



Prague, Capital of the twentieth century: A surrealist history

Michael Löwy

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Book Reviews

Derek Sayer (ed.), *Prague, Capital of the twentieth century: A surrealist history*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, 624 pp., ISBN: 978-0-6910-4380-7, £24.95 (hardback).

This is a remarkable, unusual and fascinating book. As the title shows, it is directly inspired by Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* – whose working title was “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century” – an unfinished manuscript entrusted by its author to his friend Georges Bataille, before fleeing from Paris the day before the Wehrmacht entered the city. Benjamin's project, a montage of excerpts, peppered with personal comments, is a labyrinth, whose Ariadne's thread is, according to Sayer, Karl Marx's doctrine of commodity fetishism. I would propose a somewhat different definition of the thread, by quoting Benjamin's own words: “One can perceive as one of the methodological aims of this work to demonstrate the possibility of a historical materialism, that has annihilated in itself the idea of progress. Here is precisely where historical materialism has to dissociate itself from the bourgeois habits of thought”.

As Benjamin, Derek Sayer tries to rummage amid the rags and refuse of yesterday's modernity, but this time in order to understand the twentieth century. Like Benjamin, he chooses a single city for this excavation, not Paris but Prague. Is Prague indeed the “Capital of the 20th Century”, because of its “modernist dreams”? In any case, it is certainly “the magical capital of old Europe” (André Breton). Instead of excerpts, the book has a collection of narratives, rather loosely connected. There is not a strong theoretical framework, as in Benjamin's manuscript; and the titles of the chapters, unlike those in the *Arcades Project*, have only a vague connection to the content: for instance, chapter 6, “Body Politic”, is mainly about love and sex, while chapter 7, “Loves' Boat Shattered against Everyday Life”, is mainly about politics.

It is obviously a different project, but a grandiose one: the book brings together fantastic material from history, literature, art, politics, architecture and poetry, giving the readers an incredibly rich and diverse picture of modern Prague; drawing on books, archives, photos, paintings and travelogues – from Ripellino's classic *Praga magica* to Michelin's *Green Guide* – he is able to create a unique image of Kafka's native town. By the way, Kafka is quite present in various chapters, but I miss any reference to his connection to the Prague anarchists, an important clue for understanding his work.

The book is a labyrinth, but it also has an Ariadne's thread, suggested by the subtitle: *Surrealism*; more precisely, the *communicating vessels* between the

Parisian and the Prague surrealist groups. This red thread sometimes gets lost, thanks to the many digressions, deviations, *derives* and lateral excursions, but it gives a sort of unity to the whole. The book is, in the final analysis, a *surrealist history*, even if one hears also about other figures, such as the Maharal of Prague, creator of the Golem; the Dadaist John Heartfield, inventor of the communist photomontage, exiled in Prague after 1933; the writers Joseph and Karl Capek; the communist intellectual S.N. Neumann; the poet Jaroslav Seifert; and many, many others.

Let us try to briefly summarize this history, following a chronological order which does not quite correspond to the chapters. The Parisian surrealist group decided, in the late 1920s, to join the French Communist Party, but when Louis Aragon, in 1932, became an unconditional Stalinist, this led to a break with André Breton and his friends. Criticizing his former comrade Aragon, Eluard quoted from Lautréamont: "All the water in the sea cannot wash away a stain of intellectual blood". Meanwhile, in Prague, the surrealists, around Vítězslav Nezval and Karel Teige, tried to combine eroticism with dialectical materialism (this part is illustrated with some delicious erotic drawings by Toyen (Marie Čermínová)). Teige declared in 1931: "poetry cannot be a song of a bird, but a crater overflowing with lava in which the Pompeii of luxury and piracy will perish". Nezval was a member of the KSC (Czech Communist Party) and some communist intellectuals, such as Zavis Kalandra, wrote in 1934 essays explaining that Surrealism and historical materialism were compatible.

In Spring 1935, André Breton, the founder of the Surrealist Movement, and Paul Eluard, one of the greatest surrealist poets in France, came to Prague to visit their Czech friends. Breton gave several talks and interviews, insisting that "authentic art goes hand in hand with revolutionary activity". This was exactly the viewpoint of the Prague surrealists, who believed, as Teige emphasized, that "surrealism is not an artistic school, but a movement for the liberation of the human spirit". Both groups issued a bilingual *Bulletin International du Surréalisme* (April 1935). Breton was enchanted with the Starry Castle, on the outskirts of Prague, a strange renaissance building from the time of the Habsburgs. He later published in the Journal *Minotaure* an essay under the title *Le Château Etoilé*.

In the Summer 1935, Nezval, Jindřich Styrsky and Toyen visited Paris and met Breton and his friends. Nezval was a delegate to the International Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture (a broad, but communist-sponsored event), but he was not allowed to give his lecture. The same happened to Breton, but after René Crevel's suicide, Paul Eluard was permitted to read his presentation. Soon afterwards, on June 2, the surrealists met and approved a document, *The Time When the Surrealists Were Right*, definitively breaking with the "the present regime in Soviet Russia and its all-powerful head", Joseph Stalin. Back in Prague, the surrealists met but could not reach a decision. Only in 1938, when Nezval approved the Moscow Trials (including the death sentences), and Teige opposed them, did it come to an open clash; Nezval declared the demise of the surrealist group, but Teige, Toyen, Styrsky

and Jindrich Heisler denounced him and published *Surrealism against the Current*, the Czech equivalent of the Parisian tract from 1935. Zavis Kalandra, who had been expelled from the Party for "Trotskyism", supported them. When Nezval visited Paris again in 1938, he did not look for his surrealist friends, but hung out with Louis Aragon. The same year Breton visited Leon Trotsky in Mexico and the two co-authored both a Manifesto, "For an Independent Revolutionary Art".

During the war, Breton went into exile in the USA, while Paul Eluard joined the Resistance – and the French Communist Party – in France, and wrote a famous poem, "Liberté", which was dropped by Royal Air Force pilots over France. Breton returned to Paris in 1946 and organized a great International Surrealist Exhibition next year, followed by a similar one a few months later, on a smaller scale, in Prague. But, when Toyen and Jindrich Heisler – whom she had hidden in her apartment during the war (he was Jewish) – moved to Paris (1947), the Prague surrealist group dissolved.

The next chapter of this "surreal history" is a most tragic one: Zavis Kalandra, who had been arrested by the Gestapo in 1939 and sent to Ravensbrück, survived the Nazi concentration camps but became a victim of stalinism. Arrested as a Trotskyist in 1949 and put to trial on accusations of "treason", he "confessed" and was condemned to death. Breton organized an appeal for clemency to the Czech (Communist) authorities, signed by Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Michel Leiris, and several others. He also published an "Open Letter to Paul Eluard" (June 1950), asking him to help his former Prague friend from 1935. Eluard's infamous answer was: "I already have too much on my hands with the innocent who proclaim their innocence, to occupy myself with the guilty who proclaim their guilt". This too is an intellectual bloodstain that all the water of the sea cannot wash (to quote Eluard's comment on Aragon). Zavis Kalandra was hanged on 17 June 1950.

Breton died in 1966, and above his grave there is an *objet trouvé*, a piece of masonry which he had collected because it strangely resembled the Starry Castle of Prague. Breton's friends, Vincent Bounoure and José Pierre, returned to Prague during the "Prague Spring" and helped to organize a new international surrealist exhibition, "The Pleasure Principle", with a new generation of Czech surrealists, Vratislav Effenberger and Petr Kral. They issued a common declaration, the *Prague Platform*, denouncing "the myth of Progress and historical inevitability". Effenberger managed to publish a surrealist journal, *Analogon*, reproducing Breton and Trotsky's Manifesto, several writings by Zavis Kalandra, and Breton's open letter to Eluard. The Soviet tanks soon put an end to the "Prague Spring" and to public surrealist activity. Meanwhile, in Paris, Jean Schuster, José Pierre and others formally dissolved the surrealist group, to the dismay of their Prague friends.

So far the remarkable book I'm reviewing. But, the "surrealist history" continues: Vincent Bounoure, Michel Zimbacca, Toyen and others refused the dissolution of the group, and decided to continue the surrealist adventure, with the full support of Effenberger and the Prague surrealists. Both groups cooper-

ated in publishing a collective book, *La civilization surréaliste* (Paris, Payot, 1975), and, in one way and the other, collaboration between them has continued, with new generations emerging, till now, 2013. But, that is another story.

Michael Löwy
National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS)
Paris, France
Email: michael.lowy@orange.fr
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Krassimira Daskalova, Caroline Hornstein Tomic, Karl Kaser, and Filip Radunovic (eds.), *Gendering Post-Socialist Transition. Studies of Changing Gender Perspectives*. Vienna: LIT VERLAG, 2012, 328 pp., ISBN: 978-3-643-90229-0, €34.90 (paperback).

Heike Kahlert and Sabine Schafer (eds.), *Engendering Transformation. Post-Socialist Experiences on Work, Politics and Culture Gender*. Leverkusen: Barbara Budrich Verlag, *Gender issue 1*, 2011, ISSN: 1868-7245, 25.99 (paperback).

Since the mid-1990s feminist and post-socialist studies scholars have underlined the gendered character of post-socialist transitions in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. The literature on gender and post-socialist transition published in the last twenty years is vast, notably when it comes to monographs dealing with post-socialist transition in specific nation-states. Edited collections have been rarer, and they were mainly published during the 1990s or early 2000s (Funk and Mueller 1993; Gal 2000a, 2000b). The edited volume *Gendering Post-Socialist Transition* adds to this body of literature, exploring the effects of post-socialist transition twenty-four years after 1989 and the collapse of socialist regimes in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. The volume has been sponsored by the Austrian ERSTE Foundation, which was also the main sponsor of the recent exhibition *Gender Check – Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*, held in Vienna in 2009.

The aim of the volume is to uncover “In what way have post-socialist developments and transformations of the past two decades influenced gender relations, role concepts and everyday practices of men and women? How have the developing and changing gender roles and perceptions of gender relations touched upon the central question of social integration and equality?” (15). Nine research teams from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine were asked to choose the topic that they deemed most urgent. As the editors underline in the introduction, this was “a privilege enjoyed by few East European scholars during the last twenty years of Transition.” The case studies contained in the volume draw upon existing data, but also make use of new surveys and