

Fehérváry, Krisztina. 2013. *Politics in Color and Concrete: Socialist Materialities and the Middle Class in Hungary*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. 288 pp. Illus.

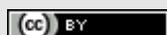
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Krisztina Fehérváry's *Politics in Color and Concrete* focuses on Hungarian material culture in the context of the social, political, and cultural transformations that Hungary underwent since World War II to the fall of communism in 1989-90. In Fehérváry's own introductory words, this book "explores the interpretation of politics and materialities, particularly of the multitude of meanings and affective powers embedded in the qualities of lived space" (2). An Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan, in this book Fehérváry breaks new ground in a field that has only recently received scholarly attention in Western academia. As her case study, she chose Dunaújváros, a central-state city built from scratch in the early years of communism and predicated entirely on the steel industry that made it an archetype of the new socialist city. Although Dunaújváros can hardly be regarded as a typical Hungarian city, it does serve, as Fehérváry demonstrates, as a microcosm of shared sentiments and sensibilities centered on the material culture of everyday life during communism and in its immediate aftermath. In particular, the interior space of the home and what it means to live a good life and "create spheres of normalcy" (6) recur as central themes in the book.

Fehérváry's work follows a chronological logic built around "politically charged assemblages of material qualities that have provoked widely shared affective responses" (3). Although she uses terms such as Socialist Realism, Socialist Modern, Socialist Generic, Organicist Modern, and Super-Natural Organicism to describe these assemblages, their meanings are not restricted to the architectural styles that they normally denote. Rather, for Fehérváry these terms collectively signify the material culture of a particular era, ranging from plastic kitchenware to prefabricated concrete, and the ways in which people use and emotionally relate to these materials and forms. In other words, these substances and artifacts signify human-object relationships and the social and cultural practices woven around them in the country's everyday life. At the same time, they also denote citizen-state relationships that are negotiated through various practices involved with them.

To set the stage for the exploration of the material world as an intermediary between subjects and the state, at the beginning of her book the author refers to a range of theoretical works including recent theories of material culture, Peircian semiotics, theories of space, and

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phenomenology. While these discussions implicitly inform her arguments throughout the book, they are rarely mentioned explicitly in the subsequent analyses, with the exception of Foucault's notion of heterotopia. This concept is central, especially in the last chapter, "Heterotopias of the Normal in Private Worlds," insofar as it designates a kind of place that counters the rules and dynamics of the space of which it is part. In Fehérváry's use of this term, the interior space of the home is shown to have served as a heterotopic counter-site of individual creativity that undermined the system yet remained within the affordances of socialist consumer culture and design. Although heterotopia is indeed a useful concept here, the complexity of the term and Foucault's rather vague definitions of it would have deserved more analytic treatment at the outset to clarify the sense in which this term is later employed throughout the book.

The experience of reading this book is enriched by Fehérváry's self-reflective writing. She positions herself as a researcher of mixed Hungarian-American background, having frequently visited Hungary with her family starting in the early 1970s, while growing up in the United States, and continuing after the fall of communism in the entire Soviet bloc. These family visits set the stage for the author's anthropological fieldwork of the 1990s, which ultimately resulted in the present book. Her methodology included participant observation and interviews with individuals, couples, and families whose lives she has been observing closely for over a decade. Growing up in the U.S. with Hungarian as the language of her father enabled Fehérváry to embark on her research as simultaneously an outsider and an insider, which is an ideal disposition for such an undertaking.

The first and the last chapters serve as the book's frame in that they look at lingering traces of socialism in the immediate aftermath of the regime change. In the first chapter, "Normal Life in the Former Socialist City," the author discusses what she saw in the 1990s as a general wish to disown the "stigmatized material culture of a 'not normal' state socialist modernity" and instead perceive Western living conditions as the norm (41). In this chapter she introduces a number of Hungarian adjectival expressions that were frequently used by her interviewees, such as *normális* ('normal' or 'sane'), *rendes* ('orderly' or 'proper'), and *igényes* ['exacting' or 'demanding'], which she translates as "having exacting standards or discerning requirements" and of "not settling for less in one's material world" (45). Throughout the book Fehérváry returns to these qualifiers and explores how their meanings and connotations have transformed during and after socialism in both public and private discourse. For instance, what is considered to be *normális* in relation to living standards in the early, frugal years of communism in the 1950-1960s would be way too modest and even dull compared to things considered *normális* during the more affluent Goulash Communism of the 1970-1980s.

Toward the end of the book, in the sixth chapter, "Unstable Landscapes of Property, Morality, and Status," the author discusses the turbulent times of the regime change, a time that witnessed the emergence of the concepts of winners and losers (164), the appearance of new English terms in everyday Hungarian parlance, such as *business* and *manager*, and the rise of a general condescension toward socialist materialities and working-class values and manners. The seventh and last chapter, "The New Family House and the New Middle Class," traces the tendency to mimic Western middle-class values in the aesthetics of the family home as one of the challenges in the newly emerging (wild) capitalist economy. Although her insights into phenomena such as the fetishizing of nature as worthier than the city and the re-affirmation of

traditional gender roles are pertinent, I tend to disagree with her assessment of construction materials used for the "capitalist" new homes as "high quality" and "durable" (191). As the past decade has proven, the materials hidden by the "ice cream colors" of the 1990s did not last longer than their counterparts produced under State Socialism (189). This last chapter would have benefited from a more critical engagement with post-socialist materialities as conducive to themed representations of imagined Western lifestyles, yet without the subversive irony that postmodern architecture would otherwise entail. Rather than exhibiting more durable materials, many of the houses built in this period emulated Western themes and this tendency continued well into the 2000s, when new *lakóparkok* ['housing projects'] were named after Western or Mediterranean regions like Riverside or Tuscany, but in their quality they further evidenced the lingering memory of gray prefab housing projects of the 1970s and 1980s. The criticism and irony targeting these architectural and behavioral performative dynamics would have also deserved more attention, in combination with the term *újjgazdag* ('nouveau riche'), which, unlike *polgár* (lit. 'citizen' fig. 'bourgeois'), was used pejoratively in the 1990s.

The other chapters in the book address particular phases of socialist material culture before the regime change. Chapter Two deals with Socialist Realism and its rejection of the pristine, streamlined forms inherited from pre-World War II modernism now deemed as bourgeois elitism. Chapter Three focuses on the 1970s, a decade that gave rise to a "Socialist Modern" aesthetic, which once again embraced modernism albeit without its "elite overtones" (93). While this period witnessed the rise of prefabs, synthetic textiles, and new plastics, Fehérváry convincingly demonstrates how furniture, traditional styles, and materials formerly associated with the bourgeoisie now came to be revered as valuable antiques counterpointing state-produced materialities that were increasingly perceived as below standard. The decreasing value of an "abstracted, mass-produced and stripped-down version of modernism—epitomized by the massive and monotonous panel construction residential blocks built in the 1970s" (112) is further explored in Chapter Four, in which the homogenizing aesthetic of "Socialist Generic" is contrasted with the rise of the second or gray economy of goods smuggled in from the West, and with a growing "Do it Yourself" (DIY) culture. This economy was also illustrative of the "set of values embedded in particular material forms and properties that opposed and counteracted the effects of state socialist materialities" (138).

Chapter Five, "Organicist Modern and Super-Natural Organicism," discusses material culture in the years leading up to the fall of communism in Hungary. In particular, the author examines the proliferation of furniture and design elements made of natural materials in an attempt to counter "the genericist aesthetics of the state and the ostensible duplicity of life under communism" (152). This is the time when wooden, leather, and fur decorations were used extensively in prefab apartments to hide materials regarded as low quality and associated with the socialist state. However, it would have been useful to foreground the role of these organic materials not simply as materials *per se* but also as camouflage devices creating moods and atmospheres similar to the period's wall posters depicting natural settings that became trademarks of their time. Still, in many ways, this is one of the most insightful and thought-provoking chapters of the book. Going beyond material and consumer culture, Fehérváry traces the fetishization of nature and folk culture in the context of gender relations, pop culture, and political sensibilities. Mainly, she masterfully highlights the ties among the revival of traditional

gender hierarchies, the upsurge of interest in folk dance and peasant culture, and the immense popularity of figures like Koppány, the pagan male character opposing the effeminate protagonist István in *István a király* ['István the King'] (1984). For many viewers this rock opera modeled the antagonism between the emasculated socialist regime and the weakened yet rebellious Hungarian populace. Likewise, Fehérváry's observation about the lasting legacy of organicism as a language of materials and forms that satisfied, after the regime change, a general desire for "materialities that seemed in harmony with capitalist understandings of human nature and at the same time allowed for individuated shelters from capitalism's harsh demands" (163) is one that should open new horizons of research into the politics of organic architecture in transformation era Hungary. Her notion of a "Super-Natural Organicist aesthetic" (163) that would emerge in the wake of the regime change is similarly insightful, although the interrelation of its super-natural dimensions with nationalistic sentiments and the economic inequalities of the 1990s would have needed a more detailed elaboration in the final chapters.

Although it is usually a commonplace to say that one needs to look at things from the outside to gain insight into them, Fehérváry's book testifies to the truth of this cliché. Having myself grown up in Budapest of the 1980s and 1990s, I feel that this book hit home to me and brought me back to a plethora of memories and feelings from my childhood. Yet, as said, it requires the author's unique disposition as simultaneously an insider and an outsider, not the least her erudition as an anthropologist, to bring to the fore the tendencies and interrelations she has discovered during the years of her research project. *Politics in Color and Concrete* is an outstanding contribution to the study of Hungarian material culture under socialism that is bound to pave the way for new research projects of its kind and quality in disciplines such as architecture, anthropology, sociology, material-culture studies, film studies, and Hungarian Studies. One possible track of inquiry would be to examine comparatively socialist materialities within a larger spectrum of East-Central European countries. Also, the dichotomous conception of the capitalist West versus Hungarian socialist materialities should likewise be nuanced, possibly by questions such as which geopolitical regions of the West and which of their components or aspects offered role models to late-socialist Hungary? As for the time after the regime change, it would be interesting to explore the role of post-socialist sensibilities such as retro and nostalgia in the circulation of past, socialist materialities in museums, flea markets, and private spaces in twenty-first century Hungary. Krisztina Fehérváry's highly informative, engaging, and accessible *Politics in Color and Concrete* provides, besides a fascinating even if at times poignantly nostalgic read, an ideal platform to begin to explore these and possibly further compelling questions.