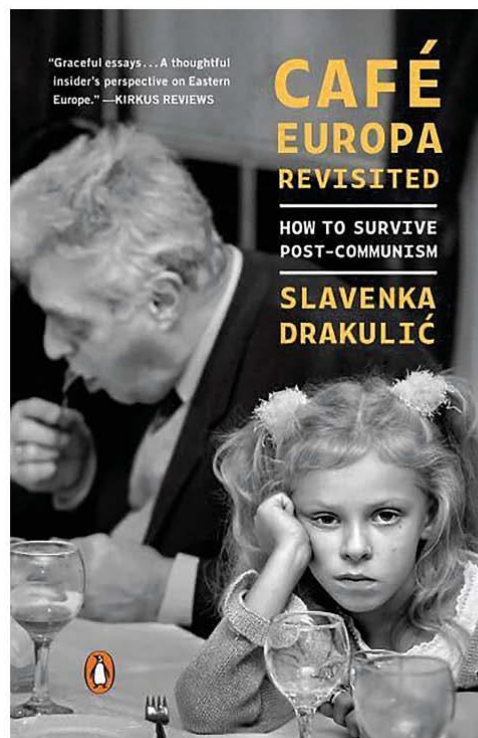


CAFÉ EUROPA REVISITED: How to Survive Post-Communism by Slavenka Drakulic book review

- Written by Yosola Olorunshola
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by Slavenka Drakulic • Penguin

In 1996, less than a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Slavenka Drakulić wrote a series of essays on life in the fledgling 'new Europe' that emerged from this political earthquake. Under the title *Cafe Europa*, she explored the daily realities of life in an ostensibly reunited continent. As she travelled between East and West, the ubiquity of cafes across Eastern Europe bearing the name 'Cafe Europa' became a repeated symbol of an aspiration towards a shared identity – an aspiration that didn't always seem to be reciprocated by these countries' Western neighbours.

Thirty years after the collapse of the Communist bloc, Drakulić has more questions about this shared identity. In *Cafe Europa Revisited*, a new wide-ranging collection of essays, she

zooms into and out of the social, cultural and political questions that dominate Europe today. Hailing from Croatia, once part of Yugoslavia, her success as a writer has afforded her a cosmopolitan experience that defines her perspective. While she was born and raised under Communism, she has lived extensively in Western Europe and, due to the relative lenience of Yugoslavia's cultural policy, she had access to British and US popular culture from an early age.

As we discover Europe through Drakulić's eyes, her gaze constantly scans between East and West, her feet planted somewhere between the two. At points, the breadth of her perspective may feel a little unwieldy for a reader unfamiliar with her material. The opening essay, 'Once upon a time in 1989', sets the tone for the scope of the collection, exploring the disappointment that followed this pivotal year, as dreams of progress in a democratic and capitalist future were tainted by the rise of inequality and corruption. Although the essay captures the immediate disillusionment well, it rushes through a sweeping range of themes that could leave a reader dizzy: the role of religion in the Yugoslav Wars; corruption in Romania; the refugee crisis; the rise of nostalgia and nationalism. Perhaps this is a deliberate stylistic choice, a narrative whirlwind that shows Europe isn't static but constantly in a state of flux. However, Drakulić's writing feels strongest when it hones in on a particular issue and dissects its ramifications.

Elsewhere, Drakulić fluidly moves between her personal experiences and wider socio-political trends. Whether writing about regional differences in the way the #MeToo movement manifested itself across the continent, or the unequal quality of food between Eastern and Western Europe, the personal is always political.

Beginning with the story of a young Slovak boy who notices that Nutella tastes different while on holiday in Vienna, the essay 'European Food Apartheid' examines the controversy around consumer brands using lower-quality ingredients in Eastern European markets. For example, a study found that in Poland, Leibniz biscuits were found to contain five per cent butter and some palm oil, while in Germany they contain 12 per cent butter and no palm oil. Many similar discrepancies were found in a trend that scandalised consumers in post-Communist nations, who resented being treated as 'second-class citizens' in terms of diet. Political leaders seized on this outrage, which reached a fever pitch in 2017–18 as concerns reached the highest levels of the European Union. Drakulić writes: 'The food scandal demonstrated that a sense of belonging to the EU begins in the stomach of its citizens.'

The question of what it means to 'belong' in Europe runs through *Cafe Europa Revisited* and the theme of migration surfaces repeatedly. The essay 'A Parrot in Sweden' explores Drakulić's own experience of integrating into life in Sweden, contrasting her privileged experience as the partner of a Swedish journalist with the refugees who arrived from her former homeland to escape the Yugoslav Wars. Throughout the collection, she highlights the factors that facilitate or hamper the possibility of integration, asking how questions of race, faith and language affect the welcome new arrivals receive. For Drakulić, Europe has characterised its Muslim populations as the new 'other' and she's careful to warn against the trend of reducing people to a monolithic identity.

While the tone across the collection seems to warn of the old divides and new differences that define Europe today, one or two essays paint a particularly fond picture. 'My Favourite Card' is essentially an ode to the European Health Insurance Card and a reminder of the benefits European unity has brought to healthcare, although it does lament the continent's fragmented 'every nation for itself' response to the pandemic. The final essay, 'My Brexit', ends on a surprisingly nostalgic, even optimistic, note, reflecting on the author's youth and the British music and fashion – from the Beatles to Mary Quant – that shaped her adolescence. Looking back at the referendum result, she writes: 'The British and their culture are so much a part of European identity that even when they sailed away, we had the best of them and will continue to do so. No politicians in the world can pull out their threads of the colourful woven fabric of European culture.'

While her position on Brexit is implicit, Drakulić slips beyond simple political divides to celebrate how porous culture can be, no matter how hard borders become. As someone who grew up behind the so-called Iron Curtain, Drakulić knows this all too well. From her vantage point on both sides of a continent still trying to find itself, *Cafe Europa Revisited* offers a portrait of a Europe that's fragile, but still whole.

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