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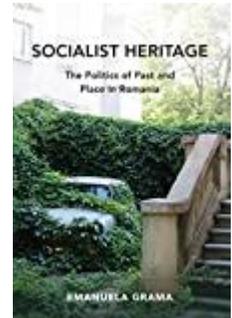
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Emanuela Grama. *Socialist Heritage: The Politics of Past and Place in Romania (New Anthropologies of Europe)*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019. xv + 247 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-04480-8.



Reviewed by Antonela Capelle Pogacean (Sciences Po - CERI)

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Tracing the multiple political lives of a small district of Bucharest called the "historic center" is the prism chosen by anthropologist Emanuela Grama to look at the making of the communist and postcommunist state and city, in connection with the production of social classes and ethno-cultural identities in the Romanian capital. The author analyzes the heritage regimes that shaped the life of a ruined sixteenth-century princely palace (Old Court) and the district surrounding it (Old Town) in Bucharest. The narrative's focus ranges from the discovery of traces of a "medieval past" for Bucharest in the early 1950s to the 2010s, when the same area was revalued as embodying the cosmopolitan European character of the capital. From the socialist period to the more or less chaotic clash of multiple temporalities of the first postsocialist decades, the book reveals how a variety of social actors—politicians, architects, urban planners, archaeologists, heritage preservation experts, real estate agents, inhabitants, and state tenants—redesigned this space according to specific ideological and professional logics.

The temporal framework places the volume in the wake of works that approach the topic of socialist heritage through a fine reading of the ruptures and continuities represented by socialism. The latter is no longer considered as a parenthesis but is included in the specific historicities of the societies under consideration.[1] Grama's book dialogues with a rich literature devoted since the 2000s to the social and urban history of socialism, to material culture and consumption, or to the sociology of professions. Thus, modernist architecture and its role for the material making of socialist regimes have been the subject of valuable analyses, especially, but not only, in the works devoted to the new socialist cities. For her part, Grama uses the case of Bucharest's Old Town to unveil both the steps taken to propel the capital into the socialist future and those taken to give it a historical thickness, "purified" of the ethno-cultural heterogeneity that characterized its past (p. 15). The discussion of urban changes that occurred after 1989 enables the author to maintain a fruitful dialogue with ethnographic and sociological

works, which are interested in the postsocialist future of cities confronted with increasing social inequalities. While one regrets the modest use of works of human and urban geography, one welcomes the extensive historiographical and especially anthropological literature that provides the theoretical and conceptual framework for the investigation.

Foucault's reflections on power as well as the ethnographies of the state inspired by Foucault guide the research.^[2] While this perspective is not very new to readers familiar with works on socialism and postsocialism, it helps to consider the production of heritage as a mode of government. The essentialized narrative of the past produced within this framework allows for the differentiation and hierarchization of social groups. In the wake of articles and books published in the early 2000s by anthropologists of socialist and postsocialist societies such as Katherine Verdery, who supervised Grama's academic training, the author defines heritage as a "propriety of property."^[3] It is "a domain emerging at the intersection of moral codes, social expectations, and economic behavior that legitimize a property regime" (p. 20). While observing continuities (of practices, representations, and actors) beyond the great political ruptures, the author highlights two heritage regimes. A "centralized heritage regime, formed through the symbolic and economic monopoly of the state" is thus progressively replaced after 1989 by "a decentralized and multivocal model in which different groups claim the right to define their own heritage as a form of political autonomy—or even altogether reject heritage as an empty label" (p. 20).

Grama diversifies the firsthand sources with a beautiful methodological mastery. Formal interviews and participant observations during repeated field trips, textual and visual documentation produced within the framework of various urban renewal projects, and media monitoring feed the examination of the new heritage regime deployed after 1989. In addition to these sources,

the volume is grounded in archival research (mainly in the National Archives and those of the National Institute of Patrimony). The author also uses monographs of the city, tourist guides, telephone directories, architectural magazines, and a very rich secondary literature devoted to socialist and postsocialist Romania. The book—enriched with maps, photographs, architectural sketches, and models—follows a chronological plan and unfolds in five chapters, three of which are devoted to the Old Town's political functions during the socialist years and two to the postsocialist period. Each chapter opens with a vignette that sets the scene and captivates the reader from the beginning. The story of the convening of the chief architect of Bucharest before government officials in 1956, when the urbanization master plan for the capital, which had been in preparation since 1949 and was based on the Soviet model, was still not completed, opens the first chapter. Grama places the discussions around the plan in the context of the factional struggles within the communist leadership of the 1950s, which are now well documented. The broader framework is that of the formation of the socialist state, particularly through industrialization and urbanization. Political authorities were faced with multiple challenges. The housing shortage has led to a wild development of the peripheral areas of the city of Bucharest. Expertise is vital, but scarce. Resources are limited.

Against this background, visions of the city divided both politicians—who promoted the dictatorship of the plan (p. 47)—and architects. Aesthetic preferences (socialist realism or, on the contrary, functionalism guided by economic imperatives), but also the role—progressively diminished—of Soviet expertise were debated. Beyond the different representations of the socialist future of the capital, a consensus emerged among architects in favor of building a modern, aesthetically homogeneous, and functional city center. The Old Town with its tortuous alleys of merchants and craftsmen, its courtyards and narrow passages, its eth-

nically diverse populations, notwithstanding the stereotype of the Jewish quarter that was associated with it before the war, seems doomed to fade away.

Yet these visions of future were hampered by the discovery in 1953 of the ruins of the former residence of the princes of Wallachia, which had been destroyed by fire and abandoned in the eighteenth century. The aftermath of this discovery—the way a site acquires historical value—is the subject of the second chapter. It covers the period from the early 1950s to the opening of a national open-air museum around the ruins in 1972, which transformed the Old Court into the historic heart of the city. Against the backdrop of the regime's nationalist turn, the author looks at the emergence of new professional competition. Faced with architects who wanted to project the city into the future, even if it meant erasing the past, archaeologists strove to inscribe the capital and, through it, the nation, in a medieval framework.

Their knowledge of the ruins was supposed to produce, in accordance with the teachings of historical materialism richly discussed by Grama, an "objective" reading, backed by material evidence and artifacts, of the medieval past. The Old Court was thus included in a teleological history of social progress, of which the medieval past is an obligatory milestone and the present constitutes the achievement. But it also becomes a symbol of the struggle—seen as intense already in the sixteenth century—for national independence. Bowing to Soviet expectations, after having documented a Slavic presence in it in the early 1950s, the Old Court gradually provided—as Russian troops left the country—a narrative of Romanian ethnic continuity and national antiquity. Assigning political value to the past thus contributed to legitimizing the nationalist turn taken during the early 1960s by the new political regime. But, as Grama underlines, this enterprise also promoted a kind of knowledge supposed to have by its very techniques, a privileged access to the truth. It valor-

ized the archaeologists in an intellectual field where new hierarchies were outlined and new disciplinary borders were drawn.

The third chapter covers the 1970s and 1980s. It traces the paradoxical development of the Old Town neighboring the Old Court, at the improbable juncture between its promotion as the historic center of Bucharest and its symbolic marginalization. The author again sets political developments—from the relative openness of the regime, which went hand in hand with the deployment of nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s, to the authoritarian turn of the 1980s—against the architectural and urban planning controversies of the time. Following an earthquake that devastated the city of Bucharest in 1977, a monumental new project for a civic center was launched. Wanted by Nicolae Ceausescu, the authoritarian party leader of Romania, the project met, if not in the form, at least in substance, the still vibrant desire of a majority of architects to modernize and homogenize aesthetically the downtown of Bucharest. The monumentality of the project required massive demolitions that affected the majority of the still extant eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings in the city center. The Old Town escaped this fate, but the urban change nevertheless brushed against it and led to a spectacular devaluation of the district.

The Old Town's status as a historic center, acquired at the end of the 1960s, had fueled a renovation project meant to turn it into a showcase for a national architectural style that would have developed in the eighteenth century. Hardly consensual within a profession rather faithful to the modernist credo, this project never materialized. But Grama rightly insists on the impact of these controversies in validating the heritage value of the neighborhood. In consequence, many architects mobilized in the late 1980s to save the Old Town from demolition. With its half-decrepit buildings, which gradually were occupied by poor residents, the old district became a zone of social

liminality pulsating on the outskirts of the gigantic construction site where Ceausescu's megalomaniac new civic center, the Palace of the People, was to be erected. The Old Town became a place of administrative neglect, a space for transgressions welcoming the black market that flourished on the debris of the 1980s socialist economy. Grama persuasively points out the discrepancies between the political visions of the new civic center as a "spatial representation of a highly centralised system" (p. 28), and the representations of the Old Town centered on its patrimonial value within the mobilized intellectual circles, on the one hand, and the mundane appropriations of this urban space by its new inhabitants, on the other.

The final two chapters examine the unfolding of a new heritage regime connected to a new property regime in the wake of 1989. This heritage regime was shaped by a wide variety of actors and driven by the development of state capitalism. This allowed for a primitive accumulation of capital that went hand in hand with a strong social polarization. In Bucharest's Old Town of the 1990s, impressive bank headquarters stood alongside old, ramshackle buildings housing more or less legally occupied apartments with no water or heating. To explore these new political lives of the Old Town, Grama borrows the expression "imperial disregard" from the historian Ann Laura Stoler^[4] to put postsocialist and postcolonial studies in dialogue.^[5] The expression was coined to describe the affective posture of the Dutch colonial bureaucracy toward the local population in late nineteenth-century Dutch Indonesia. The political management of the Old Town in the 1990s is thus described by Grama as being shaped by a "strategic disregard" of national and local political authorities toward the neighborhood and its inhabitants (p. 147).

This posture explains, according to the author, the resistance shown by the authorities to the attempts of architects previously committed to fighting demolitions who called upon British expertise

to rehabilitate the historic center by the early 1990s. Their "strategic disregard" created a site of ambiguity. At the same time, state and local officials proceeded to the economic and affective devaluation of the downtown area—which according to them would be nothing but ruins—and to its revaluation. The latter can take on different aspects, from the consideration of the Old Town and its population as a reservoir of political clientele that would trade votes for legalized housing, to the investment of this sector as a place of capital accumulation through the privatization of commercial spaces at the very beginning of the 1990s, or the restitution of real estate later on. Making possible the concentration of a poor population within a few meters of several banks, this strategic disregard ultimately led, as the author points out, to the representation of this urban space as out-of-time, a place of the ethnicized Other, the Roma in this case, after being also associated with the Jews during the interwar period.

The object of "strategic disregard" in the 1990s, the Old Town underwent in the 2000s a revaluation as a European cosmopolitan historic center while Romania was preparing to join the European Union. The referential time frame was no longer the medieval past, as in the 1950s and 1960s, nor the eighteenth century, as promoted by the renovation project at the turn of the 1960, but rather a phantasmatic interwar period. In line with studies that have analyzed postsocialist gentrification as a consequence of state privatization and changes in property rights, Grama examines the gradual gentrification of the Old Town at the crossroads of redefined property rights, infrastructure privatization, and the arrival of pre-accession funds from the European Union.^[6] The new property regime was illustrated by the restitution of nationalized buildings (which accounted for the majority of the Old Town properties), up to then governed by unstable legislation, with multiple grey areas. Actors rich in political and relational capital but also new real estate professionals or sometimes, state tenants (forgotten here),

were able to take advantage of the opportunities offered by this kind of uncertainty.

As the author convincingly shows, the privatization of the state and the neoliberal ideology that accompanied it changed the nature of the state, which "overtly discarded social responsibility" (p. 175) and condemned the most fragile of the neighborhood's inhabitants to "infrastructural invisibility" (p. 178). The revaluation of the Old Town through the prism of European heritage and its partial rehabilitation transformed the site. From a place signifying the Other, it became a place that gradually excluded the most vulnerable populations, who were unable to hold up certificates of ownership and to undertake the rehabilitation of the buildings. Again, Grama borrows in a heuristic way Ann Laure Stoler's vocabulary and draws on the term "ruination" to highlight a process of power assertion by national and local post-socialist politicians, including the power to construct new social classes. At the end of this process, the partially rehabilitated Old Town of the 2010s and early 2020s reveals the commodification of ruination. Along the freshly paved pedestrian streets, buildings in precarious structural condition host bars, cafes, and restaurants. They now illustrate the aesthetic sensibility of the new, globalized urban middle classes and international tourists in search of exoticism, in an area described by a real estate agent as "the major entertainment area in Bucharest" (p. 206).

Very rich in insights, the volume shows at times accelerations or bifurcations that can be frustrating for the reader. Architects are the essential actors of these "politics of past and place." We see them at different times within socialist and postsocialist governmentalities. On several occasions the author points out the heterogeneity of this professional group. But in her writing it sometimes appears excessively homogeneous, lacking social depth. A more accurate sociology of the architectural milieu (and that of the archaeologists) would have enriched the book. The last chapter

abandons the architects. Were they absent from the "European" rehabilitation of the Old Town? If not, what place did they occupy in the new, postsocialist heritage regime and what architectural controversies played a role in shaping the latter?

Another weak point concerns the description of the sometimes too "intentionalist" approach of the actors. The architects of the 1950s and 1960s are at times presented as being essentially driven by career ambitions. These ambitions would enable them to change their aesthetic visions—as in the case of Horia Marcu, who abandoned the modernism promoted during the interwar period for socialist realism—or to redeploy these visions in the service of the regime, as was the case of Constantin Joja, for example. Can their career paths be analyzed solely in this vein? Might they not also be part of broader life histories, moral universes, and aesthetic negotiations? Another critical point that one might raise concerns the author's interpretation of the political changes of the 1990s and early 2000s. Fueled by some political analysis (particularly that of Tom Gallagher) and media monitoring that would have benefited from a more critical and contextualized approach, it leads to an overly binary presentation of the government party, the "heir" to the Communist Party, against the opposition forces that won the presidential and legislative elections of 1996, before losing them again four years later. But doesn't the example of the city of Bucharest, which has been run by the opposition since 1992, call for a less dichotomous view of the national and local political elites of the 1990s? The author's argument that the postsocialist devaluation of the old city, transformed into a space of abjection, was a way for the authorities to make people forget their own communist past, does not entirely convince the reader. Finally, a more systematic comparison with other postsocialist capitals would have been beneficial, allowing for a deeper understanding of the specificity of the Romanian case.

These few remarks do not undermine the quality of Grama's fascinating inquiry. The book is beautifully written, and readers from different disciplinary backgrounds interested in topics as diverse as socialism and postsocialism, the materiality of the state and city, architecture and its political power, including the making of urban heritage, will find enough to enrich their own reflections.

Notes

[1]. Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, "Thinking between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography after the Cold War," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 1 (2009): 6–34.

[2]. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, Random House, 1970); James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta, "Spatializing States: Toward an Ethnography of Neoliberal Governmentality," *American Ethnologist* 29, no. 4 (2002): 981-1002.

[3]. Katherine Verdery, *The Vanishing Hectare: Property and Value in Postsocialist Transylvania* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Caroline Humphrey and Katherine Verdery, eds., *Property in Question: Value Transformation in the Global Economy* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

[4]. Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

[5]. For more, see Chari and Verdery, "Thinking between the Posts."

[6]. Mathias Bernt, "How Post-socialist Is Gentrification? Observations in East Berlin and Saint Petersburg," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57, nos. 4-5 (2016): 565–87; Irina Zamfirescu and Liviu Chelcea, "Evictions as Infrastructural Events," *Urban Geography* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2020.1778281>; Irina Zamfirescu, "Housing Evictions, Displacement and the Missing Social Housing of Bucharest," *Calitatea Vietii* 26, no. 2 (2015): 140–54.

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