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## IRONY, MEMORY, AND MEMORABILIA: AMERICANS CONSUMING THE COLD WAR

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### Abstract

A small purchase made by the author at the flea market in front of the Alexandar Nevski Cathedral in Sofia, Bulgaria in 2010 serves the point of departure for this work, which explores the manner in which certain American tourists interact with the spaces and memories of Eastern Europe. The conflicted nationalism that arises from these encounters, which manifests as ‘ironic consumption’ (Klein 1999) of touristic objects and experiences, is produced by a tension between the broad cultural tropes that communicate and perpetrate a triumphal understanding of the Cold War in the American popular imagination, and the tourist’s own experiences of social and economic anxiety in the post-Cold War era.

**Keywords:** *tourism; consumption; memory; national identity; Cold War*

*Touristic ironic consumption: an auto-ethnographic moment.*

I’ve had a lifelong fascination with informal markets – and by markets, I mean not the abstract concept of exchange network, but actual physical places where items are bought and sold: street fairs, yard sales, garage sales, thrift stores, bazaars, flea markets, farmers markets, fundraisers, swap meets, rummage sales, craft fairs, and so on. My favorites, much to my hygiene-obsessed mother’s chagrin, were sites of second-hand goods exchange such as flea markets, thrift stores, and yard sales. In high school, when I first gained some degree of autonomy over my own movement in the form of a driver’s license, I spent my weekends prowling through thrift store racks and digging through bins of old linens at the year-round indoor flea market nearby; upon moving into my own living quarters, my searches expanded to include all manners of housewares and furniture. It was in flea markets and yard sales, sifting through the still-useable items that their owners had decided to cast off for one

reason or another, that I first developed my abiding curiosity about the relationship between people, their possessions, and the various idiosyncratic meanings that buyers and sellers attribute to these items. The most compelling aspect of these yard sales and flea markets, for me, has been simply looking at the items and imagining the lives behind them, much more so than actually purchasing items; more often than not, I left these venues empty-handed, the act of purchasing and subsequent ownership being of secondary interest.

Therefore, it surprises exactly nobody who has known me for any length of time that one of my favorite memories of Sofia is the hour or so that I spent in the flea market in the park adjacent to Alexandar Nevski Cathedral, arguably Sofia's most recognizable landmark, during my visit in 2010. I made two purchases that day: the first, a slightly disheveled Bulgarian military officer's hat for my 9-year old son, for whom it sparked an interest in cultivating a vaguely Eastern European accent that he trots out occasionally for his grandparents' amusement; the second, a "Mother Heroine" medal of indeterminate vintage (if it is authentic at all) that features the Bulgarian crest on its face, and on the reverse side a seated woman breastfeeding an infant, with a young girl standing at her knee, while an inset bust of Georgi Dimitrov looks on with approval (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Mother Heroine medal (left: face; right: reverse).**

It was, as a colleague explained to me at the time, a medal awarded to Bulgarian women who had born a certain number of children, in recognition of this act as a service to the state. I bought this medal for myself, keeping it pinned to a curtain in my bedroom, and I've never once been tempted to bring it to my office to join the jumbled assortment of scholarly memorabilia that assures my students that I am credibly academic in even my leisure pursuits. If the Mother Heroine had joined my office scenery, perhaps I would not wonder so much about my own motives for pur-

chasing it, and what this might illustrate about the relationship of Western tourists to the memories and relics of Eastern European socialism and the Cold War era in which it existed. For that matter, if I felt myself to be one of those people for whom parenthood is a calling of the highest order, and a source of life's greatest satisfactions, perhaps I would not wonder about my purchase of the Mother Heroine medal. But I am not one of those mothers myself. I don't, as the Bulgarian state once did, imagine that I have made some contribution to the survival and endurance of my nation (or my ethnicity, or my race, or my culture). I am not, as some of my generation are, the type of mother who closely monitors the everyday minutia of their children's lives, nor am I the type who lists my children among my friends. At the outset, I neither particularly sought to attain motherhood nor sought to avoid it. In short, I would describe myself as an engaged but essentially amateur mother: it's a labor of love, but not a calling. If I am being completely honest, in fact, I consider my identity as a mother to be secondary to my identity as a scholar, in large part because of the myriad ways in which the former identity complicates and conflicts with the latter.

So why the Mother Heroine medal – of all the bric-a-brac that I could have purchased, or declined to purchase? The sociological canon implies two main motivators of the acquisitive impulse. First, people may consume items as a way to establish an identity. What identity am I establishing with the Mother Heroine medal? Establishing identity via possessions is to describe a link between self and object either through ancestry (as in, “I collect Civil War memorabilia because my great-grandfather served in that war”) or personal taste (as in, “I like the color purple, so I bought purple pillows for my sofa”). Some possible affinities that could be established and legitimized through the Mother Heroine medal, then, might include: Bulgarian, scholar of Bulgaria/ Eastern Europe/ Communism, aficionado/ collector of same, souvenir junkie. Although I like Bulgaria perfectly well, I wouldn't describe myself as a ‘fan.’ I'm not Bulgarian and I don't normally study Bulgaria, or Communism, or motherhood.

Second, possessions are held to be a way to establish status. Status possessions include not only “status goods” like designer handbags but also things like mementos and souvenirs, which exist to remind others of a particular temporal and/or spatial location, as a way to establish a person as someone who travels (in the case of postcards) or as someone who survived a serious illness (in the case of a saved hospital bracelet, or the ‘chips’ awarded in Alcoholics Anonymous for various durations of sobriety). To whom am I displaying my possession of the Mother Heroine medal? Although it may be construed as a memento, it hasn't served as a conversation piece, either in the conventional sense (“look at the weird thing I purchased while in Bulgaria”) or in the academic sense, at least until the writing of this paper. And yet, perhaps, this memento is important after all, albeit in the most tangential way – it is, as I once described it, an item “purchased in a paroxysm of Cold War Nostalgia.” I am of the generation that came of age in the waning years of the Cold

War; the Berlin Wall fell in the fall of the year that I graduated from high school. It's around this particular facet of my own experience in relation to the object consumed that I orient the subsequent analysis.

### *The objects of ironic consumption.*

I examine these questions and themes by means of autoethnography, in which the 'reflection' section of ethnographic field notes – wherein the researcher recounts the visceral experience of data collection, and typically serving not as a data source in its own right but rather as a mechanism to contextualize and qualify the ethnographer's descriptions of the external social environment – is treated as an independent and focal data source. My autoethnographic method is informed by the 'standpoint epistemology' of Dorothy Smith, who argues that knowledge invariably emanates from the specific social identity and location of the observer, which she identifies as standpoint (Smith, 1987). In her landmark work *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*, Smith argues that standpoint is the only place from which knowledge is ever created, and yet mainstream scientific ideals of objectivity function in large part to obscure standpoint; by obscuring the positional nature of knowledge, scientific standards of objectivity naturalize what is a predominately white, male, Western perspective as a purportedly neutral standard against which the voices of historically marginalized scholars are judged as non-rational, subjective, and therefore inferior. By way of remedy, Smith proposes the adoption of institutional ethnography, a methodology wherein the researcher is charged with examining the relationship between her everyday experience and the institutional imperatives in which that experience is embedded (Smith, 2005).

Guided by the concerns raised by Smith's feminist epistemology, I recorded ethnographic fieldnotes of three visits to Bulgaria I made in 2010, 2014, and 2015, which combined amounted to approximately five weeks of observations. Although these visits were not strictly touristic – the bulk of these observations were made during the 2010 and 2015 visits, throughout which I served as co-leader of a study abroad program for American college students from my home institution – they nevertheless provided ample opportunities to view the Bulgarian landscape through a touristic lens; as most study abroad leaders could attest, in fact, the challenge for both students and faculty lies in avoiding the tendency to default to a touristic stance when traveling through unfamiliar landscapes, and instead adopt a critical scholarly gaze. Observation sites included Sofia, Plovdiv, Veliko Tarnovo, Buzludzah, Shumen, Slanchev Briag, and Nessebur, each of which invites a slightly different ideal-typical visitor to engage in touristic consumption through some institutionalized constellation of historical site tours, recreational activities, scenic outposts, and shopping locations at least partially if not entirely oriented towards souvenir hunters. In documenting these encounters with Bulgarian landscapes, as an American

woman who came of age during the waning days of the Cold War while traveling in the company of students all born after the Cold War's end, I sought to contextualize and reconcile my own visceral response to the landscape with respect to the insights and limitations of my academic discipline. More specifically, I aimed to capture the positional (gendered, class-based, and generational) nature of my own encounters with Bulgarian landscapes as the standpoint from which the following account of the institutionalized imperatives of American identity proceeds.

The concept around which I've organized my ideas on this topic is "ironic consumption," a term coined by Naomi Klein in her popular book about contemporary branding processes *No Logo* (1999). When I first read this work a few years back, it's this term that particularly resonated with me because it seemed to capture so accurately, if fleetingly, one of the emergent trends in late 20th and early consumption patterns, in which the individual confronts the encroaching co-optation of youth culture with a sort of tongue-in-cheek ambivalence, and consumes objects in a deliberately unserious, and yet obliquely critical, manner. Here, I want to offer an examination of this concept of ironic consumption, and what it means in the context of post-socialist heritage tourism by Westerners. In Klein's account, ironic consumption is an attempt to resolve a contradiction: the individual needs (or wants) to participate in consumer culture in that consumption is, increasingly, culture itself, but s/he rejects the choices presented by mainstream cultural production in all of their hegemonic blandness and fleeting ubiquity. The goal of ironic consumption, then, is consumption itself – the individual just wants to buy something, participate in some way, and does so ironically, where the irony expresses ambivalence about the available choices.

Superficially, my own experience in the Nevski flea market conforms to this description – I arrived at the Nevski flea market looking for a souvenir for my children, I don't have much disposable income, and I'm disinclined to purchase straight from the corporate global supply chain of cheap souvenirs that are by nature only a short distance from being landfill inhabitants. But this perspective does not elucidate why particular objects resonate as objects of ironic consumption, but not others. Klein herself does little to interrogate the symbolic qualities of the ironic objects themselves, and so her analysis doesn't satisfactorily answer the "why this object and not than object" question except as necessary to differentiate between new/ mainstream/ corporate and old/ subcultural/ informal market objects. In Klein's account, the consumer is interacting with a hegemonic consumer culture, whereby historical memory, and by extension the potent symbolic qualities of objects in and of themselves, are relegated to the status of merely a convenient device for generating and assembling alternatives; the historical memory and symbolism imbued in the objects themselves here are assumed to be dimly understood, largely uncontested, and vaguely positive. Why the American consumer might plumb the depths of recent history for alternatives to an increasingly distasteful present is likewise described as relatively straightforward, in that the culture of the past is better than the present,

and is a way to both consume (to establish identity) and disdain consumption (as a mark of a certain status), ideally suited to a generation of American youth that has been raised to value and celebrate consumption as a way to define selves, but cannot be forced to consume in the ways that the modern culture industries dictate.

However, I reject wholesale the argument that the substance of the ironic consumption act is fully subservient to the format (that is, the act itself). While acknowledging the capacity of the privileged to ignore subtext while gleefully consuming surface, it seems facile to assume that the consumption of post-socialist relics by those whose own personal biographies intersect with the Cold War era is wholly unserious. At the very least, there is a degree of symbolic violence inherent in ignoring the deep cultural resonance of certain objects (see, for instance, the arguments made by those who would describe the Confederate flag as “heritage”), wherein even those who may be initially unfamiliar with an object’s significance are complicit insofar as possessing that object without troubling oneself to seek its provenance is a form of actively maintained ignorance; only those who hubristically presume mastery over that history can afford to treat its relics as harmless.

To some degree, I follow the argument proposed by literatures in the uses of culture, which assert that the meaning of the object, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder – or rather, an interpretive community of beholders – who orient consumption towards the accomplishment of strategic ends in loose accordance with Swidler’s (1986; 2001) notion of cultural tool-kits or repertoires. In Janice Radway’s (1984) study of romance novel readers, for instance, the object consumed is positional within the broader culture but also functionally related to that position in ways that are misunderstood by others outside of that milieu as a form of symbolic violence. More specifically, romance novels are assumed to have a primarily female readership and are therefore a lower status choice than either contemporary literary fiction (which is understood as a gender-neutral choice), or detective mysteries (which are generally understood to have a predominately male readership); meanwhile, the (low-status) female readership of romance novels reflects the structural realities of their social position, and is positively used by readers as a way to navigate those realities. In other words, the choice to read romance novels is not simply a reflection of naturalized class-based choices and constraints like lower educational attainment, low-brow cultural tastes, and similar; it is used (and not merely justified) as a lens through which to understand and negotiate the world of working-class femininity (Radway 1984). In a similar vein, Tia DeNora’s (1999) work on musical choices and tastes describes how they may be understood externally as positional (i.e. you know something about a person based on what they listen to) but are consumed neither as a naturalized expression of class-based preferences nor an explicit bid to mark status – rather, musical choices are made for strategic reasons, specifically to accomplish emotional management objectives such as “mourn a bad breakup” or “get excited for tonight’s party” and similar (DeNora 1999).

Without discounting the idea that my own consumption of the Mother Heroine medallion might also be construed as socially strategic – for instance, to materially reify a common intellectual interest with a friend, or claim a form of authenticity (as appropriate to my status and ideological commitments) without having to spend an arm and a leg (as appropriate to my resources) – the language of social uses of culture doesn't necessarily exclude the possibility that consumption may also be driven by non-strategic expressions: for instance, as contributes to my own internal dialogue about my ambivalence towards my role as mother, or as expression of contradictory class position (Wright 1997) wherein my respectable social status as a college professor is belied by my relatively and substantially less privileged economic position as a particularly poorly paid one. In this vein, literatures on taste, for which Bourdieu (1984; 1993) continues to be standard-bearer, indicate that material objects themselves are also meaningful insofar as they're congruent with a class-based logic of consumption, and express position within a field of consumption relative to other objects. The symbolism of the object itself is seen as self-evident – Thai food expresses high cultural capital and low economic capital, a fatty prime rib expresses the opposite end of both continuums, and any culturally literate person occupying the relevant field of consumption can clearly determine which is which. There is no ambivalence in the interpretation of symbolic meaning, because the logic of class and the logic of the consumption field provide the Rosetta Stone by which those meanings are revealed. However, this perspective is somewhat problematic when assessing touristic consumption – how does one identify the field of consumption, when the act of consumption itself is both geographically and culturally remote from those against whom the touristic consumers might position themselves?

Then again, this may only be problematic if one assumes that the American consumer is necessarily coming to the act of touristic consumption as cultural outsider – in other words, there are more nuanced ways of defining belongingness, and the relative merits of the claims of insiders and outsiders on material embodiments of historical memory. In fact, it looks a whole lot like Geertzian 'deep play' (Geertz 1973) wherein the actor engages with collective identity via individual performance. Just as the Balinese cockfight serves to materialize Balinese conceptions of masculinity and group boundaries, and conscripts individuals to perform the salient features of a collective identity described in large part through these themes, touristic consumption (while a less overtly public act) serves to materialize salient features of American identity as described through its difference from Eastern Europe, while conscripting individuals into a performance of this identity. In other words, the more souvenirs an American tourist buys, the more American they themselves feel and appear, and the more they contribute to the collective performance of American-ness by American travelers. In this manner, touristic consumption allows individuals to identify/partake of local culture while simultaneously distancing themselves from it. It is with this idea in mind that I now aim to not only understand my particular

act of ironic consumption, but also to identify and generalize the key processes of ironic consumption.

*Cold War tropes and American collective identity:  
public issues meet private troubles.*

If we are to take seriously the notion that the consumption of Cold War memorabilia is a form of ‘deep play’ on the part of tourists, what produces the particular format – ironic consumption – that this deep play may occasionally take? I argue that the act of ironic consumption occurs at the point where individual identity problematizes collective identity. For Americans, the salient collective identity here is a cultural context whereby the West, and more specifically the United States, is perceived as the self-declared “winner” of the Cold War, in contrast with the Eastern European ‘loser’ of that conflict. Status as ‘Cold War Winner’ is, therefore, a component of the American collective identity. Further, the triumph so readily expressed in political and economic realms is strongly echoed in the popular media. Increasingly, the Cold War is trivialized through sentimentality – sentimental precisely because of its loss of power as a serious challenge to American ideologies.

Seen through the eyes of American media, as the Cold War has passed into the safe respectability of history in the American collective imagination, it hasn’t disappeared as much as it has simply changed genres: from the genres of action/thriller/horror – including James Bond films such as *From Russia With Love* (1963), Tom Clancy’s series of Jack Ryan novels such as *The Hunt for Red October* (1984) and *Patriot Games* (1987), and similar – to the genres of comedy/romance. In the former category, Eastern European characters are typically villains or victims, and occasionally – as with Ivan Drago, the menacing Russian boxer who ultimately reveals a semi-sympathetic individualism in *Rocky IV* (1985) – both. In the latter category, the characters turn humorously harmless even as they continue to play in accordance to the character rules of the earlier dramatic genres. One recent example is the film *Muppets Most Wanted* (2014), which offers multiple iterations of one stock character of the Cold War, the Soviet villain, in comedic relief. One is Constantin, the evil doppelganger of Kermit the Frog implicated in a mistaken identity plot, while another is embodied in Tina Fey’s character of Nadya, the Russian prison guard at Gulag 38B. The overall tenor of the film, a feel-good mass market comedy film for children, is playfully sentimental. Not incidentally, the parents of the children who are presumably watching alongside are pretty squarely in Generation X, the generation born between 1965 to 1980 who were the last generation raised among the ideological certainties of the Cold War. Another film released roughly contemporaneously, Wes Anderson’s *Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), is more sophisticated in its use of common Cold War tropes, but no less sentimental. Set in a fictional Eastern European state over the span of several decades, the film’s timeline

begins at the onset of the military conflict that ultimately produces the totalitarian state of the film's conclusion. This narrative is more explicitly critical of the Cold War – in the set itself, the pre-communist lobby of the hotel is as sumptuous and inviting as the post-communist lobby is jaundiced and austere. At the same time, the film romanticizes not only the latter aesthetic, in its portrayal of the hotel as a beautiful ruin, but also even the political indignities and brutalities of the totalitarian period – the dangers of border crossings, the civilian casualties, and the everyday corruptions and nepotisms that serve as informal workarounds to the bureaucratic ritualism of state personnel.

The collective imagination of Americans, at least by this measure, has officially relegated the Cold War to the realms of history, in the sense that we generally understand 'history' to be an entirely separate entity from the 'contemporary' wherein the former has salience only as an example, not as prelude. The point at which the Cold War becomes nothing more than a design choice (as with *Grand Budapest Hotel*) or comedic device (as with *Muppets Most Wanted*) is the point at which the Cold War itself becomes the same for the public as a whole – that is, simply a plot point in American history, the point at which the collective imagination has determined that the Cold War has become tangential to understanding current realities. Moreover, this relegation to the past, to nothing more than a comedic trope or revivalist design choice, is a luxury of the victors, for whom any painful associations with the war are superseded by the warm glow of conquest, no matter how ill-earned.

However, individual participation in the performance of this collective identity is problematic for those whose social location challenges or contradicts key elements of the collective narrative. It is the uneasy syncretism between collective and individual narratives that restricts a sincere performance of collective identity, and thus produces the conditions for ironic consumption. For certain tourists, the collective identity and status of Americans as Cold War victors is particularly problematic for at least two reasons. First, the construction of the American "winner" implies a moral victory and moral superiority for the United States. However, unlike the villains of World War II, the moral culpability is largely restricted to a few mid-century Eastern Bloc leaders, most of whom the typical American cannot even name; meanwhile, whereas 1940s German citizens were understood as voluntarily complicit in the actions of their governments, mid-century Communist citizens are generally understood as unwilling conscripts. If there is a moral victory, then, the losers are largely invisible to the tourist gaze. Equally problematically, understanding Americans as occupying the moral high ground may serve to legitimizing various forms of villainy and ineptitude that were perpetrated by the U.S. state during the Cold War in the name of defeating the "Red Menace."

Second, younger generations of Americans in particular may have little sense of having personally experienced the spoils of victory. Unlike previous generations, Americans born after 1965 have come of age in a time when they could reasonably expect their own economic circumstances to be worse, not better, than those

of their parents. In this time period, for men, median wages have stagnated for all but the most highly educated as a consequence of deindustrialization since the early 1970s. Women, meanwhile, have made modest wage gains but continue to experience segmented labor markets and a still sizable wage gap relative to men. Dual income families have become an economic necessity for most, without any corresponding growth in social support systems for families, such as supplements for early childhood education and improvements in choices for elder care, and so on. Income and wealth inequality has grown, and class mobility has declined. Moreover, there is an emerging cultural narrative that speaks to our collective concern with the status of younger generations, albeit one that commits structural violence in its attribution of the woes of Millennials and Gen X-ers to generational character flaws (raised by helicopter parents! Addicted to phone screens and social media! Recklessly consumed expensive student loans! etc.) rather than these broader structural constraints, which may exacerbate their structural unsettledness for rendering it a shared personal deficiency. In other words, there exists both ambivalence (or worse) towards this notion of Americans as Cold War victors, as well as a palpable sense of personal economic and social loss relative to the generations living during and before the Cold War, producing a ‘conflicted nationalism’ that problematizes the way American tourists confront recent history.

Further, the conflicted nationalism produced by the ambiguities and disparities of the American Cold War ‘victory’ is permeated by the contrasting gender politics of capitalist and communist systems during the Cold War. For example, consider the co-evolution of the perceived roles of women vis-a-vis the state on either side of the Iron Curtain. In the American popular imagination, the characters of Nadya in *Muppets Most Wanted* (Tina Fey) and Ludmilla Drago in *Rocky IV* (Brigitte Nielsen) are both familiar as representations of the stereotypically mannish, if not also sexless, Communist woman whose status is defined to some degree by her being an equal and enthusiastic party to the routine administration of violence by the state and its delegates. Against this image, the ideal American woman’s own claim to status throughout the bulk of the Cold War period is largely premised on her nonviolence; precluded from military service both by convention and law throughout this period, she served to establish the means and exercise of violence as uniquely masculine, and in doing so legitimized the dominance of women by men as not only the natural order of the world but also a patriotic duty. The Communist woman, from this vantage point, is a figure of revulsion with respect to American/capitalist gender ideology – and yet also, from the perspective of the burgeoning feminist movement that emerges in the later days of the Cold War era, an aspirational figure. A key aspect of the ambiguity of the American moral victory in the Cold War is the a victory of less egalitarian gender ideology under the guise of women’s liberation, wherein American women are increasingly expected to become autonomous economic agents like their Eastern European counterparts, but without either the same measure of public recognition for the unique burdens that women may face in the paid labor force as a consequence of their reproductive role or the material support for reconciling the

competing demands of the labor force and motherhood. The quasi-military recognition of Bulgarian women's contribution to the state in the form of the Mother Heroine medal, from this standpoint, could be read less as an indictment of Bulgarian communist ideology, wherein the act of motherhood is coopted and recast by the state as a consciously patriotic act regardless of the actual motives and aspirations of the mother herself, and more as an indictment of American capitalist ideology in which motherhood exists almost entirely outside the sphere of public service – or perhaps more accurately, a public service whose burdens have been wholly and unequally privatized.

*Collective narrative and individual location: producing irony.*

Regardless of one's social position, tourism is a circumstance wherein one's collective (national) identity takes precedence and becomes a master status; the tensions inherent in this master status are nowhere more evident than at the point of touristic consumption. Touristic consumption typically serves to reaffirm national identity of the tourist – you buy tourist stuff because you don't buy local stuff, because you are not a local and are in some way privileged relative to the local population and its commodities. Moreover, following Klein, the consumer is obliged to be a consumer, drawn into the consumption process as a way to participate in the culture.<sup>1</sup> The consumption of the 'conflicted nationalist' should conform to that logic in a way that pays heed to the inherent ambivalence of conflicted nationalism; ironic consumption therefore offers a way to both have and eat cake – to consume but not be a consumer, to reject but also concede one's privilege over the local population and the commodity, to retain the right to ambivalence towards the present by indulging a complicated nostalgia towards the past. Ironic consumption is one of many possible manifestations of nostalgia, but one that is not universally available to all consumers and producers. Similar to 'ostalgie', ironic consumption is a form of nostalgia that is primarily available to those who are associated with a discreditable Cold War past, but who have alternate claims to status that may subvert or counteract this association. Like 'ostalgie' and other nostalgic practices and orientations, ironic consumption serves to define and circumscribe interpretive communities (Radway 1984); unlike 'ostalgie', however, ironic consumption explicitly allows individuals to maintain a critical (and easily renounceable) distance between self and object.

Further, it makes sense to consider ironic consumption as a ritualized form of status anxiety, the performance of which mediates the tension between the compet-

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<sup>1</sup> Two alternatives should also be noted: a) attempt to 'pass' as local (a strategy not available to most tourists, bogged down with the practical constraints of being laden with American sign-equipment of language, dress, and demeanor), and b) forgo touristic consumption altogether, for which the tourist altogether relinquishes any post-travel use of material objects as props in relations with family and friends. In both cases, these alternatives require further rethinking of the uses of touristic acquisitions, a matter for future consideration.

ing status claims of multiple social locations and experiences – in this instance, being both a ‘winner’ and ‘loser’ of the Cold War in various respects (political, social, economic, ideological, moral, and so on). I return here to Bourdieu’s understanding of the relationship between class and consumption, whereby one’s lived experience of class is inscribed upon oneself in the form of a certain class-based logic of tastes, preferences, and disposition, and expressed as a function of one’s economic and cultural capital. Ironic consumption is essentially a positioning strategy, as various actors jockey for status within a social system. Through this lens, ironic consumption is clearly affiliated with high cultural capital, for at least two reasons. First, you can consume something ironically only if you are knowledgeable about its material and symbolic provenance. Second, irony itself is a skill that relies on a degree of cosmopolitanism and abstract and critical reasoning faculties that are both privileged by, and cultivated within, elite educational spheres. Particularly for those who find themselves less able to compete for status on the basis of economic capital – i.e. just buy really expensive souvenirs – ironic consumption allows the individual to pass off their constraint (in economic terms) as choice (a cultural choice). As Bourdieu makes clear, this should not be construed as “settling” for something deemed inferior; rather it is a positive status positioning strategy used to delineate class distinctions. For the American tourist to Eastern Europe, for example, the lines are between both the extravagant (read: intellectually lazy) upper classes, who only travel there as a form of passive consumption, and the sincere but uncritical (read: intellectually ignorant) “patriotic” tourists who go to witness the spectacle of presumptive Eastern European hangover from the communist era. The ironic consumer, like the informed and adventurous consumer of, say, ethnic food (another one of Bourdieu’s explicitly described fields of cultural consumption), uses consumption as a battle to position themselves as being culturally (read also: intellectually) superior.

This conflicted nationalism, arising from a context of the economic uncertainties and moral ambiguities experienced by Americans (and particularly those born after the Baby Boom ends in the mid-1960s) is an example of what Ann Swidler (1986) calls “unsettledness” – that is, any time when people’s usual habits and skills become insufficient in terms of navigating their everyday lives. According to Swidler, the way in which people use their cultural repertoires – that is, the sum total of an individual’s exposure to stories, traditions, experiences, material artifacts, et cetera – is different in unsettled times than it is in settled circumstances. So, whereas people’s approach to everyday life in settled times is commonsense, flexible, relatively uncritical, and seemingly natural, people navigate unsettled times in a much more ritualistic and ideological manner, which is the point at which culture becomes an overt and highly contested terrain. In this sense, ironic consumption seems to occupy a middle ground – it’s a form of consumption more critical than buying postcards and “I Heart Bulgaria” t-shirts, but not as ideological as buying Cold War era military regalia as a form of trophy – the ironic consumer buys the trophy, but wields it as critical observer rather than as victor, and legitimizes this position as a form of humor.

In this way, ironic consumption is more closely affiliated with unsettledness in the sense of being a ritualistic (rather than habitual) practice – the ironically purchased medal is a sacred object in the Durkheimian sense of being heavily laden with symbolic import, and therefore requiring deliberate and careful handling – because of course their symbolic resonance makes them powerful and even dangerous. In this vein, we can consider ironic consumption as a variant of “civil inattention” (Goffman 1971). In a common example, civil inattention may occur in a crowded subway car, where one may be pressed against virtual strangers in violation of personal space norms. To manage this common-place norm violation, the strangers must not, under any circumstances, acknowledge one another as human beings, only as objects; one can only safely interact with strangers with an appropriate space between parties, and one can only safely interact with strangers under close quarters by *not* interacting with them. Similarly, within the context of ironic consumption, the tourist manages their interaction with a sacred (dangerous, uncertain) and potentially discredited past by keeping a safe distance between themselves (as identity-objects and status-objects) and the souvenir object representing that past. The ritual of ironic consumption allows the consumer to be both the winner and the loser of the Cold War.

*“History and biography and the relations between the two...”*

The dual status of ‘winner’ and ‘loser’ is available to those who experienced the Cold War from either side of the so-called Iron Curtain, and yet the American who has ‘won’ the Cold War politically but ‘lost’ it economically has a somewhat different orientation to the relics of the Cold War than the Bulgarian, or Russian, or Czech who has both ‘won’ and ‘lost’ on entirely different terms from both the American and from one another. For all of the palpable unease in the relationship of Eastern Europeans with the socialist era, it is precisely this embeddedness of personal biography into recent history that provides a readily available discourse for articulating their current experience to the past – not only by virtue of having experienced a fairly radical change in political, economic, and social circumstances in everyday life within the context of personal biography (even if, for younger cohorts, indirectly experienced via older generations), but also for having the concept of “The Change” to draw upon, which has a certain everyday salience that is utterly lacking in the Western conception of the Cold War (and is more closely approximated by 9/11 for the typical American in terms of being a collective watershed moment within recent memory). For Americans, the end of the Cold War lacks the same omnipresent salience because for most, this moment did not radically transform a way of life in material terms, even as it profoundly reshaped the conceptual landscape and compromised the efficacy of strategies of action that relied on the existence of the Cold War repertoire of cultural tropes and ideological polarities. The American version of

“The Change” is more problematic because it is a sort of cultural black hole – that is, salient only by its absence of tangible economic, political, geographic debris, a war victory without monuments. For Americans, the Cold War passes immediately, and completely, into the realm of history; in winning the Cold War, Americans lost the symbolic equipment of the Cold War, and lack the language to articulate this loss.

For those whose individual experience diverges, sometimes sharply, with the collective identity of Americans as the ‘winners’ of the Cold War, the loss of the symbolic equipment of the Cold War is compounded by the failure of a new narrative to emerge that legitimizes the American (capitalist) system while offering the same type of moral clarity and widespread salience. The Occupy Wall Street protests highlighted the scope of this loss, both for those whose sympathies lie with “the 99%” and with those who lodge a litany of micro-critiques of the capitalist system that failed to cohere into a single sustained narrative, as well as for the would-be critics of Occupy Wall Street, whose attempts to vilify protesters as radical Marxists/ Communists/ Socialists rings to the modern ear as quaint as calling someone a scallywag or a hobo. Moreover, this vilification is not just quaint but also impotent – most Americans, including most Occupy sympathizers, have so thoroughly internalized free-market ideology that being called a Socialist seems worthier of a shrug than a shudder of fear.

Ironic consumption reflects this rhetorical absence through non-verbal gesture. It therefore seems appropriate to wonder about similar gaps in the available language with which we may express a sense of conflicted nationalism, and the manner in which ironic consumption and related processes / gestures may be used to bridge those gaps. There’s no shortage of recent historical circumstances about which the typical American may be conflicted or ambivalent, from Vietnam to Iraq, nor is there any indication that either the spoils or the ravages of these wars are broadly shared. Nor is conflicted nationalism necessarily salient only for Americans traveling abroad; insofar as nationality is an identity fraught with tensions on the basis of gender, race, religion, ancestry, and the like, national identity is routinely invoked or implicated in conversations about everything from police brutality to social security provisions and beyond. This analysis raises important questions about the nature and scope of ambivalence in touristic consumption and the relationship of ironic consumers to producers, but also about the broader generalizability of ironic processes and performance to various facets of social life.

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