



Matters of revolution: Urban spaces and symbolic politics in Berlin and Warsaw after 1989

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BOOK REVIEW

Matters of revolution: Urban spaces and symbolic politics in Berlin and Warsaw after 1989, by Dominik Bartmanski, London, Routledge, 2022, 224 pp., £34,99 (paperback), ISBN 9780367706203

In this carefully researched and beautifully written book, Dominik Bartmanski reconstructs comparatively the ‘monumental’ endowment of the cities of Warsaw and Berlin in order to understand the moral careers of some of their key sites, such as the Berlin Wall, the Warsaw Palace of Culture and Science, and many others. The 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall, described by the author as a ‘revolution that did get televised’, not only sets the stage, but provides the veritable gravitational point for the whole discussion. For indeed, the demise of the USSR and its satellite regimes in Europe marks not only a historical watershed (*die Wende*), but also an intense cultural milieu, a *bouillon* filled with material debris turned into cult objects, sensations of bewilderment turned into both excitement and nostalgia (*Ostalgie*), whole urban sites in stand-by turned into massive redevelopment projects. The ‘event’ that apparently severs *before* and *after*, in fact, continually joins them into a sticky, ‘chronic’ type of temporality, where they constantly look at and search into one another for direction and meaning.


Here Bartmanski exercises a keen eye in showing how an array of former communist paraphernalia, including whole buildings and sites, have been soaked into a new capitalist *Verwertung* process, as is the case, for instance, with the Warsaw Palace of Culture (... that communist ‘gift’) featured in the 2018 cover of the first issue of *Vogue Polska* edition; or former DDR’s 1950s rationalist-looking *Palast der Republik* torn down to be replaced with an incongruous replica of the baroque *Königliches Schloss* completed in 2020. From the collective shockwave and euphoria that the ‘event of 1989’ propelled around the continent to the tiny little pieces of the Wall now sold to tourists in transparent plastic bags at 3€ each (a veritable echo of Durkheim’s notion of ‘parcels of sacredness’!), and to communist-era Polish neon signage monumentalised via a dedicated municipal museum, the author is able to delineate a continuum that intersects – and perhaps stumbles into – the many urban conundrums of the two capital cities under scrutiny. It is a whole politics of visibility that comes to be attached to (with a nod to Jane Jacobs) the ‘death and life of great communist palaces’, where the same monument and its whole material structure can be captured by conflicting imaginaries and many different semiotic performances. At the same time, following the book’s line, at some point, one can also get convinced that, quoting Daniel Miller’s slightly animistic assertion, monuments are ‘stuff that makes us in the first place’ – for after all, as the author aptly remarks, it

is the uniqueness of each artefact that makes the history, rather than simply some general template of cultural evolution.

Matters of Revolution goes far beyond the case study (at which it *also* excels): through a theoretically sustained discussion in sociological theory, the author looks for a balanced synthesis of spatial sociology *à la* Martina Löw and cultural sociology *à la* Jeffrey Alexander. In doing so, Bartmanski aims to attain a rounded and nuanced understanding of cultural icons as analysable and explainable in terms of their entangled materiality, spacing, coding, visibility, scale, liminality, affordance, mythology, and so on. There is here, in other words, an attempt to develop a refined vocabulary for social theory, subtle enough to tackle the many *modes of enchantment* that, in one way or the other, come forward as near ‘imperatives’ of cultural life. Finally, as one considers the problem of a nonlinear explanation of cultural transformation, one may also find it apposite that Bartmanski is also the author (with Ian Woodward) of *Vinyl: The Analogue Record in The Digital Age* (Bloomsbury, 2015), where it was a matter of a different type of ‘revolutions’ and ‘turning points’ – still, formations (and sounds) deeply imbued in, and informed by, the powerful ‘Berlin scene’ that developed throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Especially as observed from the vantage point of 2022, the year 1989 that kick-started all of that, now appears in the ambivalence of a ‘revolution’ that resembles ... a round – or perhaps better, vinyl-wise, a spiral.

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