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RECALLING FIELDWORK. A BOOK ON THE INTERSECTIONS OF INTIMACY, BOUNDARIES, INTERPRETATIONS AND POWER

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Abstract

This review critically examines the book titled "Recalling Fieldwork: People, Places, and Encounters," edited by Raluca Mateoc and François Rüegg. The book presents an invaluable collection of memories shared by prominent anthropologists, who utilize it as a platform for meta-discursive analysis of their professional development and the pivotal role of fieldwork in their research endeavors. This review meticulously engages with the diverse anthropological narratives presented within the book, scrutinizing the researcher- source relationships and unveiling potential latent political underpinnings inherent to this scholarly undertaking. By closely examining the rich content of the book, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between personal experiences, academic growth, and the broader socio-political contexts that shape the discipline of anthropology.

Keywords: ***fieldwork, anthropology, intimacy, distance, boundaries, politics.***

"Recalling Fieldwork" is a poignant and inspiring collection authored by American and European anthropologists, dedicated to the legacy of Swiss professor Christian Giordano, notably known for establishing the Freiburger Sozialanthropologische Studien. This volume owes its existence to the generous support of three distinguished funders: the Council of the University of Fribourg, the Schroubek-Fonds Östliches Europa, and the Le Cèdre Foundation. Within its pages, ten prominent scholars recount their experiences, predominantly in Romania and Bulgaria, spanning the Socialist era and the tumultuous aftermath of the Soviet

Bloc's collapse.

This review, authored by a non-anthropologist researcher from Romania, offers a unique perspective on the significance of the volume. The collection makes a substantial contribution on several fronts. First and foremost, the anthropologists within the book candidly share the myriad challenges they confronted, including personal dilemmas such as navigating the disclosure of their religious affiliations, navigating complex relationships with their informants, and contending with the ever-present specter of the Securitate (Security), the secret police. Additionally, the volume offers valuable insights into the nuances of the ethnographic method, providing rich material for both theoretical and methodological exploration. Consequently, "Recalling Fieldwork" stands as an invaluable resource that extends beyond the discipline of anthropology, offering profound lessons for scholars across various domains.

"Recalling Fieldwork" emerges as a profoundly significant volume, shedding light not only on the experiences of Western anthropologists but also on their perceptions of Eastern societies. As a non-anthropologist researcher from Romania, I found it especially enlightening to witness the perspectives of renowned scholars like Katherine Verdery and Gail Klingman as they examined villages so intimately connected to my own heritage, ones I have visited countless times. The book, in essence, serves as a mirror reflecting the Eastern experience, including my own family's.

The editorial decision by Raluca Mateoc and François Ruegg to divide the texts into two distinct sections proves insightful. The first section features contributions from anthropologists who have amassed extensive fieldwork experience, exemplified by the late Christian Giordano, an internationally acclaimed researcher who, regrettably, passed away during the volume's editing process. Giordano's trajectory, spanning from Sicily to Malaysia via Bulgaria, underscores the richness of these experiences (Giordano 2020, 19). Conversely, the second section offers insights drawn from researchers' experiences in specific locales, deepening the volume's narrative diversity.

A striking characteristic of "Recalling Fieldwork" is its resemblance to a captivating novel. Several authors exhibit remarkable storytelling prowess, crafting vivid and enthralling narratives that captivate readers.

Notably, the anthology presents varied perspectives on fieldwork, with some contributors adopting a more detached and comprehensive stance. Figures like Christian Giordano, François Ruegg, and Peter Skalník, as noted by Raluca Mateoc, the co-editor of the volume,

offer insights drawn from a myriad of fieldwork encounters that have enriched their research. Giordano's account, in particular, offers a humane portrayal of the hurdles he faced, including institutional and political constraints that influenced his professionaltrajectory.

What truly distinguishes the anthology is its departure from triumphalist and positivist perspectives that often portray scientists as unwavering seekers of absolute truth, detached from context. Instead, the authors candidly recount their struggles and failures, acknowledging the complexities inherent to their work. These challenges extend beyond confrontations with secret services and encompass the anthropologists' nuanced positioning, their hesitancy to rush to judgments, and their continual negotiation of boundaries. The resulting narrative depth provides readers with a profound understanding of the intricate dynamics at play in the world of fieldwork.

The volume also provides a unique perspective on the experiences of anthropologists working within the ex-Soviet Bloc. American researchers, including Katherine Verdery,
Gail Kligman, Steven Sampson, Carol Silverman, and Gerald Creed, offer their accounts of conducting research in communist-era Romania and Bulgaria.

Christian Giordano, a prominent figure in the volume, begins his contribution by highlighting the influence of classical anthropologists he encountered in various locations, such as the Trobriand Islands (Malinowski) and the Northern highlands of Burma and Iraq (Leach). Giordano challenges the conventional notion that an anthropologist should solely immerse themselves within a single community.

Giordano elucidates that his career path was characterized by a diverse range of fieldwork experiences, not solely driven by a rational pursuit of knowledge, but also influenced by historical and social circumstances that significantly shaped his trajectory.

In light of the candidness displayed by the contributors in this volume, I feel compelled to offer a similarly forthright perspective. Having resided in Romania for the past three decades and closely observing the evolution of anticommunist ideology in mainstream media and academia, I have found narratives concerning the so-called communist regimes in both Romania and Bulgaria to be somewhat repetitive and one-dimensional. These narratives tend to depict an overwhelmingly negative portrayal, emphasizing a bleak existence and the oppressive nature of the secret police.

Over time, this simplistic narrative left me somewhat disheartened. It is for this reason that I find Christian Giordano's research on the re-privatization of land in the Dobruja region of Bulgaria particularly noteworthy. Giordano's work sheds light on how the idealistic notion of

redistributing land to the people failed to deliver on its promise of solving all societal woes.

In fact, it is worth acknowledging that communist regimes, despite their many criticisms, achieved certain undeniable successes. For instance, their heavy industrialization efforts in countries like Romania and Bulgaria provided citizens with stable employment opportunities in urban areas and facilitated upward social mobility. However, the process of re-privatization ushered in a new set of challenges, as it often led to the consolidation of power among individuals who had held influential positions within the socialist regime. This shift allowed them to acquire significant land holdings and subsequently amass considerable authority.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the research conducted fails to illuminate the swift consolidation of both land and capital into the hands of a select few individuals, effectively resulting in a return to a quasi-feudal order within former socialist Bulgaria due to the process of deregulation. Surprisingly, the re-privatization of agricultural lands in both Romania and Bulgaria often yielded economic consequences that were nearly as severe as those witnessed during the era of collectivization.

Regrettably, it appears that much of the intellectual discourse, akin to the perspectives of some authors in the present volume, remains ensnared in the overarching anti- communist narrative.

A particularly intriguing contributor to this anthology is the co-editor of the volume, François Rüegg. His narrative diverges markedly from those of the American intellectuals who ventured to study the denizens of socialist Eastern Europe. Rüegg's text, penned with literary finesse, recounts the captivating and tumultuous atmosphere of the Parisian universities during the 1970s.

During that era, gaining access to fieldwork posed a formidable challenge for young researchers. François Rüegg, in search of a way to embark on his own fieldwork journey, ingeniously reached out to Anca Stahl, the wife of the renowned anthropologist Paul- Henri Stahl, who hailed from Romania and was visiting for a year. This connection provided Rüegg with a valuable opportunity, and he was even provided with a compact car that granted him the freedom to travel at will. The allure of Romania at the time stemmed from its predominantly rural character and its status as a closed society behindthe Iron Curtain.

Remarkably, Rüegg refrains from casting his experiences in a negative light. Instead, he portrays his research endeavors as dynamic and rooted in spontaneity. Influenced by the nuanced perspectives found in post/decolonial theory, he offers a critical examination of the "civilizational mission" pursued by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Rüegg juxtaposes this

historical campaign with similar initiatives undertaken by entities such as the United Nations and the European Union in contemporary times.

As a communication specialist, I find it truly captivating to perceive my homeland from the perspective of a foreign researcher who dedicated a significant portion of his efforts to comprehending the emergence of new ethnic identities post-1989, as well as the rise of nationalist sentiments in Cluj. In this context, it is noteworthy that the public sphere in Cluj was marked by the presence of chauvinistic symbols.

Additionally, I appreciate the attention François Rüegg directed towards the Roma community and its adoption of Christian neo-Protestant practices. His diligence in acknowledging the inherent temptations that often pervade narratives concerning the Roma people, whether through the lens of miserabilism or exoticism, is commendable.

Moreover, in addition to his insights on the Roma communities residing in Romania and Moldova, François Rüegg delves into a fundamental anthropological aspect: the intricate relationship between the researcher and their subjects. Rüegg offers a critical perspective on the influence of decolonial theory on anthropology, highlighting the tendency to select the most marginalized subjects to align with a narrative of oppression. He astutely points out that this approach can inadvertently perpetuate a form of colonialism, which presents its own set of problematic implications out that this approach can inadvertently perpetuate a form of colonialism, which presents its own set of problematic implications.

Furthermore, Rüegg presents a compelling argument regarding the role of anthropology in transforming one's own homeland into a fieldwork setting. He contends that this approach often leads to the oversight of crucial details by individuals who lack the outsider's perspective. Moreover, he asserts that such an approach can be inherently self- centered, ethnocentric, and narcissistic in nature.

Peter Skalník, an anthropologist hailing from the former Czechoslovakia, encountered notable challenges on his academic journey. Although he secured admission to Northwestern University, his aspirations were thwarted by the communist regime's refusal to grant him a travel visa. In his recollection, he briefly touches upon the 1968 Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, which cast a shadow over the research environment, rendering it inhospitable for social research endeavors.

Coming from an intellectual family with ties to the Communist Party, Skalník displayed resilience and adaptability in navigating the academic landscape. He ultimately found his academic home at Leningrad University, where he aimed to specialize in African Studies.

Despite applying for numerous scholarships, his appeals were consistently rejected by the Czechoslovakian communist regime. As a result, he was compelled to redirect his ambitions and settle for an academic path centered in Slovakia. This professional trajectory necessitated frequent travel between Prague and Bratislava, where he engaged in teaching roles at universities in both cities.

Regrettably, Peter Skalník's academic journey took a distressing turn as he was denied the chance to pursue study and work opportunities abroad. His unwavering commitment to his principles led him to decline signing a politically motivated document, a decision that had severe consequences. In 1975, he found himself compelled to leave the university and was ultimately forced into exile.

Fleeing to the Netherlands, Skalník embarked on a new chapter in his life. Despite the loss of valuable tape recordings, he persevered and succeeded in publishing his research findings during this tumultuous period in his career.

The second portion of the book encompasses what are commonly referred to as single- sited ethnographies. These texts feature anthropologists who dedicated the majority of their research efforts to studying rural regions in Romania and Bulgaria. Among these scholars, Katherine Verdery is a notable figure, recognized by the Romanian public for her recent publication, "My Life As a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police File" (Verdery2018).

In her contribution to the current volume, Verdery eloquently recounts her fieldwork experiences from 1973 to 1974. With a literary flair, she guides readers through the challenges faced by a young American researcher working in a Romanian village within a country concealed behind the Iron Curtain. One of the villages she explored is Aurel Vlaicu, which happens to be in close proximity to my grandmother's own village, a place I have traversed countless times. It is truly remarkable to discover the vibrancy and richness that lie concealed within such seemingly unassuming locations. Additionally, Verdery's research endeavors extended to other villages, including Geoagiu.

Another village of interest in Verdery's exploration was Geoagiu, which, like Aurel Vlaicu, is a picturesque locale situated in proximity to a resort I have frequented on numerous occasions. In 1972, Verdery secured a grant from the International Research and Exchanges Board to support her fieldwork. While she was originally assigned to conduct research in Geoagiu, she came across Aurel Vlaicu via local television. This medium-sized village boasted its own collective farm, sparking Verdery's curiosity.

At the time, Katherine Verdery had limited fieldwork experience and was guided in her

initiation by Romanian professor Mihai Pop, who had been assigned as her supervisor. With a touch of self-irony, Verdery reflects on her research journey, as documented in the Securitate file, where her early endeavors were characterized as shallow, akin to viewing things from an aerial perspective (Verdery 2020, 83).

She initially emphasized macro-social theories in her work but subsequently dedicated more attention to the voices of the villagers in her later books. Notably, Verdery places significant emphasis on her unique relationship with the secret police. The Securitate informed the villagers that she was a spy, a notion she found quite exotic, almost as though the CIA were an entirely naïve organization that might have overlooked an opportunity to gather information about countries behind the Iron Curtain through ostensibly "innocent" researchers. It is worth noting that one of the contributors openly states that he was visited by the American ambassador, who requested his cooperation as an informant, which might explain her lack of surprise. Her prolonged interaction with the community ultimately led to her acceptance and undoubtedly facilitated the villagers'integration of her into their lives.

The research primarily delves into the daily lives of the villagers and their relationship with the secret police. Yet, it lacks a historical analysis of the Romanian village and its transformation from a predominantly illiterate population to one with minimal education. Unfortunately, there is no available data on the percentage of illiterate individuals prior to the communist regime coming into power.

One of the most controversial texts within the book is authored by Gail Kligman. She chooses to recount her experiences during fieldwork in communist Romania, exploring significant facets of her identity as an American citizen, a woman, and a secular Jew. In doing so, she discloses the identity of a distressed couple who sought her assistance when Ceaușescu implemented a ban on abortions in 1966. By contemporary ethical standards, such a revelation would likely breach the right to privacy. Regardless of the legal context, the enduring moral principle remains: it is essential not to disclose the identity of those who confided in you with intimate aspects of their lives.

Another significant issue arises concerning the concept of the "benevolent spy." In Kligman's account of her experiences in the Ieud village in Northern Transylvania, it becomes evident that she utilized information provided by villagers who had started to care about her in ways they may not have fully realized. During that era, it is likely that a formal contract or agreement between the researcher and her sources was not common practice, highlighting the importance of reevaluating these ethical principles. Contributors in the book note that

Romanian ethnologists seldom engaged in participant observation at the time, and the use of formal contracts was a relatively new and infrequently employed concept.

Steven Sampson, another American scholar with a keen interest in Romania, became involved in research in the country during his time as a student at the Massachusetts-Amherst School. He was invited by Professor John W. Cole to join a research team conducting fieldwork in Romania, an experience he likens to a tattoo, as it left an indelible mark on his memory. Sampson conducted his fieldwork in the Romanian village of Feldioara. Interestingly, he was prohibited from entering Romania between 1985 and 1989, but he later returned as a consultant for the Romanian government, participating in the EU accession process. This represents a remarkable professional trajectory, evolving from a person banned from entering a country to becoming a government consultant within just four years.

During his time in Romania, Sampson encountered challenges due to the Romanian Communist government's reluctance to accept criticism. Despite this, he published articles addressing topics such as corruption, the underground economy, and migration. Additionally, he contributed to journalistic pieces and collaborated with CIA-backed radio stations like Voice of America and Radio Free Europe. The Romanian Communist government had limited means to counter hostile narratives, and their heavy-handed tactics proved to be ineffective when confronting adversaries with greater experience and power in the realm of communication warfare.

Sampson acknowledges that the American ambassador visited him in the village of Feldioara but refrains from speculating about whether the ambassador was affiliated withthe CIA or not.

Steven Sampson played a significant role as a consultant for the Romanian Ministry of Environment, particularly in assessing the social impact of closing down the mines. It's important to note that the closure of the mines had a devastating effect on the local communities, especially in regions like Hunedoara, where the majority of miners were employed. This region holds personal significance for me, as it's where I grew up.

Sampson's involvement in overseeing the closure of the Romanian mining industry may seem ironic, given that he was declared persona non grata in 1985. However, he returned in 1992 and played a key role in the process. From his perspective, Sampson saw himself as a participant in the export of democracy and Western liberal models to Eastern Europe during this transformative period.

I find this particular perspective problematic. We, the Easterners, were fed time and again these

stories about the lack of corruption in the West. 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 build its current economic power is due to the uncritical presentation of such narratives.

Carol Silverman tells the story of the fieldwork she has been conducted in Bulgaria when she studied Roma music. She experienced significant difficulties due to the Cold War tensions and the fact that, again, Bulgarian Secret Police was labeling her as a spy, not a researcher. This is a common topic in all the researcher's accounts of their fieldwork in Eastern Europe. It seems the Bulgarian secret police was even more draconic than its Romanian counterpart 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 the bureaucracy in academia. The Bulgarians seemed to have taken all the necessary efforts 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 moths promising each day this situation will eventually change. Then, they postponed for months in a row his actual fieldwork. What is interesting here is the fact that he encounters a highly trained Bulgarian researcher: Veska Khouzhouharova. 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's researchers had no ideological perspective (sic!). The world is thus divided between (bed) 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 the contacted TB and that nearly costed him a lung a few years later. Creed attended the events of the village life and was able to tell an interesting story. But still, his view of the post-socialist Bulgaria tribalism and irrational anticommunism made relaxed discussions almost impossible.

Georghiță Geană offers a theoretical perspective on fieldwork and anthropology discussing concepts such as philosophical anthropology, theological anthropology. He tells the story of his studying philosophy between 1960 and 1965 and that he rejected the ideologized contents of philosophy wanting to go to a more abstract zone, such as logic and epistemology. Of

course, in Slavoj Zizek terms, the lack of ideology is itself ideological, but again for decades in Romanian intellectual environment ideology was equated with the official political left.

Zoltán Rostás is the 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 the inter-war and post-WWII times was in Romania and how influential his studies proved to be. In his contribution to the volume, Rostas presents the "unconventional history of the Romanian sociological school". For this he interviewed elderly professors that worked with Gusti. His text discusses the way he discovered the importance of the oral history, in the context in which he was forced to work during Nicolae Ceausescu's restrictive regime. Zoltán Rostás focused his entire career on oral history that appears then as an anti-establishment orientation and method, since it takes into account the marginalized groups, the informal stories and the voices of those who are usually ignored in official histories. 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 then, during the first years of the communist regime. Eight members of the Gustian school were imprisoned, three died. Fifteen years later the school was re-habilitated and ironically considered as a „left" view and social reform 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 proper room for this type of unconventional history. Zoltán Rostás explains how on the occasion of the International History Congress in Bucharest made him realise how important oral history as a research method was. It was a 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.

In this chapter Zoltan Rostaș explains how he decided to interview the former collaborators of Dimitrie Gusti who were at that time aged people. Due to the political circumstances, he was not at all sure that these interviews would ever meet the public, but he nevertheless carried out this self-imposed task. The journey into Dimitrie Gusti's school is fascinating. The only think I probably would have added to the description is the very dark and controversial episode of the collaboration with some of the prominent personalities in Gusti's school, such as Traian Herseni, with the Legionary movement and its very sinister ideas regarding eugenics. The footnote presents Herseni only as the close collaborator of Gusti why had "legionary activity" and was imprisoned by the communist regime. The very problematic times when right wing

extremism was dominating Romanian intellectual elites should have been probably better explained in order to understand the historical context and the fac that some of the members of the Gusti's school came to be imprisoned.

Raluca Mateoc describes the contributions to the volume focusing on the constant negotiations of intimacy, 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 is an anthropology book written by researchers that were affected by the Cold War and the restrictions it imposed on research in general. The dominant narrative is, even though it is more nuanced, is that communism was bad and that the Western society had a lot to teach the underdeveloped Eastern countries. The book it is important, thus, 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 communist regimes and that some of the anthropologists that authored text in this book took active part in "educating" Romanians in "democracy". The book is also important because it shows an important power imbalance: while the West had highly trained intellectuals that came to study the poor rural areas of Romania and Bulgaria, we don't have even to this day intellectuals that would go in the extremely poor areas like Bronx, Queens or Detroit to report on the capitalist devastation of society. We have limited ability and very few studies regarding our own communities so, unfortunately, the narrative was and still is dominated by the West.

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