

# The insidious ways ideology and economics affect our lives

By Julie Ashley

The intersections, and the inseparability, of the public and private domains have long provided material for Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulić. Her third and latest nonfiction collection, *Café Europa: Life After Communism*, reveals a growing frustration with just how little some things have changed since the upheavals of 1989.

*Café Europa* echoes the form and feeling of Drakulić's two previous books, *How We Survived Communism*

and *Even Laughed and Balkan Express*. In 24 short, entertaining pieces written between 1992 and 1996, she tackles political themes from unusual and often decidedly personal angles. The result is an accessible and engagingly down-to-earth study of

the insidious ways political systems, ideology and economics infuse the lives of individuals.

In the collection's title essay, Drakulić discusses the unspoken assumptions behind the plethora of Western European and American names given to cafés, hotels, restaurants, bars and shops in post-communist nations — two Café Viennas in Sofia and Tirana's Café Europa, for example, along with countless establishments bearing names in English or French. Lest it seem unclear that this Eastern European propensity for Western names bears any significance, imagine a similar craze for Bulgarian, Albanian or Hungarian names in Paris. The fashion for Westernized names, Drakulić insists, discloses an Eastern European longing to join a "Europe" not geographical but mythological:

"It [Europe] is something distant, something to be attained, to be deserved. It is also some-

thing expensive and fine: good clothes, the certain look and smell of its people.

Europe is plenitude: food, cars, light, everything — a kind of festival of colors, diversity, opulence, beauty. It offers choice: from shampoo to political parties. It represents freedom of expression. It is a promised land, a new Utopia, a lollipop."

Throughout these essays, Drakulić stresses that the psychological and ideological residue of communism are at least as damaging as the economic disaster left in its wake. Using examples from her own experiences as well as the region's history, she effectively charts the results of oppressive, double-think political systems on people who (with the notable exception of the former Czechoslovakia) were largely rural and poverty-stricken before the communist era.

According to Drakulić, some of the tendencies created, or exacerbated, by communism include: hypocrisy and prevarication as survivalist techniques, an inability to believe in a better future (which, she points out, only encourages people to take whatever they can today by any means necessary), an almost insurmountable fear of taking risky stances, a deep-seated need to blame failure on any possible Other, and a dangerous eagerness to erase, rather than admit or inquire into, past mistakes.

Only an insider could produce such a scathing yet compassionate critique of the Eastern European mind set. Drakulić's intelligence, wit and grasp of history lend authority to even her most opinionated assertions, while her strong, simple prose carries the reader effortlessly from each idea to the next.

A novelist as well as a journalist, Drakulić enlivens her essays by combining fiction techniques with autobiography and history. In the essay "An Unforgettable Meeting," she reconstructs persuasively the imagined inner dialogue of Croatian President Franjo Tudjman during a



banquet of international leaders. In "He Sleeps Like a Baby," she does the same for Dinko Šakic — former commander of a Croatian concentration camp in which Serbs, Jews, communists, Romanies (Gypsies) and other "undesirables" were murdered between 1942 and 1945 — and a Croatian journalist who interviewed him, rather sympathetically, in 1995. In Drakulić's capable hands, inner dialogue serves at once to humanize, criticize and deflate these dangerous figures.

In almost every essay here, Drakulić uses con-

crete (and often personal) examples to open a window onto a more general reality. "In Zoe's Bathroom," for instance — which begins, memorably, "I peed in her pink toilet" — she describes the expensive kitsch of the private bathroom of the former Romanian dictator Ceausescu's daughter Zoe. Comparing this communist version of "Western-style" luxury with normal Western bathroom standards, she then widens the scope to discuss what bathrooms in Eastern Europe tell us about the post-communist mind set. Throughout *Café Europa*, Drakulić uses such everyday, even banal, details to present microcosms of larger problems.

This method, though extremely effective, begins to feel formulaic by the collection's end if the essays are read in rapid succession. Thus, this is a book better enjoyed in small doses, with plenty of time to digest between bites.

Drakulić's constant trumpeting of individualistic ideals also starts to seem a bit simplistic, even jingoistic, by the book's end (for example, "Europe is what we make it ourselves"). Repetitive as her cautioning may sometimes seem, it certainly is preferable to unrelieved cynicism or the refusal to offer solutions at all. Drakulić herself — coming from a country where the former "historian" who was just re-elected president seems more concerned with denying his nation's past than with examining it — might argue that certain ideas, certain truths, cannot be repeated often enough.

## SVÁTKY

For many people, a name day, or *svátek*, is as important as a birthday. People will appreciate it if you acknowledge this day with a small gift or the traditional congratulation "Všechno nejlepší k svátku" (All the best on your name day).

Wed., July 2 — Patrice  
Thur., July 3 — Radomír  
Fri., July 4 — Prokop  
Sat., July 5 — Cyril and  
Methodius Day

Sun., July 6 — Jan Hus Day  
Mon., July 7 — Bohuslava  
Tues., July 8 — Nora  
Wed., July 9 — Drahoslava

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