

How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed

Slavenka Drakulic's life history provides an insight to what I've always considered to be the "other" side of Europe. A noted writer from Croatia, she built a career on controversial literature. She eventually immigrated out of the country as a result of violent threats accusing her of "raping Croatia". *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed* illustrates several understated subtleties of communism. From what I've learn in school, I imagine a routine of living day to day in a constant state of shortage and uncertainty. In an effort to create a society that was labored, owned, and utilized by everyone equally, private property was taken away and with it personal rights, privacy, and time. *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next* by Katherine Verdery explains this etatization in Romania as "time taxes"; state appropriation of the individual's time. This exponential shift to an open and community ownership of property created an over-contact between people. I found this to be the most interesting theme in Slavenka's book. There is only so much rub one can take before the pain of chafing occurs.

Laundry is a dreaded task I perform about every two weeks. When I visit my parents I hate the thought of them seeing my dirty laundry so I do it myself. Slavenka's washing experience is my worst nightmare, yet an interesting memory. She describes the scene of entering a back street and seeing "...hanging clothes flutter like flags of another state... (52)." Clothing has always been used as an icon either as a way to portray your personal identity, culture or to make a political statement. But the forced parade of laundry is a very interesting concept. Slavenka says the general rule was that anything at any time could be proclaimed a luxury and detergent, washing machines and dryers were no exception. Clothing needed to be washed and dried. The dryer was a luxury communism was reluctant to permit and this left people with no choice but to hang their identity like scarlet letters on their balcony dryers. Hang drying laundry wouldn't be so bad if it weren't for the condensed overlap of personal and community contact. Walking down the street on the way to work or school all one had to do was look up to know the most intimate details of a person's household. You could tell someone is "playing woman" by the number of nylons hanging up. The number of occupants, age and gender, extended guests, level of housekeeping, and even occupation could be read from the lines of laundry dripping down to the public below. It was a symbolic literacy that Slavenka learned from her grandmother.

The concept of living on top of each other is further emphasized by the fact that multiple families often times shared an apartment. Slavenka describes it as the strange ability of apartments to divide and multiply. Dividing and sharing apartments lead to awkward compromises. One apartment she lived in was shared by two families.

Problems ensued because the bathroom was located in 'their' part of the apartment. It doubled as their kitchen and dishes were regularly in the tub. The whole family scheduled a day to take baths and do laundry in the tub. In these times people were still desperately trying to maintain a grasp on some kind of privacy and personal life. Slavenka's family erected plywood walls down the apartment to separate the two family's areas. I think it's a part of human nature to want an introspective, completely private and personal part of their lives. This part of the individual's life was put under attack by the forced communization of property.

The chapter called "Our little Stasi" was the most captivating topic in the book. It ties all my thoughts together. The act of standing in line at the post office made you shed your skin and become vulnerable to everyone around you whether they were employees, officials or ordinary citizens. Slavenka says it is like a living room and everyone in it becomes a sort of family you feel you have known your whole life. The long lines and extraordinary waiting times left people dire to remedy their boredom. Unconsciously you glance at the person's mail next to you or overhear a conversation on the phone nearby. A 450 dinar money order for rent quickly calculates to a two-room apartment in a new apartment. You can quickly learn a lot about a person by waiting beside them in any kind of line involving money or documentation. She says "the only reason I don't feel like a spy is that he too can 'spy' on me..." (94). This is what communism did to people. Left without personal time and given communal access to everyone's life, the individual was stripped of privacy.

In reading *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed* I imagined a state of living on top of each other in a constant state of interaction. I strongly believe that it's human nature to need a private safe haven. Though it is not explicitly written out in the U.S. Constitution, our culture has definitely come to accept this aspect of privacy to be not only a personal liberty, but an individual right. This right to privacy was taken away under communism by subtle actions like limiting detergent and washing facilities, apartment overpopulation, and shortages that led to long lines. These commercial changes each appropriated personal time and privacy time from the individual. This concept leads me to think the most powerful weapon of communism was the fear of the institution. In American politics we call this the Law of Anticipated Reaction. Just the fear of repercussion turns every ordinary individual into an agent for the system. People start looking over their shoulder and everyone becomes a suspect. The chapter on the post office line briefly hit on this concept and I would have like to hear more of Slavenka's thoughts on the

subject. Overall, I think an interesting and rather important theme in the book is the fact that people were in over-contact with themselves. They were stacked to the brim. In the end it was not only the system, but also the constant contact with other individuals that taxed personal time, limited privacy, and denied human nature.