

## **Other criticism of Milan Kundera: crowd problems**

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*Abstract.* This paper examines another criticism of Milan Kundera apart from the familiar charge of sexism: that his representations of crowds are overly negative. It is made in a paper by Martha Kuhlman. I agree that Kundera generally depicts crowds in a negative light, but I also observe that there are major and puzzling differences between novels when it comes to details, which I believe is intentional.

*Draft version:* Version 2 (6th August 2022, “childhood”).

—*This crowd of daffodils*

*Care not for your skills*

A familiar criticism of Milan Kundera is that his novels are very sexist, a criticism which I wouldn't resist. But what else has been said by critics? If only there were a convenient list! Another criticism is that Kundera represents crowds in an overly negative way and below I look into this.

In a well-conceived and rewarding article for *The Comparatist*, Martha Kuhlman presents negative images of crowds in different novels by Kundera (e.g. 2001: 89). She ends her article by contrasting Kundera's impressions of crowds with that of another novelist, who happened to observe a crowd event while passing through Prague. This is how she ends her article:

...Canetti's perception of crowds is decidedly more favorable than Kundera's, as is evident from his account of the May Day parade. These two opposite visions of

May Day serve to underline the fact that the crowd is ultimately an empty construct with no intrinsic meaning outside of the specific context from which it arises. (2001: 103)

As I understand Kuhlman, she is criticizing Kundera for representing crowds as if they are by their very nature negative. What another novelist might do, she suggests, is present different perspectives on the crowd without encouraging the reader to take a negative perspective as capturing the nature of the crowds.

After reading her article, I looked into the role of the crowd in Kundera's novels, or some of them. What I found is that although he presents crowds or crowd-like phenomena in a negative light, he is not consistent on details, to the point where it looks an intentional puzzle left for readers.

1. *Life is Elsewhere*. This novel is about the life of an annoying young poet. Part four of the novel opens with this sentence:

In every poet's life there comes a time when he tears himself away from his mother and starts running. (1986: 161)

Kundera portrays both his fictional poet and famous actual poets as not just running from a specific relative, but also running to something: to revolutionary activity and associated crowds.

Here is one scene involving the main character:

The students marched through the streets with Jaromil at their side; he was responsible for the slogans on the banners and for the declamation of his colleagues; this time he no longer thought up beautifully provocative aphorisms but simply copied several slogans recommended by central agit-prop. He was shouting like a corporal counting out cadence, and his colleagues rhythmically

yelled out the slogans after him. (1986: 176)

The joining of revolutionary crowds at this stage seems an attempt at growing up. Rather than writing lovely poems for family, the poet is now making his voice heard in the more public world and issuing instructions. Kundera portrays this as a dangerously naïve entry into politics.

There is soon dancing and because this will matter below, a further quotation will be useful:

The marchers had already passed the reviewing stand on Wenceslas Square and the blue-shirted young people were dancing to hastily improvised bands. (1986: 176)

The natural way of reading this is that the students march and then they dance. Perhaps marching is not dancing, but there is no significant opposition drawn between marching and dancing. (By the way, Kuhlman refers to this novel and also Kundera's instruction not to take it as specifically about communist revolutions, while the quotations selected are mine and the explicit analysis of the role accorded to crowds in development. See 2001: 90-91)

2. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. There is a section of this book in which Kundera interprets a scene depicted in a photograph:

It is clearly an interlude before a clash with police guarding a nuclear power plant, a military training camp, the offices of a political party, or the windows of an embassy. The young people have taken advantage of an interlude to form a circle and, to a simple, well-known tune, take two steps in place, one step forward, raise first the left leg and then the right. (1996: 88)

Here are Kundera's intuitions about the meanings of all this:

I think I understand them: they have the impression that the circle they are

describing on the ground is a magical circle uniting them like a ring. And their chests swell with an intense feeling of innocence: they are united not by *marching*, like soldiers or fascist formations, but by *dancing*, like children. What they are trying to spit in the cops' faces is their innocence. (1996: 88)

In this novel (i) dancing and marching are opposed, and (ii) the behaviour of the protestors is meant to symbolize childhood innocence rather than be a movement towards adulthood, even a faulty one. These are large contrasts with *Life is Elsewhere*, though Kundera's attitude towards crowd phenomena is not more favourable. (Kuhlman refers to Kundera's account of his own dancing in a ring, but does not note these contrasts between the novels. She emphasizes continuity between the two. 2001: 96. It looks deliberately inconsistent, but I would not have noticed the inconsistencies without the prompting of her article to focus on crowd images.)

3. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. With this novel, I shall simply rely on Kuhlman. Her article opens with this quotation from the novel:

She would have liked to tell him that behind Communism, Fascism, behind all occupations and invasions lurks a more basic, pervasive evil and the image of that evil was a parade of people marching by with raised fists and shouting identical syllables in union. (Kundera, quoted in Kuhlman 2001: 89)

The character is Sabina and she will not participate in demonstrations, having been forced to march on May Day in Communist Czechoslovakia.

This novel is Kundera's most famous but it is the contrast between the two earlier novels which grips me. I agree Kundera does generally depict crowds in an unfavourable light, but the contrast, or pair of contrasts, leaves me with the following impression: "I, Mr. Kundera, don't like crowds nor do the characters of mine that I am fond of, but I don't really have a clue about

the details of crowd phenomena involving lots of young people. In one novel, I try one approach. In another novel, a contradictory approach.”

## **References**

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