

## BOOK REVIEW

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### **Thomas LAUX & Ulf BOHMANN (Hg.): *Kulturhauptstadt Chemnitz 2025: Sozialräumliche Erkundungen***

**Bielefeld 2024: transcript Verlag, 366 p.**

**ISBN: 978-3-8376-7234-3**

Chemnitz is one of the European Capitals of Culture for the year 2025. Of significance to the entire region, this project has brought not only attention to Saxony's largest city but also new opportunities for creative cultural and social self-reflection. To thirty authors, predominantly social researchers of the Chemnitz University of Technology, this was a good enough reason to explore and present the city from a range of perspectives – both in its cultural and social diversity and with respect to specific challenges and issues.

The 366-page book published by transcript and entitled, *Kulturhauptstadt Chemnitz 2025: Sozialräumliche Erkundungen*, is an extensive collection of cultural studies and social science contributions analysing Chemnitz as a complex social space that takes many different forms. As the editors, Thomas Laux and Ulf Bohmann, seek to transcend the image of Chemnitz as a city of industrial heritage experiencing a general economic decline, they emphasise its symbolic significance and current European visibility associated with the title of European Capital of Culture. Their ambition is to draw a differentiated picture defying the usual stereotypes, to present the city as an intersection of diverse social, cultural, and political processes. The book's seventeen chapters systematically cover a host of key topics. The two editors wrote a notable chapter on some of the pressing challenges to the city's social and community development, and cultural policy in general, that have arisen in the context of the European Capital of Culture project. The city was given opportunities to revitalise its cultural infrastructure, renovate public spaces, and support art projects. As the authors demonstrate, the project engendered new ambitions for local cultural institutions (museums, theatres, galleries) to seek new opportunities and help reinforce a local cultural identity that has been traditionally tied to the city's industrial heritage. Similarly, they enumerate the contribution of project activities to social cohesion, civic engagement, and also tourism.

Some other chapters of the publication are devoted to problems such as right-wing extremism and social divisions, which have played an important role in the city and beyond both historically and recently. The chapters by Cecilie Sandten, Susanne Ripl, and Klara Steinmetz argue that in recent years, the extreme right in Chemnitz has featured as one of the most frequently discussed socio-political problems of the city and the broader Saxon region. Formerly known as Karl-Marx-Stadt, Chemnitz has strong industrial roots; after the fall of the East German regime, it was faced with such social and economic

challenges that provided a breeding ground for the extreme right movement. The authors remind us that in 2018, when an ethnic German was murdered in a street brawl, the mass protests and demonstrations that followed were partially organized and exploited by extreme right groups. This and other events, the authors argue, shed light on profound social tensions, a growing xenophobic and nationalist sentiment, and problems with migrant integration. Research studies, including one conducted by the Chemnitz University of Technology and presented in the book, identified a risk that the extreme right might also exploit the international attention presently focused on the city to advance its goals.

Factors strengthening the extremist movement include social isolation of some communities, a high level of unemployment in former industrial areas, and a sense of lost social identity ensuing from the city's transformation. In response to these threats, the local and regional governments have initiated counter-extremism projects in areas like fostering democratic citizenship or anti-bias education as well as civil society initiatives to enhance community cohesion and people's involvement. Furthermore, a survey of Chemnitz citizens presented in the book demonstrates that cultural projects such as the European Capital of Culture may be instrumental in preventing extremism by promoting dialogue, diversity, and positive public participation.

Other chapters deal with local social transitions in the contexts of migration and colonialism, offering insight in the ways demographic, historical, and global factors shape both the face of the city and its social structure. Substantial attention is also paid to the activities and roles of the Chemnitz University of Technology, which is viewed by locals not only as an educational and research institution but also as a driver of social and cultural projects.

The book is designed as a guide for experts, students, and the general public with an interest in cultural policy and regional development. Overall, it paints a comprehensive picture of Chemnitz as a dynamic space in which cultural, political, and social processes intertwine. Especially the analysis of political aspects of development, extremism, and cross-border cooperation helps us better understand the challenges and opportunities faced by Chemnitz during its year as a European Capital of Culture. However, given the city's location at the Ore Mountains foothills and in close vicinity of the Czech border, we find it regrettable that the book does not deal with the significance of European Capital of Culture projects for the Ore Mountains region and for Czech–German cooperation in general.

**Lukáš Novotný**

Department of Political Science

Faculty of Arts

Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem