

Animal analogies tweak communism's tale

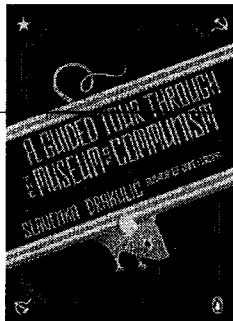
Review: *A Guided Tour Through the Museum of Communism* by Slavenka Drakulic

BOB DENT

This slim volume is both charming and humorous. In addition it is simultaneously serious and thought-provoking. It takes a tour through a number of East European, former state-socialist countries - Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Poland, East Germany, Hungary, Romania and Albania - examining their political and social characteristics before the changes of 1989-90, and in many cases afterwards as well.

Animal instincts

As the book's subtitle indicates - *Fables from a Mouse, a Parrot, a Bear, a Cat, a Mole, a Pig, a Dog & a Raven* - the different stories are told almost exclusively through the mouths of animals. Thus the mouse is Czech, the parrot Yugoslav, the bear Bulgarian and so on. The author cleverly uses this humorous device



to discuss a number of issues that might otherwise turn off many readers, due to their serious and sometimes controversial nature. The Czech mouse, for example, raises the thorny issue of why the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia enjoyed, at least for much of the time, the support - sometimes

active, sometimes passive - of vast numbers of Czech and Slovak citizens. Such a question, the type of which naturally applies to other countries in the region as well, is not usually even asked these days, let alone considered, as if nobody ever supported the various ruling parties. The mouse's monologue breaks through such self-induced amnesia.

The Polish cat tackles something arguably even more controversial by discussing in a fairly sympathetic manner the claim of General Wojciech Jaruzelski that his imposition of martial law in December 1981 was undertaken for patriotic reasons, namely to forestall an invasion of Soviet troops sent by the Kremlin to put an end to the Polish troubles, as they saw it, and the influence of Solidarnosc, Poland's popular, independent trade union.

The Bulgarian bear addresses another subject. Ostensibly it is the story of a performing bear and his gypsy master in which, after the

political changes in Bulgaria, the bear is "liberated" by Western animal-rights activists but the gypsy loses whatever security he had. It's not difficult to see in it a parable not simply about bears but about social divisions and discrimination in society at large.

The Hungarian tale, as related by a pig, tackles a different, albeit related theme. "From Gulag to Goulash" focuses on the country's former "goulash economy" but keeps reverting to the recipe for traditional Hungarian beef soup, which at first sight appears entirely non-controversial. It's only when we read of the many ways in which the dish can be prepared does the hint of a message about variety and tolerance creep in.

Different beasts

And so it goes. Each animal describes its country in a different way, highlighting different issues, and this itself is a reminder of the

important fact that whatever the commonalities of these former states, they all had their own specifics - something else that tends to be glossed over these days.

This little book is worth more than its weight in gold. It deserves to be read by anyone wanting to get to grips with some essential aspects of recent East European experience. As such it says more than many a thick tome devoted to political history and political ideology.

Buy the book

A Guided Tour Through the Museum of Communism - Fables from a Mouse, a Parrot, a Bear, a Cat, a Mole, a Pig, a Dog & a Raven

Slavenka Drakulic, Paperback, 192 pages Penguin, 2011 USD 14.00

Gaps mar beneficial but not full Marx overview

Review: *How to Change the World: Marx and Marxism 1840-2011* by Eric Hobsbawm

BOB DENT

This is a collection of writings most of which have been previously published, though not always in English. As such, although they are presented chronologically in terms of their themes, beginning with Karl Marx's era and ending with today's global economy, there is a certain disjuncture between chapters. That does mean, however, that they can be read separately, in random order, or even skipped.

Pick your poison

Skipping is presumably not what the author or the publisher have intended but many readers will find it difficult to digest certain sections, such as a chapter on the *Grundrisse* (a set of Marx's writings pre-figuring his more famous *Capital*) or another on Marx's views of pre-capitalist formations. Other chapters are much easier to read, including informative commentaries about the *Communist Manifesto*, Engels' *Conditions of the Working Class in England*, the views of Marx's Victorian critics (by no means always negative) or the influence of Marxism in the era preceding the First World War, particularly in connection with large socialist parties affiliated to strong trade unions, as appeared in Germany (and, albeit to a lesser extent, in Hungary).

Later chapters cover the era of anti-Fascism, 1929-1945, and the influence of Marxism - or lack of it - post-1945. A couple of chapters are devoted to the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, clearly a favourite of the author, but it remains to be seen whether readers will emerge with a clear idea of the Gramscian notions of "hege-

mony" and the relative autonomy of culture and ideology, and whether such concepts essentially diverge from classical Marxism.

Holes of history

Hobsbawm himself is not a difficult writer, though sometimes he's dealing with difficult themes. All in all, however, this is on the surface a straightforwardly written history of ideas, and can be taken as such to the benefit of many readers.

Yet there are some curious gaps. The chronologically presented themes guide us up to 1914 and the Great War but then suddenly jump to the 1930s. In other words some of the most important developments in the history of Marxism - the impact of Leninism, the Russian Revolution and the appearance of a Bolshevik government, resulting in what was claimed to be the first ever state based on Marxist principles - are simply overlooked. This means that, although there are scattered references to Lenin and his ideas, there is no systematic treatment of the key questions concerning the extent to which Leninism with its emphasis on the primacy of the Party (under the correct leadership, of course) can be regarded as a genuine reflection of what Karl Marx had in mind. In turn, there is no real discussion of the Marxism of Lenin's Russian opponents, the Mensheviks, let alone other socialist movements of Lenin's times, such as the Social Revolutionary Party or the anarchists.

Pink-uh-oh

This major gap *vis-à-vis* the Soviet experience (with its subsequent intellectual impact in post-1945 Eastern Europe) in a work presented as an overview of Marxism is not simply curious in

itself, it is also reflected - notwithstanding the praise showered on Antonio Gramsci - in the general lack of attention paid to what might be called "alternative Marxisms", let alone non-Marxist revolutionary traditions.

This induces the irritating feeling that there's something in the nature of apologetics about this work - perhaps not surprising given that Hobsbawm was a long-standing member of the Communist Party of Great Britain - exemplified by the off-hand treatment of the zig-zags of Soviet policy, particularly the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact, signed on the eve of the Second World War, and a very peculiar, even scandalous comment about the (otherwise not seriously examined) Spanish Civil War of 1936-39, which claims that there was no alternative (then or in retrospect) to the communist policy pursued in Spain.

The communist line in Spain involved the physical elimination of political opponents, particularly left-wing opponents, the manipulation of political power, backed by Soviet arms, and the vilification of Spanish anarchism (more deep-rooted than any Spanish Marxism) and the powerful anarcho-syndicalist trade unions, not to mention the use of tanks to break up agricultural cooperatives. Even the communists' policy of disbanding popular militias and establishing a more conventional regular army to fight Franco's forces in the end failed rather than succeeded. Was there no alternative to all that?

Misleading imagery

Thus, while much can be learnt from this work there are also shortcomings and, to say the least, unexplored ambiguities. Reflecting that is the book's cover, which includes a reproduction of Boris Mikhailovich Kustodiev's 1920 oil painting *Bolshevik*, depicting a large heroic figure with huge red flag marching over a Moscow cityscape triumphantly leading a mass of demonstrators flowing through the streets. It is a typically Soviet image of its time. Yet, as noted, the book doesn't deal with the early Soviet experience. Also on the cover is a well-known, endlessly reproduced



ERIC HOBSBAWM
HOW TO CHANGE
THE WORLD

IDEAS OF MARX AND MARXISM



Buy the book

How to Change the World: Marx and Marxism 1840-2011

By Eric Hobsbawm Hardback, 470 pages Little Brown, 2011 GBP 25.00

iconic image of Che Guevara, but inside there's next to nothing about him. It's as if some publisher's marketing wiz-kid had thought of what might be attractive selling images, irrespective of whether they had anything to do with the book's content.

And what of *How to Change the World*, the strange, quite misleading main title? This is not a handbook about changing anything. Ironically in view of the subject matter - Karl Marx and his ideological legacy - a more justifiable title might have been: *How Not to Change the World!*

startlingly original and moving... endearing and as utterly compelling as the lovely *Konos* Scotsman

emma donoghue room - a novel

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