Adorned with imposing government buildings, impressive monuments, and an assortment of civic institutions, capital cities have long held special significance as the practical and symbolic locus of political authority and allegiance. In addition to the routine functions of government and venues for everyday life, capital cities also frequently host elaborate ceremonies, celebrations, and commemorations marking occasions of state importance. It is little wonder that ruling elites since antiquity have invested considerable time, energy, and resources in establishing and embellishing capital cities. Historically, the ruling elites have tended to be monarchs or dynastic lineages and their immediate retinues, and so capital cities glorified the power, authority, and legitimacy of the individual ruler, often justified through some type of divine sanction. Since the early nineteenth century, the rise of mass nationalism, accompanied by notions of popular sovereignty, have largely replaced hereditary monarchism as the basis for political legitimacy and authority. As a result, capital cities have shifted to embody the sovereignty of the national community, however defined, rather than the monarchy.

In *Prague: Belonging in the Modern City*, historian Chad Bryant charts the course of that evolving dynamic in Prague, the capital city of Czechia, or the Czech Republic. As the notion of a distinct Czech identity initially gained currency through the nineteenth century and adapted through successive republican, communist, and liberal democratic regimes in the twentieth century, Prague’s built environment was encoded with successive notions of “Czechness” and Czech identity through architecture, place names, monuments, et cetera, and in the process gained a multilayered texture of identity, public memory, and ideology. As Bryant noted, “capital cities such as Prague were loci for imagining nations as political communities, places where the nation became imaginable” (p. 11). But imagining the nation was not something that just happened spontaneously or unfolded divorced from broad socioeconomic and political trajectories. Rather, the work of imagining the nation and encoding nationalist narratives in the urban landscape of Prague required the energy, passion, and resources of public and private sector elites, activities, business interests, marginalized groups, and occasionally even foreign actors.

While each successive project of representing and building a Czech national identity through Prague’s cityscape was framed around notions of inclusivity, unity, and shared heritage, those projects invariably invoked practices of exclusion, division, and marginalization. In that sense, Prague, like all cities, provides mechanisms that concen-
trate and homogenize while simultaneously creating pathways to differentiation. To tell that story, or perhaps better framed as intertwined stories of nationalist visions of Prague, Bryant focuses on the life stories of five residents of Prague whose “stories follow the rise of nationalism while exposing tensions between homogenizing national imaginations and the persistence of urban diversity” (p. 5). Bryant weaves these stories together through the lives of “an aspiring Czech-language guidebook writer; a clever, German-speaking journalist; a Bolshevik carpenter; an actress of mixed heritage living in the shadow of Communist terror; and a Czech-speaking Vietnamese blogger” (p. 5). These successive residents of Prague exemplified important trajectories of their respective times and left behind a substantial amount of written material, diaries, collected newspaper clippings, et cetera. In the end, Bryant's Prague “is part urban biography, part individual biography” (p. 8).

The main body of the book consists of five chapters in roughly chronological order that chart Prague's history as a German city under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Habsburg Empire, a Czech city as Czech nationalists gradually gained control over municipal government in the decades leading to World War I, a city of revolution through the tumultuous decades of interwar period leading to Nazi occupation and eventually communist rule, a communist city interpreting Czech identity through the context of socialist ideology, and finally a global city reflecting aspirations for integration into the European Union and networks of global connectivity.

Chapter 1 relates how Prague was imagined as a German city through much of the nineteenth century due to its association with the Habsburg monarchy and the prominence of a German-speaking merchant and ruling class. Yet during this time, Czech nationalist activists began agitating for greater political participation and representation, and in the process, began imagining Prague through a national lens. The aforementioned “aspiring Czech-language guidebook writer,” for example, was part of a movement of middle-class Czechs to promote Czech-language travel guidebooks, newspapers, poetry, theater, leisure strolling, and salon soirées, among other cultural artifacts, as activities and venues “to create for themselves a sense of belonging in the city—and then to brashly declare Prague to be their city,” a Czech city (p. 16).

Chapter 2 recounts the ascendency of Czech nationalism in the decades leading to World War I, culminating in independence for Czechoslovakia. During these decades, municipal programs of slum clearance and overall modernization embodied by new sanitation systems and the demolition of city fortifications were entangled with the rise of Czech municipal power and efforts to imprint Czech identity and memory throughout the cityscape. A new, middle-class café and cabaret culture also became emblematic of burgeoning aspirations for a Czech national identity. In contrast, one “clever, German-speaking journalist” published a series of feuilletons in German-speaking outlets focusing on “the city's forgotten, down-and-out characters whom Czech national elites had tried to make invisible” he encountered during his “carousing late into the night in cabarets and less-than-respectable pubs” (p. 59), providing a counternarrative to notions of a more refined, genteel, bourgeois Czech capital city. Chapter 3 outlines efforts by leaders of the Czechoslovak Republic to fashion “Prague into a capital for a new country, dotting the city's landscape with peculiarly Czech expressions of liberal democratic progress” (p. 107). Beneath that veneer of unifying public nationalist iconography, the caustic diary entries, newspaper clippings, and other assorted scrapbook-like artifacts amassed by “a Bolshevik carpenter” illustrated the undercurrents of discontent, agitation, and communist sympathies that churned through Czech society during the interwar years and German occupation.
The communist seizure of power in 1948 marks the beginning of chapter 4 and efforts to reorientate Prague as a communist city, replete with public iconography that “reflected a Czech national past reworked for the Communist present and future” (p. 157). To realize its visions of fundamental socioeconomic transformation, the communist regime engaged in widespread surveillance, repression, and violence, including to the family of “an actress of mixed heritage living in the shadow of Communist terror.” Although speaking Czech, her German-Jewish background made her suspect in the eyes of the regime and led to the murder of her father, yet she and “fellow artists pursued small-scale, creative projects that forged their own notions of community and place. Along with other Praguers, they created their own sense of belonging within and in spite of a Communist regime that was determined to mold and coordinate their lives” (pp. 157-158). Chapter 5 brings the story to the present as Prague assumes the mantle of capital city of an independent Czechia, divorced from Slovakia but both increasingly integrated into the supranational, liberal democratic framework of the European Union and global flows of finance, technology, and information. In this globalist milieu, Prague is commonly imagined as a multicultural home to vibrant Czech, German, and Jewish communities, yet “a Czech-speaking Vietnamese blogger” contemplates how second-generation migrants might fit into that narrative, and in the process, she and “her peers created their own virtual spaces to meet, console each other, and debate.… They met and mobilized online. They formed networks across space that led them to create ‘real’ face-to-face gatherings and associations” that grappled with notions of dual, hybrid, and contingent identities (pp. 204-205). Through these five life stories, Bryant carefully explores how successive dominant narratives of Czech identity in Prague faced counternarratives. The book ends with a short conclusion that returns to Bryant's opening call “to imagine the past in a way that provokes a sense of empathy and historical understanding, while inspiring hopeful visions of the future” (p. 14).

Bryant is to be commended for producing an eminently readable book that weaves together the broader trajectories of Czech history with the more everyday aspects of life in Prague over the last two centuries. He successfully examines the dichotomy between the homogenizing impulses of Czech nationalist narratives and the realities of individuals and groups that do not fit comfortably, of those who do not appear to belong, within those overarching narratives of Prague as the Czech capital and pinnacle of “Czechness.” The book includes some basic reference maps, but those unfamiliar with the historical geography of Prague's urban morphology may struggle to locate and follow the narrative. Bryant does not provide much new to the history of Prague or its evolving role as the unofficial and later official capital of Czech nationalist movements, but effectively illustrates how those broader developments might have been experienced by “regular” people. Those interested in Prague or more generally in Czech history will find Prague: Belonging in the Modern City a good read.
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