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The First Full Shelves: *Gazeta Stołeczna* and Warsaw's First Supermarket, 1990–1994

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After the end of communism, foreign direct investment in Eastern Europe increased dramatically. In December 1990, the Austrian chain BILLA opened the first foreign-owned supermarket in Poland. I examine foreign-owned supermarkets as key spaces of encounter between West and East in which neo-liberal ideas about urban space, everyday life, material consumption and retail were promulgated, contested and routinised. Examining coverage of the Warsaw BILLA shops in *Gazeta Stołeczna*, the local edition of the widely read and arguably most trusted daily newspaper in Poland, I draw from literature in consumer history as well as economic and urban geography alongside concepts from business and marketing to argue that local actors, and in particular the emerging independent press, helped naturalise neo-liberal values about consumption and retail in early post-communism.

On a Friday morning in December 1990, less than a year after the dissolution of the Communist Party and just one day prior to opposition leader Lech Wałęsa's inauguration as the first democratically elected president of Poland, the Austrian supermarket chain BILLA opened the country's first foreign-owned supermarket in Warsaw. Just two months later, the chain, 'already well-known to Varsovians' according to the city's foremost daily newspaper, announced its ambitions to open a second shop: 'there will be another BILLA', read the headline. The newspaper noted the popularity of the chain, as well as new frustrations: 'every day, around 2500 customers visit BILLA. On Fridays and Saturdays one must wait in line for a cart', simultaneously an ironic inconvenience reminiscent of communist-era lines and a symbol of a new era of abundance.¹

BILLA was one of a small number of 'pioneering firms' that invested in Eastern European retail in the early 1990s, when the chaotic economic climate deterred many potential investors.² Joining forces with a Vienna-based trading company headed by two Polish-born businessmen as well as a domestic firm as per Polish joint venture law, BILLA held the majority share. The joint venture's ambitious goal, spelled out in a June 1990 application to the Polish Foreign Investment Agency, was to 'create a commercial network . . . in order to fully meet the needs of the population . . . [and] improve the commercial infrastructure in Poland', identifying the chain's niche by projecting an image of underserved, dissatisfied consumers.³ In its early days, BILLA indeed found a receptive market in Poland: by 1991, nearly 20,000 patrons – over one per cent of the city's population – visited the shop each week, often competing for shopping carts.⁴

¹ 'Będzie Następna Billa', *Gazeta Stołeczna*, 23 Feb. 1991. On grocery lines during communism, see Małgorzata Mazurek, *Spółeczeństwo kolejki: O doświadczeniach niedoboru 1945–1989* (Warsaw: TRIO, 2010).

² John Dawson and Masao Mukoyama, eds., *Global Strategies in Retailing: Asian and European Experiences* (London: Routledge, 2013), 12.

³ Application for establishing a company with foreign capital, 11 June 1990, Archiwum Akt Nowych Warsaw (AAN), Agencja do Spraw Inwestycji Zagranicznych (ASIZ), BI-44 1868/1, 2.

⁴ 'Będzie Następna Billa'.

Between opening day in 1990 and the chain's acquisition by a German corporation in 1996, BILLA would open only a relatively small number of shops in Poland, including a second in Warsaw. Yet even for smaller chains such as BILLA, 'numbers belied their importance', according to the Polish Institute for Home Market and Consumption.⁵ Establishing a foreign footprint on the Polish retail landscape, foreign actors helped to introduce new norms of consumer practice and retail trade to the capital city. In this article, I build upon Victoria De Grazia's effort to historicise multinational supermarket chains as 'a model, a catalyst, and a sustained presence' through which foreign actors and their local allies reshape consumer norms.⁶ Similarly to De Grazia's study of American ventures in post-1945 Western Europe, meanwhile, major changes were taking shape across Polish society at the time BILLA came to Warsaw. I therefore emphasise the coinciding emergence of the free press in Poland in early post-communism with the beginnings of internationalisation and privatisation in Eastern European retail to show how certain local actors helped to mediate, interpret and affirm neoliberal ideals of consumption in tandem with foreign investors.

Framing post-communist reform as, in part, a quotidian process of routinising neoliberal values, I tell the story of the two BILLA shops in Warsaw in the early 1990s, arguing that foreign-owned supermarkets constituted a significant early arena in which ideas about consumption and retail developed in Western neoliberal capitalist contexts were promulgated, debated and naturalised in post-communist Eastern Europe.⁷ I centre Warsaw daily *Gazeta Stołeczna*, arguing that as one of the primary local actors responsible for managing and mediating the circulation of information about foreign-owned supermarkets and the post-communist food shopping experience, the emerging free press was essential to the naturalisation of these new modes of consumption. As I will show, the neoliberal values which shaped post-communist consumption were thus borne of interaction between both foreign and local actors, rather than imported wholesale or mimicked in ersatz reproduction.

Using *Stołeczna*'s coverage as evidence of the reproduction and promulgation of particular neoliberal ideals in local spaces of daily life, I illuminate how the newspaper reacted to and presented the multinational retail model of the late twentieth century, which privileged transnational capital, demanded more labour and responsibility on the part of individual consumers and fostered new inequalities within the emerging consumer landscape of post-communist Poland. First, I examine *Stołeczna*'s coverage of the spatial and temporal dimensions of BILLA's entry into Poland, drawing from urban geography research into the phenomenon of food injustice in neoliberal cities. Although Warsaw's primacy in the minds of investors led to an early focus on the capital, cost-rationalising logic increasingly drew large-format retailers to the urban periphery. I use the lens of 'neoliberal urbanism' to illuminate how the newspaper's attention to the ways in which the peripheralisation of food retail began to alter urban shoppers' mobilities and daily routines functioned to naturalise new geographies of retail and consumption. I then assess the newspaper's presentation of the Western chain supermarket's preference for automated technology and standardised regulatory frameworks. These characteristics both privileged foreign goods distributed via centralised supply chains and fostered a growing emphasis on consumer labour over in-store customer service or protection from the state. Finally, I link *Stołeczna*'s attention to price and affordability as a key priority of the post-communist consumer to the development of an increasingly depersonalised, market-oriented, individualist atmosphere of consumption.

Situated after 1989, this article illuminates an era in twentieth-century consumer history not yet analysed in the robust historiographies of either communist-era consumer culture or the 'supermarket revolution' in the United States and Western Europe.⁸ The significant body of ethnographic work on

⁵ Cited in Dawson and Mukoyama, *Global Strategies in Retailing*, 12.

⁶ De Grazia illuminates supermarkets as 'major agents of neoliberal capitalism' as they made their way around the world. Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 398.

⁷ On the establishment of neoliberal hegemony in Europe, see Philipp Ther, *Europe since 1989: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

⁸ On communist-era consumer culture, see Paulina Bren and Mary Neuburger, eds., *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) and David Crowley and Susan

material consumption and daily life after 1989 has been less attentive to retail as such, focusing instead on domestic space and practice, the symbolic position of food and other goods and issues of gender.⁹ Historians have illuminated the dynamic culture of consumption in Eastern Europe prior to 1989, highlighting not only vibrant networks of informal consumption but also the institutionalisation of modern retail formats including the self-service grocery store.¹⁰ This has helped to uncover important continuities in consumer experiences across the 1989 divide. While privatised and self-service retail existed prior to 1989, the introduction of foreign-owned retail in Eastern Europe in the 1990s nonetheless marks a significant historical shift. As Patrick Hyder Patterson notes, ‘globalisation in its strictest sense, that is, expanding multinational coordination of business ownership and governance’, transformed Eastern European retail only after 1989.¹¹ Unlike more informal transnational transfers during the Cold War, the post-communist period saw the ownership and authority over food retail distribution shift from state to primarily foreign multinational firms beginning in the early 1990s.

These particular changes were not merely a product of communism’s collapse, however, nor were they fully analogous to historical systemic ruptures such as that of 1945. I situate the entry of foreign retailers within not only the opening of the former bloc but also the globalisation of American-style retailing, a process which accelerated dramatically in the late twentieth century as neoliberal trade models privileging multinational retail corporations became increasingly ubiquitous.¹² I build upon the work of economic geographers who contextualise the ‘supermarketisation’ of Eastern Europe as part of the sudden ‘emergence of a select group of food and general merchandise retailers’, primarily American and Western European firms, within the global market, previously the near-exclusive domain of manufacturing and production-based firms, in the 1980s and 1990s.¹³ In this sense, the Westernisation of retail and consumption in Eastern Europe after 1989 was more directly entangled in the global spread of neoliberalism than the informal exchanges that preceded the fall of communism or comparable transatlantic transfers after 1945. Thus far, however, retail history has largely focused on the American and Western European cases, capturing transatlantic international expansion as part of Cold War currents but showing trepidation about transcending the 1989 divide,

E. Reid, eds., *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010). On the ascendance of the supermarket model in the United States, see Tracey Deutsch, *Building a Housewife’s Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). On self-service supermarkets in Western Europe, see Lydia Langer and Ralph Jessen, eds., *Transformations of Retailing in Europe after 1945* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing 2012).

⁹ On consumption after communism, see Daphne Berdahl, *Where the World Ended: Re-unification and Identity in the German Borderland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Melissa L. Caldwell and Marion Nestle, eds., *Food & Everyday Life in the Postsocialist World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Yuson Jung, *Balkan Blues: Consumer Politics after State Socialism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019); Caroline Humphrey and Ruth Mandel, eds., *Markets and Moralities: Ethnographies of Postsocialism* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2002); and Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery, eds., *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000). On continuities, see Krisztina Fehérvári, *Politics in Color and Concrete: Socialist Materialities and the Middle Class in Hungary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

¹⁰ See Patrick Hyder Patterson, *Bought and Sold: Living and Losing the Good Life in Socialist Yugoslavia* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2011) and ‘Making Markets Marxist? The East European Grocery Store from Rationing to Rationality to Rationalizations’, in Warren Belasco and Roger Horowitz, eds., *Food Chains: From Farmyard to Shopping Cart* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 196–216; and David Crowley, ‘Warsaw’s Shops, Stalinism and the Thaw’, in Susan E. Reid and David Crowley, eds., *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-war Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2000), 25–47. For a recent historical work that transcends the 1989 divide, see Jill Massino, *Ambiguous Transitions: Gender, the State, and Everyday Life in Socialist and Postsocialist Romania* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019).

¹¹ Patterson, ‘Making Markets Marxist?’, 197.

¹² Ngai-Ling Sum, ‘Wal-Martization and CSR-ization in Developing Countries’, in Peter Utting and Jose Carlos Marques, eds., *Corporate Social Responsibility and Regulatory Governance: Towards Inclusive Development?* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 50–76.

¹³ Neil Wrigley, Neil M. Coe and Andrew Currah, ‘Globalizing Retail: Conceptualizing the Distribution-Based Transnational Corporation (TNC)’, *Progress in Human Geography* 29, 4 (2005), 438.

consequently obscuring the role of eastward expansion in the global establishment of neoliberal hegemony and resulting ascendance of Western European multinational chains.¹⁴

Foreign investors themselves, however, were not the sole determiners of popular engagement with and understanding of neoliberal reform in Eastern Europe. Transnational retailing requires the support and cooperation of the host market; indeed, researchers in economic geography have argued that multinational retailers are characterised by a high degree of direct engagement with local 'markets and cultures of consumption' relative to their production-based counterparts.¹⁵ Scholars of retail history have likewise deployed the notion of 'embeddedness' to describe how even retail institutions proffering standardised mass consumption must create localised ties.¹⁶ I contend that both multinational retailers such as BILLA and their local allies constituted critical institutional actors in the larger project of establishing neoliberal hegemony in Eastern Europe.

Recent work has illuminated the local press as one such external actor holding 'substantial power to influence the public's perception of a [foreign firm's] legitimacy' such that corporations frequently 'seek to use the media to accomplish their public relations objectives'.¹⁷ This was particularly apparent in the relationship between BILLA and Warsaw daily *Gazeta Stołeczna*, which printed advertisements for BILLA but also comprised a key source of information for readers planning shopping trips. *Stołeczna's* reporting on BILLA can therefore be read simultaneously as a source of empirical data on the shops' hours, prices and inventory, and as evidence of the way that domestic commercial actors shaped the emerging market via interplay with foreign investors. Reporting on a privately-owned yet publicly-situated site in which ideas about 'normal' standards of material welfare, the purportedly 'natural' or inevitable character of the free market and the mythologised 'reunion' of Eastern Europe with its Western neighbours converged, *Stołeczna* acted as a crucial mediator between shopper and supermarket, contributing to the public understanding of changes in retail on a routine basis. The early media discourse surrounding foreign-owned supermarkets therefore offers critical insight into how ideas about the 'new normal' were gradually established after the end of communism.

Reporting on BILLA: A Warsaw Daily Goes to the Supermarket

Stołeczna is the Warsaw edition of the nationwide daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the first independent newspaper in post-communist Poland. Prior to 1989, the Polish media was dominated by highly censored publications including the party paper *Trybuna Ludu* and, since 1982, the government paper *Rzeczpospolita*. As part of the Round Table Agreement hashed out by the opposition movement and trade union *Solidarność* (Solidarity) and the communist government in the spring of 1989, the formerly underground opposition newspaper *Tygodnik Mazowsze* was relaunched in May 1989 as *Gazeta Wyborcza* under the leadership of prominent dissident Adam Michnik.¹⁸

¹⁴ Like the historiography of post-communism more generally, historical research on transnational supermarkets after 1989/1991 tends to relegate the subject to concluding chapters. On historicising post-communism, see Ghia Nodia, "'Chasing the Meaning of Post-Communism": A Transitional Phenomenon or Something to Stay?', *Contemporary European History* 9, 2 (2000), 269–83.

¹⁵ Wrigley, Coe and Currah, 'Globalizing Retail'.

¹⁶ Tracey Deutsch, 'Exploring New Insights into Retail History', *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 2, 1 (2010), 130–38.

¹⁷ Mike Sibley and Gina Nadas, 'Multinational Corporations and the Competition for Media Influence in Developing Countries', *Business and Society Review* 111, 1 (2006), 59–60. See also Alfredo Jimenez, Jonas Holmqvist and Diego Jimenez, 'Cross-Border Communication and Private Participation Projects: The Role of Genealogical Language Distance', *Management International Review* 59, 6 (2019), 1009–33 and Douglas Dow, Ilya R.P. Cuypers and Gokhan Ertug, 'The Effects of within-Country Linguistic and Religious Diversity on Foreign Acquisitions', *Journal of International Business Studies* 47, 3 (2016), 319–46.

¹⁸ On the press in the Solidarity movement, see Siobhan Doucette, 'Censoring Solidarity: Freedom of Speech and its Denial in Poland, 1980–1981', *Contemporary European History*, 29, 3 (2020), 325–38. On the central role which women played in the publication of *Tygodnik Mazowsze*, and their subsequent obscurement after 1989, see Shana Penn, *Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

In the early 1990s, a disillusioned populace frustrated by decades of censorship and propaganda sought sources of truth and credible commentary on the Polish future. *Rzeczpospolita*, although formally independent by June 1989, was still widely perceived as a state publication, eventually compelling its editors to seek out foreign investors, evincing the legitimacy initially offered by foreign actors even in the realm of the press. By contrast, not only did *Wyborcza* benefit in this regard from its association with the opposition but, by September 1990, the paper had announced independence from Solidarity as well, due to internal divisions in part related to differing opinions on economic reform. Analysing pro-market rhetoric in *Wyborcza*, Jacek Kochanowicz argues that the paper represented ‘an unequivocal supporter of the market transition and perhaps the country’s most important pro-market opinion-forming platform’.¹⁹ *Wyborcza*’s popularity – in 1994, copies sold hovered just under half a million, greater than its readership today and the highest in the country at the time – positioned the newspaper and its local subsidiaries’ voices among the loudest in the post-communist arena, particularly when it came to economic change. As journalist Agnieszka Romaszewska-Guzy, who worked for prominent Polish periodicals as well as major newspapers in the West in this period, observed, in the early post-communist period, *Wyborcza* ‘[told] everyone what to think’.²⁰

As a local daily, *Stoleczna* maintained a less overtly political tenor than its national counterpart. Responsive to both advertisers and readership, consumer bases in their own right, the paper faced many of the same basic economic considerations dictating operations at BILLA. In an effort to establish itself as a desirable commodity, the paper positioned itself as a reference guide for changes in consumption. Whereas *Wyborcza* offered high-level commentary on reform policies, the local supplement reacted to their implementation and manifestation on the ground, assessing which changes progressed relatively smoothly and which encountered greater resistance. *Stoleczna*’s stories on BILLA were not confined to a business section, appearing varyingly as front-page stories, updates on market reform, advertisements and editorials. At times, the paper presented foreign investment as urban drama, describing the frustrations and complaints of customers and exposing the nefarious ploys of capitalist managers whilst simultaneously affirming the market conditions in which BILLA operated. Notions of transparency shaped this pursuit as well: explicitly pursuing ‘the truth’ distinguished the paper from its communist predecessors while, importantly, engaging readers.²¹ *Stoleczna* offers the perspective of a local actor nominally in support of neoliberal reform; that its coverage was, at times, critical of BILLA reflects an uneasy alliance between foreign actors and even the more market-oriented locals.

Consumers, meanwhile, wrote to *Stoleczna* to praise or complain about their encounters with BILLA on several occasions, further indicating the centrality of the media to the broader consumer encounter with transformation. In this way, *Stoleczna* contributed on a regular basis to the routinisation and affirmation of neoliberal modes of commerce and consumption at the level of the everyday. For its readers, the daily paper was as much a part of the quotidian *consumer* landscape as the daily (or, increasingly, weekly) shopping trip; reading their mutual consumption by Varsovian shoppers helps us understand the entangled nature of such institutions in remaking normative structures of daily practice.

Neoliberalising the Urban Trajectories of Polish Consumers

BILLA’s entry took place within a wider context of growing investment from foreign retail in the Polish capital.²² As scholars of neoliberal urbanism have shown, cities emerged as ‘strategically important

¹⁹ Jacek Kochanowicz, ‘Private Suffering, Public Benefit: Market Rhetoric in Poland, 1989–1993’, *Eastern European Politics and Societies* 28, 1 (2014), 104.

²⁰ Krzysztof Dzięciołowski, ‘Is There a Chance for Non-Partisan Media in Poland?’, *Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper* (2017), 20.

²¹ AM Kalinovsky has argued for greater consideration of ‘trust as a category of analysis’ in studies of 1989 and its aftermath. AM Kalinovsky, ‘New Histories of the End of the Cold War and the Late Twentieth Century’, *Contemporary European History* 27, 1 (2018), 150.

²² Following a series of law-permitting joint ventures, the late 1980s and 1990s saw a dramatic increase in the flow of foreign capital into Poland. A year before BILLA applied for legal status as a joint venture, *Wyborcza* reported on the staggering number of permits the Foreign Investment Agency granted in its first six months of operation: 203 permits totalling US

areas' for neoliberal 'rollback strategies' aimed at attracting investment via regulatory concessions and development incentives.²³ Many foreign investors, focusing their efforts on major cities, acquired former state enterprises, but supermarket chains such as BILLA required larger areas to hold their extensive standard inventories, which *Stołeczna* reassured readers would be available in the new shops. Such foreign investment strategies contributed over time to greater retail suburbanisation, encouraging individualised automobility as well as weekend and off-hours shopping trips. This functioned as part of the broader process of what scholars have called 'urban neoliberalisation', which 'mobilise[s] city space as an arena both for market-oriented economic growth and for elite consumption practices', and as such intensifies urban inequality.²⁴

Beginning in the 1950s, Western European grocery stores began to move to suburban areas in response to rising rent prices and parking limitations in city centres. This provoked further increases in the size of shops, encouraging the proliferation of supermarkets and, later, hypermarkets, distinguished, albeit imprecisely, by their combining of supermarket and department store inventories. This paralleled the earlier shift in the United States from smaller food shops in urban centres to supermarkets located in urban peripheries, featuring large parking lots, anchoring shopping malls and providing growing suburban populations with a one-stop option for their shopping needs.²⁵ The proliferation of supermarkets in the West gradually began to discourage 'traditional' shopping patterns, characterised by frequent trips to numerous smaller, more specialised shops located in city centres. The peripheralisation of retailing, as Clifford M. Guy explains, thus helped to 'divorce shopping from its wider business and recreational context . . . [and] become a much more single-purpose activity'.²⁶

At the end of the communist period, the vast majority of Polish shops were concentrated in cities and the average floorspace of the estimated 150,000 retail shops in Poland was only eleven square metres.²⁷ Rather than take over an existing retail space, therefore, BILLA found a home for its first storefront in a 2500 square metre vacant building on *ulica* Ostrobramska, a thoroughfare in Warsaw's Praga district on the eastern bank of the Vistula River. The second shop, which opened in October 1992, filled a 1200 square metre hall in a former trolleybus depot on the corner of *ulica* Chełmska and *ulica* Czerniakowska. The size of the shops represented an ongoing interest of the newspaper, reflecting the dramatic shift in the scale of retail operations after 1989. *Stołeczna's* reporting on both Warsaw BILLA shops frequently noted their size in square metres, enticing readers with a sense of the shift in scale awaiting their shopping trips.

Stołeczna was likewise attentive to capturing the range of BILLA's inventory, noting that the first shop's shelves carried over 250 brands and listing some by name, such as Wiener Kaffee. In 1991, the newspaper reported that the chain planned to expand its holdings to 800 brands with the opening of the second store.²⁸ By the time the second BILLA opened, the assortment had been expanded to 5,000 individual items, 'from cleaning products to stationery to car parts'.²⁹ Often, *Stołeczna's* reporting took the form of lists, which served to emphasise the variety: one article highlighted BILLA's

\$220 million in investments. Krystyna Naszkowska, 'WIELKI KAPITAŁ Podobno Już Napływa...', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 30 June 1989, 6. By June 1990, over 1,000 such ventures were operational, doing business in Poland only a year after the conclusion of the Round Table Agreement and the formal beginning of post-communist reforms in Poland.

²³ Jamie Peck, Nik Theodore and Neil Brenner, 'Neoliberal Urbanism: Models, Moments, Mutations', *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 29, 1 (2009), 49, 58.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁵ Kim Humphery, *Shelf Life: Supermarkets and the Changing Cultures of Consumption* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²⁶ Clifford M. Guy, 'Controlling New Retail Spaces: The Impress of Planning Policies in Western Europe', *Urban Studies* 35, 5–6 (1998), 954.

²⁷ John A. Dawson and John S. Henley, 'Changes in the Structure of Grocery Retailing in Poland after 1989', in Ajay K. Manrai and H. Lee Meadow, eds., *Global Perspectives in Marketing for the 21st Century* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 279–82.

²⁸ 'Będzie Następna Billa'.

²⁹ 'Supermarket w zajezdni', *Gazeta Stołeczna*, 7 Sept. 1992.

selection of beers from around the world – Polish *Okocim*, Slovak *Zlatý Bažant* and *Radegast*, Danish *Carlsberg* and Israeli *Maccabee* – as well as the numerous bread options including Sunflower, Soybean and Soya.

In August of 1992, the paper announced a new ‘supermarket in the depot’, juxtaposing BILLA with the large infrastructural space, which after several decades serving Warsaw’s transit system had become a clearinghouse for discontinued buses, highlighting not only the scaling up of shopping but also the displacement of public infrastructure with privatised commercial spaces.³⁰ Changing urban mobilities comprised a recurring theme in *Stoleczna*’s coverage of BILLA. One 1991 article decried that:

the designers of *ulica Ostrobramska* apparently care only about the comfort of drivers, not taking into account the safety of pedestrians . . . to get to [BILLA], you have to walk 300 metres unnecessarily . . . for people who are curious about shopping at BILLA (not everyone has a car), it is an ordeal. No wonder that residents are trampled . . . on their way to the store. There is a lot of traffic there and the more impatient cross between speeding cars.³¹

Scholars of the neoliberalisation of urban space have emphasised the ‘elimination of public monopolies for the provision of municipal services’ including mass transit and the subsequent development of privatised, autocentric zones of consumption as central ‘destructive’ and ‘creative’ processes, respectively, by which cities are transformed.³² As Richard W. Longstreth has argued, the gradual reorientation of American shopping culture away from downtown, pedestrian shopping and toward private automobiles and suburban parking lots in the mid-twentieth century ‘rendered many long-established retail districts obsolete’, ushering in a new era of automobility.³³ Privileging the use of private automobiles via its relationship to the cityscape and physically displacing prior systems of public transportation, the Ostrobramska BILLA’s suburban setting reflected the geographies of consumption and retail that had emerged in the West in the previous half century.³⁴

In the early 1990s, the Ostrobramska BILLA seemed remote from the perspective of Varsovians on the other side of the river. Although BILLA boasted large parking lots, car ownership initially remained quite low in Poland. Over time, however, private automobiles were increasingly seen as a means of acquiring social prestige, linking consumers not only to private ownership more generally but also to the otherwise inaccessible consolidated consumption sites emerging on city peripheries. The literature on the development of suburban supermarkets in the United States has revealed how such shifts disproportionately advantaged wealthier suburban residents.³⁵ In the Eastern European case, Erika Nagy argues that edge-of-city shopping sites likewise disproportionately impacted ‘less mobile pensioners and lower-income households’ who increasingly ‘face[d] long journeys to shop within the city’.³⁶ Simultaneously, as Melanie Bedore argues, ‘shifting consumer landscapes easily lend themselves to depoliticized narratives about the need for individual responsibility,

³⁰ ‘Supermarket w zajezdni’. *Stoleczna*’s commentary on the installation of a supermarket in the Chelmska bus depot also included some consideration of the implications of privatisation for workers employed by the public transit authority in Warsaw. *Stoleczna* interviewed the transit authority director, who told the paper that ‘apart from paying the rent, BILLA will donate around several hundred million zlotys to a social fund for the [transit authority] work crew’. This served to portray BILLA’s role as investor as a quasi-philanthropic one, seemingly contributing not only to the improvement of the consumer environment but that of labour as well.

³¹ ‘Ostrobramska Nie Dla Ludzi’, *Gazeta Stoleczna*, 23 Sept. 1991, 2.

³² Peck, Theodore and Brenner, ‘Neoliberal Urbanism’, 60.

³³ Richard W. Longstreth, *The Drive-In, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914–1941* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), xiv.

³⁴ Neil Wrigley and Michelle Lowe, *Reading Retail: A Geographical Perspective on Retailing and Consumption Spaces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

³⁵ Andrew Deener, ‘The Origins of the Food Desert: Urban Inequality as Infrastructural Exclusion’, *Social Forces: A Scientific Medium of Social Study and Interpretation* 95, 3 (2017), 1285–1309.

³⁶ Erika Nagy, ‘Winners and Losers in the Transformation of City Centre Retailing in East Central Europe’, *European Urban and Regional Studies* 8, 4 (2001), 346.

entrepreneurialism, and prudence', obscuring inequalities by advancing a neoliberal consumer value system which prioritises individualised consumer satisfaction.³⁷

Stoleczna characterised BILLA's target audience as 'motorists who supply the household once a week, or less often', linking individualised automobility with bulk shopping.³⁸ The parking lots of suburban supermarkets, as they were conceived in the United States, encouraged large-haul shopping trips conducted on a weekly basis and transported via private automobile. Supermarkets stocked a much larger array of goods in a single location, replacing the convenience of proximity with that of abundance and, in turn, centring the shopping trip around weekends rather than weekdays. While consumers, especially in urban spaces, still visited small shops located closer to their homes, these trips were increasingly viewed as supplemental to the weekly visit to the suburban supermarket.

The newspaper reported on opening day at the second BILLA that 'despite the many attractive goods and the low price ratio, there were very few people with full baskets', but the staff appeared unfazed:

'Our store is focused on a customer who makes large purchases once a week' – says the cashier. 'We hope that those who came only for reconnaissance today will become our regular customers in the future'.³⁹

In a 1993 article entitled 'Shopping for the Whole Week', *Stoleczna* reflected on this shift in shoppers' routines. Not only were the 'wide range of goods' conducive to large hauls, the paper noted, but BILLA and similar supermarkets also stocked non-grocery items such as cosmetics, toiletries, household appliances and books, enabling shoppers to 'make purchases that meet the needs of the household for a long time'.⁴⁰ This observation appealed to social concerns that had arisen in the previous decade (and earlier) as consumers felt compelled to hoard certain goods, most infamously toilet paper, due to recurrent material shortages.

The newspaper also used weekly shopping to differentiate BILLA and other foreign supermarkets from local competitors. By 1994, BILLA competed with the German supermarket chain HIT as well as a number of local 'grocery stores designated supermarkets by their owners', a qualified phrasing indicating the newspaper's scepticism vis-à-vis domestic ventures in capitalist retail, some of which had begun in the late 1980s.⁴¹ Surveying the growing array, *Stoleczna* used weekly shopping as its measuring stick, arguing that 'for weekly shopping you can go to [German-owned hypermarket] HIT or BILLA. The rest, although they are called supermarkets, look more like large neighbourhood shops'.⁴² Despite seemingly comparable inventories – by 1994, BILLA's 18,000 products were rivalled by the 17,000 offered at Polish-owned Marcpol – *Stoleczna* maintained that it was 'Weekly BILLA [*Tygodniowa BILLA*]', as the subsection on BILLA was titled, that was the real supermarket, centring foreign-owned chains as the genuine changemakers in the urban food retail landscape.

³⁷ Melanie Bedore, 'Food Desertification: Situating Choice and Class Relations within an Urban Political Economy of Declining Food Access', *Studies in Social Justice* 8, 2 (2014), 213.

³⁸ 'Billa W Porywach Droższa', *Gazeta Stołeczna*, 23 Oct. 1991.

³⁹ 'Pierwszy Dzień Billi', *Gazeta Stołeczna*, 10 Oct. 1992.

⁴⁰ As *Stoleczna* wrote in 1993, 'the meat-buying housewife [*pani domu*] can also buy *Pamiętnik Anastazji P.*', the controversial tell-all alleging relationships between the author, the Polish journalist and writer Marzena Domaros (alias Anastazja Potocka) and various political figures published in 1992, alongside more mundane reading such as cookbooks and, for children, fairy tales and children's histories. 'Zakupy Na Cały Tydzień', *Gazeta Stołeczna*, 6 Jan. 1993. Simultaneously invoking the growing number of women who left the waged labour sector after 1989 for the purportedly 'housewife's pursuits' of shopping, cooking and childcare and one of the foremost, and deeply gendered, morality scandals of the early 1990s, *Stoleczna* embedded BILLA's striking range of goods as part of much broader sociocultural changes in this period.

⁴¹ Janina Blikowska and Magda Kłodecka, 'Supermarket – Sklep Niezwykły', *Gazeta Stołeczna*, 5–6 Nov. 1994.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Over time, weekend shopping as encouraged by the peripheralisation of shops also 'became both pleasurable and fashionable' due to its association with foreign chains and Western-style consumption.⁴³ The new supermarkets also offered extended opening hours, transforming the consumer relationship to the temporal division of both workday and week. In the Polish case, 'the traditional, Catholic image of the weekend (and Sunday in particular) [underwent] dramatic changes' after 1989 as a result of changes in both retail and labour.⁴⁴ Without incentives to work overtime, communist-era workers had more flexibility when it came to shopping, whereas the more transactional nature of work in market capitalism rendered time a more precious resource. The one-stop shopping and weekend and nighttime hours of the suburban supermarket worked within this new temporal landscape.

In January 1992, an article in the *Market* supplement to *Stoleczna* wrote of the emerging culture of evening and nighttime shopping. Whereas the Polish manager of a neighbourhood grocery store in downtown Warsaw expressed his doubts that it would be possible to transform Poland, a 'nation of traditionalists', into a land of evening shoppers, the paper observed the number of Poles already 'vot[ing] with their feet' by shopping after 7 pm.⁴⁵ At BILLA, where the automated sliding doors welcomed customers seven days a week and until 8 pm on weekdays, one manager told *Stoleczna* that 'an average of 75 customers [shop] in the hour before closing. Most people come at the end of the week, especially on Saturdays'.⁴⁶ By conflating changes in consumption with democratic politics and linking domestic ventures in modern retail with traditionalist cultural attitudes, the newspaper thus helped to position BILLA and similar supermarkets as the modern and desired future.

By explaining and applauding shops such as BILLA, *Stoleczna* encouraged radical changes in the daily routines and trajectories of Varsovian shoppers, aiding the neoliberalisation of the Polish capital and its retail landscape. Foreign-owned large-format supermarkets brought shoppers to urban peripheries, recast shopping as a weekly practice and championed the use of private automobiles and large-quantity buying. This spatial decentralisation and temporal concentration of shopping represented a dramatic departure from the robust social networks and communal approaches to food procurement that characterised the previous decade in many Eastern European cities.⁴⁷

Consumer Labour and the Technologisation of Polish Retail

New reliance on the hauling capacity of the private automobile was not the only mode by which the emergence of large-format suburban supermarkets such as BILLA contributed to the technologisation of the shopping experience. According to the joint venture application submitted to the Foreign Investment Agency in 1990, BILLA furnished the Ostrobramska shop with seven electronic cash registers, two electronic sliding doors, two forklifts and a computer and computerised warehouse system, cumulatively valued at \$100,000.⁴⁸ Prior to approval, the Foreign Investment Agency commissioned a study of the proposed venture based on data provided by the companies as well as research by a state

⁴³ Lalita A. Manrai, Ajay K. Manrai and Dana N. Lascu, 'Retailing in the Transition Economies of Poland and Romania: A Comparative Analysis', *Journal of Marketing Channels* 19, 4 (2012), 278.

⁴⁴ Marta Borowska-Stefańska, Michał Kowalski and Szymon Wiśniewski, 'Changes in Urban Transport Behaviours and Spatial Mobility Resulting from the Introduction of Statutory Sunday Retail Restrictions', *Moravian Geographical Reports* 28, 1 (2020), 29.

⁴⁵ 'Wieczorne i Nocne Zakupy', *Gazeta Stoleczna*, 24 Jan. 1992.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ 'Traditional' retail models, both in the Bloc and in the West prior to the ascendance of supermarkets, encouraged familiarity, given that these shops were embedded in neighbourhoods where shoppers, primarily women, often formed relationships with sales clerks, talked with their neighbours and viewed retail spaces as 'a locus for exchange of information and advice'. Guy, 'Controlling New Retail Space', 954. As Małgorzata Mazurek argues, the creativity and resourcefulness demanded of consumers during periods of acute material shortage likewise 'had a highly social character rather than an atomizing one'. Mazurek, 'Keeping It Close to Home: Resourcefulness and Scarcity in Late Socialist and Postsocialist Poland', in Bren and Neuburger, *Communism Unwrapped*, 311.

⁴⁸ Application for establishing a company with foreign capital, 11 June 1990, Archiwum Akt Nowych Warsaw (AAN), Agencja do Spraw Inwestycji Zagranicznych (ASIZ), BI-44 1868/1, 2.

institute. The study reported that the Ostrobramska building would be ‘modernised and equipped with modern equipment and technologies’ and that ‘the technical assumptions of the planned venture have been carefully designed by foreign partners’, evincing the centrality of technologisation to BILLA’s plans for its Polish shops.⁴⁹

In the West, food retail benefited from significant advancements in information and industrial technologies in the second half of the twentieth century, ranging from the introduction of digital databases of barcoded goods and the installation of automated meat-slicing machines to improvements in cargo-handling technology such as forklifts and consumer conveniences including automated sliding doors.⁵⁰ Checkout scanning devices accompanied the widespread implementation of the thirteen-digit European Article Number (EAN) system in Western Europe, growing in popularity in the 1970s and 1980s. The scanner revolution also reached Eastern Europe, in some cases prior to 1989; in 1984, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Yugoslavia joined the standards organisation EAN International, and Czechoslovakia installed its first scanner registers in the same year.⁵¹ Poland joined in January 1990, a public signal of the state’s commitment to implementing existing models of standardised, multinational retail as part of transformation.

Like extensive inventories, automation was marketed as a path toward convenience and efficiency, elements which the Foreign Investment Agency report highlighted repeatedly. BILLA’s electronic cash registers, the report observed with enthusiasm, could automatically read the value of goods by scanning the label, reducing the time spent at checkout to a mere sixty to ninety seconds.⁵² In the West, supermarkets had promoted new technologies as evidence of their commitment to finding ‘new ways to serve you better’.⁵³ In its early coverage of BILLA, *Stoleczna* promoted the shops’ checkout scanners as a convenience for shoppers and shop clerks alike, applauding the shops’ ability to ‘quickly issue receipts with a list of purchases’.⁵⁴

And yet scholars have shown how self-service supermarkets, wherein consumers, assisted by automated technology, compare, select and transport goods themselves, foster the development of a retail culture oriented around individual consumer labour. Michael Palm argues that the technologisation of self-service retail in neoliberal capitalism encourages a shift toward the ‘direct collection of revenue from the performance of consumer labour’.⁵⁵ In turn, technologisation reduces the need for workers, fostering the development of a more flexible and precarious labour system. In 1991, *Stoleczna* wrote that ‘thanks to computerization, BILLA employs only 35 people – a cashier, salespeople, employees, security and back office’.⁵⁶ Despite the growing unemployment rate, the paper presented this as an advantage, lauding the computerised inventory system as an upgrade from the perspective of workers, who could easily monitor the volume of turnover and inventory at any time. In this way, the newspaper foregrounded conveniences for an increasingly individualised, self-serving consumer assisted by technology, fostering greater expectations of consumer labour.

Technologisation also worked to bolster claims that large corporations with standardised inventories and automated labelling mechanisms offered regulatory benefits in comparison with local firms or

⁴⁹ Pre-implementation study of a project of a company with foreign capital, June 1990, Archiwum Akt Nowych Warsaw (AAN), Agencja do Spraw Inwestycji Zagranicznych (ASIZ), BI-44 1868/1, 65–68.

⁵⁰ Although barcodes had existed since the early 1950s, computerisation really took hold in Western supermarkets beginning in the 1970s, complementing the already efficiency-driven premise of the modern standardised supermarket. Annika Menke argues that, with regard to the introduction of electronic scanners to the retail sector more generally, ‘food retailing proved to be a pioneer’. Annika Menke, ‘The Barcode Revolution in German Food Retailing’, in Langer and Jessen, eds., *Transformations of Retailing in Europe after 1945*, 220.

⁵¹ Peter Jones, ‘The Spread of Article Numbering and Retail Scanning in Europe’, *The Service Industries Journal* 5, 3 (1985), 275.

⁵² Pre-implementation study of a project of a company with foreign capital, June 1990, Archiwum Akt Nowych Warsaw (AAN), Agencja do Spraw Inwestycji Zagranicznych (ASIZ), BI-44 1868/1, 65–8.

⁵³ Carroll Pursell, *Technology in Postwar America: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 84.

⁵⁴ ‘Tanie Lady’, *Gazeta Stoleczna*, 12 Dec. 1990, 1.

⁵⁵ Michael Palm, *Technologies of Consumer Labor: A History of Self-Service* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 218.

⁵⁶ ‘Będzie Następna Billa’.

governments. Beginning in the 1980s, the West saw the ‘installation of a regulatory environment amenable to large corporations’, for whom compliance within new regulatory frameworks was easier than for smaller, domestic companies, part of the broader neoliberal shift toward state support for large, multinational corporations.⁵⁷ Discourses about regulation had particular salience for the global food industry, given concerns about perishability in large supply chains, but were also understood to encompass standardisation and oversight with regard to prices, ingredients, processing and expiration dates. In a 1993 article about new modes of shopping, *Stoleczna* quoted an employee at BILLA who claimed that the computerised system ‘guarantees the safety of the articles sold’ by automatically checking expiration dates, linking technology with not only convenience and efficiency but regulation and security.⁵⁸ The foreign supermarket’s guarantee, as quoted in the paper, appealed to consumers frustrated by the uncertainty and precariousness of communist-era shopping and promised stability amidst a rapidly changing consumer landscape. Whereas self-service sent shoppers into the aisles on their own, guarantees about automated standardisation promised to support and protect consumers by eliminating the risk of human error.

Although BILLA initially claimed it was committed to selling as many Polish products as possible, according to *Stoleczna*, most domestic goods did not meet the chain’s regulatory requirements. On opening day, the manager of the Chelmska shop informed *Stoleczna* that, compared to Western products, ‘only a few Polish companies can compete with them in terms of quality and price, of whom few label their goods with the barcode required’ for scanning and cross-referencing with the computerised store books.⁵⁹ That BILLA required that all of its grocery products be packaged and hermetically sealed according to existing regulatory guidelines, meanwhile, disqualified domestic products produced and processed in local facilities. BILLA, therefore, imported much of its inventory, contributing to a larger shift in product sourcing across the Eastern Bloc with the introduction of foreign-owned chains. Most large-format multinational supermarkets source goods primarily from a small group of dedicated wholesale and other suppliers. This allows the firms to construct a standardised inventory of goods according to established safety and quality guidelines and to reduce variables such as supplier delays, unexpected costs and so on. For the multinational firms that set up shop amidst the dismantling of state-run and collectivised procurement systems but before the widespread development of domestically-owned private wholesale networks, the close proximity of the Eastern European markets allowed Western European chains to maintain links with their established wholesale and buying networks.

As late as 1993, most Polish ‘shop-owners [did] not have barcode scanning equipment, even though in some stores the merchandise [was] barcoded’.⁶⁰ In a 1992 article entitled ‘Do We Know What We Are Buying?’, the newspaper contrasted BILLA’s automated technology and standardised labelling system with their absence in Polish-owned shops. In particular, *Stoleczna* took aim at a recently opened store on ul. Czerniakowska, near to the depot that would soon house the second BILLA. Citing the absence of informational labels on packaging, the paper argued that the shop’s inattention to providing consumers with standardised product information was the cause of ‘more and more irritation among the district’s residents’.⁶¹ According to the paper, however, there was still cause for optimism:

The residents’ mood will only improve with the news that in a few weeks, at ul. Czerniakowska near ul. Chelmska, the firm BILLA will open a large supermarket. If this shop has the same low

⁵⁷ Amy J. Cohen and Jason Jackson, ‘Governing through Markets: Multinational Firms in the Bazaar Economy’, *Regulation & Governance*, (2020): 1–18, 13. See also Elizabeth C. Dunn, ‘Trojan Pig: Paradoxes of Food Safety Regulation’, *Environment & Planning* 35, 8 (2003), 1493–1511.

⁵⁸ ‘Zakupy na cały tydzień’.

⁵⁹ ‘Pierwszy Dzień Billi’.

⁶⁰ Edward J. O’Boyle, ‘Work Habits and Customer Service in Post-Communist Poland: Some First-Hand Observations’, *International Journal of Social Economics* 20, 1 (1993), 20.

⁶¹ ‘Nie Wiedzą, Co Sprzedają’, *Gazeta Stoleczna*, 5–6 Sept. 1992, 14.

prices and the same great supply as in the shop the chain already runs at ul. Ostrobramska – this shop at ul. Czerniakowska 32 will either go bankrupt or finally take care of its clients.⁶²

This scathing commentary evinces how the newspaper backed BILLA's approach by framing automated technology as attentive customer service in and of itself. On this occasion, the manager of the shop in question wrote back; *Stoleczna* published his response in a subsection titled 'Clarifications'. Accusing the newspaper of 'malice' and 'falsehoods', the store owner concluded by arguing that 'what is really outrageous is the fact that a poor team of journalists and an amateurish attempt at surreptitious advertising for the BILLA supermarket found their way into the pages of *Gazeta Stoleczna*'.⁶³ This telling exchange offers insight into the dynamic and, at times, contentious interplay between the newspaper and its readers, representative of not only the consumer population but also the entrepreneurial landscape. The sense of betrayal which the manager evokes by way of reference to untrustworthy advertising techniques reflects the emerging association between foreign-owned capitalist commerce and the post-communist media, evincing popular perceptions of *Stoleczna* as an ally of foreign-owned business.

Perhaps, given their willingness to publish the feedback, stirred by input from such locals and ever conscious of maintaining a reputation for truth, *Stoleczna* later carried out informal investigations into reader complaints about standardisation at BILLA. In 1993, for example, Janina Blikowska, one of the few *Stoleczna* writers credited by name in coverage of BILLA, published an article entitled 'Billa's Secret' which opened with the provocative declaration: 'At BILLA, the prices on the shelves differ from those at the checkout'.⁶⁴ Blikowska continued with a brief anecdote:

A few days ago, he was shopping at the BILLA on ul. Chełmska. Based on the price tags affixed to the shelves, he calculated that he would pay one million zlotys. A million and a half were demanded from him at the checkout. The cashier replied only that some of the prices on the shelves were out of date. When the same customer was shopping at BILLA two days later, he found that the prices on the shelves had not changed.⁶⁵

Blikowska interviewed the manager of the BILLA shop, who told her that employees had only an hour each morning to update the price tags in the aisles, often insufficient time to do so. Noting the 'unsurprised' demeanour of the manager, she deemed his explanation 'absurd', explaining that:

the choice of goods is determined by their price and the customer should not be surprised at the checkout. BILLA is a shop where one does a lot of shopping and where there are also considerable price differences. It is inadmissible for the manager of the shop, whose duty is, *inter alia*, to organise work, to manage employees in this way.⁶⁶

Strikingly, Blikowska positions herself as an expert in capitalist retailing, informing BILLA's managers about retail ethics by referencing the responsibility of managers to both workers and customers. Here, *Stoleczna* occupies a middle ground between advocating for its readership and, by articulating a basic rule of capitalist consumption, the opportunity for price comparison, legitimising the presence of a mode of commerce which increased the labour expected of consumers.

Technologisation rendered price and brand comparison, as well as other elements of shopping, the responsibility of the consumer while ostensibly safeguarding them against discrepancies and inconsistencies. In turn, automated technology disempowered the retail worker by affording new agency to the consumer, raised expectations with regard to efficiency and transferred the responsibility for shop

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ 'Nie wie, co pisze?' *Gazeta Stoleczna*, 12–13 Sept. 1992, 8.

⁶⁴ 'Tajna Billa', *Gazeta Stoleczna*, 3 Nov. 1993, 3.

⁶⁵ 'Tajna Billa'. The numbers themselves reflect the massive inflation of Polish currency in the early 1990s.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

operations to machines. This, like the geographic and temporal changes described earlier, helped to depersonalise retail despite new discursive emphases on customer service and satisfaction.⁶⁷ *Stoleczna*'s role, meanwhile, vacillated between consumer advocate and BILLA promoter, in both cases helping to naturalise consumer labour and render the individual consumer, and not the retail worker, as the central subject of the shopping experience.

Discount Supermarkets and the Normalisation of Price-Oriented Consumption

One notable feature of *Stoleczna*'s early reporting on BILLA is the regular inclusion of numerous individual product prices in broader news stories. Reporting on opening day at the second BILLA, *Stoleczna* performed a sort of inventory of the goods on offer, listing prices for different meats, breads and drinks. The newspaper also commented on the popularity of items featured in promotional sales; in this case, meat products from the shop's on-site butcher. The article further explained to readers that it was cheaper to buy meat in bulk, saving customers up to 20,000 zlotys. *Stoleczna*'s first article on the Ostrobramska BILLA likewise emphasised BILLA's competitive pricing, noting prices for a range of goods including soft drinks, butter, dish washing soap and chocolate bars.⁶⁸ The article was entitled 'Discount Counters [*Tanie Lady*]', offering a literal translation of the chain's name, which is a portmanteau of the German words '*billig*', meaning inexpensive, and '*laden*', meaning shop. Simultaneously, this phrasing evoked the Polish phrase '*spod lady*' or 'under the counter', popularised during the resource-constrained communist period, when informal relational networks became critical to obtaining scarce goods. Juxtaposing shortage-era consumer habits with language about price, *Stoleczna* presented BILLA as representing a 'new normal' in Polish consumer habits wherein price consciousness was to be a central responsibility of the consumer.

Throughout its early coverage, *Stoleczna* foregrounded affordability as an advantage of the foreign-owned supermarket, observing that BILLA's large inventory and bulk sourcing methods enabled the chain to offer lower prices compared to smaller shops in Warsaw. Urban geographers have linked the proliferation of discount shops and other low-cost retail operations to the broader neoliberalisation of urban space, arguing that such structures encapsulate how the responsibility of providing for impoverished populations shifts from the state, in the form of public services, to the market, in the form of low prices.⁶⁹ Price lists worked to alert customers to the wide variety of both product and price options at BILLA and in the retail landscape more generally, encouraging the development of price-oriented approaches to buying.

BILLA, itself an early leader in the implementation of discount food retailing in Western Europe, opened in 1953 as a small discount perfumery chain. Andrea Morawetz has identified the early 1950s as the 'starting point of a mass consumer society in Austria' after which a growing range of products targeted at not only the upper classes but also the middle and lower classes appeared in 'new distribution systems like self-service supermarkets'.⁷⁰ Scholars in marketing have cast BILLA's innovation, selling 'cosmetics at discount prices', as 'revolutionary' in and of itself.⁷¹ In the discount chain store model, retailers obtain large quantities of goods at significantly reduced rates from wholesale suppliers, storing and distributing them from centralised locations.⁷² Whereas most Western European

⁶⁷ Annika Menke has similarly argued that the EAN 'translated the material world of goods into characters in a digital communication system', rationalising but also depersonalising the retail experience. Menke, 'The Barcode Revolution in German Food Retailing', 220.

⁶⁸ Jerzy Kochanowski, *Tylnymi drzwiami. Czarny rynek w Polsce 1944–1989* (Warsaw: Virtualo, 2015).

⁶⁹ Sara González and Paul Waley, 'Traditional Retail Markets: The New Gentrification Frontier?', *Antipode* 45, 4 (2013), 965–83.

⁷⁰ Andrea Morawetz, 'A Backward Republic or "Brave New Austria"? Market and Motivation Research in Dichter's Home Country after the Second World War', in Stefan Schwarzkopf, ed., *Ernest Dichter and Motivation Research* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 191.

⁷¹ S. Grabner-Kräuter and A. Schwarz-Musch, 'Ja! Natürlich: A Success Story', in Martin Charter and Michael Jay Polonsky, eds., *Greener Marketing: A Global Perspective on Greening Marketing Practice* (Austin: Greenleaf Publishers, 1999), 285.

⁷² John Fernie, Suzanne Fernie and Christopher Moore, eds., *Principles of Retailing* (London: Routledge, 2015).

department stores and large-scale food retailers had since at least the nineteenth century striven to create consumer spaces defined by exclusivity, discount retail, as developed in the United States and introduced to Western Europe after 1945, viewed clearance lines and other discount operations as an opportunity to profit from the masses.⁷³

By contrast, prior to 1989, the system of state-distributed ration cards, price controls and subsidised food products, coupled with widespread shortage, had made actual prices less important to late communist-era shoppers than in Western economies. Małgorzata Mazurek observes that, in the 1980s, 'the supply crisis had the peculiar result of changing what had been a constant obstacle for [her interviewee's] family – lack of money – into an issue of no importance'.⁷⁴ Indeed, for many Poles, 'access to scarce goods meant more than wages' in the 1980s, because goods could be used for bartering on the black market more effectively than cash.⁷⁵ Thus, as the new decade dawned and the command economy collapsed, many Poles actually had remaining 'cash reserves which they had not entrusted to communist banks', ready to be put to use in new consumer environments.⁷⁶ With the elimination of price controls, however, grocery costs skyrocketed. For many, the new consumer paradox of the 1990s held that store shelves were full but few had money to buy the goods in stock. Although Poland initially saw the proliferation of open-air bazaars selling clothing, household appliances, food and other goods, foreign-owned supermarkets quickly began selling the same goods at considerably cheaper prices, sourcing in bulk from established networks, and therefore gradually displaced informal retailing sites.

By April 1991, however, an article in *Stoleczna* warned shoppers that BILLA was getting more expensive. The article compared prices on a number of items, including packaged juices, olive-stuffed peppers, dry wine, grapes, nectarines and kiwis, at BILLA and elsewhere in the city; all of the products in question turned out to be cheaper at other shops in Warsaw. A litre of Vitamin C juice, for example, was priced at 15,000 zlotys while at Pewex, a former communist-era hard currency shop, the juice cost only 12,000 zlotys.⁷⁷ 'All in all', *Stoleczna* concluded, 'BILLA is still worth visiting, but be careful about prices when shopping. Not everything is actually as cheap as BILLA announced after opening'.⁷⁸ Here again, the paper strikes a balance between supporting the culture of consumer practice which BILLA represented, namely price comparison, while critiquing the shop itself to maintain its position as a source of truth and guidance for readers. Ironically, that *Stoleczna* advocated price comparison between stores, rather than simply within the aisles of a one-stop shop, harkens back to the communist-era habit of traipsing around cities in search of recently stocked shops. The new landscapes of urban (im)mobility associated with the peripheralisation of retail made comparing prices in different shops still more difficult.

Meanwhile, although BILLA and other large Western chains offered a 'a much wider choice of higher quality, often standardised products at moderate prices', compared to both street bazaars and the smaller specialty shops in the city centre which also sold Western products, imported goods were nonetheless often more expensive than their Polish counterparts, particularly with regard to pantry staples.⁷⁹ In January 1993, *Stoleczna* reported that 70 per cent of BILLA's goods were foreign, albeit procured from domestic wholesalers who by that time had begun to tap into global sourcing chains. From the perspective of the paper, however, the chain's emphasis on foreign-made goods had become cause for concern. Polish-made goods, as *Stoleczna* explained, were considerably cheaper

⁷³ See De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*.

⁷⁴ Mazurek, 'Keeping it Close to Home', 313.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 310.

⁷⁶ Padraic Kenney, *The Burdens of Freedom: Eastern Europe since 1989* (London: Zed Books, 2006), 17.

⁷⁷ 'Billi w Porywach Droższa'.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Grzegorz Karasiewicz and Jan Nowak, 'Looking Back at the 20 Years of Retailing Change in Poland', *The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research* 20, 1 (2010), 110.

than their Western counterparts and thus preferred by price-conscious Polish shoppers, comprising 50 per cent of BILLA's product sales despite being a minority in terms of goods offered.⁸⁰

Concerns about price intensified following the implementation of the Valued Added Tax (VAT) system in the summer of 1993. VAT, which by the 1990s was already a popular tax instrument in parts of Western Europe and had become a common feature in tax advice offered to developing countries, is levied on products at different stages of the supply chain.⁸¹ Yet critics of consumption taxes, including VAT as well as sales tax, argue that such taxes are intended to compensate for reductions in welfare and disproportionately impact lower-income households, given that they are levied unilaterally on all shoppers.⁸² Scholars of market liberalisation and the destruction of welfare systems have described VAT as a marker of the 'shift in emphasis from a progressive income tax system to the taxation of consumption'.⁸³

In July of 1993, under a subsection entitled 'Before and After VAT', *Stoleczna* presented the results of an informal survey of prices for certain goods in shops around Warsaw, the day before and one day following the introduction of VAT. While at other shops, prices remained unchanged, meat products at BILLA, which had long claimed to offer affordable prices on meat by virtue of the in-house butcher at the Chelmska shop, saw a price increase of 2,000 zlotys.⁸⁴ Positioning itself as a liaison between state and consumers, the paper reported that the Ministry of Finance and the Federation of Consumers both claimed that the prices of eggs, coldcuts and other meat products and cigarettes were to remain unchanged, while flour, cheese, sugar, beer and chocolate prices would go up. The paper further reassured customers that it would continue conducting these surveys on a weekly basis, asserting its position as a source of regular, updated information on changes in retail.

The newspaper's commitment to fostering a retail landscape oriented around low prices manifested in other telling ways. In November 1993, *Stoleczna* published an article entitled 'Merchants to Market!', describing the frustrations of domestic shop owners struggling to compete against larger chains. 'Large western supermarkets have appeared', observed the paper, referencing BILLA as well as the Belgian chain Globi, the Norwegian chain Rema and the Dutch wholesale chain Makro, which 'purchas[ed] directly from the producers and can negotiate prices' to offer affordable goods to consumers.⁸⁵ By comparison, the article explained, the vast majority of the estimated 320,000 shops in Poland were domestically-owned, physically smaller, many not exceeding 30 square metres, and tended to source from intermediaries within the supply chains. This forced them to sell for higher prices, 'asking more from the customer', as the paper put it. As a solution, *Stoleczna* quoted the Ministry of Industry and Trade, advising domestic owners to form 'multi-store enterprises', explaining that the 'lowered standard of service and the limited assortment would be compensated by low prices'.⁸⁶ Again positioning itself as liaison between state and consumers, *Stoleczna* took part in the ongoing debate around protecting domestic trade by expressing support for retail consolidation and the chain store model in particular, demonstrating a commitment to affordable prices over customer service and, strikingly, even product assortment. Beyond private enterprise more generally, this focus on consolidated retail reflects what scholars have called the 'reconcentration' of the retail sector, wherein the initial fragmentation of the highly concentrated public retail sector of the communist period after 1989 was followed by the rise of highly concentrated, multinational private-sector enterprises in the mid-1990s.⁸⁷

⁸⁰ 'Zakupy Na Cały Tydzień'.

⁸¹ Kathryn James, *The Rise of the Value-Added Tax* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁸² Nico Pestel and Eric Sommer, 'Shifting Taxes from Labor to Consumption: More Employment and More Inequality?', *Review of Income and Wealth* 63, 3 (2017), 542–63.

⁸³ Brent McClintock, 'Whatever Happened to New Zealand? The Great Capitalist Restoration Reconsidered', *Journal of Economic Issues* 32, 2 (1998), 500.

⁸⁴ 'Zmiany Cen Nieznaczące', *Gazeta Stołeczna*, 7 July 1993.

⁸⁵ 'Kupcy Do Kupy!', *Gazeta Stołeczna*, 15 Nov. 1993.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Dries, Reardon and Swinnen, 'The Rapid Rise of Supermarkets in Central and Eastern Europe', 536.

By emphasising price as a pressing consumer concern, *Stoleczna* helped to establish affordability as a foremost marker of commercial success and customer satisfaction. As a pioneer in discount retailing, BILLA initially offered the newspaper evidence that foreign-owned retailing could offer consumers the most cost-effective options. Yet, as inflation and unemployment intensified and the vulnerability of domestic business in the rapidly globalising market grew more apparent, *Stoleczna* grappled with its dual commitment to Polish shoppers and foreign investors, offering price-focused investigatory reporting while advocating consumer practices such as price comparison and bargain hunting. In the process, the paper positioned itself as a vital source of regular information about the consumer landscapes and thus a critical tool of the post-communist shopper.

Conclusion

The early 1990s saw rapid political, economic and cultural change which transformed the urban consumer landscapes of Poland and its neighbours. Consumption in the post-communist period saw the influence of a range of neoliberal socioeconomic values as a result of foreign direct investment by retail chains such as BILLA, who introduced new geographies of urban consumption and trade, additional responsibilities and positionalities for individual consumers, and greater emphasis on cost within retailing alongside new goods. As such, privately-owned spaces of public consumption demand consideration as critical sites in which the post-communist everyday and, by extension, all quotidian landscapes subject to foreign direct investment, were negotiated and forged.

Rather than the product solely of foreign intervention, however, the neoliberal cultures of commerce and consumption which BILLA represented were forged via dynamic partnerships between investors and local actors. To navigate and negotiate these changes, consumers, in pursuit of a 'new normal' defined by economic stability but also transparency with regard to material consumption, relied on institutions such as local newspapers to make sense of change by narrating daily life. In turn, the emerging free press became a constituent part of the consumer landscape, legitimising new forms of trade in order to establish itself as an authority on the Polish future and thereby constitute itself as a desirable consumer good in its own right.

Examining how *Gazeta Stołeczna* positioned itself vis-à-vis Poland's first foreign-owned supermarket and, in the process, underwrote the economic environment in which the paper itself would stake its claim helps us understand the sometimes symbiotic, sometimes antagonistic, yet generative interplay between foreign retail investors, domestic institutions of daily life and Polish consumers in this period. This helps us rethink how the contemporary landscapes of consumption in the post-communist region emerged, acknowledging the important input of local actors but also how the domestic perspective itself was, much like the foreign retailers, mediated and guided by economic concerns.

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