



Socialist heritage: the politics of past and place in Romania

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BOOK REVIEW

Socialist heritage: the politics of past and place in Romania, by Emanuela Grama, Bloomington, USA, Indiana University Press, 2019. 247 pp., \$30 (paperback), ISBN: 9780253044808; \$60 (hardcover), ISBN: 9780253044792; \$14.99 (ebook), ISBN: 9780253044815

The title of this book gives away little about its contents. In fact, *Socialist Heritage* is a detailed (and in places, forensic) analysis of a small area of central Bucharest known as the “Old Town”. Furthermore, the focus is not confined to the socialist era: instead, Grama charts the changing approaches to (and appropriations of) this area from the period after World War 2 to the late 2010s. She makes use of a combination of extensive archival research and interviews with local people, and the result is a rich and fascinating account of urban change in Bucharest. More broadly, her analysis demonstrates how the evaluation of the past is situated in (and shaped by) particular historical and political contexts.

Grama begins by introducing the Old Town, the key concepts which underpin the book, and the data sources used in the analysis. The first part of the book (Chapters 1–3) focuses on the socialist era up to the collapse of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s regime in 1989. That Romania’s socialist regime exploited and manipulated history for ideological ends is well-known, but what this book highlights is how this process played out in “ordinary” urban space within a small area of the capital city. During the early socialist period the priority was modernization, intended to turn Bucharest into a showpiece socialist capital. Resources were allocated to housing construction and in this context the Old Town was neglected, being viewed as a rather distasteful relic of a former era. One plan for the modernization of the city even envisaged the demolition of a large part of the district.

However, as the socialist regime embraced nationalism in the late 1950s and 1960s the situation changed. Once archeologists had discovered the medieval Old Court in the heart of the Old Town there were new opportunities to turn the district into an important site of national history, testifying to continuity of Romanian settlement in the city. There were also proposals to remodel the buildings in the Old Town in an 18th century style to make them look more “national” (that is, Romanian). As such the district became less marginal and, instead, a site of national value. Two groups – archeologists and historians on one hand and architects on the other – produced radically different (and competing) visions for the future of the Old Town. Ultimately, nothing was decided and the district was left to decay (although it was claimed and enlivened by the people who lived and shopped there). Meanwhile the regime pushed ahead with the construction of a new “Civic Center” (involving widespread demolition of a large area of central Bucharest) right on the edge of the Old Town. Throughout these chapters Grama emphasizes the ways in which the socialist regime appropriated both time (history) and space in order to legitimate an exclusionary nationalist agenda.

The second part of the book examines changes in the Old Town during the post-socialist era. Grama argues that the district continued to be neglected but now as a deliberate strategy among the post-socialist elite to consolidate their political and economic power. In this way, the Old Town represents “a unique window into the

broader power competition following the end of the communist regime" (p.136). On one hand, Grama argues that elites dismissed the Old Town as a spatial representation of the recent past, as a strategy of distancing themselves from the socialist era. I did not find this argument entirely convincing, given that the enormous (and unfinished) Civic Center (which abuts the Old Town) is a far more evident symbol of the socialist regime: if anything, the Old Town represents the pre-socialist era which became an important reference point after 1989. More convincingly, Grama argues that the deliberate neglect of the Old Town was a strategy which enabled the new "entrepreneurs" to plunder the area for personal gain by securing cheaply the most profitable resources. But in the 2000s the approach changed again. As Romania sought EU accession, the Old Town was re-valued for its Europeanness, and as proof of the country's European history. What followed was a gradual and erratic (and not yet completed) process of gentrification which enabled the Old Town to be rebranded as the "historic center".

Grama also considers how local residents were impacted by changes in the Old Town after 1989. Some residents moved out as soon as they could. Their places were taken by some of the poorest and most marginalized groups, with the result that the district was increasingly scapegoated as an area of deprivation and criminality. Residents also lost out as utilities such as water and electricity were privatized, since the utility companies would only supply to associations of owners or tenants and most local people lacked the bureaucratic knowledge of how to form such associations. An informal policy of neglect put pressure on state tenants to move out (so that their houses could be sold to private investors), while the pedestrianization of the Old Town forced many businesses into bankruptcy. Furthermore, prolonged infrastructure work to install new water pipes and sewers left the district as a construction site for several years, exacerbating the difficulties faced by those who lived and worked there. Grama interprets these developments as a strategy by the state to assert its control over public space whilst abandoning any responsibility for citizens who were considered too poor to live in a "European" historic center. For such people, the notion of "heritage" had little resonance.

There is much to like about *Socialist Heritage*. The analysis of the socialist era adds to an established body of research about how socialist regimes used urban space as part of the ideological project of creating a new society. While issues of architecture, monumental public spaces, and symbols (such as statues and street names) have been widely researched, Grama adds a new dimension with a detailed analysis of how a socialist regime sought to deal with a pre-socialist historic district. Here it should be added that the range of archival sources that have been used to examine the socialist era is astonishing: Grama clearly enjoys working in archives. *Socialist Heritage* also broadens our understanding of the strategies adopted by post-socialist elites to retain and consolidate power, by demonstrating how such processes are worked out within the historic landscape of a capital city. A further contribution of this book is that it demonstrates how post-socialist Europeanization plays out within urban space, and how a historic district can be mobilized within the (contested) process of EU accession.

For all this book's strengths, there were some aspects which I found less convincing. The analysis is firmly situated within the discipline of anthropology and, as a result, there is limited reference to parallel debates in other disciplines. For example, while Grama talks about the "spatialization of political power" (p. 91), human geographers may be disappointed to see little engagement with an established body of research about the relationships between urban space, power and politics (under both socialist and post-socialist regimes). Neither is there much reference to the extensive work by urban geographers into urban change, privatization, social exclusion and gentrification in post-socialist cities. At the same time, the conceptualization of heritage is somewhat

detached from wider debates within Heritage Studies. The author understands heritage as predominantly material (that is, as property) but there is limited engagement with wider heritage research which increasingly conceptualizes heritage as a cultural process through which societies engage with their past in the present. Furthermore, while *Socialist Heritage* highlights the politics associated with heritage, it appears rather divorced from two decades of heritage research which has focused on this very issue.

These reservations notwithstanding, this is an impressive piece of scholarship. The strengths of this book are the breadth of the data sources, which have enabled the author to uncover in detail how change in a particular historic urban landscape is shaped by broader issues of power and identity (in both socialist and post-socialist contexts). *Socialist Heritage* will be of interest to postgraduate students and academic researchers in disciplines such as history, anthropology, human geography, urban studies and sociology. For anybody wanting to understand Bucharest's Old Town there is no better source available. Indeed, over the course of 25 years I have frequently wandered around the Old Town and found myself asking "why is it like this?". Now, after reading *Socialist Heritage*, I know.

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