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*Socialist Heritage: The Politics of Past and Place in
Romania* by Emanuela Grama (review)

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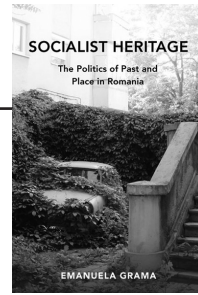


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BOOK REVIEW

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Emanuela Grama. *Socialist Heritage: The Politics of Past and Place in Romania*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019. 268 pp.

“Heritage” entrepreneurship has been an important site for constructing legitimacy and accumulating power in the modern world. Though presumably revolutionary in ideology and goals, state socialist regimes have also used this memorialistic framework to articulate the cultural legitimacy of their ascent to power. How that heritage discourse has fared in the post-socialist world is at the heart of the analysis Emanuela Grama offers in *Socialist Heritage: The Politics of Past and Place in Romania*. By focusing on a neighborhood in Bucharest that has been dubbed “the Old City,” Grama takes us through a journey of how the heritage discourse was first constructed and operationalized through archaeological, historiographic, and urban planning activities under state socialism, and then repurposed as well as contested after 1989, with results that show profound fissures in the ability to deploy “heritage” as a successful legitimating tool. Though the author focuses on a relatively small site of heritage building and negotiation, the case study is meant to represent a larger trend in Romania.

The overall argument of the book can be divided into two parts. To begin with, Grama shows how after 1948 Romanian architects, archaeologists, and members of the Politburo turned the Old City neighborhood in Bucharest into an object of personal attention on the part of these various players. Uncovering and restoring medieval ruins became a way to gain visibility and resources from the political leadership. These heritage entrepreneurs eventually helped grow the Marxist-nationalist brand of historical narrative about the past that culminated under Nicolae Ceaușescu. Historians joined the chorus by unearthing or simply adhering to a historical materialist

discourse imposed by the Marxist ideological straight jacket dictated by the Politburo, for the sole purpose of aligning historical narratives—together with archives, archaeological sites, and thus any representation of the past through institutional means—with the ideology of the Romanian Communist Party. Within that universe of constrained access to power, entrepreneurial professionals constructed discourses and practices that advanced a dialectic inscribed in the urban landscape, for the purpose of bolstering the claims of the political leadership to have played the revolutionary role of liberating the nation from the shackles of capitalist oppression.

That argument was made most powerfully over two decades ago by Katherine Verdery, who appears quite frequently in the footnotes. I see the current contribution as a distinct articulation of the theoretical insights made in *National Ideology under Socialism* (Verdery 1995), confirming the workings of hierarchies of institutional and discursive power detailed in that analysis of knowledge making under state socialism. It is in tying that analysis of power relations among the communist elites to the lived environment—in short, as material and not just intellectual consequences of those struggles—that this book deepens our understanding of state socialism. And by starting *Socialist Heritage* with the reactions of someone who lives in that area today, Grama makes clear that revealing the consequences of these contests for the citizens of this lived environment is ultimately the stake of her work. The book excels especially when she brings in the concept of heritage as a means for governance and shaping the everyday experience of the *bucureșteni* (Bucharesters).

The first three chapters are dedicated to exploring how various knowledge makers became heritage entrepreneurs and helped turn streets and buildings in the Old City into so many signposts of the political order that dominated Wallachia's medieval period. The focus here is on the political negotiations among intellectual and professional elites of the early state socialist period. Archaeological speculation became historiographic certainty about evidence of specific forms of feudalism that would enable the telling of a longer story about class struggle and the dialectics of power in the premodern period, enabling the Romanian Communist Party to generate a genealogy of oppression and struggle that fit neatly with the Marxist dictates of the Politburo as articulated both in Bucharest and in Moscow. But, ironically, the specific inflections of the archaeological and historiographic speculations helped underscore a particularly nationalist story, which only grew in complexity in the 1970s and beyond.

In the second part of the book, Grama focuses on elements of continuity in discourses about heritage around the Old City on the part of the post-socialist regimes after 1989. In the transition towards the emerging neoliberal order of free markets, political power holders repurposed the discourse of heritage to transfer property in that area to interested parties (e.g., banks, real estate developers) as a means of enrichment. Other new actors, among them leaders of non-governmental organizations and Romanian architects interested in the revivification of the area, also participated in the contests over controlling the fate of the buildings and public spaces in this area through the dominant heritage grid. Left in the dark (both figuratively and sometimes literally), were some of the inhabitants of the area, whose safety and quality of life seem to have been of little concern for policy makers.

The story that unfolds in the second part is a dramatic example of a larger trend present in eastern Europe after the fall of state socialism. It is a story with a messy, complex set of agents and meanings. Being able to connect all of the relevant elements is no small feat, and overall the book reveals important developments in this murky landscape. By gaining direct access to some of the important players in the process of negotiating privatization and urban planning after 1989, Grama is able to provide first-hand accounts about the hopes and frustrations of civic leaders, architects, and some investors in the area. That is not the case in relation to the power brokers who ended up controlling the fate of the Old City. What we end with is a sympathetic portrait of civil society leaders and young investors, with a rather two-dimensional damning portrait of the political elite. While I personally share some of those sympathies, as a historian I was somewhat dissatisfied with the unevenness of the evidentiary base presented here. The author is honest about the frustrations she experienced in trying to get access to, or straight stories from, some officials and official channels of communication, such as the total occupancy of buildings in the area and the regime of occupancy—owners, tenants, undocumented tenants. But at the same time, she occasionally relies on the word of people she trusts, without their stories being verified by other sources. If it were the attitudes of those interlocutors in relation to the question of heritage or privatization of those properties that were at stake, then such oral communication would seem sufficient. However, when the interlocutor provides the sole explanation for a particular set of factual puzzles (e.g., the dramatic decrease in occupancy rates, followed by a significant increase in a short period of time), to use

such sources without clarifying the speculative nature of the explanation strikes me as insufficient.

Overall, the book offers a vivid and provocative analysis of the politics of urban planning in Bucharest after World War II. The arc of the narrative highlights the huge gaps between policy makers and citizens who bear the brunt of these heritage entrepreneurs' ambitions for power and money. If before 1989 those entrepreneurs helped frame the heritage discourse under the watchful eye of the Romanian Communist Party, after 1989 capitalist neoliberal formations have played in the hands of ambitious politicians like Traian Băsescu, who used his career as the Mayor of Bucharest to ascend to the Presidency. In that sense, the story of the Old City and the struggles for a shared use of this neighborhood by different stakeholders is an important case study for understanding how Romania transitioned from nationalist state socialism to neoliberal capitalism. And core to that story, as Grama evocatively highlights in the second part of the book, are other social problems. Racism towards the Roma is one important aspect of the contest for power and legitimacy, with many inhabitants of the Old City being denied a voice in urban planning because they did not fit the kind of "proper" performance of citizenship that was granted any public legitimacy. Other important tensions have grown around the contestations of younger generations of activists around urban planning, a post-socialist phenomenon that speaks to the criticism faced by neoliberal reforms in these countries. The author highlights the ingenuity and persistence of these critical agents of change in the heritage discourse, pointing towards further work that can be done in better understanding how social practices and power relations are shifting.

The sophisticated theorization of heritage and the use of material culture and specifically lived environments in post-socialist spaces renders this case study relevant for scholars of memory, semiotics, historians, and cultural anthropologists. It invites further examination of discrete acts of framing, negotiating, and rejecting purported collective identities. Upon examination, these collective identities reveal fragmentation and hierarchies of power and privilege hidden in the interstices of discourses that naturalize the past as one cohesive narrative for the entire community. ■

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Verdery, Katherine. 1995. *National Ideology under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania*. Berkeley: University of California Press.