

## **Raluca Mateoc, François Rüegg (eds.), *Recalling Fieldwork: People, Places and Encounters*, Münster, LIT Verlag, 2020.**

The volume *Recalling Fieldwork: People, Places and Encounters*, edited by Raluca Mateoc and François Rüegg and published by LIT Verlag (Münster, 2020), belongs to a series of comprehensive efforts undertaken in recent decades and aiming to gain a better understanding of anthropological fieldwork. It reunites ten autoethnographic studies written by anthropologists and sociologists who reflect on the impact of their first fieldwork experiences on their professional careers and on their personal development. The various contributions contain, first and foremost, recollections of memorable people, places, and events from the time of the authors' first experiences of fieldwork, which influenced and shaped them as individuals. This justifies the reading proposed by Raluca Mateoc, namely the reflection on fieldwork in relation to intimacy. The contributions are connected to each other, based on geographical area and the period in which the research was conducted: Central and Eastern Europe during the socialist period and in its immediate aftermath, in the transition years after the fall of communism. Three of the studies (Giordano, Rüegg, Skalnik), however, transcend this space, as they also refer to fieldwork done in Western Europe (Italy, Austria, Switzerland), as well as in Oceania and South Africa, thus testifying that the work of anthropologists is constantly dynamic and that fieldwork experiences complement each other, allowing anthropologists to perfect and refine their theories.

The studies are preceded by an *Introduction*, where the author (François Rüegg) is presenting the articles following several paths (spaces recalled; themes debated; differences between the narratives of the North American anthropologists, who came to South-Eastern Europe as a result of a political exchange at the time, and the European researchers – natives or not). Though, at times, his tone is condescending, one example<sup>1</sup> springs to mind: the assertion that the efforts of foreign scholars to introduce social anthropology in Romania and Bulgaria were met “with little success” (Rüegg, p. 13), although there are other anthropologists, like Enikő Magyari-Vincze<sup>2</sup> (2000), who have been concerned

1. Another example is the disapproving tone employed when mentioning the research of Romanian and Bulgarian ethnographers who, according to the author's memories, “had a harder time to adapt to the country life” (Rüegg, p. 14).
2. Magyari-Vincze (2000), in the collection of essays coedited with Colin Quigley and Gabriel Troc, acknowledges, in the “Afterword”, the merit of foreign scholars who conducted research in the region, thus “anthropologizing” it, the notion invented by the anthropologist, implying “a socio-cultural process through which «Eastern Europe» becomes the field of anthropological discourse and through which the formal and informal networks of this discipline are built” (pp. 404-405).

with studying the impact of foreign scholars on shaping anthropology as a science in Eastern Europe. In my opinion, I consider Rüegg's conclusion to be unfortunate, also based on my studying experiences, and as someone who is well-acquainted with the programme of anthropological studies run by the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA) in Bucharest, and the Faculties of Sociology (University of Bucharest, and "Babeş-Bolyai" University in Cluj-Napoca).

From the very beginning the editors state their intention not to provide "a complete view of anthropologists working in and on Eastern Europe during socialism and shortly after" (Rüegg, p. 16), and the studies included in the present volume are very well selected in order to offer a comprehensive background in which anthropological research was conducted at the time. Let us explore how this is done.

The first article, signed by Christiano Giordano, questions the cliché that a researcher remains anchored in the practical and theoretical premises of his or her first important fieldwork. Giordano recalls his fieldworks across different cultural spaces, beginning with his first formative fieldwork in Sicily, continuing with his research in Bulgaria and ending with his fieldwork in Malaysia. He identifies the common thread of all his research on the subject of political elites – namely that all the research experiences allowed him to make progress and develop the theoretical concepts advanced after his first fieldwork, revealing the coherence of the anthropological theoretical endeavour.

François Rüegg focuses on how he became a researcher in the field of anthropology coming from a different background: art history. Rüegg looks at the social and political context in which he carried out his fieldwork in Eastern Europe in the 1970s, despite not speaking the language of the local population. Based on his interaction with rural communities and his direct experience, he feels entitled to claim that, although the theories he formulates are the result of an industrious process, the intellectual satisfaction he derives in the end is far greater than he initially expected, concluding that fieldwork shaped his entire convictions.

Peter Skalník reflects on his early years as a researcher in the field of African Studies<sup>1</sup> during some turbulent times (Czechoslovakia in the second half of the 1960s). He speaks about the themes he approached in his first fieldwork (1970s, Slovakia), the challenges and dilemmas he faced on the ground and the ethical questions he was concerned with (in the 1970s and after the return from exile, post-1990). Although his experience in the field of anthropological research expanded in time, Skalník also working in Africa (northern Ghana) and Oceania (Papua New Guinea), he considers the fieldwork he did in Slovakia to be the most memorable not only from a professional, but also human point of view. This experience helped him build a philosophy of life which considers existence as a form of continuous fieldwork.

Katherine Verdery describes, in a friendly tone and with great honesty, how she learnt to do fieldwork and overcome her fear of interviewing people. She is recalling her first fieldwork, carried out in Transylvania in the early 1970s, where she returned in the following years, especially after the fall of communism. Verdery's article is a reflection on her formative years, mentioning her awkwardness and loneliness, as well as the gifts she received from her interviewees, friendship being the most precious. She fondly remembers the Romanian ethnologist Mihai Pop, while also commenting on the differences

---

1. The biggest problem Skalník faced at the time was the impossibility to travel abroad, to continue his studies, or to do research.

she noticed between the way foreign and native researchers conducted fieldwork and in how they were perceived by the local communities. Last but not least, although she does not elaborate on the topic, Verderey also recalls that when she was doing fieldwork during communism, people were reluctant to speak about certain subjects because they suspected her of being a spy, which is why she was followed by the Securitate (the Romanian communist secret police)<sup>1</sup>.

Gail Kligman recalls her fieldwork in Maramureş during frequent visits to the region from the late 1970s until the collapse of communism. Although this was not her first fieldwork in Romania<sup>2</sup>, it was, however, the first she did on her own, without being accompanied by a Romanian researcher, suggesting that the research in Maramureş played the greatest role in her development as an anthropologist. Kligman describes the circumstances that led to her choosing this particular assignment and recalls the Romanian ethnologists and foreign anthropologists who, one way or another, contributed to or guided her in her choice. She presents her fieldwork experience by discussing three categories that shaped the public self: being an American, being a single woman, and being Jewish, albeit non-practicing. Kligman discusses each of these three identity traits separately, including details and memories about various experiences she had in her interactions with the local community and which eventually led her to being perceived and assimilated by the members of the community as an “outsider within”.

Steven Sampson began his fieldwork in Romania in 1973 as a member of a research group coordinated by Professor John W. Cole<sup>3</sup>. In his article, the anthropologist recalls his first fieldwork experiences in Feldioara (Braşov) and how it influenced him. He believes that research as such is both an intellectual and emotional endeavour that leaves its marks, which he calls “research tattoos”. He thus believes that the experiences he had during fieldwork had a lasting impression and generated feelings and memories that he would carry his entire life, and which cannot be removed without causing pain. Despite this, he admits that these “tattoos” can also be a limitation, turning into an “ankle bracelet” that keeps him a prisoner to the opinions he first formed<sup>4</sup>. His memories recall the subjects of research and how he gained access to information, remembering the encounters with the locals and his participation in the social life of the community. Given that Sampson was able to access, after 1990, the file the Securitate used to keep on him, his reflections also deal with the monitoring of the secret police at the time and the suspicion that he was a spy.

- 
1. This subject is dealt with more extensively in her book *My Life as a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police File* (2018, Durham NC: Duke University Press), translated into Romanian as *Viaţa mea ca „spioană”: investigaţii dintr-un dosar de securitate* (2018, Bucharest: Vremea).
  2. In 1975-1976 she studied the *căluş* ritual in southern Romania over the course of eight months, being accompanied in her fieldwork mainly by Anca Giurchescu. The result of her research was published in *Căluş: Ritual Reversal in Romania* (1977, Berkeley: University of California), republished in 1981 as *Căluş: Symbolic Transformation in Romanian Ritual* (1981, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press). The author chooses, however, to make no mention of this fieldwork in her contribution to the volume under review.
  3. This group later became known as the UMASS Romanian Research Group (see also Anăstăsoaie *et al.*, 2018).
  4. The example given by the anthropologist refers to the lack of trust in the state authorities, which he also experiences in Denmark, his country of residence, where, as he puts it, “I have a Romanian suspicion of public authorities” (p. 138).

The ethnomusicologist Carol Silverman has a 40-year-long experience in conducting fieldwork in Bulgaria, where she travelled for the first time in 1971 to learn how to sing and dance Balkan folk music. Her case demonstrates the natural transition from a hobby (the interest in Balkan folklore) to a research career, which focused mainly on Romani music (especially *zurna* music), and then to social activism to support the recognition of Roma rights. Discussing the prohibitions imposed by the communist state on Bulgaria's minorities, Silverman notes that, although she did not intend to make a study of political anthropology, owing to the fact that the pressure exerted by the state was felt everywhere and it dramatically affected the lives of the musicians she became friends with, she considered changing the focus of her research into investigating the resistance through music and artistic activities. Among others, she describes the differences with respect to freedom of movement and organisation between independent research trips, when she and her husband felt no institutional constraints, and the research organised as part of a grant. The latter, being the result of bilateral agreements between the USA and Bulgaria, were much more politicised in their approach and more restrictive (involving the obligation to stay in a hotel, the impossibility to live in the community studied, and the obligation to be accompanied by a Bulgarian colleague).

Gerald Creed belongs to a generation of researchers who conducted fieldwork in Eastern Europe, more precisely in Bulgaria, at the end of the 1980s, around the time of the fall of communism. Creed's experiences are generally similar to those of the other authors published in this volume, but they differ slightly in that they belong to the period of late socialism, which was characterised by stricter regulations, tighter state control, with the authorities more alert to what was considered as ideologically "suspicious" cases<sup>1</sup>, and less openness from interviewees. Creed admits that all these initial experiences<sup>2</sup> left important marks. While preparing to write the present article, rereading his fieldwork diary was a revelatory experience, because he realised that he could trace his theoretical conclusions in the frustrations and dissatisfaction he recorded straight away.

Gheorghiță Geană describes his initiation into the field of anthropological research at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, a practical form of education which differs radically from his background in philosophy. He emphasises from the very beginning that there are clear differences between the two disciplines, not only on an epistemological level, but also concerning the methodology. The focus of his article is on the importance of participant observation as a means of gathering information, and, as Geană states, being the best method to attenuate the "aggression" of anthropological research on the communities studied. He acknowledges, in this manner, the role played by personal experience in his professional development, considering fieldwork as the initiation ritual of the researcher<sup>3</sup>.

Unlike most previous texts, which describe fieldwork research carried out as part of inter-state agreements or within an institutional framework, Zoltán Rostás focuses on his experiences as a young researcher at the start of his career who chooses his research

- 
1. Exaggerated vigilance led to the creation of opaque procedures, the anthropologist notes, "so that citizens could never be certain that particular actions would produce desired results" (p. 173).
  2. The time spent in the capital city waiting for approval to travel to the field site, and then the first impressions on the community studied and the efforts to integrate into its everyday rhythm.
  3. See also Hastrup (1990) for the same perspective on considering fieldwork as the necessary initiation ritual of the anthropologists.

subject without any official constraints – namely an oral history of the Interwar School of Sociology, with an emphasis on personal experiences and the lifestyle adopted by interwar scholars. In this respect, the subject of research is similar to that of this book. Thus, the text resembles to a story within a story, with the author describing his own dilemmas, explorations, and experiences, as well as two other important topics. One presents the history of sociology, which was banned as a discipline in 1948, before being rehabilitated 15 years later, making a strong comeback in the academic milieu only after 2000. The second story within the story is more extensive and contains a presentation of the Dimitrie Gusti' School through a short history and especially through the testimonies of the scholars who belonged to this movement. The author includes excerpts of interviews he coordinated, and which shed light in retrospect both on the methodological explorations of the members of sociological research teams, and on the relationships between them. The article also dwells on the way in which the latter perceived the interwar Romanian village, while also mentioning the impact they had through their active involvement in the social and cultural life of the communities. Comparing the two types of fieldwork experience, the article proposes that for both the young sociologist at the start of his career in the 1980s and for the young interwar researchers, actual fieldwork was the supreme test and something that would deeply mark their personality.

The "Conclusions", written by Raluca Mateoc, do propose an interesting approach, namely to interpret the different contributions in the book from the point of view of "spheres of intimacy coming out from everyday interactions, while depicting two distinctive realms in the field narratives: references to everyday socialism and post-socialism, and methodology" (Mateoc, p. 235). They dwell on how the texts brought together in this volume could be approached, with a special focus on the intimate aspects revealed with generosity by the authors and which would otherwise have remained hidden. As noted by Mateoc, the texts are explorations of intimacy showcasing the lessons learnt on a personal level and which also had an impact on the professional development of each of the authors. The sphere of intimacy thus intersects with the specific anthropological methodology. Mateoc also points out that the texts act as a mirror for the socialist and post-socialist period, shedding light on everyday life, the network of relations created within the communities and the way in which the political sphere of the states interfered with people's lives. Still, there are some omissions from the brief "Literature Review" (pp. 235-237) in terms of bibliographic references, that reveal the weakness of the endeavour, suggesting insufficient knowledge of similar theoretical initiatives. The most notable omission<sup>1</sup> is a volume edited by Vintilă Mihăilescu, Iliia Iliev and Slobodan Naumović (2008), which contains a critical analysis of research conducted during the communist period in Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia and, at the end, a few interviews with American anthropologists about their personal experiences. This oversight is all the more unfortunate as the aforementioned work was published by the same publisher as the book here under review. Another omission, although citing three of the studies included, is the mentioning of the context in which it has been published the volume no. 63(2) of the journal *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai. Sociologia*, edited by Viorel Anăstăsoaie, László Fosztó and Iuliu Rațiu (2018). It is important to mention the context, as the special issue was born

---

1. The only reference to the book edited by Mihăilescu *et al.* (2008) comes from Carol Silverman in her contribution, where she mentions the work of Bulgarian researchers who conducted research during communist time in Bulgaria.

of a similar endeavour as the one of the book under review: the invitation for anthropologists to “revisit” their fieldwork conducted in Romania during the communist time (see Anăstăsoaie *et al.* 2018, pp. 7-12), reflections originating from a panel proposed by Iuliu Rațiu at a conference held in 2018<sup>1</sup> and chaired by the anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu.

The volume, as a whole, invites the readers to discover not only a past era, namely the socialist period and the transition years, but also the contexts in which the anthropologists conducted their fieldwork, explaining their personal feelings through the methodology lens.

Anamaria IUGA<sup>2</sup>

## References

- Anăstăsoaie, M.V., László Fosztó, I.R. (eds.) (2018). Fieldwork in Socialist Romania: The UMASS Romanian Research Group. Special Issue. *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai Sociologia*, 63(2).
- Hastrup, K. (1990). The Ethnographic Present: A Reinvention. *Cultural Anthropology*, 5(1), 45-61.
- Magyari-Vincze, E. (2000). Postfață. Către o antropologie critică a Europei de Est [Afterword. Towards a Critical Anthropology of Eastern Europe]. In E. Magyari-Vincze, C. Quigley, G. Troc (eds.), *Întâlniri multiple. Antropologi occidentali în Europa de Est* [Multiple Encounters. Western Anthropologists in Eastern Europe] (pp. 403-414). Cluj-Napoca: Editura Fundației pentru Studii Europene.
- Mihăilescu, V., Ilia Iliev, S.N. (eds.) (2008). *Studying Peoples in the People's Democracies II. Socialist Era Anthropology in South-East Europe*. Berlin: LIT Verlag.

---

1. The panel “Shaping the Field in Romanian Studies: American & Romanian Scholars at Work” was part of the Conference of the Society for Romanian Studies (SRS) held in Bucharest (26-29 June 2018).

2. The National Museum of the Romanian Peasant. E-mail: anaiuga@gmail.com