Heritage on the Margins? Central and Eastern European Perspectives

Špela Ledinek Lozej

ZRC SAZU, Institute of Slovenian Ethnology, Slovenia
spela.ledinek@zrc-sazu.si
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0632-1414

Nataša Rogelja Caf

ZRC SAZU, Slovene Migration Institute, Slovenia
natasa.rogelja@zrc-sazu.si
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8087-7491

This introductory article reflects heritage-making processes in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) context. It links discussions of the ZRC SAZU multidisciplinary research program on heritage with case studies presented at the conference Heritage on the Margins? (November 2023, Ljubljana). The focus of the article is heritage formation and the performative influence of heritage in minority, remote, linguistic, industrial, (post)imperial, (post)socialist and otherwise marginalized settings.
▪ **Keywords**: heritage, critical heritage studies, marginality-centrality, Central and Eastern Europe

Uvodni članek tematskega zvezka prinaša razmislek o procesih ustvarjanja dediščine v srednje- in vzhodnoevropskem kontekstu. Besedilo povezuje razprave in raziskave večdisciplinarnega raziskovalnega programa o dediščini, ki poteka v ZRC SAZU, s študijami primerov, ki so bili predstavljeni na konferenci Dediščina na obrobjih? (november 2023, Ljubljana). Osrednja os premislekov sta tvorjenje in performativna moč dediščine v manjšinskih, odročnih, jezikovnih, industrijskih, (post)imperijskih, (post)socialističnih in drugače marginaliziranih okoljih.
▪ **Ključne besede**: dediščina, kritične dediščinske študije, marginalnost-centralnost, srednja in vzhodna Evropa

The relations, flows, and shifts between margins and centres are at the core of this thematic issue. They have prompted us to reflect on the geographical, political, and academic margins and centres of Europe using the heritage angle to discuss multiple relational processes with, within, and beyond the so-called Central and Eastern Europe[1] (CEE) that seems to be a promising laboratory for such discussion. Namely, an explicit or implicit distance from the core European narratives and symbols is a thread that runs through ethnographies and papers included in this thematic issue. How to think about marginality and centrality from within this part of the world? What can be gained by approaching European heritage and memory from CEE? What are the inner margins of CEE? The relationship between margins and centres is always positional and dynamic; it "must involve an awareness that traditional axes are in fact in motion, […] at the

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[1] Similarly as Ognjen Kojanić (2020), we use the notion of CEE as a general designation of the region, and not as limited to the temporal container of post-socialism. We acknowledge its internal differences and multiple axes of centrality-peripherality.

same time it is worth stressing that not everything, everywhere is in flux. Being at the (perceived) centre – economically, politically, discursively – still matters" (Whitehead et. al., 2020a: 98).

Heritage

"Heritage today is a broad and slippery term", Rodney Harrison (2013: 5) noted more than ten years ago in his textbook on critical approaches to heritage, and thus reaffirmed a series of (critical) heritage scholars that had – soon after the sedimentation of the concept with the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO, 1972) in the global value regimes – pointed out its ambiguity (Lowenthal, 1985, 1998) and various social and political ends (Samuel, 1994; Smith, 2006). "It might be used to describe anything from the solid – such as buildings, monuments, and memorials, to the ethereal – songs, festivals, and languages" (Harrison, 2013: 5). Heritage covers a range of things and phenomena, from large to small, grandiose (e.g. operas in our case study, see Meašić, 2025) to modest (e.g. autodramas, see Senčar Mrdaković, 2025), natural or man-made, from whole landscapes to archaeological fragments, skills, and songs. It can refer to magnificent palaces or simple houses, wilderness, urban environments, memory trails (see Gregorač, 2025), and the tacit knowledge of industrial workers (see Vodopivec, 2025). It operates at different spatial, temporal, and institutional scales referring to the connections between various groups, their pasts, shaping of presents, and envisioning futures. Consequently, a much broader understanding of heritage emerged, bringing to the fore disconcerting questions such as: What is heritage? As Waterton and Smith (2009: 12) argued, the answer might as well be that there is no such thing as heritage: "Rather, it exists as a range of competing discourses that have significant and powerful cultural and political consequences and uses." Before reaching this re-conceptualisation point – from heritage as a noun to heritage as a verb, as Harvey (2001) suggested –, let us present a brief pre-story.

The ways in which heritage was defined, understood, managed, and sedimented by the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO, 1972) in the time of (late) modernity are related to the vision of linear progress, the development of a risk society (Douglas, 1966; Beck, 1992), and the resulting need for governmentality, classification, and ordering; to the rise of nation-states and their "invented traditions" (Hobsbawm, Ranger, 1983); to accelerated globalisation, migrations and other transnational flows (and eventual reterritorialisation); to the technological modernisation of everyday life and the accompanying nostalgia for pre-modern "old- times" and "old- things" (and eventual retraditionalisation); and the growth of consumerism and the tourism industry. The concept was adopted and adapted by the larger public, as well as by a range of disciplines – from museology and conservation science, to other technical disciplines

concerned with the protection, preservation, restoration, and presentation of heritage, which recognise its potential for business and social engineering.

After the consolidation of the concept in public, administrative, and expert discourses in the 1970s, we can follow more critical reflections of the concept beyond essentialist understandings, according to which heritage is not "a thing" to be "discovered", but a process of evaluations, attitudes, and relations to the objects, practices, environments, and past events; it is formed in the present and reflects current concerns about the pasts with the aims to shape the future (Tunbridge, Ashworth, 1996; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998; Harvey, 2001; Lowenthal, 2004; Hudales, Visočnik, 2005; Muršič, 2005; Smith, 2006; Bendix, 2009; Tschofen, 2012; Harrison, 2013; Fournier, 2021). Such an understanding does not diminish the importance of heritage for communities, groups, and individuals as "a highly significant dimension of political organisation and cultural life" (Whitehead et al., 2020b: 222). However, the questions to be asked are as follows: Why and under what circumstances is something recognised as heritage; who are the decision-makers, what are the premises of their decisions and argumentations (in connections with experts from different disciplines); who are the (representatives of) (heritage) communities to whom – following the recent heritage conventions[2] – the responsibility of identifying and preserving heritage is delegated; how are community voices recognised and included in, or excluded from the "authorised heritage discourse" (AHD) (Smith, 2006) or "official" (Harrison, 2013) heritage institutions such as registers, museums, public monuments and events; how "heritage dissonances" (Kisić, 2017) are negotiated; what are the implications of heritage-making at local, national and, in our case, macro-regional level – from economic to environmental impacts in the local community, the construction of different (national, macro- and micro-regional) identities, impacts on tourism flows and (cross-border) cooperation. In sum, following all these questions, one can conclude that heritage is a selective process.

Margins

As Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing argues, being at the margins is not an essential condition but the result of socio-cultural and power-political processes. People are marginalised as "their perspectives are cast to the side or excluded" (Lowenhaupt Tsing, 1993: 5). Marginality often refers to the experience of individuals or groups living outside the

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[2] UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003) that points out communities as key actors in heritage recognition (see Smith, Akagawa, 2009; Hafstein, 2018; Akagawa, Smith, 2019; Blake, Lixinski, 2020) and the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (so called Faro convention) (Council of Europe, 2005) that emphasizes the social and participatory aspects of heritage, encouraging communities and individuals to play active roles in defining, managing, and preserving their heritage (Zagato, 2015; Pinton, 2017).

dominant structures of power, privilege and cultural norms, and is usually theorized within a conceptual pair – centres vs. margins/peripheries – not in terms of sharply differentiated oppositions but as closely intertwined relationships (Green, 2005; Hannerz, 2015). Marginality and centrality are not to be conceptualized in opposition but as different "relative locations", determined by their connections to and separations from other spaces. Marginality as discussed by Sarah Green implies for example a difficult and ambivalent relevance to the heart of things and can become part of the heart of the things (Green, 2005; Green et al., 2024). The concept is used to analyse and understand the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, inequality, and the interactions between dominant and subordinate groups. Their marginality can be captured in line with postcolonial and subaltern studies (Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1994; Bošković, 2008) by focusing on how power relations create "subaltern" groups who struggle to have their voices heard and their heritage recognised in dominant narratives. It is a dynamic, intersectional (i.e. overlapping of race, ethnicity, gender, class, language), and contested process that is shaped by historical, social, and political forces. Understanding margins in (critical) heritage studies means analysing how AHD is shaped and how it operates to create and maintain boundaries between what is and what is not heritage, but also how marginalised groups resist, negotiate meaning and create their "heritage from below" (Robertson, 2016).

Such complex entanglement between heritage and marginality has inspired and challenged the multidisciplinary research group Heritage on the Margins, whose members contributed to the establishment of the Association of Critical Heritage Studies' (ACHS) CEE chapter, organized its first conference, and put together this thematic issue. Throughout the process we aimed to provide "a view of heritage beyond the obvious, around corners and across obstacles", with a focus on "the performative influence of heritage on the margins – in minority, remote, linguistic, migrant, occupational and otherwise marginalized settings, […] heritage diglossia and the possibilities of undisciplined heritage" (Heriscope, 2022). Thinking from Central and Eastern European corners seems to be a privileged position for such an exercise.

Central and Eastern European perspectives

Thinking, locating, and framing Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) on contemporary mental maps of Europe is a difficult endeavour, as stressed by various researchers (e.g. Schenk, 2017). As Frithjof Benjamin Schenk (2017: 188) wrote, "mental maps depend both on geographical points of view and on competing regional concepts in different scholarly and political discourses." However, anthropological studies that focus on CEE, although often overlooked outside the region, are of value to understand also other places in Europe (Kojanić, 2020: 52) and their heritage-making processes.

The history of CEE has been replete with violent and perpetual changing of borders and routes ever since the First and Second World War, while the post-war events continue to shape everyday local realities, state formations, and the displacement of communities. (Self-)imposed views on the centrality and/or marginality of the region come strongly to the fore, creating an inherent diversity. Socialism and post-socialism can be understood as a unifying experience in the region, but they are also highly differentiated when considered alongside historical events and local political developments. How do all these different historical developments affect heritage-related processes in the region? What perspectives can be gained from Central and Eastern European heritage-making processes? (Heriscope, 2023). Such questions were discussed at the conference Critical Heritage Studies: Central European Perspectives (Prague, 6–7 October 2022), organized by the Institute of Ethnology at the Czech Academy of Sciences (Institute, 2022), which led to the aforementioned establishment of the CEE Chapter of ACHS, and in the following year to the organisation of its first conference.[3]

The title of the conference Heritage on the Margins? Central and Eastern Europe Perspectives puts the theme of marginality and centrality at the heart of discussion by exploring complex CEE geographies and histories at the entanglement of post-imperial and post-socialist legacies (Palaić, 2024). We raised the topics of "inter-imperiality" (Doyle, 2020), "internal colonialism" (Verdery, 1979), and legacies of the Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman empires (for example the forgotten, renamed, and reclaimed Ottoman heritage in Bulgaria; cf. Strahilov, Karakusheva, 2025); of the two world wars, displacements of people, changing borders and political regimes; of different legacies of (post-)socialism (for example the absence of workers in the Slovenian industrial heritage of socialism (Vodopivec, 2025), and the multiple layers and vigorousness of the Trail of Remembrance and Comradeship around Ljubljana (Gregorač, 2025)); of marginalisation of (linguistic) minorities (for the case of the Sorbs in Lusatia, Germany; and the Vlachs in the Timok Valley, Serbia see Selvelli, 2025), as well as present and future heritage prospects (for the discussion on the current reception of the Soviet opera see Meašić, 2025; and for the entanglement of heritage and social innovation see Senčar Mrdaković, 2025).

Text written by Nina Vodopivec (this volume) discusses the absence of workers in industrial heritage in Slovenia and brings us into the context of post-socialist countries that often deny or blur their socialist past. And yet, this past exists in the experiences and stories of former industrial workers described by the author. Namely, the article points to the importance of (re)interpreting industrial heritage through the lens of workers' experiences. Industrial heritage is here presented as a potential site of value creation for the labour invested, where workers might regain their self-esteem. Another

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[3] The conference was hosted by the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC SAZU) and co-organised by the Institute of Ethnology at the Czech Academy of Sciences in Ljubljana (29–30 November 2023) (see Heriscope, 2023; Fekonja, 2024).

complex and multilayered heritage-making process relates to the case study of the Trail of Remembrance and Comradeship, a memorial trail in Ljubljana (Slovenia). Jernej Gregorač (this volume) explores through the elements of memory, materiality, and movement (that is, active engagement with the trail) how a memorial trail was created, curated, and used under socialism, and how its maintenance, use, and promotion persisted, changed in part, and were heritagized in post-socialism.

Ivo Strahilov and Slavka Karakusheva (this volume) bring us to the outskirts of the CEE and write about Bulgaria's Ottoman heritage beyond the authorised dissonance in the article 'Forgotten, Renamed, and Reclaimed'. In their research they explore the presence of the Ottoman heritage in Bulgaria, arguing that despite its exclusion from the national heritage canon, different communities engage with this past, they valorise and reclaim it. Using a scalar approach, authors examine how appropriations of the past operate at various levels, revealing the dynamic interplay of dominant and vernacular discourses. A comparative perspective on two CEE outskirts, that of the Sorbs in Germany and that of the Vlachs in Serbia, has been adopted by Guistina Selvelli (this volume). It identifies three dimensions of marginalization that precede the loss of ecoculturally diverse landscapes through the expansion of mining activities: linguistic difference, border proximity, and the element of rural culture. The article argues that these are part of larger processes that aim to legitimize "wastelanding" (Brynne Voyles, 2015), meaning the deliberate destruction of a minority (and its heritage) through environmental degradation.

The omnipresence of heritage (discourse) and its entanglement into community-based social innovation actions is examined by Marko Senčar Mrdaković (this volume). He presents the practice of autodrama, staged annually for over fifty years by the Teatro Povero di Monticchiello in rural Tuscany, on the outskirts of CEE. From the perspective of the local population, autodrama is acknowledged as a heritage, yet its social outcomes exhibit characteristics closer to social innovation, speaking of the fluidity and malleability of heritage.

In the last text written by Magdalena Marija Meašić (this volume), we are confronted with the question of how to stage Soviet operas in the 21st century. Namely, amid the Russo-Ukrainian war, the discussion on "Soviet" operas abroad acquired a new dimension. The parallel occurrences of boycotting Russian music and the resurgence of Soviet Russian music provoke questions about the power embodied by music and heritage, while also challenging the notion of music as detached from the current political turmoil. The complex persona of Sergey Prokofiev and his two "Soviet" operas are put at the forefront, linking easily with the discussion on marginality and centrality.

Several participants of the conference Heritage on the Margins? developed their conference papers into the here presented original scientific contributions, others only contributed with their ideas that importantly boosted the debates. Although not included here as authors, their names can be found in the conference booklet

(Rogelja Caf et al., 2023). Here presented conference contributions were joined by two other authors who responded to the editorial call. The result is not a "typical" CEE perspective on heritage but a bricolage of different viewpoints on the centres and outskirts of CEE geographies, a "crosslocation multigram", to use Green's et al. (2024) words, where participants may establish a common dialogue by recognizing a considerable number of topics to which they could relate, contribute, or learn from.

Acknowledgement

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Dediščina na obrobjih? Srednje- in vzhodnoevropske perspektive

Članek prinaša razmislek o procesih ustvarjanja dediščine v srednje- in vzhodnoevropskem kontekstu, o katerih se je razpravljalo na konferenci Dediščina na obrobjih? Srednje- in vzhodnoevropske perspektive, ki jo je novembra 2023 v Ljubljani organizirala večdisciplinarna raziskovalna skupina ZRC SAZU. Članek povezuje razprave in raziskave večdisciplinarnega raziskovalnega programa ZRC SAZU Dediščina na obrobjih: novi pogledi na dediščino in identiteto znotraj in onkraj nacionalnega z razpravami in študijami primerov, ki so bili predstavljeni na konferenci. Premislek o tvorjenju dediščine in performativni moči dediščine v manjšinskih, odročnih, jezikovnih, industrijskih, (post)imperijskih, (post) socialističnih in drugače marginaliziranih okoljih so narekovale raziskave v srednji in vzhodni Evropi in sosednjih deželah. Območje s številnimi notranjimi razlikami in prekrivanji je obetaven laboratorij za več vprašanj: Kako premišljati o sodobnih procesih ustvarjanja dediščine v dialogu s konceptualnim parom marginalnost-centralnost? Kaj lahko pridobimo, če k evropski dediščini in spominu pristopimo iz srednje- in vzhodnoevropske perspektive? Kateri so notranji robovi srednje in vzhodne Evrope? Odgovori, ki jih avtorici luščita iz prepleta teoretskih nastavkov in študij primerov, ne zarisujejo »tipičnega« srednje- in vzhodnoevropske(ga) (tvorjenja) dediščine, temveč so brikolaž (ne) povezanih, razcefranih in/ali prekrivajočih se pogledov na središča in obrobja. Gre za nekakšen »medlokacijski multigram« (Green idr., 2024), ki je udeležencem konference omogočil ustvariti dialog in prepoznati skupne teme.