

Reviews

when the TRIVIAL is political

SLAVENKA DRAKULIC'S *HOW I SURVIVED COMMUNISM AND EVEN LAUGHED MOVES A.M. MENDOZA, JR.* TO CONFRONT HIS RELATIONSHIPS— TO CAUSES; WITH COMRADES, AND HIS WIFE.

How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed is a potent little book and Drakulic is one powerful writer. The sources of potency: the engaged attention to detail, the sense of history, and the eloquent mix of trivia and substance. Drakulic's work is effortlessly substantial. She examines such matters as runs on panty hose, the propriety of fur coats, dolls, soups, the infinite varieties of potato dishes, washing tubs and machines, dripping clothes' lines, the availability of sanitary napkins, toilet paper, cosmetics and hair dyes, and of course, MEN. Drakulic adds new and sharper teeth to the aphorism 'The personal is political.' Though a cutting critique of socialism, *How We Survived Communism* does not succumb to a mindless, knee-jerk embrace of the 'other' system.

The book hit me hard because of two personal connections. I spent a substantial time studying and analyzing "actually existing socialism" or *realsozialismus* from afar, without stepping on a square inch of socialist soil nor understanding their native tongues. I simply took advantage of the flood of revealing materials emanating from the Soviet Union, unleashed by *glasnost*. I did so in the quest for an authentic socialism, and for

a way to reform *realsozialismus*. In the process, I had to consult and use not only scholarly sources, polemical materials, and Party propaganda. I sought access to personal accounts, anecdotes, cartoons, and the like. Nonetheless, Drakulic's work is the first of its kind that I have encountered—a 'grassroots feminist critique of communism.' Indeed it offers a different view.

Most of the critiques of *realsozialismus* I have read before Drakulic were written by men save for Ferenc Feher's and her collaborators' *Dictatorship Over Needs*.¹ None of these critiques, not even that of Feher and her colleagues used the take-off point of Drakulic—micro-trivia. All of them were macro-critiques and were concerned with such substantial matters as inefficiencies of central planning and bureaucratism, as well as the stultifying weight of pseudo-democracy. Should these accounts turn to everyday life problems, they invariably worry about food, apartments, electric appliances, and cars. The *samizdat* intellectuals were worried about human rights, particularly civil and political rights. In the Brezhnev years, they feared consignment to the insane asylum or the psychiatric ward. None were ever moved by Drakulic's "petty" concerns.

Drakulic's stories also evoke memories of the many and frequent debates, quarrels and tiffs I had with Rosalie, my wife. We were both political activists but as things stood then, I was more politically involved than she was. The indicators: I occupied higher positions in the organizational hierarchy, had more responsibilities, had to travel a lot, and had to supervise more activists and projects. From the beginning of our relationship, she was ever apprehensive of my being a so-called intellectual and her non-UP-just-the-University-Belt pedigree². Despite my constant assurances that it will not adversely affect our relationship, my equally constant harping on her preoccupation with what I then considered trivia obviously gave a different signal.

I would nag her about the need to be concerned with "matters of consequence." I would force her to read beyond her usual fare (of what I then condescendingly considered as 'female stuff') and engage in serious discussions with me. I would tell her that it was our duty to improve ourselves to the utmost in pursuit of political goals. But I did not have to do all of these things during the early part of our relationship—that is, when we were just a couple and

not yet a family; when we were still on the run and not yet operating above-ground. My incarceration and the arrival of our first daughter altered the tenor of our relationship.

A typical source of disagreement is the conflict between political work and what I considered trivial family and social obligations. Our exchange would invariably run like so: She tells me that a wedding (baptism, birthday, wake, funeral, hospital visit) involving my (her) relations (friends) is scheduled on a certain date and that both of us must go. I tell her that I have an important (always) meeting (appointment, study session, etc.) on the same day and therefore could not make it and so why shouldn't she go by herself and the children. She retorts that I was also unable to make it to the previous baptism, wake; that I should try to make an appearance this time around. I flare up and point out (by shouting) that if one attended to so-called social obligations, then no time is left to do significant political work. I also remind her sarcastically that what I am doing will ultimately redound to the benefit of the Filipino people, our relations and friends included. End of episode. Forceful male logic triumphs again. Never-mind that most of these episodes would occur while I am driving, my daughters in the back seat either in rapt attention or feigned indifference. Talk about driving dangerously.

It is funny and truly ironic that our present perspectives have altered. I have turned deep into my self and our nuclear family, while Rosalie has reinvented herself (and our relationship in the process) through NGO work—light-years away from my own work. After the fall of Marcos, Rosalie embarked on human rights work for seven long and difficult, yet fruitful years. Away from me, she began to develop her own persona. Almost two and a half years ago, she joined the staff of an international feminist organization. In the meantime, I resigned from the vice pre-

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SLAVENKA
DRAKULIĆ



HOW WE SURVIVED
COMMUNISM AND
EVEN LAUGHED

sidency of the FDC in December 1990 to attend to a personal agenda.³ I had to finish my graduate studies so I could gain tenure in the University. I retreated into a shell, into an ivory tower of

theory, into a reconstructed real world populated by Nikita, Leonid, Boris, and Tatiana Zaslavskaya, among many others. The retreat worsened with the open split in the national democratic movement in late 1992. After spending some effort attempting to help build a "third force" in the "reaffirmists" versus "rejectionists" debate, I reached a *modus vivendi* with Rosalie.⁴ Taking stock of ourselves and our family (which had grown to a full six in 1991 with the arrival of a son after three daughters), Rosalie and I agreed that only one of us can continue to be an activist. It was decided that I should focus on providing for the family's material requirements with a house of our own as the most important target. In truth, the quest for a house graduated into an obsession.

In the process, I became selfish. I wanted to have my family around me. Our daughters were growing up and starting to build lives of their own. I was dethroned as the "king" of the family when Arlo arrived. I began to resent the time Rosalie spent for meetings, consultations, out-of-town trips, and the like. But she started taking care of herself. She found the time and appetite for books, high-brow music, fine dining, crossword puzzles, needle point and flower arrangements. And yet, she still managed to attend to family and social obligations adequately—PTA meetings, comforting the bereaved, etc. She is even more solicitous of my relatives. She continues to be more knowledgeable about the love life and familial circumstances, hopes, and aspirations of our household help and of course, of show biz personalities. My only consolation so far is her inability to distinguish Michael Keaton from Tom Hanks, Bruce Willis from Clint Eastwood and Sean Connery, or Julia Roberts from Julia Ormond, or that *X-Files* is with Channel 9 and not with Channel 2, or that Joe Taruc is with DZRH and not DZXL.

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ask me how I knew, but the chatter on the other line "sounded" like a he. Maybe it's instinct I have developed from years of dealing with men, being patronized, and being treated, as a Russian woman friend said, like an "uncompleted man." The person on the other line left me high and dry, but not without first sending me this long sermon about how things in the world are really more complex than people from poor countries make it out to be. Bah.

Then there was the incident in a chat room for thirtysomethings where one chatter whom everybody referred to as "Doc" (how much more male can you get with a handle like "Doctor Dawgystyle") made the ignominious comment that with a handle like "Mandaya," I probably come from a lost African tribe of "insanites and inanites." I told him the name's not African but Malayo-Polynesian, and asked him what he meant by "insanites and inanites." It turned out he meant insanities and inanities, and he said these applies to people in West Africa where people are killing each other for food while their presidents are vacationing in some ritzy resort. When I wouldn't let him off the hook on that, he simply ignored me. The rest of the chatters, perhaps because they have exchanged "inanities" before, took the cue from the Doc.

So the Internet is not exactly egalitarian, gender- or race-wise. Neither is the real world. But this has not stopped us—women and members of minority groups—from claiming our space and working to change the terrain. And what is cyberspace but another terrain of power. In her book *Nattering on the Net*, Dale Spender, erstwhile feminist editor, now self-confessed convert to the information technology makes a similar, but better-argued point. She said that the computer is not a toy, despite the belief of some people, and that cyberspace is the site of wealth, power and influence now and in the future. Women, Spencer, said really have no choice but to take up the challenge of shaping a world where cyberspace is a fact of life.

In five months I gave gone from a completely illiterate Web browser to a fairly literate user and a gender- and race-sensitized chatter. I can't wait to see what happens in the next seven months. ☺

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She spends time listening to the dreams, problems, and vexations of friends and co-workers. We don't seem to have enough time for and with each other. I don't think she has neglected me, though in my dark moments I thought she sometimes did.

Has she changed? Apparently, she did; but, in truth, I think she did not. She remains imbued with a humanity I can only aspire for, a humanity that my books, academic degrees, and lofty ideas cannot automatically provide. Have I changed? Apparently too; but, in truth, I may have not. I have loved the people in the abstract and had vowed to serve them unselfishly. Up to now, I think I have not been able to care for them in the concrete. I have not been able to give myself fully. I thought I did when I endured torture, imprisonment, deprivation, hunger and solitude, and persevered in work. But it looks like most of the time, I have served from afar, by myself, rather than with comrades and the people. I thought myself unselfish, but this was just my conceit.

Is it principally my male-ness and her female-ness which accounts for the difference? Weren't most of the selfless male comrades actually engaged in power games, ego trips, and selfish, petty pursuits? I can only recall the ruses, the subterfuges I myself had to engineer not for the benefit of the 'enemy' but for comrades and sympathizers. Can I ever get rid of the needling notion that for the male, what is political is actually trivial?

Should there be a Great Wall between the personal and the political, between tedium and substance? Rosalie has repeatedly admonished that it should not be the case. That I should learn to reconcile both. That imperceptible details add up to magnificent wholes in the long haul. Drakulic's work is Rosalie's latest vindication. ☺

Notes:

1. Ference Feher et. al., *Dictatorship Over Needs: An Analysis of Soviet Societies*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983.

2. UP is for University of the Philippines, the state university where the "best of the brightest" of each generation of Philippine intellectuals are supposedly bred. The University Belt, a.k.a. U-Belt is an area in old Manila dotted by private universities and colleges notorious for charging exorbitant tuition fees. Intellectual snobs generally look down on graduates of U-Belt schools.

3. FDC is Freedom from Debt Coalition, a progressive, multi-sectoral and politically-pluralistic alliance in the Philippines.

4. "Reaffirmists" and "rejectionists." In 1992, the Philippine national democratic movement was split between those who adhere to the Communist Party program encapsulated in the document, "Reaffirm our Basic Principles and Rectify Errors" (thus "reaffirmists"), and those who rejected this (rejectionists).

The Reviewers

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