

Raluca Mateoc and François Ruegg (eds.) Recalling Fieldwork. People, places and encounters . LIT Verlag Münster, 2020 ISBN9783-643-80247-7

Maria Cernat

“Recalling Fieldwork” is a very inspiring book written by American and European anthropologists about the ills of state socialism. The book is a tribute to the Swiss Professor Christian Giordano. One of his main contributions was the creation of the Freiburger Sozialanthropologische Studien. The volume appears thanks to three funders: the Council of the University of Fribourg, the Schroubek-Fonds Östliches Europa and the Le Cèdre Foundation and contains ten articles where Western anthropologists recall their research conducted in various places, but mainly in Romania and Bulgaria during the socialist era and in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Block. This review is written from a Romanian and non-anthropologist researcher point of view.

The volume represents a valuable contribution for many reasons. First of all, the anthropologists generously share an abundance of details regarding the challenges they had to face: personal challenges (like revealing details about their religion), difficult relations with their informants, and the constant threat of the secret police called Securitate (Security). They also share important details that may offer a closer perspective on what is the ethnographic method in general. So, there is a lot to learn from a theoretical and a methodological point of view.

The volume is also important because it provides very useful information on the way Westerners see us, Easterners. It was indeed extremely interesting to see how Katherine Verdery or Gail Klingman saw the villages very close to my grandparent’s ones, villages that I visited dozens of times. It was like a mirror placed before us, me and my family.

The editors, Raluca Mateoc and François Ruegg, had a good idea in dividing the texts into two sections. The texts in the first section were written by anthropologists that had done a lot of fieldwork, as is the case of the internationally acclaimed researcher and professor Christian Giordano (who unfortunately passed away as the volume was being edited) who went „from Sicily to Malaysia via Bulgaria” (Giordano 2020, 19). The contributions in the second part are based on the experiences of researchers in one particular place/country. The book can be read as a novel

because some of the authors are really talented writers that know how to create very vivid and exciting narratives.

There are perspectives on doing fieldwork that are more detached and comprehensive like the ones presented by Christian Giordano, François Rüegg or Peter Skalník that represent, as Raluca Mateoc, the co-editor of the volume points out, a perspective on various fieldworks that they have explored and used as data for their research. Especially Giordano's text recalls in a very humane way all the obstacles that he faced and also the institutional and political constraints that made him choose certain professional paths. What strikes me most in this anthology is the fact that it almost completely lacks the triumphalist and positivist perspective where the scientist follows the Truth and he/she does so in a completely decontextualized manner. All the authors made sure that they explained their failures, their constant struggles, and their doubts. And these struggles have not been always related to the secret services and their constant harassment. They were mainly related to the anthropologists' position, to their fear of making hasty judgements, their constant negotiation of boundaries.

Additionally, the volume offers a clue about what it was to be an anthropologist in the ex-Soviet Block. The American researchers (Katherine Verdery, Gail Kligman, Steven Samson, Carol Silverman, and Gerald Creed) described their experiences in communist Romania and Bulgaria.

Christian Giordano was influenced, as he conveys at the beginning of his contribution, by the classical anthropologists who worked in different places - Trobriand (Malinowski) or the Northern highlands of Burma and Irak (Leach). He goes against the idea that one anthropologist has to immerse himself or herself in only one community. He explains that this is what he did throughout his entire life and career and that was not always the result of a rational pursuit of pure knowledge, but also the result of historical and social circumstances that had a powerful impact on his career.

Since the contributors to this volume were so sincere in their texts this obliges me to do the same. Living in Romania for the past three decades and having witnessed the process of anti-communism ideology becoming almost a religion, I find the stories about the so-called communist regimes in both Romania and Bulgaria rather redundant and mono-colored: almost everything was bad, bleak and the secret police was awful. For quite a while I grew very disappointed with this simplistic narrative and this is why I find Giordano's research on the re-privatization of land in Dobruzha (Bulgaria) particularly significant as far as it tells how the idea of giving back the land to the people would magically solve all their problems. In fact, most intellectuals would be prone to accept that the communist regimes had their indisputable achievements, one of which being the fact that the heavy industrialization of countries like Romania and Bulgaria offered people stable jobs in the city and ascendant social mobility. The re-privatization meant the implication of social actors who had already been in power positions during the socialist regime, meaning

that the ones who had been in charge of the agricultural cooperatives were able to buy land and concentrate a lot of power. However, the research doesn't reveal the rapid concentration of land and capital into the hands of a few, and thus the return to an almost feudal order in former socialist Bulgaria as a result of deregulation. As shocking as it may seem, the re-privatization of the agricultural lands in both Romania and Bulgaria often proved to be almost as brutal as the collectivization. Unfortunately, most intellectuals, like some of the present book authors, seem caught in the anti-communist perspective.

A very interesting presence among the contributors is the co-editor of this volume, François Rüegg. He tells a different story from that of the American intellectuals who came to study the socialist Easterners. His text written with literary talent narrates the story of the exciting and troubled air of the Parisian universities in the 70's. During that time it was almost impossible for a very young researcher to gain access to do a fieldwork. Rüegg found his way out by contacting Anca Stahl, the wife of the famous anthropologist Paul-Henri Stahl with origins from Romania, and coming for a year in what he calls „exotic Romania”. He was given a small car that enabled him to travel wherever he wanted. The exoticism of Romania was due to the fact that it stayed mainly rural and that it was closed behind the Iron Curtain. Rüegg resists the temptation of depicting his experiences in dark colors. He describes his research experience as dynamic and based on spontaneity. Influenced by very nuanced studies in post/decolonial theory he describes critically the „civilizational mission” of the Austro-Hungarian which he compares with similar campaigns led by the United Nations or the European Union in recent times.

As a communication specialist, it is fascinating for me to see my country through the eyes of a foreign researcher who devoted much of his energy to the understanding of the affirmation of the new ethnicities after 1989 and the nationalistic tendencies in Cluj where the public space was occupied by chauvinist symbols. I also note his attention paid to the Roma community and its conversion to Christian neo-protestant practices. Of course, he quite diligently points to the temptation most of the stories on Roma people face: miserabilism or exoticism.

Besides these perspectives on Roma people living in Romania and Moldova, Rüegg comes back to the crux anthropological point: the relation of the researcher to his/her subjects. Rüegg's critical view of decolonial theory, impacting anthropology, is that of choosing the most oppressed subjects in order to fit the narrative of the oppression which is in itself extremely colonial and thus problematic.

Rüegg expresses a very strong point with regard to anthropology as devoted to the transformation of a homeland into fieldwork. He considers that many details would be ignored by those who definitely lack the eye of the stranger and it will be also self-centered, ethnocentric and narcissistic.

Peter Skalník is an anthropologist coming from former Czechoslovakia who was accepted to the Northwestern University, but was denied a travel visa by the com-

munist regime. He briefly remembers the 1968 Soviet intervention into Czechoslovakia and the fact that what followed afterwards was not a very friendly atmosphere towards social research. Coming from an intellectual family of Communist Party members, he was able to navigate through the academic waters and became a scholar at the Leningrad University where he wanted to become a specialist in African Studies. He applied for several scholarships but his requests were not accepted by the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. Instead of following his dream of becoming a specialist in Africa, he had to be satisfied with Slovakia. His career and personal life made him travel between Prague and Bratislava since he was teaching at universities in both cities.

Unfortunately, Peter Skalník, after being denied the opportunity to study and work abroad, was even forced out of the university. After refusing to sign a politically motivated document he was forced into exile in 1975. He escaped to the Netherlands and then he was able to publish his findings, even though his tape recordings were lost.

The second part of the book contains the so-called single-sited ethnographies, that is, the texts of anthropologists who had spent most of their time researching regions of rural Romania and Bulgaria. Katherine Verdery is known to the Romanian public with her recent book *My Life As a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police File* (Verdery 2018). In the text written for the present volume she tells her story of the fieldwork she did back in 1973-1974. With a vivid literary talent Verdery walks us through her difficulties as a young American researcher in a Romanian village in a country behind the Iron Curtain. Aurel Vlaicu is a village very close to my grandmother's one and I must have passed through it hundreds of times but I could have never imagined that it was such a place! She also spent time in the villages Aurel Vlaicu and Geoagiu. The last one is also a picturesque village close to a resort that I also visited on countless occasions. In 1972 Verdery received a grant by the International Research and Exchanges Board. She was assigned Geoagiu as a village to do a fieldwork, but she heard of Aurel Vlaicu from the local TV, a village of a medium size that had its own collective farm. At that time, Verdery had no experience in doing fieldwork and was initiated by the Romanian Professor Mihai Pop who was assigned as her supervisor. With a lot of self-irony Katherine Verdery describes her own research from the point of view of the Securitate file where her initiative was described as shallow, as taking a view from an airplane (Verdery 2020, 83). She focuses more on the macro-social theories, but gives more space to villagers' voices in her next books. Indeed, Verdery insists on her special relation to the secret police. Securitate told the villagers that she was a spy, which she finds very exotic as if the CIA would have missed an opportunity to get information about the countries behind the Iron Curtain through „innocent” researchers. One of the contributors clearly declares that he was visited by the American ambassador who required him to act as an informant, so maybe she had little reasons to act so surprised. Her very long

contact with the community made her accepted and definitely helped the villagers involve her into their lives.

The research focuses on the daily lives of villagers and on the relation to the secret police. Again, there is no historical analysis of the Romanian village and its evolution from a situation when almost everybody was illiterate to the one when people had minimal education. We have no idea about the percentage of illiterate people before the communists came to power.

One of the most controversial texts in the book belongs to Gail Kligman. She decides to tell her story of doing fieldwork in communist Romania by exploring key elements in her identity as an American citizen, as a woman, and as a secular Jew. She discloses the identity of a desperate couple who asked for her help when Ceaușescu banned abortions in 1966. By today's standards this story would have probably violated the right to privacy. Besides the current legal standard, the moral principle still stands: you simply do not reveal the identity of those who trusted you with the intimate details of their lives.

Then there is the problem of the „benevolent spy”. In Kligman's text about Ieud village in Northern Transylvania it is obvious that she used the information villagers gave her based on the fact that they started to care about her in ways they were not aware of. Probably during that era, a contract between a researcher and her sources was not mandatory and this text proves how important it is to revisit these principles. Contributors say that participant observation was not practiced during that time by the Romanian ethnologists. Contracts were something very new and rarely used.

Another American scholar who took an interest in Romania was Steven Samson. At the time, as a student at the Massachusetts-Amhers School, Samson was invited by Professor John W. Cole to join a research team conducting fieldwork in Romania. He considers his first fieldwork like a tattoo because it stays in the researcher's mind forever. Steven Samson worked in the Romanian village of Feldioara. It is interesting that he was forbidden to enter Romania between 1985 and 1989, but he came back as a consultant to the Romanian government during the EU accession process. It looks as a rewarding professional track for a person banned to enter a country to becoming a consultant for the government just four years later. The Romanian communist government had a hard time accepting criticism. And Steven Samson published articles about corruption, underground economy, and migration. He also wrote several journalistic articles and collaborated with the CIA backed radio stations – the Voice of America and the Radio Free Europe. The Romanian communist government had very little power in terms of countering hostile narratives. Their brutal methods were stupid and inefficient as they were facing an enemy that had a lot more experience and power in communication wars.

Samson declares that the American ambassador visited him in the village of Feldioara, but he would not speculate whether the ambassador worked for the CIA.

Steven Samson was one of the consultants for the Romanian Ministry of Environment that was there to assess, among other things, the social impact of closing down the mines. Readers of this review might not know that closing down the mines had a catastrophic social effect, especially in Hunedoara, a county where most of the miners worked and where I grew up. So, Samson might be seen as someone who was declared *persona non grata* in 1985 and came back in 1992 to oversee the process of complete destruction of the Romanian mining industry. Steven Samson was a key player in exporting democracy and Western liberal models to Eastern Europe, as he recalls.

I find this particular perspective problematic. We, the Easterners, were fed time and time again these stories about the lack of corruption in the West. As a political philosopher, Arto Artinian once declared in an interview that in the neo-protestant cultures the corruption is engrained in the system, it's not accessible at all levels, but only to the elites. The alleged superiority of the West in terms of its bureaucratic system was one of the most important narratives that kept Eastern Europe fascinated with the exported neoliberal model for decades. The fact that there is little debate on the superiority of the West or on the way the West built its current economic power is due to the uncritical presentation of such narratives.

Carol Silverman tells the story of a fieldwork she conducted in Bulgaria while she studied the Roma music. She experienced a lot of difficulties due to the Cold War tensions and the fact that, once again, the Bulgarian Secret Police was labeling her as a spy and not a researcher. This is a common topic in all researchers' accounts of doing fieldwork in Eastern Europe. It seems the Bulgarian secret police was even more draconic than the Romanian in its approach. Carol Silverman and her husband were forced to even sleep in their car for a night because the place where they were staying was locked while they were away.

Gerald Creed's text is one of the most interesting in terms of his description of the tensed relations he had with the Bulgarian secret police as well as with the bureaucracy in academia. Bulgarians seemed to have taken all the necessary measures to deter Creed from entering a Bulgarian village. They made him stay in a student dormitory with a suspicious roommate. They kept him there for months promising each day this situation would eventually change. Then, they postponed for months in a row his actual fieldwork. What is interesting here is the fact that he encountered a highly trained Bulgarian researcher: Veska Khouzouharova. While he acknowledges her intellectual skills, he labels her as being somehow negatively influenced by her ideological views because she was a member of the Communist Party. In turn, we understand of course that the Westerner researchers had no ideological perspective (*sic!*). The world is thus divided between (bad) leftists with ideological views and (good) neutral and objective intellectuals. This is maybe an unconscious representation, but still extremely effective. Creed was stubborn enough to pursue his research interests even though he contracted tuberculosis that nearly cost him a

lung a few years later. Eventually, Creed participated in the events of the village life and was able to tell an interesting story. But still, his view of the post-socialist Bulgarian tribalism and irrational anti-communism made relaxed discussions almost impossible.

Georghită Geană offers a theoretical perspective on fieldwork and anthropology by discussing concepts such as philosophical anthropology, theological anthropology. He tells the story of his studying philosophy between 1960 and 1965. He rejected the ideologized contents of philosophy wanting to go to a more abstract zone, such as logic and epistemology. Of course, in Slavoj Žižek terms, the lack of ideology is in itself ideological, but again for decades in the Romanian intellectual environment ideology was equated with the official political left.

Zoltán Rostás is a Romanian researcher and professor who devoted most of his life to the analysis of Dimitrie Gusti's sociological school. His efforts are of vital importance for understanding how important the thinking of the inter-war and post-WWII times was in Romania and how influential his studies proved to be. In his contribution to the volume, Rostás presents the „unconventional history of the Romanian sociological school”. For this he interviewed elderly professors who had worked with Gusti. His text discusses the way he discovered the importance of oral history in the context he was forced to work during Nicolae Ceausescu's restrictive regime. Zoltán Rostás focused his entire career on oral history that appeared back then as an anti-establishment orientation and method, since it took into account marginalized groups, informal stories and the voices of those who were usually ignored in the official histories. The first conclusion of his text is that Dimitrie Gusti and his collaborators did not cease to publish and they continued their work even in dire circumstances such as the WWII and during the first years of the communist regime. Eight members of the Gustian school were imprisoned, and three of them died. Fifteen years later the school was re-habilitated and ironically considered as a “leftist” view and social reformist nowadays. The second conclusion is that the fall of the communist regime was not positive for oral history because of the political primitivism. Only in the last decade there was a proper space for this type of unconventional history. Zoltán Rostás explains how the occasion of the International History Congress in Bucharest made him realise how important oral history as a research method was. It was an anti-establishment method in and out of itself since it did not explore the official history made public by the establishment, by the authorities, but explored the nuanced, complex and colorful life stories of marginal groups and people.

Raluca Mateoc describes the contributions to the volume focusing on the constant negotiations of itimacy, boundaries, research methods, the relation with the sources and so on. Her effort revolves around synthesizing the articles presented in the book she co-edited. She presents the reasons for separating the texts into the specific categories and she carefully describes the differences that allowed her to take those editorial decisions.

In conclusion, “Recalling Fieldwork“, is an important book covering the research experiences of numerous anthropologists. At the same time, it bears the signs of its time, in a way that it is an anthropology book written by researchers who were affected by the Cold War and the restrictions it imposed on research in general. The dominant narrative, even though more nuanced, is that communism was bad and that the Western society had a lot to teach to the underdeveloped Eastern countries. The book is important as a historical document that shows how Western anthropologists reflected upon the poor rural areas in countries like Romania and Bulgaria. 30 years after capitalism was imposed as the only viable path for Eastern Europe, we see that the pervasive anti-communist ideas were present a long time before the actual fall of the communist regimes and that some of the anthropologists who authored texts in this book had taken an active part in „educating” Romanians about „democracy”. The book is also important because it demonstrates an important power imbalance: while the West had highly trained intellectuals who came to study the poor rural areas of Romania and Bulgaria, we don’t have even to this day intellectuals who would go to the extremely poor areas like Bronx, Queens or Detroit to report on the capitalist devastation of society. We have limited abilities and as a result - a very few studies regarding our own communities so, unfortunately, the narrative was and still is dominated by the West.

Katherine Verdery, *My Life as a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police File*, London: Duke University Press, 2018.

Maria Cernat, “No ivory tower – a discussion on capitalism in education – part 1”, *The Barricade Online*, online document available at: <https://thebarricade.online/no-ivory-tower-part-1/>

Dr. Maria Cernat

E-mail: macernat@gmail.com