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## Prague: Belonging in the Modern City by Chad Carl Bryant

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### Book reviewed

Bryant CC (2021) *Prague: Belonging in the Modern City*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts/London, England.

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*Prague: Belonging in the Modern City* is an exciting work in urban history. Prague weaves a rich tapestry of European modernity from imperial Austro-Hungary to Fascist Europe to Communist Czechoslovakia to present day globalism, and it does so in part through the voices of theorists of the modern city such as Charles Baudelaire, Walter Simmel, Walter Benjamin, and David Harvey, as well as through the everyday experiences of selected figures who lived the city at various times. By focusing on what it means to live in times of change, to dwell in the city, and to belong in an often fragmented and contested sense of community, Prague extends urban history into a wider interdisciplinary field deeply informed by social theory, spatial thinking, and a rich geographical imagination. Prague asks us to focus on the concrete ways in which city lives interact with these larger historical processes, and how we can understand the ways people belong and identify with cities during periods of major change.

Prague, like many Central European cities, has experienced such changes, yet those experiences have often been described through the lenses of national history or linear or progressive modernization stories. In them Prague has been described as a national capital, Czech-in-becoming, an iconic city of Czech identity and culture, a center of national imagination and governmental and cultural power, planned and remade by struggles among political elites and governmental or corporate regimes. Bryant's explicit task in Prague is to decenter such nationalist and state-centered historiographies by paying attention to the rich geographical experiences and diversity of migrants to the city, to the complexities of everyday lived worlds of city residents as they live under, and tried to make sense of, regime change. The nationalist city-story is dislodged from a single narrative to one of reordering and remaking as loci of power and opportunity shift with each changing regime.

The book tells the story of Prague in terms of five chapters and five 'cities': German City, Czech City, Revolution City, Communist City, and Global City. Each 'city' is unpacked through the experience of apparently ordinary individuals and their lived experiences of the streets, parks, cafes, and many other places of the city. None of these individuals are the typical figures of national or urban city. Instead, Bryant focuses on a writer of guidebooks, a German-speaking

newspaperman, a Bolshevik carpenter and activist, an actress who navigates the complex politics of communism, and a Czech-speaking Vietnamese female blogger. Karel Vladislav Zap was a Czech-speaking writer who wrote the first guidebook to Prague in 1947. Egon Erwin Kisch was a German Jewish writer who wrote regular feuilletons for the German-language newspaper Bohemia during the period of German and increasingly anti-Jewish government. Vojtěch Berger, the World War I veteran from rural Bohemia and radical social democrat alienated by the war and the class politics of the first Czech Republic. Vojtěch was a communist who wrote 65 volumes of his daily diaries, collecting materials and details of his life. Hana Frejková -the author of a memoir- was the daughter of a causality of Stalinist purge and was forced out of the city after her father was assassinated. Duong Nguyen Jirásková is a contemporary Vietnamese second generation migrant who blogs to come to terms with the immigrant experience.

In Bryant's carefully crafted narrative each of these figures and their everyday lives reflects how different forms of exclusionary nationalism shaped their lives. Each person experienced isolation or marginalization in the city. At some point, several were expelled from it. But while we follow these characters as they wander through the streets, stroll park paths, join political marches, or write about their lives, we are asked to focus on the ways in which these outsiders embody different forms of the urban experience and, in turn, remake the city for themselves. Spaces and places that --on the surface --have typically been seen to have been built by and often for others, are rewritten and reworked as sites of everyday experience and struggle. In each, the category of 'belonging' is central. Drawing on social psychologists and humanist geographers working on migration studies, Bryant figures 'belonging' as a complex and uncertain relation to place. In this sense, cities are always churning sites of difference. As old structures were swept away with industrialism, nationalism, war, and regime change, efforts to render the city as a place of national belonging (German, Czech, Revolutionary, Communist, Global) also engendered in residents of the city a sense of loss and uncertainty, and a struggle to create meaning. Many of these efforts were organized around exclusionary, violent, and disturbing practices. But Bryant links these concepts of cities as sites of difference to the ebb and flow of wider political and economic change. He asks how individuals and communities imagine their relationship to their nation, their country, and their people when their struggle for belonging is disrupted by structures of power. To paraphrase in terms of actually-existing socialism and actually-existing post-socialism, what are the actually-existing practices of belonging that characterize Central European city life?

The book ends by imaginatively bringing these five historical characters together in the Old Town Square of Prague, allowing them and others to reflect on what belonging means in the modern era. How do we practice of belonging? Can we belong differently, and better? Can the city be a locus for a hopeful future restructuring of urban diversities and inclusions?

Prague is both a pleasure to read and a useful guide to thinking about cities. But it also poses a challenge for us all. How do we think and write about our own places outside the typical national narrative? Who do we turn to if we want to understand what our towns and cities mean? What would an urban geography/urban spatial history of Sofia, Plovdiv, Burgas, Montana, or Kurdzhali look like if it framed its stories of marginalization and belonging in terms of a range of political economic and cultural regimes such as the Ottoman City, National City, Communist City, and European City, telling the story of each through the archives and life experiences of individuals or groups who were shaped by, and who also shaped, the production of the places we inhabit - a tour guide, a street cleaner, the opera or folk

singer, the newspaper reporter, or the Vietnamese blogger? Prague is an excellent model and guide.

Author: Chad Bryant is Full Professor of History at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Previously has written *Prague in Black: Nazi Rule and Czech Nationalism* (Harvard University Press 2009, which was awarded the Hans Rosenberg Book Prize) and co-edited *Borderlands in World History 1700-1914* (Palgrave Macmillan 2014) and *Walking Histories* (Palgrave Macmillan 2016).

Readers can learn more about Prague and Chad Bryant in the following interviews and excerpts:

- On the podcast *New Books in Eastern European Studies*, listen to Chad Bryant discuss Prague with Professor Steven Seegel (UT Austin): <https://newbooksnetwork.com/prague>
- At Literary Hub, read an excerpt from *Prague on café life and belonging in the turn-of-the-twentieth-century city*: <https://lithub.com/cafe-life-and-literati-life-in-turn-of-the-century-prague/>
- Watch Bryant discuss Prague with Professor Tara Zahra (University of Chicago) at a May 2021 online event cohosted by Chicago's Seminary Co-op Bookstore and the University of Chicago Center for East European and Russian/Eurasian Studies: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qe\\_Tv\\_24PXY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qe_Tv_24PXY)

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