

The (Im)possibility of Liberation

With(out) Humor

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Under repressive regimes, which curtail basic freedoms of association and expression of opinion, people are forced to find apocryphal, clandestine ways of dealing with their frustration with reality, and their inability to organize a meaningful resistance against a rigid authoritarianism that flouts subservience instead of free thought as the ideal of social realization. The “underground” resistance mechanisms, devised by people living under communism in Eastern Europe, were individual rather than collective, psychological rather than physical, inward rather than outward, signifying a “velvet” revolution of survival fought by the mind – a revolution far more important than any anti-regime demonstration or blood-shedding attempt to regain freedom.

Slavenka Drakulic’s book “How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed” offers a useful synopsis of the various survival techniques people developed during the years of communist rule. The first is the practice of collecting and recycling, mastered to perfection in the face of a permanent shortage of basic goods and uncertainty for the future. Although Drakulic’s account of her grandmother’s skills in collecting formidable quantities of objects as diverse as shampoos, hair-dyes, pills, glass jars, sugar, stockings, sanitary napkins, and plastic bags, is bitterly sardonic, she acknowledges the vital necessity of this practice on the basic level of physical survival, which communism forced Eastern Europeans to battle daily for. Collecting and recycling also symbolized people’s determination to fight for the basics and their refusal “to accept a deteriorating standard of living” (75).

A second method of coping with reality was fighting off one’s privacy. In the effort to oppose the unnatural encroachment of communism on everything private, owning a home turned into a primary task, a “life prize” (91), because home was the place where a

respite from the omnipresent “public”, from the spying and reporting, was possible. Often forced to live together, family members from different generations strengthened the ties among each other and acquired a sense of battling together against a bigger enemy. In Drakulic’s opinion, however, what appeared to be a romantic and strong tie between family members was actually a conservative domination that didn’t allow independence and self-reliance for the young.

Another mechanism for coping with communism was the ability to ignore reality and imagine oneself differently. Universal symbols of “otherness”, such as Coca-Cola, bananas, or fashion magazines, served as powerful tools of undermining communism’s promise of the approaching “bright future” and exposing the bleak reality of misery, lack of variety, and ineffective production. The natural instinct of human beings towards distinguishing themselves from the others by expressing physically their individuality could not be suppressed by the culture of uniformity. Women found simple, natural ways of remaining beautiful, attractive, and feminine as opposed to the communist ideal of the genderless woman. Western fashion magazines might have been the objects of impossible choice, and untouchable, debilitating longing, as Drakulic argues, but more importantly, they enabled Eastern European women to imagine themselves differently and thus challenge the foundations of communist culture.

The two remaining important mechanisms Drakulic identifies in her book, but doesn’t elaborate as extensively upon, are the role of religion, and the role of humor. She does provide an account in the very first chapter of the book of her friend Tanja’s sorrowful suicide, where a Bible was found open on the page describing life after death, but only to exemplify religion’s failure in providing people with a psychological haven

from communism's mind-destruction. Later on, discussing religious leaders' boisterous jubilation after the fall of communism, Drakulic remains skeptical about the power of religion, asking "[why] had God waited so long?" (157). She attributes the hypocrisy of leading priests, who had relegated religion to an "opium for the masses" in exchange of favorable party status, to religion as a whole, and fails to acknowledge that religion was suppressed by the regimes exactly because of their understanding of its ability to muster the uniting powers of people in the face of adversity.

Last but not least, Drakulic discusses humor as one of the ways to survive communism, as the title of the book emphatically suggests. The book, however, fails to live up to the initial expectation that it will place humor as the leading survival strategy. Drakulic feels there is something wrong in the title of her book: "We have not yet survived communism, and there is nothing to laugh about" (xi). On only one occasion – when discussing the hundred ways to prepare food for a party from potatoes, humor is specifically mentioned as a source of survival – "sometimes humor is the only way to overcome depression" (16). Karel Kosik follows a similar line when stating that "[t]he absence of humor leaves an emptiness that is filled by [...] an imitation, or by depression" (190).

Certainly, humor is present throughout Drakulic's stories, but it has been created with the reconstruction and analysis of events in the memory. It is a resentful, bitter, and derisive humor, the humor of self-disappointment from not taking initiative and rebelling more doggedly against communism. As much as she is willing to acknowledge the significance of humor under such circumstances, Drakulic sees it as an outlet for the anger accumulated by the frustration from one's own feebleness, and readiness to auto-

ensorship in a repressive regime that kills the impulse to speak out. The impossibility of humor in the public pre-determines, in Drakulic's eyes, its futility, and impropriety in the private – a view distinctly opposite to Kosik's.

The ability to laugh not only at others, but at oneself, is crucial for psychological liberation, argues Kossik – it is the cause, not the effect of liberation. Humor is the basis upon which mutual trust and closeness are built, it is the vehicle for personal liberation from selfishness. Fettered by a gnawing conscience, humor becomes a confine. Only free of remorse consciousnesses are able to laugh wittily at their own mistakes. Suspicion and hostility, attitudes that dominated interpersonal relationships during communism, in Drakulic's understanding, made the existence of humor and its transformative force impossible. This conclusion, however, is validated only by a reversal of the cause-and-effect pattern: introducing mutual trust and closeness as the necessary prerequisite for humor will naturally exclude it from appearing in a society ruled by suspicion and distrust.

Humor occupies a central place as a resistance force against repressive regimes. It is not only a tool for personal liberation, but carries a codified social message that breaks the rigid censorship of malicious regimes, unable to laugh. Thus, it becomes a linking bridge between people who refuse to auto-censor themselves and builds a dissident movement, whose weapons are language, intelligence, and spirit.

Works Cited

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