CHAPTER 3

The Ideology of Consumption in the Soviet Union\(^1\)

Olga Gurova

This article explores the mass discourse on consumption and official attitudes to consumer goods (mostly clothes) in Soviet Russia from 1917 to the 1980s. Through media discourse analysis this era divides into four periods based on changes in the official ideology of consumption in Soviet culture. Dominant in 1917 and throughout the 1920s was asceticism and criticism of pre-revolutionary patterns of consumption such as philistinism or the demonstration of social status by means of clothes. In the second part of the 1930s the idea of individual culture (kul’turnost’) emerged, and possessing material goods was rehabilitated. In the 1950s and 1960s imitating Western consumer patterns was criticised by Soviet authorities. In the 1970s and 1980s the idea of the de-materialization (razveshchestvenie) of everyday life was overshadowed by the increasing demands from Soviet consumers and values of individual style and taste. In the 1990s, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the discourse on consumption became much more diversified; the issue of identities arose along with the discourse of repair, which continued to be topical in the context of severe economic upheavals. This article demonstrates that the ideology of consumption was neither consistent nor homogeneous during the Soviet era.

The Concept of Ideology

In this research the concept of ideology is defined according to the tradition begun by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their paper called ‘The German Ideology’. They defined ideology as a set of ruling class ideas aimed at promoting and preserving the existing social order. According to philosophers, the ruling class defines a particular historical epoch, and the beliefs of the ruling class dominate a particular historical period (Marx, Engels 1976). Marx and Engels also discussed ‘false consciousness’ or ‘illusions’ and used these categories as something similar to ideology. According to them, ideology can also be considered as a set of illusory thoughts of the ruling class, which relate to the existing social order and how it is organized. Such illusions as a set of beliefs legitimise

---

The ideology of consumption in the Soviet Union relationships of domination and subordination in society, and those in a subordinate position usually accept such beliefs passively.

The ideas of Marx and Engels inspired other concepts of ideology, some of which were developed by scholars of the Frankfurt School. For example, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer examined ideology in the context of the critique of mass culture and the media. They considered ideology to be a false consciousness and to give a false view of social reality, which the establishment imposes by means of the media with the aim of preserving the existing social order and power relations (Adorno, Horkheimer 2002). Roland Barthes, who also analysed media and mass culture, pointed out the link between ideology and myths; he considered ideology as meanings that are ascribed to different cultural objects (clothes, images, words) by the mass media. According to Barthes, an ideology uses the bodies of ‘innocent’ cultural objects to give those objects particular meaning (Barthes 1993). Like Marx, Engels, Adorno and Horkheimer, Barthes considered ideology as a negative phenomenon or as a phenomenon with a negative function, such as the representation of reality in a false way according to the will of the ruling class for the purpose of promoting the existing social order, namely domination and subordination.

Some sociological concepts of ideology refuse to treat ideology as a false picture of social reality, but rather understand it as a reality itself. They also refuse to view ideology as part of public consciousness, considering it instead as collective unconsciousness. Louis Althusser, for example, considers ideology in that way; he defines it as a set of representations of social and cultural reality, a set of concepts, ideas, myths and images of reality, which form people’s understanding, evaluation and experience of the real conditions of their existence (Althusser 2000).

In this paper, ideology will be treated as a set of dominant discourses that contain ideas about consumerism and attitudes to consumption and consumer practices as represented in the media in Russian society. These discourses are promoted through various forms of cultural production or cultural artefacts (magazines, newspapers, TV, cinema, material objects). These cultural artefacts contain and spread particular ideas, values and beliefs and are proliferated through everyday practices. The focus of this paper is on the ideas and concepts having information about attitudes towards clothes, fashion and everyday consumer practices in Soviet Russia from 1917 to the 1980s. These ideas and concepts are parts of official discourse, which, on the one hand, construct social reality and, on the other hand, represent that reality. Four main periods in the ideology of consumption in Soviet Russia were defined on the basis of media discourse analysis.²

---

² This article is based on my doctoral research ‘Ideology in clothes: A cultural history of underwear in Soviet Russia in 1917–1980s’. The following sources were used in this research: bro-