

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

Emanuela Grama's *Socialist Heritage: The Politics of Past and Place in Romania* is a compelling exploration of heritage making as state-making through the lens of the postwar and postcommunist transformations of Bucharest's Old Town. Alternatively known as Lipsani or 'the historic center,' the Old Town is a revealing lens because the socialist and postsocialist states mediated their relation with their citizens - their strategies of inclusion and exclusion - via place and material structures like buildings and objects. The book thus joins a growing body of historical ethnographies of socialist and postsocialist transformations, particularly those on property restitution, changing regimes of value, and collectivization like Katherine Verdery's *The Vanishing Hectare* (2003) and Gail Kligman and Katherine Verdery's *Peasants Under Siege* (2011) or works on elite changes and continuities such as Szelenyi's "Circulation or Reproduction of Elites" (1995).

Drawing on solid archival and ethnographic research, the book structure maps onto this chronology with the first three chapters focused on the communist elites' priorities, which shifted from modernizing the urban and social fabric of Bucharest in the 1950s to the reclamation of a national past compatible with the socialist future since the 1960s. This section makes an important contribution to our understanding of the (mal)functioning and limitations of state socialist regimes. *Tensed Urban Visions* examines minutes of party meetings with urban planning experts to reveal the tensions between the regime's ambitions of transforming Bucharest into a modern socialist capital and the endemic lack of expertise in the 1950s. While many studies take the imposition of the Soviet model in postwar satellite countries for granted, Grama shows how the Romanian regime and its architects used the visit of Soviet urban planners strategically to resolve their own disagreements without implementing the otherwise impractical Soviet blueprint.

*Matters of State* and *Time-Travelling Houses* explore how the regime's turn to nationalism in the late 1950s and 1960s emboldened architects and archeologists to articulate competing views of the Old Town as either a space in need of modernisation or an open-air museum that would provide the state with a usable (medieval) past, a narrative of Romanian continuity allegedly culminating with the communist regime. Through an analysis of public and mysterious, anonymous letters that give the book the narrative arc of a detective novel, Grama shows how diverse professional groups of architects and archeologists manipulated (urban) place and time in their competition for limited centralised resources. While most of the architects aligned with the modernist vision of Bucharest as a functional socialist city, the more marginal group of archeologists sought to 'salvage' medieval artefacts that confirmed the regime's teleological view of history. Particularly interesting here is Grama's argument that, in associating materiality with objective, unmediated historical truth, the archeological method of knowledge production reduced Marx's theory of dialectical materialism, providing the regime with a newly excavated heritage and attracting more research funding.

Turning to unrealized architectural projects of the Old Town as a 'historic center' in the late 1960s, the author argues this emerging vision was shaped by the (western) European model of the unifocal medieval town fuelled by the regime's agenda to prove the Europeanness of Bucharest at a time of rapprochement with the West. While Grama contributes a focus on heritage to our understanding of national communism, the author misses a chance to explore and theorize the transnational, specifically European, dimensions of national communism, a

topic she returns to in her discussion of the socialist authorities' embrace of the 'heritage as cultural recognition' model in the conclusion.

Drawing on ethnographic research, interviews with architects and residents and even rumours, the final two chapters examine the district's fate in the 1990s and 2000s. *Lipstick and Lines Pockets* explores how post-communist power brokers (Verdery's 'entrepratchiks') derived their political, economic and knowledge capital from the networks of reciprocity developed under communism, continuing the communist regime's practices of 'strategic disregard' to devalue the Old Town and amass wealth. The European-funded projects of revitalising the 'historic center' in the 2000s occasion a valuable discussion of Europeanization as privatization, gentrification and social marginalization in the last chapter, *Displacements*. Although the author provides a persuasive analysis of the 'entrepratchiks' sources of power, there is less theorization of the non-communist social and political elites - local or European - involved in wealth accumulation and corruption in the more diffuse post-communist field of power.

These sections strengthen the author's important contributions to our understanding of relevant continuities in expert, political and economic elites and strategies both in the postwar and postcommunist periods. Particularly valuable here is the analysis of the Old Town as a space of the Other, of abjection, that exposes the strategies of social and ethnic marginalisation (of the Roma and poor residents) that have been central to interwar, communist and postcommunist regimes alike.

A theoretically dense, but engagingly written book, *Socialist Heritage* is a must read not only for specialists of (post)socialist Romania and Eastern Europe, but also for students and researchers of nationalism, urbanization and heritage making, history (re)writing, the role of experts under socialism, postcommunist efforts of Europeanization and privatization as gentrification, or ruination as commodification.

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## Bibliography

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