

Bryant, Chad. *Prague: Belonging in the Modern City*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2021. xii+325 pages. \$ 29.95

Chad Bryant, an award-winning historian and professor at UNC-Chapel Hill narrates a fascinating tale of Prague city through the eyes of five different dwellers in this historic capital of Czech Republic. He explores the meaning of belonging and describes how these individuals “in their own ways, experienced marginalization in a city they called their home” (p.5) came identify with the city in their own times, crises, and amid tensions.

Bryant divides the book into five chapters with each chapter delving into the life of the selected inhabitant and explores the city from their perspective. The first chapter explores the Prague identifying as a German city under the Habsburg monarchy and highlights the aspirations of Czech speaking, middle class guidebook writer to belong and the struggle “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).

The second chapter focuses on Prague as a Czech city explaining the evolving nationalism post-independence. Through the published works of Kisch, a German speaking journalist we see the effort to belong in a Czech city through his “sentimental depictions of the city and his colorful, yet thoughtful encounters with Prague’s down-and-out, reveal a struggle to forge a sense of place in a city increasingly imagined as “golden, Slavic Prague” (p.104). In the third chapter, Berger, a Bolshevik carpenter, reflects upon Prague as a revolutionary city and how “among fellow Communists, however, Berger found a home” (p.107).

The fourth chapter narrates the tale of Prague as a Communist city and follows actress Hana Frejková as she experiences an identity crisis of being a Czech or a German or a Jew. The Communist regime sets the background through which she tells her tale of belonging to this city.

Chapter five describes the appeal of modern Prague as a Global city. Duong Nguyen, a student at the Metropolitan University encapsulates the dilemma of Vietnamese Praguers who “were also engaging in radically new practices of belonging” (p.204). The new generation’s virtual connections have created new forms of network but struggle with the same dilemma “asking best how to navigate their Czech and Vietnamese worlds” (p.205).

Throughout the book, Bryant has toyed with the same idea of belonging and historical imagination of a city. He has beautifully weaved multiple identities of the Prague city, each with its counter narrative. There is never a dull moment in the text and each carefully selected citizen takes you on a journey in time and makes the reader visualize the complexities of the society they lived in their time in the same city. The organization of the content brings a fresh perspective and makes it an interesting read unlike many others written previously. He begins with the question of finding a true meaning of belonging in a city and what it entails but he doesn’t give us a definite answer. He doesn’t pick sides with any side of the historical figures or political systems and concludes with the notion that the best way is “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).

Nadia Bukhtawer, MPhil
International Development Studies
Lecturer Department of Gender Studies
Fatima Jinnah Women University
Rawalpindi, Pakistan.