants, hotels and shops. This lasted until the beginning of the 1980s when Ceausescu - realizing that Romania was deeply indebted to Western states - decided to pay the foreign debt by increasing the exports and thus limiting the access of Romanians to the basic consumer goods.(Giurescu, Stefanescu and Tiu, 2010)

The industry of porcelain, crystal and silverware on which this research is focused emerged and developed during these two phases in Romanian history. It produced china and crystal table sets (of plates and cups), figurines, vases, boxes, ashtrays and other recipients; and silverware. China and crystal objects were produced in several places in Romania and exported all over the world. The best known were in Alba Iulia and Curtea de Arges (for porcelain) and Medias and Turda (for crystal). Today some of these factories were closed because they went bankrupt and others were privatized.

At the same time, china, crystal and silverware from the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc could be found in Romania. They were either commercialized in state owned stores or circulated through more informal practices like bringing them from trips abroad or giving them in exchange for other goods or services. Among the fashionable items there were the Bohemian crystal produced in the former Czechoslovakia, the Chinese ornaments made of

porcelain, the Hungarian porcelain manufactured in Kalocsa, silverware made in Russia and crystal sets made at Zajecar in former Yugoslavia.

In the second chapter of this paper I present the theoretical perspectives on which my research is based: the active role of material culture, the biographical approach and the specificities of consumption and the domestic sphere in socialism. Then I briefly present the research site and the methodology I used.

In the first part of my analysis (chapter four) I look into the sources of acquisition and the uses of crystal, china and silverware. I also exemplify the general ideas with two case studies: the red crystal or “the ruby” and the crystal box. In the fifth chapter I look at the objects of my research in relation with five practices connected with the dwelling places: demolition, repartition, renovations, moving from a flat to a house and buying a second home in the country.

In the last chapter I look at how the results of my research contribute to defining the biography of crystal, china and silverware from socialism until the present day. I also point to the limitations of my study and advance suggestions for further research.

2. Looking at the Material Culture of Socialism through the Biographical Approach

2.1 The Active Role of Specific Objects and the Biographical Approach

This research is situated in the new stage of material culture studies that states the importance of focusing on specific domains and the role of the form in the cultural world, but seeing all this through the lens of material culture. This is a step forward from the previous studies that looked at materiality in general seeing material culture more as a *means* than as an *end*. According to Miller, this concealment of the focus on objects under the curtain of the focus on society was due to the fact that scholars were afraid of being accused of fetishism. (Miller, 1998: 4-6)

The current phase of material culture studies keeps the assumption that materiality is significant because objects – contextualized in the social life – portray the meaning of the society. However, to this it adds the idea that these objects are not to be selected arbitrarily, that *specific* objects are important and the necessity of a deeper analysis of them is a reaction to the uncertainty and ambivalence of establishing which things matter. (Miller, 1998: 10-14) Similarly, when writing about “things that talk”, that convey messages through their materiality, Lorraine Daston states the importance of exploring “the meaning of things in situ, gaze fixed firmly on this or that thing in particular rather than on the ontology of things in general” (Daston, 2004: 9). This justifies my focus on domestic objects as a specific category that I consider important for reaching conclusions based on a detailed analysis and not mere general statements that would lack substance.

Of course, this doesn't mean that the findings of my study lack a wider relevance despite the fact that I concentrate on the specificity of a location and a set of objects. What

appears to be an audacious and maybe unrealistic aspiration is actually an idea supported by theorists of material culture such as Renfrew (2001) who points to the fact that – even if studies of materiality take into consideration the cultural context- there are always implied generalizations and attempts to explain long term change.

These generalizations are not simply imposed by researchers who want to justify the importance of their work. They are a natural outcome of “the active role of material culture” (Renfrew, 2001: 126) that does not simply reflect social realities, but constitutes them thus being able to explain long term change. The importance of material culture has deep historical roots, being associated with the development of the human species (language and self-consciousness) that was driven by the “engagement with the material world” (Renfrew, 2001: 127). This connection between humans and materiality was facilitated by the crystallization of sedentary societies and “the emergence of certain materials as embodying wealth and prestige” (Renfrew, 2001: 127-128).

Miller’s (1998) remarks on the importance of material forms as an *end* and on analyzing the consequences of things for people associated with them, as well as Renfrew’s (2001) conceptualization of material culture as an active agent are consistent with the Latourian tradition that sees objects as active agents because they are participants in the course of action. Obviously, objects don’t *do* things to the same degree as humans, but they influence the course of action: they “might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid and so on” (Latour, 2005: 72).

According to Latour, objects can explain the durability of associations, but there are situations when their roles as *mediators*, that “transform, translate, distort and modify the meaning of the elements they are supposed to carry” (Latour, 2005: 39), are more visible and for a longer time. For example, Radley (1990) talks about the central role of objects in the memory of cultures and individuals emphasizing that they are neither neutral, nor passive. In

like manner, Daston underlines that the “things that talk” don’t merely repeat what the humans say. On the contrary, they have “something of the plenitude, spontaneity, and fitness of utterance” (Daston, 2004: 12).

I started my research from the assumption that the tableware and silverware from communism epitomize this class of objects that have a contribution on the large scale transformations in a society and embedding them as agents in the daily life enhances their role as mediators. One of the best ways to assess the active role of objects – not only in a fixed time and space, but across cultural and territorial boundaries and throughout history – is to look at their significance in different contexts and at different times. This leads to the next idea of this chapter: *the biographical approach* or *the social history of things* (Appadurai, 1986).

The discussion of the biography of things was initiated by Kopytoff (1986) and further developed by other authors like Appadurai (1986) who looks at the social and political context of the exchange, Strathern (1988) who explores how the gifts produce social relations, Gell (1998) who concentrates on art objects, Gosden and Marshall specialized in archaeology (1999) and Daston (2000) in the study of scientific knowledge.

In his work, Kopytoff emphasizes the importance of the cultural biography defining it as something that approaches the object “as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories” (Kopytoff, 2001:13). Furthermore, objects enter and leave the commodity phase throughout their social life depending on the particular moment in time and the person who assesses the character of the object. (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 2001)

Thus, in his essay, Kopytoff asks questions about the “biographical possibilities” inherent in the object’s status and in the specific period and culture and how these possibilities are realized. He also raises questions on the origin and creator, the current and the

“ideal career” of the object, the periods in the object’s life and the cultural markers for these periods, the changes of its use in time and what happens when the item is no longer considered useful. (Kopytoff, 2001:11) These aspects are of particular relevance for my research since I also analyzed the various stages in the life of domestic objects, starting from their origin, going through the changes in their use and significance for people and exploring the situations when people stop using these objects.

Appadurai (1986:36) distinguishes Kopytoff’s “cultural biography” focused on specific things, from what he calls “social history of things” that looks at longer term shifts and larger scale dynamics in types or classes of things. At the same time, the cultural biography is not divorced from the social history of things because small scale shifts in the former may lead to large scale shifts in the latter. Consequently, my study is guided by a combination between the two perspectives. I explore the small scale changes in the use and perception over crystal, china and silverware, but I also want to advance some reflections on the larger scale changes of consumption and domestic life in Romania by looking at this *category of things*.

The main points of Appadurai are that objects have a social life in which they acquire value by being circulated, that consumption is something relational, social and not limited to capitalist societies and that there is no “magic distinction” between commodity exchange, bartered items and gifts because an object is a commodity in certain situations. (Appadurai, 1986: 13) This perspective becomes even more germane to my study when placed in connection with Miller’s (2001c) reflections on the study of consumption. Miller points to the misconception that consumption is something with clear boundaries and draws attention on the need to define consumption and look at what consumers are actually doing, rather than equate it with materialism and modern mass consumption.

Moreover, Appadurai talks about paths and diversions from the commoditization of things, saying that one can decontextualize objects, for example by placing them in domestic displays. Complementary, Miller (2001c) emphasizes the need to look at what happens after the acquisition because it is then when the object is “worked upon”, recontextualized. It becomes invested with certain connotations, associated with groups or individuals. Thus, consumption is a form of reappropriation and a creative act because exactly in the moment of consumption the object is no longer perceived as a commodity (Miller, 2001c: 291).

The combined perspectives of the two authors are important guides in my research because I’m looking at consumption in a former socialist society, thus one that didn’t experience Western capitalism. In addition, I also question the meaning of the commodity by exploring instances when the porcelains, crystals and silverware are gifts, consumer goods and even bartered items. Finally, I go beyond the moment of acquisition and look at what people are *doing* with these objects and how they decontextualize and recontextualize them.

The theoretical perspectives presented in this first part of the chapter make a more general framework for the study of consumption and material culture. Nevertheless, my research is about the specificities of consumption during socialism, focusing on the home as a site of taste expression through the silverware, china and crystal sets and ornaments. This leads to the following section of this chapter, in which I talk about consumption, the home and its material culture as agents and their specificities in the socialist context.

2.2 Specificities of Consumption and the Home in Socialism

In this subchapter, I address a series of issues that I met while reviewing the literature on consumption and the domestic sphere in socialism and post socialism. First, I discuss what has been written on consumption in socialism, namely the relation between past and present practices and the dichotomy between the state economy and the “secondary”, informal practices. Second, I deal with the dichotomy between the domestic space as a site for ideological interventions and the home as a site of individualization and of contestation of the imposed order. In the end, this section should set some guidelines for the study of consumption and taste within the home in the socialist and post socialist context of Romania.

The literature on from the areas of sociology and anthropology of consumption in socialism is not very vast. A large part of the pieces written focus on the penury of consumer goods and the informal economy developed in response (Campeanu, 1994; Cernat, 2004; Chelcea, 2002; Humphrey, 1995; Manolache, 2003; Verdery, 1996). Other authors discuss the significance and consumption practices associated with Western goods in socialist countries – both during the regime and after its fall (Burrell, 2010; Fehervary, 2002; Humphrey, 1995; Humphrey, 2002).

So these studies are only tangentially related to my topic since I neither look at consumer goods (such as food, sweets, coffee, cigarettes) nor at goods produced in Western countries, but at tableware, silverware and ornamental objects produced in Romania or in other socialist countries. Thus, my research brings new the dimension of the commercial relations within the Eastern Bloc.

Nevertheless, this previous work done on consumption in socialism and post socialism is still of use for my study as it underlines two important guidelines for further research. The

first one states that looking at consumption during socialism, doing a “history of local consumption” (Miller, 1995:7) is essential for understanding the current practices and patterns in the former socialist countries. Humphrey (1995) nicely illustrates this idea with the ethnography she did in Moscow in the early 1990s in which she shows how the old mentality towards consumption did not disappear after the fall of the regime: queuing, that was a common image during the regime, continued, so did putting the vendor on a pedestal because it was still thought that s/he has the power to decide who gets what. Similarly, in my research I look at the consumption of china, crystal and silverware during communism in order to understand the current mentality when it comes to home possessions.

Second, the earlier studies point to a well known dichotomy between the state and the informal economy. The former ignored consumption, practicing a “dictatorship” in relation to people’s needs (Verdery, 1996) and allotting goods via a system of distribution (Humphrey, 1995). The latter consisted of practices like stealing materials, doing favors in exchange for goods and producing for your own consumption even if it was not legal (Verdery, 1996). However, it makes no sense to see them as discrete categories since the secondary economy was a means for people to challenge the official way in which their needs were defined and met by the center. More specifically, consumption became a way of individualizing yourself in a society where homogenization was attempted. In my study, the critical examination of this dichotomy is also important because I am dealing with various ways of acquiring crystal, china and silverware – not all of them part of the official economy.

At this point, launching the discussion about the home and its associated possessions comes in naturally. Firstly, because looking at home and domestic objects as agents renders in greater detail the previous discussion about the active role of material culture. Also it’s because the domestic world has been a key dimension in the sociological and anthropological study of socialism.

Miller (2001a) emphasizes the increasing research interest on the relationship between people and their homes and how the two actors transform each other. Not only people act upon their homes, but the homes also transform people, they reflect long term historical processes and are “both the source and the setting of mobility and change” (Miller, 2001a: 3-4). Since objects have an “intrinsic quality of materiality” (Miller, 2001b: 112) they are not simply manipulated by humans. On the contrary, people often feel constrained by what they can do with their possessions, for example when these are part of a history of relationships (inheritance or gifts). Moreover, by being associated with certain events and people in the family history - especially in times of change – objects become key actors in creating the sense of home: they contain the house by creating and recreating the sense of place (Marcoux, 2001: 60-74). This idea is of particular relevance for my study since I also intend to explore the way the history of certain possessions acts upon their owners and the prominent voice of the objects within the house.

To this Latourian image of objects as agents, Miller (2001) adds an explanation given by Keane (1997): the *durability* and *physicality* of things makes them signify more than people intend to convey through them. This idea points to an interesting contrast between the longevity of homes and objects and the transient character of people using them. Thus, when thinking about the objects on which I focus - “the most durable cultural objects” (Lévi-Strauss: 1997:33) that are protected, repaired and even passed on from one generation to the next - this perspective makes a lot of sense for me since I want to resort to the durability of things in order to analyze changes in Romanian society.

Turning towards the research done on the home in socialism and post socialism, it is noticeable that a lot has been written about the issue of privacy and sharing the space in the communal apartment (Boym, 1994; Buchli, 1999; Crowley and Reid, 2002) with a focus on the Soviet Union. Other authors who have written about countries from the Eastern Bloc

either try to tackle the “mystery” of the importance of Western goods inside households from former socialist countries (Fevervary, 2002) or they look at the role of particular objects in the process of change since the fall of socialism (Drazin, 2001; Fuji, 2008). My study falls in this last category since I’m analyzing the changes in Romanian domestic sphere by looking at crystal, porcelain and silverware.

The literature on the domestic sphere in socialism reveals the second dichotomy I want to address in this chapter: that between the domestic sphere as a site of ideological interventions and the home as a place of individualization, where the official discourse is constantly challenged. Again, one must be careful when working with this dichotomization since the two perspectives on the home are not mutually exclusive. Quite the opposite, they fed each other: the domestic sphere was a target for such ideological interventions precisely because it had the potential to foster practices and habits that were contesting the imposed order.

For example, Boym talks about the campaign against “domestic trash” that was supposed to make people give away all the ornamental objects that over loaded their shelves and cupboards. However, the campaign failed since these objects were kept as a “secret residue of privacy that shielded people from imposed and internalized communality” (Boym, 1994: 150). An interesting case study that the author presents is the commode from Aunt Liuba’s room in the communal apartment, the most important piece since it survived the “ideological purges”. The commode is used by Aunt Liuba to display her “still life”: knick knacks, a thermos, artificial flowers and a set of porcelain cups that she almost never uses.

The authors who write about the domestic sphere as a site of contestation of the official discourse build their arguments around the idea of giving voice to the individual and looking at the everyday life. In his book about the Narkomfin Communal House from Moscow, Buchli (1999) looks at how the state wanted to intrude into the domestic sphere and

how the disempowered engaged with the material world by using the objects and spaces in various ways, so as to deal with the daily life. Similarly, in her piece about the Russian culture, Boym (1994) states her focus on the ordinary life, material objects, art, emotions and communication. What is interesting in this challenge of the official discourse is the fact that, since it is a part of the everyday life, it is not necessarily done in an explicit or conscious manner. When writing about the interaction between people and spaces or objects in the daily life Crowley (2002:188-189) makes a good point: “Consumption, as various commentators have noted, is rarely an act of enunciation. It is rather in the discourse around and about things and spaces that meanings are established and often negotiated.”

The discussion of the everyday practices inside the socialist domestic sphere leads to De Certeau’s theory of the everyday life as an important tool for the study of consumption in socialism. First of all because he draws attention on the fact that usage and consumption as practiced in the daily life are anything but passive and following established rules. The “ways of operating” - that are often found in the domestic sphere too – represent these quotidian procedures used by the consumers to subvert the official rules of behavior (De Certeau, 1984).

De Certeau defines these “ways of operating” as tactical and explains the difference between tactics and strategies, both parts of a trajectory that people create in their daily life through their practices. Strategies are a type of calculation that makes the environment predictable and assumes a proper place. Tactics on the other hand represent many of the everyday practices. They assume a manipulation of events by the consumers in order to turn them into opportunities (De Certeau, 1984:18-19).

The concepts of “ways of operating”, strategies and tactics are useful for analyzing the results of my research since I am also exploring the manner in which people manipulate the official order in order to adapt it to their own needs. I do this by looking at the various sources of acquisition for crystal, porcelain and silverware (some of them not part of the

official economy). I also look at how the changes in the use of these objects reveal larger scale social changes in the post socialist domestic sphere in Romania.

3. Methodology

The site of my research was Targoviste, the place where I grew up, a town of around 70 000 inhabitants that is located close to Bucharest. The time I spent on the field lasted from January to March 2012. I focused my research on people who experienced a lot of the communist period in Romania: they were born in the 1950s or 1960s and formed their families in the 1970s and 1980s. Most of them graduated from a university or at least a secondary school that gave them a specialization and they have non-manual jobs like professors, doctors, engineers, accountants, managers, clerks.

Semi-structured interviews were the main technique by which I gathered my data combined with observations I got from hanging out with two of the families, in their homes and taking pictures whenever possible. In the end I had 12 interviews with one member of each family, usually the wife, although in some cases the husbands were present too and they jumped in when they had something to say.

Given the focus on the communist period, I chose to do semi-structured interviews because I considered it the best strategy to get valid answers. I am aware that in some cases the interviewees tried to convey certain personal images, for example by overemphasizing the difficult life they had back then and how they managed to get some goods by cleverly using their connections. That's why I left the conversation open by letting them talk about their family history, but at the same time subtly guided it by asking follow up questions or reformulating questions when I felt they misunderstood it. I also wanted to observe my respondents by hanging out with them, but this was not always possible because of the age difference and the degree of closeness. Knowing that I'm there to do research, I thought they would find it awkward and think that I have an agenda if I insisted too much to hang out with

them. However, I managed to spend more time with two families that I knew better through my family. I was invited to their meals or just went to their place to have coffee and chat and thus had the chance to observe better how they used and refer to their domestic object.

This leads to the discussion of the home as an important site for my research because it is a place of identity expression and display of family relation, but also because it has a sociological meaning. Namely, the ways a home and the objects in it are used “are circumscribed by moral prescriptions associated with family, gender and class positions” (Woodward, 2001: 121). Also, by being a space not exclusively public or private, the home allows a combination of the socio-semiotic and socio-cultural approach. The former approach refers to looking at what objects within the household mean, what they say about the status, style and taste of the owner while the latter focuses on “what people do with objects and the ways in which objects are culturally embedded in social relations”. (Woodward, 2001: 118).

The living room was particularly important in my study since it is a space where the private side of the home meets the public one (Drazin, 2001; Woodward, 2001). It is both a site where house related tastes and ideals of the individuals are made public and a room where private objects, with emotional value for the individuals are found. It is somehow the most public space within a private one. Drazin explains the importance of the living room (*sufragerie*) in the Romanian house, by the fact that it is the room where guests are received. Its similarities with a stage are enhanced by the furniture arrangements: one wall is “dominated” by a bookcase or display case, while the sofa where the guests are seated is on the opposite side, giving them a clear view of the objects placed there. (Drazin, 2001: 178).

I also interviewed 2 women who worked in *Muntenia* that was the main universal store in Targoviste during communism. One of the vendors used to work in the ménage sector of the store and is still a vendor but in a different branch. The other one used to work in the porcelain and crystal department and is still working in this domain, but in a private store.

In what concerns these interviews, it is important to consider the limitations given by how the vendors perceived me and by some anonymity issues. Despite telling them that I'm doing a social study of consumption practices the vendors saw me more like a business school student and felt the need to give me a lot of information about prices, sales and profits. These were also useful, but I still had to repeat and rephrase some questions in order to get more in depth information. Also, even if I assured them of the confidentiality of the answers, I felt that not knowing me well made them refrain for giving me information about the informal side of their job.

Foreword to my Analysis

In the first chapter of my analysis, I will present and discuss the process of consumption of crystal, china and silverware as captured by the data I gathered. I emphasize the fact that I see consumption as a process, in Campbell's words (1995:102) as "the selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair and disposal of any product or service". This is because I want to go beyond the moment of acquisition and explore how these items have been used over the years. Each of the following sections: the one about aspiring, selecting and acquiring and the one about using will be instantiated by an object that represents a case study.

In the second chapter of the analysis, I will reframe the results of my research along the lines of social change by looking at the objects of my research in relation to five practices. On one side, prevailing before the fall of the regime in 1989, were the demolitions of houses and the repartitions of apartments. On the other side, in the post socialist decades, the renovations of homes, moving from a flat to a house and buying a second home in the country became predominant. This second part shall lead to deeper reflections on how the different perceptions and uses of these objects reveal larger scale changes in Romania.

4. The Consumption of Crystals, Porcelains and Silverware

4.1. *Aspiring, Selecting and Acquiring*

This section approaches the first moment in the life of an object, the acquisition. But it looks at this process of acquiring in a broader context given by people's aspirations and criteria for selection at that time. Looking at the acquisition conceptualized like this will give some insights on the preferences and differentiation in what appears to be a homogeneous society. For this I will look at how these items were obtained –from which location or person and the degree of accessibility of these goods. I will also examine how they decided which were the crystals, porcelains and tableware of superior quality and I will finish by discussing a controversial case - the red crystal. These observations pertaining to the family and the household level shall help me advance some larger-scale assumptions about the significance of these items in the Romanian family life of the communist decades.

Explaining what being well-off meant during communism is required before analyzing people's criteria for selection and patterns of acquisition. This is because, as we shall see, the appreciation for silverware, porcelains and crystals becomes more comprehensible in this broader discussion about what financial and professional prosperity meant back then.

The first step on the scale of being successful was to be able to live in the city because, after completing their education, young people were assigned a place to live and work and often they were sent to villages. So it was well known that getting a job in a town was difficult: *After graduation I was sent to work in a village, because back then you couldn't get in the city* said Ad., a currently retired school teacher. Those who entered the city either had

very good grades in school, had connections in the state institutions or – in the case of women – got married to a man who lived in a city and in this way “followed” him.

The next sign of prosperity was given by the type of neighborhood you lived in and how the block of flats and the apartment looked like. Even then, when almost identical blocks of flats were built, people considered certain areas nicer looking and safer than others. Living in the city center was a wide spread goal while one peripheral neighborhood was avoided because it had a bad infrastructure and was considered dangerous. T., one of the interviewees, told me how he decided to move back to his parents’ house when his wife had the first baby: *We expected a baby; we had only two rooms, the neighborhood was peripheral and here is a central neighborhood.* Also, the apartment itself was a status marker. Its’ floor (not too high but not ground floor either) and the number and size of rooms were a source of physical comfort for the family, but also a reason to feel superior to other families who had less comfortable homes.

The final touch was given by the domestic objects: ranging from furniture and appliances to “details” like table sets, vases and ornaments. Being able to buy a good TV, a fridge, a video player, a set of furniture for the living room was something to be proud of, and so it was the possibility to obtain a porcelain table set or a set of crystal cups. For example, when asked what were the longed for objects at that time people often mentioned crystal and used expressions like “*something special*”, “*refined gift*” and “*very fashionable*”.

I have chosen to classify the means of procuring the objects that are at the core of my research based on the person who acquired the item, the place and the occasion of the acquisition.

First there are the objects bought by my informants themselves for their family. One category is that of table sets or crystal cups, bought by them from Romania, usually from the main department store in town, *Muntania* but also directly from the producers. A particularity

in this way of acquiring is that people had the possibility to buy these goods in installments. For instance, this is how L.L. got her first crystal cups: *All the crystal cups from this closet are from Medias, brought by a colleague of my husband and – the same – bought in installments. His father was working there at Medias as an engineer at the glassware department. And he brought us cups, what we wanted for water, for wine, for beer.*

Then there were the objects that people bought themselves for their household while traveling abroad. During communism in Romania people went to trips in the Soviet Union and the satellite states either with other families, by car – in what they called tours or by coach, in more formally organized groups. Although food, coffee and cosmetics were the main things people were interested in buying during these trips, more than half of the interviewees acquired at least one thing like tableware, silverware or an ornament while traveling. G. for example bought from Russia in 1989 a set of forks and knives from stainless steel because they were not so accessible in Romania and she liked their design. **(Image 2)**

Then there are the gifts (from relatives, friends or acquaintances) that make a particularly interesting category, as it encompasses a variety of dynamics in offering and receiving gifts. On the one hand, there are gifts received on special occasions, ranging from the most formal ones (wedding, christenings) to the rather informal gatherings for birthdays or anniversaries. Examples of these gifts are: a porcelain table set received by Ad. at her wedding **(Image 3)**, a china basket received by G. at the christening of her younger daughter, from the godparents **(Image 4)** and a crystal vase got by Ad.'s husband for one of his birthdays **(Image 5)**.

On the other hand there are “thank you gifts”, received as a reward for a favor or a service that my informants provided to someone. A special case here is that of school teachers who were receiving gifts for giving private lessons or at holidays like Christmas or Women's Day. For example, V. told me how she managed to obtain crystal objects in exchange for

private lessons: *You could find crystal, but this one, the Bohemian, was found mostly with connections. I remember I was giving private lessons to a child and his mother was chief of a department in Muntenia and I told her I don't want money, just crystal objects and after a few sessions she would bring me something made of crystal.* This is also a good illustration of the resemblance between crystal and currency and how this similarity was enhanced by the economic situation of that time.

Finally there are gifts received by my informants from abroad which represent a peculiar category. What is peculiar about this way of procuring tableware, silverware and knick knacks is that these gifts were always made by close relatives and with no particular occasion – the trip itself was an occasion for buying these things. For instance, in 1983, G. got a set of champagne crystal cups as a gift from her mother who was going to former Yugoslavia to sell products that in Romania were cheaper and to bring back coffee, sweets and clothes. This commercial activity is similar to the small scale traffic to Hungary that Chelcea (2002) analyzes in his study of consumption practices in the 80s in a Romanian village. Although the main purpose of these travels was to buy consumer goods, during one of these trips, G.'s mother bought this crystal set for her daughter because she thought it would be a good thing to have in the house.

While bearing in mind that the categorization above is far from being exhaustive, I believe that it is still useful in answering the question: “To what extent were these porcelains, crystals and silverware accessible?” More precisely, were these available and affordable? What comes out of my interviews is the idea that these domestic objects were more accessible than consumer goods like food and cosmetics, especially in the period of economic shortage (late 1970s and the 1980s)

In spite of this, the crystals, porcelains and silverware were also the objectification of a distinct type of social relationship: they were circulated between influential actors, such as

vendors - who were powerful actors at the time - or important Party members. For example, V. emphasized that you needed to “know someone” to have easier access to crystal: *You could find porcelain, fine porcelain more often, but crystal, especially Bohemian crystal only with connections. You had to know someone.* G. also explained to me how gifts were made depending on the type of favor someone was doing to you and the social status of that person: *Less expensive gifts were coffee, which was an important gift, food (meat, cheese), wine, palinka (these were offered in large quantities), but if someone with an important position was doing you a favor you would reward them by offering crystal objects... so crystal objects were a refined gift.* Also, the most uncommon gifts I encountered during my research were a porcelain cassette with hand painted lid made in Hungary and a set of small plates for confiture made at Alba Iulia. Both of these gifts came from members of the Nomenklatura.

(Image 6)

These observations about the sources and possibilities of acquisition point to the idea that in a society there are different forms of capital, not limited to the economic one (Bourdieu, 1986). In the context of socialist Romania it looks like the social capital supersedes the economic one. People often felt that the salaries they received meant nothing if they didn’t have a connection that could facilitate their access to the scarce goods. This is also visible in the cliché Romanians use when talking about the socialist decades, a phrase that came up during some of my interviews too: “Before we had money, but we didn’t have what to buy with them. Now the stores are full, but we don’t have money.” This type of “then and now” statement says a lot about how people perceive the changes in their standard of living from socialism till the present day.

At this point two observations about the criteria for determining the quality of crystal and china sets are worth mentioning. One is that people referred to these objects by the name of the city or town where they were produced: “porcelain plates from Alba Iulia”, “crystal

cups from Medias”. So the place of manufacturing was the equivalent of today’s brand name and it was a guarantee of quality in itself. For instance, referring to a table set as “plates from Alba Iulia” meant saying that it was a good quality set as it was known that the factory in Alba Iulia was a good one.

The second important sign of quality was the inscription “made in Romania” found on the back of porcelain plates or on crystal cups. This inscription meant that the objects were for export, thus of better quality and more difficult to find in the local shops. For example, when I asked her how she recognized the good quality table sets, M. told me: *Well I could tell what was of good quality. You could tell especially because on them it was written “made in Romania” and I knew that those with “made in Romania” written on them were for export.*

The observation that tableware and silverware produced for export were considered superior coupled with the fact that Romanians were using their social connections to obtain these goods or bought them from abroad point to an interesting relation between the state and the people. On one hand the state imposed the exportation of such goods, thus restricting people’s access to them. On the other hand, people resorted to different tactics (De Certeau, 1984) to contest this imposed order. So they responded through their everyday practices proving that they are not passive followers of imposed rules.

These were situations when the quality of the table sets and cups could be determined based on objective factors (material, process of fabrication), but the following case study will show how things become complicated when the notion of quality meets that of taste.

The red crystal or “the ruby”

A wide spread material at that time, the red crystal appeared in the form of sets of cups, vases, candy boxes and ashtrays (for a partial illustration see **Image 7**). A woman who used to work in the china and crystal department in *Muntenia*, the former universal store in

Targoviste and who is still in the business, but in the private sector told me that the red crystal is a semi crystal, something in between mere glass and crystal, thus of lower quality.

Apparently few of the people I interviewed knew about the lower quality of this crystal, or – at least – they did not seem to care about it. Only G. talks about it in more critical terms saying that it was something made from a cheap material. Most of the others refer to this as something very fashionable, beautiful, and special. They even give it a connotation of a gem stone by calling it “ruby”. N. talks about a set of such objects she got as a wedding gift: *We had, I remember, a set of ashtrays that I gave to my son in law and a vase, the vase got broken. It was made of ruby, very beautiful, very beautiful and it was made here in Romania, at Turda. We had some good friends there and when we got married they gave us this as a symbol.*

A possible explanation for the popularity of red crystal items is their color that made them more conspicuous than other objects from the home. Intriguing enough, even if the red crystal was not even a “real” crystal it was very much liked and found in most of the homes. Eight out of the twelve families I interviewed still have at least one such item in their house. In this sense, Young’s (2006, 180) conceptualization of the color as a strong component of the material world, having its’ own agency and the capability to transmit ideas and raise emotions is helpful in the sense that the use of colorful objects becomes thinkable as a tactic (De Certeau, 1984) of differentiation in a time when home objects were widely designed to look alike.

When talking about Western goods in socialist Poland, Burrell (2010, 148) also refers to the importance of the color in the visibility of the goods, but she looks at the significance of Western goods in a socialist country. What my analysis of the red crystal brings new is the fact that it says something about what was fashionable and considered of good taste among the goods produced *inside* the socialist state. These items were not brought from the Occident,

thus did not have this inaccessibility attached to them so analyzing people's attitude towards them gives us a hint on the process of taste formation in the socialist society.

4.2 The changing use of porcelain and crystal

While in the field, I frequently noticed variations in the use of some of the crystal and china objects found in the homes. First, there is a difference between the function ascribed by the manufacturer to a specific object and how people actually use that object. Second, there is a change in how certain objects are used throughout the decades. The intersection of these two aspects reveals an intriguing image of the role of these objects in the daily life. Thus, the main point of this section is to explore how larger scale changes in people's life style, consumption habits, leisure and family life can be "read" in the way these domestic objects are used.

Two patterns of use have emerged from the data gathered about these objects. One pattern is not using some objects, even if they were supposed to have a practical value. The other trend I identified is to use these objects differently, giving them other functions than those thought by the manufacturer. I have chosen to make this distinction between mere display and use because I noticed that it is very important in my informants' families and in Romanian families in general. Deciding not to use certain objects tells a lot about the high status of that item in the household.

The objects from the first category are "museified" (transformed into museum objects). They have either been considered museum pieces since they were acquired or have become like this in time, as the needs of the family members have changed. One example of "museified" objects is the crystal cups set that – as the anecdote in the introduction says – were displayed, but never used. Other examples are crystal ashtrays in families of non-smokers or table sets belonging to families that no longer have people over so don't use them anymore. *I don't use the table sets too much. If I have the opportunity, but what guests could we have now? We're just looking at them now*, says M., a woman who doesn't have too much

of a social life since she has to take care of her sick husband and has some financial problems too.

Then there are these objects that have a practical value, but whose functions have been changed by the owners because the needs and the habits in the home transformed too. For example, years ago it was common to have in the house a set of small plates to serve marmalade when having company. But these days no one serves marmalade to their guests anymore since this is rather a breakfast food than a “party” snack. According to my informants, these plates are now used for serving peanuts. Another “must have” was the cake set, especially at festive meals where people had dessert and it was important to have a set of matching plates to serve this course. Nowadays, people use them for other purposes too (to serve snacks or pizza) which show that the consumption habits have diversified.

The Crystal Box

A fascinating case study that illustrates both the “museification” and the adaptation for various purposes of an object is *the crystal box*, having the form of a cube with a lid. This was a widespread and fashionable item in Romanian homes during the 80s, also known as a common gift that teachers got from their students. I have chosen to talk about it precisely because I came across this object a lot during fieldwork: 6 of the 12 interviewees still had it in their house and the others mentioned it during the conversations we had.

It’s initial, designated purpose was to keep cigarettes in it and use the lid as an ashtray. However none of the people I talked to use it for this, even if they smoke they don’t keep the pack of cigarettes in the box. Instead, they use it in alternative ways: some keep candies in it, others just display it empty, others put all sorts trinkets in it (boxes of matches, keys, needles and threads) (See **Image 8**). I have also identified two peculiar ways of using this object. One woman keeps this object in a closed cupboard, doesn’t display it, but can’t give it away either

because her parents care a lot about the box as it was brought from the Republic of Moldova. Another woman has put the box in the bathroom and uses it to store cosmetics in it.

While the woman who uses the box as a recipient for candies is more “traditional” in her practice (this has been a second frequent use of the object) and the woman who has the box from Moldova clearly keeps it for personal reasons, the other usages reveal more interesting aspects. The mere display of the object is a classic case of “museification”, a persisting habit from the socialist times. It is obvious here that the object must be seen by the others, thus it plays an important part in the home as a place for visitors.

Quite contrary, keeping trinkets in it or placing the box in the bathroom instead of the living room proves a “downgrading” of the object. My observations were consistent with Drazin’s (2001) claim that the living room, conceived as a stage where objects are displayed is an important space in the house. So putting the box in another room, less open to visitors and using it to keep trivial things is a sign of the decreasing importance this item has in the home.

Overall, the biography of the crystal box shows how certain consumption habits, practices from the realm of family life and the home in relation to visitors have changed in time. If for some it remained a means of “showing off” in front of those visiting their homes, for others it moved somewhere in the background, being used for less important things and kept in less important rooms. This idea of the objects as a means to communicate something to the others leads to the next section of this chapter, in which I talk about the connection between china and crystal sets and leisure time.

Leisure time and table sets

During socialism, having people over for lunch, dinner or just for coffee was the main possibility for Romanians to spend their free time. Dinner is a key moment here because the

work schedule wasn't very flexible: it started early in the morning, people were away most of the day, some of them working on Saturday and it wasn't very easy to take a day off. Thus evenings were the most convenient moments for socialization. In addition, the nightlife was almost non-existent in Targoviste since there weren't too many places where you could go out in the evening, just 2-3 restaurants that were mostly used for weddings or other formal parties.

L.L., a woman who works as a nurse and lives with her husband in a 3 room flat describes her social life back then in a way that confirms this idea: *We had a lot of friends, we were visiting each other. And we were laying tables, talking. To the restaurant...it wasn't this habit to go to the restaurant. We didn't use to do that and nor did our friends. People were tired from work.* Similarly, A. talks about a habit his family and their friends had: *Usually, since we're talking about anniversaries, we had a group of about 10 families and we used to take turns in meeting in someone's house.*

I acknowledge that this practice of having friends at home is not specific to socialist countries. I also know that in Romania it remained a widespread habit, in the 1990s after the fall of the regime and it has not been abandoned yet, but I believe that this habit was intensified and made prevalent by the social and economic context of that time. The predominance of this type of social gatherings at *home* made the tableware and silverware more important in Romanian families.

Not only that people were pulling out "the good china" when they had guests, but having nice table sets, with identical plates and cups was a factor in the formation of the mundane reputation of the family. In this sense, L.L. describes a social occasion that clearly illustrates this influential character of "proper" tableware: *I remember that I got, and they were common back then, Chinese plates...for starters...I have for example trays and I remember I also had smaller plates and we were invited to the birthday party of a colleague*

of my husband who is now a manager. And when we went for this birthday party I said, have you seen, it's like they served us in 5 plates of 6 kinds? (Laughs).

After the fall of the regime this practice gradually decreased in frequency as the number of restaurants increased and the prices became more and more accessible. I am not arguing that the tableware and silverware lost their importance because people are not meeting at each other's place anymore. However, I am maintaining that the two practices are associated. Back then, the limited possibilities for leisure and entertainment – a specificity of the communist decades- contributed to the increased importance of tableware and silverware.

Now, with the rise of consumer society and a diversification and increased accessibility of leisure and entertainment the social life is taking place less inside the home. Consequently, the type of tableware or ornaments one has is a less important status marker because the home has become more of a personal space and less a space of interaction with friends. For example, the two families I observed more started going out every Sunday evening for dinner and they also go to the restaurant for anniversaries and other celebrations. From the conversations I had with them it resulted that it is more comfortable to do it like this: they don't have to prepare the house for visitors, to clean and cook. The whole socialization experience is "moved" in the public realm, leaving the home as the place for privacy.

5. Dwelling places and the consumption of domestic objects in socialism and post socialism

The significance of the objects found at the core of this research— china and crystal table sets and ornaments and silverware - becomes discernible when looking at the social and economic context of late communism (1970s and 1980s) and post communism. This context can be translated into five practices that revolve around the dwelling place.

A first practice was the *demolition* of houses done at the order of the communist leader, Nicolae Ceausescu with the purpose to build blocks of flats. Demolishing private homes in order to build collective dwellings was a specificity of the regime from its very beginning, in the late 40s, since it aimed at eliminating the differences between center and periphery and this resonated with the egalitarian aspirations of communism. However, the demolitions were intensified in the last two decades of the regime when this project was advanced to make the boulevards imposing by building ten-story blocks on each side. (Marin, 2005)

The topic of the demolitions was often brought up in my interviews, either as a fact, or as a possibility. Some of my respondents had their houses demolished and were compensated with apartments depending on the number of people in their family. Others were just threatened by this, but since the authorities postponed them over the years until 1989 they never happened. Thus, demolitions were a “hot topic” in my interviews. For example, one of my informants has a painting of her former house that was demolished in 1981 drew by a policeman as a gift for her father. Another example is a woman who was threatened with demolition since 1969, but managed to save her house. She nicely sums the whole story up in the phrase: “*We waited for the demolition, but the revolution came*” (M.).

Simultaneously, the newly formed families got a place to live by having an apartment *allotted* to them by state authorities. In most of the cases people were paying rent, not owning the places. Only one of the people I talked to had the possibility to buy a flat at that time and she presented this endeavor as a big sacrifice, but also a reason to be proud.

Also the number of rooms of the flat depended on the number of people in the family. In time, if the number of children increased, the families had the possibility to request a bigger flat by filling in an application at the city hall. But it was not very simple to get a bigger place. You often had to have a connection at the city hall in order to get the apartment easier and you were always in competition with other families who wanted the same thing. For example, L.L. a nurse whose husband works in constructions told me how they managed to move from a 2 room flat to a 3 room one. They found out there was a vacancy in a building and they knew someone who was responsible with allotting the apartments so they filled in an application and got the flat.

After the fall of communism, three other practices became predominant: renovating, moving from an apartment to a house and buying a second home in the country. *Renovations* became widespread because, after the regime changed, people became owners of the apartments. These changes in the home ranged from small scale operations like pulling down a wall in order to join two rooms to more extensive and complex ones like moving the kitchen in an outbuilding and transforming the old kitchen into a dining room.

At the same time, *moving* from a flat to a house became an “obsession” after the fall of communism. People wanted to do this for various reasons: in order to have privacy, because they had problems with parking, because of the misunderstandings with neighbors when it came to common decisions about the building or simply because they wanted to differentiate themselves through their home and they couldn’t do it in a block of flats (Matache, 2010).

Moving to a house was an important matter for my interviewees too. Some of them who managed to do it talked about why they decided to move and what this step meant for them. The others, who wanted to, but couldn't afford it talked about it only at the aspiration level. For example, L.L. talked to me about the difficulties of living in a block of flats and how she wanted to have her own house: *"I was pregnant with my second child and when I came home and saw that the elevator was not working and I had to take the stairs and carry the bag of groceries I was thinking: 'Oh, God if only I had money to buy a house on the ground and move from here'"*.

Finally, *buying a second home* in the nearby villages appeared as a practice in the early 90s when the high inflation rate determined people to quickly invest their money in something. In this sense, V. told me how they bought their second home in a village next to Targoviste exactly in 1990 and how after one year they have to pay almost the same amount of money they paid for the house just to build an outhouse. The popularity of second homes was also a result of the idealization of country life – both before and after 1989. People considered that in the country they can have a healthier and more peaceful life. They could grow their own vegetables and fruits and relax during the summer or in the weekends.

What is interesting is how by looking at these practices we can perceive the difference between socialism and post socialism. Namely, for the first two practices the state is a key actor, either oppressive or with high decision power. On the other hand, the last three practices are almost entirely private initiatives. And these visible efforts people put in the improvement of their space of inhabitation can be read as a "revanchist" attitude towards the former omnipotent state.

What further results from this is the idea that larger scale changes in society are reflected in the changes of the form and characteristics of the home. Since crystals, porcelains and silverware are important components of the home and domesticity, we can say that the

changing way they are used (or not) in the daily life reflects broader social changes. As we shall see, each of the practices described above are associated with specific relations between the owner and his possessions, namely with how the objects are consumed.

The demolition was one of the few moments during communism when people gave up objects, but it was an involuntary discard. They were forced in a more or less aggressive manner to give up some things that didn't fit the "apartment life". On the contrary, the repartition of a flat and the subsequent movement to a bigger flat involved acquiring objects in order to have a stock, either by direct purchase or by receiving them as gifts. First, when the family was founded they needed a material basis for their household and when they moved to a bigger place they had to buy more objects since there was at least one extra room to fill up.

The renovations and moving from flats to houses brought in new ways in which people "treated" the objects, ways that qualify as voluntary discard. That is to say they gave things to relatives, to charity, they sold objects they no longer needed or wanted, they deposited stuff in the garage or basement. Naturally, those who wanted to start anew bought new things for their homes, but they also kept a lot of the old things even if they did not use them or they did not fit with the new arrangement of the house. Complementary, the second homes were often some kind of store houses for things that no longer fitted the main place of residence.

My argument is that the socialist and post-socialist decades had prevalent practices and attitudes towards consumption (as previously defined): involuntary discarding and an urge to acquire and store objects was specific for the former period and voluntary discarding coupled with an attachment for old objects for the latter. During socialism involuntary discarding was an effect of the demolitions, while the high interest in acquiring and storing was justified by the scarcity and uniformity of goods. After the regime changed, people often

found themselves caught between the need to give up objects that did not fit in their renovated or new homes and the attachment they had for items from the previous decades.

So the change is ongoing. We cannot talk of a clear-cut transformation of consumption from socialism to this day and age. People are not simply throwing away what they acquired in the past, but they are not stuck with all their old possessions either. There is a constant tension between embracing a new domestic style and holding on to objects that are reminders of moments from one's family history. This is on the same par – although at a smaller scale – with what Verdery (1996) and other authors (Burawoy, 1995; Stark, 1993) say about the assumption of a transition from socialism to capitalism. This assumption is misleading. Rather, there is a transformation of countries that were under socialist rule, one that leads to various forms more or less similar to market economies.

Following from this, I realized that dividing the respondents from my study into those who keep things and those who give them away would be a misrepresentation of the data. It makes more sense to think about their behaviors as different points on a scale from “total keepers” to “total givers”. First there are those who kept these domestic objects for sentimental and/or financial reasons, but who were forced by external circumstances to part with some of their belongings. Sometimes it was simply because the objects broke. In other cases, faced with the possibility of demolitions, people had to sell or give for free some of the things that would have been difficult to take with them. There were even situations, though rare, when objects were confiscated: “... *they numbered and took every terracotta stove. I remember they were special, my father said they were bought from Vienna, on the Danube. So they didn't leave anything, not even this. We could have sold them, make some profit from them*”, says L.C. a woman whose house was demolished.

Further on this scale there are the keepers who were determined to give away some of their home possessions by subjective factors – such as different tastes and practices – most

often from within the family. Here the children are key actors. Sometimes the parents decide to pass to them some of their cherished table sets or ornaments. Conversely, in other situations the children ask their parents to dispose of the outdated items. For example, one of the women I talked to told me how her daughter made her remove some ornaments she had in the living room: “ *Among other things that were offered, there were these statuettes that represented different things: birds, dogs. I have them all in a box because E. collected them. ‘Mum, that’s enough’ she said ‘why do you need this dog with big eyes?’ ‘. (L. L.)*

Then there are those who gave away most of their objects, all at once - when they renovated or moved – or gradually, as they changed their lifestyle, but kept some old items for various reasons. I identified two groups here: those who keep things for sentimental reasons and those who keep a few things because they see no reason in throwing them away. People from the first group made quite big changes in their homes, but have kept some tableware or knick knacks for personal reasons: because they or other family members are sentimentally attached to the objects – they were gifts from close friends or relatives or they remind them of moments from the past. For example, G. has moved from a flat to a house she has more space now, but she still gave away things because she wanted to start anew. At the same time, she kept some things like a green cup that was part of a set she got from her mother. She says she does not use it anymore, but keeps it because it reminds her of the beginning of her marriage.

(Image 9)

People from the second category also changed a lot in their homes and they seem comfortable with leaving behind things they no longer like or need. However, they still have some acquisitions from the 1970s and 1980s, such as a set of crystal mugs belonging to a school teacher who got these as a gift: “*these are not too practical, but I don’t want to throw them away, because – after all – they’re not something that you throw away*” (V.) **(Image 10)**

Even the most “radical” respondent, a woman who gave away almost everything she acquired

during communism - because she likes “African” decorations now- kept a china ornament she bought from Poland. **(See Image 11)** So the fact that these objects are made of valuable materials and – at times – brought from foreign countries gives them enough credit to remain on the shelves of their living rooms.

Finally, an important idea that emerges from the previously discussed transformations of the households is that crystal and porcelain table sets and ornaments are the most durable objects inside the house. This means that they have a longer life than the furniture or home appliances that get worn out faster or become obsolete. This observation stands even for the “avant-garde” families who have intensively changed the organization and decoration of their houses: they still have a couple of crystal or porcelain items left.

But these objects did more than “surviving” the wave of domestic changes in some forgotten corners of the house. I started my fieldwork with the hypothesis of two systems of keeping such items: “the storage” - in closed cupboards and “the museum” – displaying things in closets with glass doors. I expected to have families grouped around a storage system depending on their more general attitudes towards material goods. In the end, I realized that “the museum” system was present – to a certain extent - in all the houses I saw.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to construct and analyze the *biography of china, crystal and silverware* originating in the last decades of the socialist regime in Romania. It looked at the trajectory of these objects in terms of their use and significance in order to determine what made them so important back then and what do they represent now for Romanians.

In the first chapter of my analysis I looked at the means of procuring these objects and the different patterns of using them inside the household. Looking at the process of acquisition revealed the prevalence of the social capital over the economic one (Bourdieu, 1986). By often being circulated among influential characters like vendors and Party members these crystals, porcelains and silverware became the objectification of a distinct type of social relationship. Also the various attempts to get a hold of these items and the popularity of red crystal given by its conspicuous color stand as tactics (De Certeau, 1984) of differentiation in what was supposed to be a homogeneous society.

The inquiry into the use of these objects show two patterns: “museification” – not using them even if they had a practical value – and the adaptation for various purposes of an object depending on the needs and habits specific to the present time. The case study of the crystal box exemplifies both of these patterns of use. The same section further explores the connection between leisure time and table sets, showing how the predominance of social gatherings at home granted importance to these objects and how – subsequently – the decreased public character of the home diminished the importance of table sets, cups and silverware.

The second chapter of analysis looks at these objects in relation to five practices, two specific to socialism – demolitions and repartitions and three to post socialism - renovations, moving to a house and buying a second home. It shows that involuntary discarding and an

urge to acquire and store objects was specific for the former period and voluntary discarding coupled with an attachment for old objects for the latter. This analysis indicates that these possessions are the most durable objects inside the home. Not only they “survive” the domestic changes, but they maintain a central place inside the home by being displayed in china closets.

The first conclusion is that the biography of crystal, china and silverware from the socialist past of Romania confirms that by looking at home possessions we can understand broader changes happening in societies. The objects that stay at the core of this research are more than inanimate things. Through their durability inside the home they act as reminders of the past. At the same time, through the different usages people ascribe to them they speak about changes of the domestic space, consumption habits and leisure time.

A second conclusion is that crystals, porcelains and silverware followed a trajectory from an “affordable luxury” to an “obsolete luxury”. I use the term affordable here in a more complex sense. First of all, they were affordable because of the prevalence of social capital over the economic one when it came to the acquisition. Money was not as an important condition for obtaining these goods, as social connections were. Second, due to their size these objects could be obtained easier than bigger items like cars, TV sets and fridges. These aspects coupled with the fact that the offer in tableware and decorations was neither too diversified nor too abundant, turned china and crystal items into omnipresent goods.

Nowadays, these domestic possessions are an “obsolete luxury”. Again, the term obsolete must not be taken *ad litteram*. I use the term to convey the idea that today these objects have a “life” inside the home. They somehow have become museum pieces, acting as reminders of the socialist past. Even if most of my informants have completely changed their furniture arrangements or the house altogether, these domestic objects stood the test of time in Romanian families.

The limitations of this research are given by a couple of factors. First of all, by the focus on a rather homogeneous group of people: urban residents, with a level of education above the average (at least secondary school) and non-manual jobs. Thus, it would be interesting to further explore the uses and significance of these objects for other groups of people, with less years of education, from rural areas and performing other types of jobs. This would help disentangle the meaning of class that has become such a complicated concept in the post socialist context.

Second, by looking at the perceptions of members of the younger generations further research could say more about the present than I manage to do here. It would be interesting to see if younger generations take over this interest for crystal cups and porcelain sets, if they value the same objects like the previous generations or have different tastes and how they react to the idea of inheriting such objects from their parents.

Appendix

Image 1 – The former universal store and the advertising poster that says:
“BOHEMIAN crystal and china. Go back to quality”



Image 2: The set of stainless steel forks and knives from Russia



Image 3, 4 and 5: Gifts received at special occasions: wedding (table set, bottom shelf on the right), christening (china basket- first one on the left) and birthday (crystal vase)

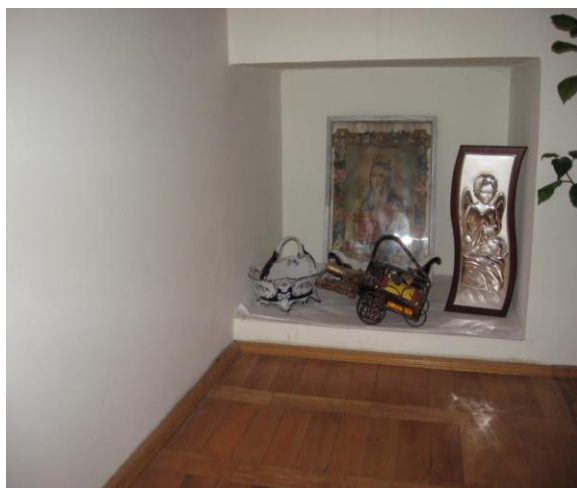


Image 6: Small plates for comfiture and the porcelain cassette



Image 7: Red crystal cups and vases



Image 8: The crystal box: museum object, practical value, “downgraded” object



Image 9: The green cup



Image 10: The crystal mugs



Image 11: The china ornament from Poland – bottom shelf, first one on the left



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