

BOOK REVIEW

***Socialist Heritage. The Politics of Past and Place in Bucharest*,
by Emanuela Grama, Bloomington: Indiana University Press,
2019, 247 pages**

DANA DOMȘODI¹

Emanuela Grama's book, *Socialist Heritage. The Politics of Past and Place in Bucharest* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2019, p. 247) represents an outstanding contribution in the field of anthropology of heritage, retracing the transformation of Lipscani street and the central district of Bucharest, the Old Town, from a socially and ethnically culturally diverse place in the early 20th century, into a benchmark of nationalist rewriting of local history during socialism, finally morphing again, beginning with the 2000s, into the historic center of an European capital. The backbone of the book is represented by a solid archival and ethnographic research into the changing meanings of the Old Town revealing the fundamentally dual nature of heritage“ as a double form of marking” (Grama 2019:29) in which the illusionary search for (historical) essence morphed into a strategy of distinction that led to marginalisation and exclusion.

Socialist Heritage. The Politics of Past and Place in Bucharest is fundamentally a book about the political intricacies of the (un)making of the historic centre of Bucharest and the socialist state's attempt to create its own heritage, followed by a remaking of the same centre as an epitome of multiculturalist history which served the purpose of legitimising Bucharest's status claims regarding its “Europeaness” and a place at the table of European capitals in the recent decades. The book relies on an extensive archival and ethnographic research, grounded in field work, extensive interviews with relevant social and political actors, but also a *tour de force* through the literature about social politics, heritage, social geography and political history, aimed at showing how the heritage (un)making functions as a form of governance, the creation of a “distinct aesthetic representation of historical narrative” (Grama, 2019), critically recounting the politicisation and stratification of (spatial) social belonging and exclusion.

¹ Babeș-Bolyai University; dana.domsodi@ubbcluj.ro

The evolution of the sociopolitical battles over the historic centre of Bucharest is analysed by Emanuela Grama by looking at the developments taking place there between 1945 and 2010. In the beginning of this period, the creation of socialist Romania was indissoluble from the production of a national history and historical centres were conceived as having an important role in this process of spatial politics, while after the fall of the communist regime, post communist local elites instrumentalized themselves urban environment with the purpose of securing political and economic power. The study of the political past of the historic centre of Bucharest shows how heritage is implicitly political, both as a strategy of political empowerment, but also as a hegemonic idiom of exclusion, culminating with a *fin de siecle* heritage reification process marred by the marginalisation and exclusion of various group from the political spotlight, while political and private actors wrestled over the appropriation of centred space filled with multifocal possibilities of legitimation for private ventures and political projects of Europeanization, the other facet of heroicized and mythologised historical past. However, as state and political regimes fought for the construction of a heritage that suited their interests, so did the residents of the centre, who fought back articulating “an active antiheritage stand” - fighting for recognition as real citizens, bearers of social rights and entitled to political visibility.

As Emanuela Grama describes the history of the Old Centre it becomes clear that it represented very different things in different historical epochs. In the beginning, Lipskani was a pivotal part of a centre constituted around princely power, then became the heart of a dynamic, vivacious and multinational economic life in the nineteenth century. During socialism the historic centre of Bucharest became a central peon in the Romanian communist strategy of strengthening nationalist ideology (a process discussed in detail in the first part of the book) and ethnic levelling of the historic centre. Finally, in the last decades, transformed into a postcommunist battle ground for legitimacy of various elite groups, being simultaneously a fantastic argument for city officials in the discourse about Europeanization, a treacherous painted veil behind with local elites played the game of the enclosure of the commons and privatisation of the public space. The strong critical theoretical and ethnographical framework employed in the book delivers a subtle and successful ethnography of the state itself as it materialises as space planning and space politics.

The book also discusses the issue of the property regime(s) and property forms starting from heritage and as an exercise into the complexities of understanding heritage as the property of property - heritage as a central element of a property regime - Grama researches the shift from a centralised heritage regime to a decentralised and multifocal model in which individuals,

groups and the state clash forces over the political stakes and goals of heritage labelling. This point is further emphasised as the book constitutes a compelling argument in favour of theory about the dual nature of the social(ist) heritage as a double form of marking.

Regarding the organisation of the book, the first chapter focuses on the debates around the issue of making a socialist capital in the fifties. The second and the third chapter investigate the disputes that followed the discovery of the ruins of the Old Court, and the battle that ensued between the archeologists and the architects over the political and historical value of the site. Finally, starting with chapter 4, the postcommunist strategies for (affective) devaluation of property come to the fore as embedded in power strategies aimed against marginal groups and dwellers of the historic centre, a transformation that culminates in the still ongoing retreat of the state from the social space as heritage is captured by the process of privatisation. Finally, the conclusion of the book further develops and synthesises the theory about the dual nature of heritage.

Emanuela Grama brings together heterogeneous sources, from areas of study both neighbouring and distant to heritage studies, thus enriching both the scope and breath of her investigation, but also the entire field of heritage studies, while analysing the concept of heritage from multiple ends and points of view of the social spaces and relations of power. She also brings to the table the illuminating perspective of the residents themselves, many of them marginalised and vulnerable, forced to deal with the effects of structural and factual disregard of the State and power regimes towards a place that was so central to their own historical and ideological process of constitution. Grama's monograph is a gripping and intensive lesson on the fluidity and plasticity of heritage, the multiple uses of the past in shaping urban spaces, the intricacies of (un)making heritage and the political stakes that bound and throw local communities against the state, the state against its history and political time against spatial politics.

REFERENCES

Grama, E. (2019), *Socialist Heritage. The Politics of Past and Place in Bucharest*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019, 247 pages

