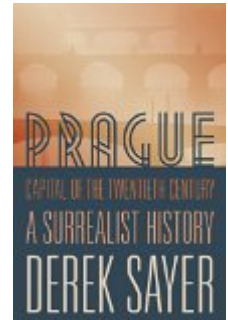


Derek Sayer. *Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century: A Surrealist History.*
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013. xxi + 595 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN
978-0-691-04380-7.



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Published on HABSBURG (March, 2015)

Commissioned by Jonathan Kwan (University of Nottingham)

Derek Sayer is likely best known to historians of East Central Europe for his brilliant and uncategorizable *Coasts of Bohemia* (1998), a book in which he used the Czechs and their history to reveal the postmodern uncertainty, complexity, and contingency at the heart of the grandiose political and cultural projects of modernity. Sayer argued that reversing Czechs' twentieth-century marginalization in Western European imaginaries, which has occurred in spite of their geographical centrality, "forces us to rethink what we understand by a history in the first place, and to confront the question of just how much forgetting is always entailed in the production of memory." [1] In the book under review, he goes a step further. Just as Walter Benjamin regarded Paris as "the capital of the nineteenth century," Sayer claims that Prague is a fitting capital for the twentieth. Echoing his concerns in *Coasts*, the author legitimizes his choice by saying that Prague is a place "in which modernist dreams have time and again unraveled; a location in which the masks have sooner or later always come off to reveal the

grand narratives of progress for the childish fairy tales they are" (p. 10).

Treading the path blazed by Benjamin in his monumental but unfinished work published posthumously as *The Arcades Project* (1982) entails a more daring methodology, too. Instead of chronological narrative and theoretical argument, the book presents a phantasmagoria of images from the twentieth-century "dreamworld" (p. 1), loosely organized into eight mostly thematic chapters. Following Benjamin (who saw himself continuing the work of Marx), the point is to demystify the twentieth century and explode its own self-referential myths. According to this view, the twentieth century becomes a "collective dream," which we must enter, not by its standard narratives of great men, events, and progress but through its material and psychological refuse, in order to finally understand it and awaken from it. [2] Befitting both the twisting course of modern Czech history and the artistic currents of twentieth-century Prague, Sayer chooses surrealism as

the leitmotif for his six-hundred-page odyssey though this “spacetime” (p. 3).

Prague is written with verve, wit, and a playfulness that matches that of its surrealist subjects. Its unconventional presentation is often tortuous, but usually entertaining and never boring. Like *Coasts of Bohemia*, it is also a labor of love. The author’s erudition on Czech avant-garde culture is equal only to his enthusiasm for it. Yet this perhaps sheds light on what could be seen as a major flaw in the book’s design: entering so deep into the self-referential world of the interwar surrealists, the reader will find only fleeting glimpses of the more quotidian twentieth century left behind.

Chapter 1 locates Prague firmly at the center of the artistic and political currents of the interwar period. In 1935, French surrealist icons André Breton and Paul Éluard visited what Bréton called “the magic capital of old Europe” (p. 15) and fraternized with homegrown luminaries Vítězslav Nezval and Karel Teige. In keeping with the Freudian preoccupations of surrealist art, Prague appears to have crept into the European artistic subconscious around this time. Meanwhile, Czech surrealists offered some of the boldest artistic visions for cutting across the boundaries within the mind and between art and politics—a divide that caused the 1920s and 1930s avant-garde much unease across Europe.

Chapters 2 and 3 draw heavily from the work of Italian Slavicist Angelo Ripellino, exploring Prague as a palimpsest on which conflicting projects have been inscribed and reinscribed. Metamorphosis—referring to Franz Kafka, a German- and Czech-speaking Prague Jew who defies categorization—seems to be Prague’s constant state. Specters abound, haunting the Prague cityscape and psyche. Modernist dreams jostle uneasily with the ghosts of the occultist Habsburg Emperor Rudolf II, who made the city his home in the late sixteenth century, and the Wandering Jew of Guillaume Apollinaire’s Prague-themed poetry. Absences are equally suggestive—the former street

names that disappeared with shifts in the political wind, the roster of great Czechs *not* buried in the hallowed ground of Vyšehrad Castle, the Germans.

This is the backdrop for Sayer’s claim in his strong fourth chapter that “modernity is and always has been ... a chiaroscuro etched in infinite shades of gray, shot through with bolts of darkness as well as light” (p. 155). Thus, the painter Alfons Mucha’s romantic nationalist “Slavic Epic” sat surprisingly comfortably within the ultramodern functionalist exhibition palace where it was first exhibited, Czech architectural cubism ebulliently incorporated elements of nineteenth-century historicism (vilified in most modernist theory), shoe mogul Tomas Bata’s Fordist vision combined workers’ welfare and their panoptic disciplinization, and avant-garde Czech “Poetism” revealed in everyday consumerist pleasures as well as “rustic art” (p. 199). Such apparent contradictions, their surreal quality, are simply the product of “our habit of seeing modernity through modernist eyes—or to put it another way, expecting history to behave in accord with the dictates of modernist aesthetics” (p. 154).

Chapter 5 moves through a series of images that, to the extent they share a common theme, show how the body figured centrally in divergent artistic and political visions in the interwar period. The surrealists aimed to emancipate sexuality—the Prague contingent taking a more ribald, lighthearted course emblemized by the work of Jindřich Styrsky and Toyen (Marie Cerminova) than their French counterparts—while the Nazis aimed to discipline and purify the body, both that of individuals and of society. The onslaught faced by freethinking surrealists and others was staged in the Nazis’ infamous 1937 exhibit of “Degenerate Art”—ironically (and surreally) the most visited single exhibition of modern art in history (p. 259).

The final three chapters chart the twilight of the surrealists’ exuberant pre-postmodernism in

the face of disillusionment during the divisive Stalinist Terror of the late 30s, the lethal Nazi occupation, and the 1948 Communist takeover. The politics of black and white, like erstwhile Prague resident John Heartfield's photomontages, triumphed over the cacophonous, the experimental, and the "down and dirty of human existence" (p. 359). Prague succumbed to the invaders. But like the pentimento under a fresh coat of paint, the surreal would not be so easily banished. Its paladins resurrected it after the war in both Paris and Prague--though with less acclaim or sensation--and the serpentine course of history bore out its hidden truth. Prague remained, as Sayer says at the outset, a place where "an exhibition may turn into a show trial, the interior mutate into a prison cell, the arcade become a shooting gallery, and the idling *flâneur* reveal himself to be a secret policemen at the drop of a hat" (pp. 9-10).

Prague may leave the reader (as it did the present reviewer) pondering the contexts in which the *flâneur* might encounter many of the images that its author conjures up. These seem to be the art gallery and the salon, or the inner sanctum of Bréton's 9th Arrondissement apartment, far more than the boulevard or the arcade. The book's stated aim is to "do for our recent past--which is to say, for Walter Benjamin's present--what *The Arcades Project* did for his: to rummage amid the rags and refuse of yesterday's modernity in the hope of uncovering the dreamworlds that continue to haunt what we fondly believe to be today's waking state" (p. 7). But the quotidian materiality of Benjamin's nineteenth century--which, alongside more recondite themes such as Baudelaire's existential crises, featured things like "fashion," "iron construction," "photography," "mirrors," "modes of lighting," "prostitution, gambling," and the advertisements lighting the way into the Paris Métro[3]--recedes from view in the twentieth. This is not to say that the everyday is invisible in Sayer's work. The politically charged metamorphosis of Prague street and building names is one example. Still, his redolent images of

the last century are more often than not mediated through, and considered within, the works of avant-garde artists. A striking effect of this rarefied thrust is to heighten the importance of Paris in what is ostensibly a Prague story and obscure the view of ordinary Praguers. The affinities between Parisian currents represented by Picasso and Braque and Czech surrealists lead Sayer to remark that the distance between the two capitals was not as great as it later became: "shorter, quite possibly, than the tram-ride taken by Franz Kafka from the Old Town to Žižkov"--a large and iconic working-class quarter (p. 173). Elsewhere, Prague appears important because it gets confused with Paris in the memory of the French surrealists and their admirers.

Benjamin intended to use the material detritus of nineteenth-century Paris to reveal the inner logic of bourgeois capitalist civilization, as well as the potential for collectivist emancipation lodged, in dialectical fashion, within it. Baron Haussmann's boulevards could not eradicate the premonitory shades of revolutionary barricades that they intended to stamp out; stultifying mass culture contained the seeds of the masses' awakening from it. Must the images of the twentieth century that haunt our present be so much more difficult to access? For all the merits of Sayer's thought-provoking work, the "collective dream" of the last century that we encounter in it was shared by only a handful of people, many of whom were seldom in the Czech capital.

Notes

[1]. Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 16.

[2]. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 1999), ix.

[3]. *Ibid.*, 29 and 84.

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Citation: Jakub Benes. Review of Sayer, Derek. *Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century: A Surrealist History*. HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. March, 2015.

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