

## FIELDWORK IN SOCIALIST ROMANIA: THE UMASS ROMANIAN RESEARCH GROUP

### *Guest Editors' Forward*

**MARIAN VIOREL ANĂSTĂSOAIE<sup>1</sup>, LÁSZLÓ FOSZTÓ<sup>2</sup>, and IULIU RAȚIU<sup>3</sup>**

This special issue of *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai Sociologia* originates from the panel “Shaping the Field of Romanian Studies: American & Romanian Scholars at Work” chaired by Vintilă Mihăilescu and organized by Iuliu Rațiu at the Conference of the Society for Romanian Studies (SRS), Bucharest 26-29 June, 2018. In line with the general theme of the conference, “#Romania100: Looking Forward through the Past”, the participants, all of whom had done research in Romania, were invited to present their views on what shaped the field of Romanian Studies, with a focus on academic exchanges and the mutual influence between international and Romanian scholars. Three participants in this panel, László Fosztó, David Kideckel, and Steven Sampson have submitted their revised presentations for this issue. Another panel member, Sam Beck, was unable to attend. Viorel Anăstăsoaie attended the panel; finally, Steven Randall did not attend the panel but graciously accepted later to reflect back on his fieldwork experience.

In the transition from panel discussions to printed essays, it became apparent that the contribution of the University of Massachusetts Romanian Research Group to the field of Romanian Studies and, more specifically, to anthropology deserved more attention. The members of the Romanian Research Group and their major research interests are: Sam Beck—marginal peasant communities, regional political economy; John W. Cole—village socio-economic organization, domestic economy; David A. Kideckel—agricultural collectivization, peasant-workers; Marilyn McArthur—inter-ethnic relations; Steven Randall—domestic economy, mountain communities; and, Steven Sampson—urbanization, regional planning (Kideckel and Sampson, 1984).

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<sup>1</sup> New Europe College, Bucharest, *e-mail: viorelan@gmail.com*.

<sup>2</sup> Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities, *e-mail: laszlo.foszt@gmail.com*.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication, The Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, *e-mail: ratiu.pfa@gmail.com*.

As John Cole points out, when he came to Romania together with his graduate students in the early 1970s, “American anthropology [was] not exactly parallel to any Romanian academic discipline,” so he used *anthropology* “to mean the work of American anthropologists who have conducted field research in Romania and *economics, sociology, ethnology* and *social science* to refer to the work of Romanian scholars” (Cole, 1984). The fact that today social anthropology is a distinct academic discipline in Romania is in part a testament to the work of the six members of the UMass Romanian Research Group and we are happy that four of them accepted to contribute essays to this issue.

Steven Sampson’s paper discusses the challenges of researchers studying insignificant places and underlines the moments when researchers’ specific knowledge pushes them to become generalists. As the first piece in the collection, Sampson’s contribution brings together the focus of the Society for Romanian Studies Conference panel (the role of international scholars in shaping the field of Romanian Studies) and the gist of this special issue (American anthropologists doing fieldwork in socialist Romania). Sampson reflects on the paradoxes of Western researchers living and talking to people during a time when it was officially illegal for Romanians to even speak to a foreigner without making a report to the police. He contextualizes the place of Romania within the field of East European/Balkan/Slavic Studies, where Romanian Studies was often the orphan inside Slavic academic departments, or lay in the shadow of Soviet or Communist Studies area. Most importantly, though, Sampson justifies why studying (in) a place like Romania was relevant to anthropology and credits the work of Romanian Studies anthropologists who successfully made other anthropologists read about Romania for truly anthropological reasons, not Romanian reasons.

As a case in point, David Kideckel’s essay considers how transportation and mobility model the character of Romanian-American interaction during fieldwork from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. He argues that transportation, seen as a vehicle for growth and development, both legitimated and delegitimated the socialist regime, in so far as it restricted, policed, and limited individuals’ ability to travel. Kideckel explains how sharing transportation with people, such as commuter buses, personal vehicles, or even bikes, either gave them cover for resistance or provoked their fear of political exposure. His ethnographic depictions ultimately enable reflection about a relatively new topic in the study of socialism, contribute to our understanding of that era, and show the manner international researchers engaged with socialist society.

Sam Beck’s contribution is a biographical essay analyzing the impact of his fieldwork in Romania on his subsequent anthropological practice in the United States. He explains how his practice is a product instigated in part by the research carried out by Dimitrie Gusti’s Bucharest School of Sociology and by

Nicolae Gheorghe's project to create an anti-hegemonic Roma strategy that could support a positive Roma identity to replace the stigmatized identity given them by the majority population in Romania and Europe. Beck's moral anthropological project is to actively engage in reformulating the reality in which we find ourselves in order to envision and create a different future than the self-destructive course our planetary leadership has chosen at this time.

Continuing Beck's vision of global engagement, Steven Randall's paper is a meditation on the collapse of Ceaușescu's regime. Randall suggests that Romania, like all states, socialist, social-democratic, and neoliberal, are confronted by the same world systemic capitalism and that all states use a mixture of policies—capitalist and socialist, democratic and authoritarian—in order to avoid the hazards and gain advantages of a global system dominated by capitalist accumulation. Randall argues that Cold War era analysis is not a useful way to evaluate winners or losers. He concludes that the failure of communism as a state system in Romania could not have been predicted purely by its authoritarian or its socialist policy features.

In addition to these four contributions by US scholars, this issue contains two papers written by anthropologists from Romania on issues pertaining to the late socialist period. Viorel Anăstăsoaie's case study of one of the few anthropological translations in socialist Romania brings to the fore the oeuvre of John Victor Murra, a US anthropologist of Jewish-Russian and Romanian origins. Murra's path-breaking PhD thesis on the economic and political organization of the Inka state, defended at the University of Chicago in 1956, was translated into Romanian by his sister Ata Iosifescu in the 1980s (Murra, 1987). Anăstăsoaie's paper reveals the contribution of anthropological translations to the circulation of ideas, theories, and ethnographic knowledge across linguistic, epistemological, and socio-political differences. It turns out that Murra was the fieldwork supervisor of Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz in Puerto Rico, while they did their PhD research as part of the comparative project coordinated by Julian Steward at Columbia University (Steward *et al.*, 1956). This collective project inspired John Cole, himself a student of Eric Wolf, to set-up the UMass Romanian Research Group's comparative project in Romania. Cole's theoretical interest in cultural ecology, originally based on his work in the Italian Alps (Cole and Wolf, 1974) and later in the Romanian Carpathians, parallels Murra's analysis of processes of ecological adaptation in the Andes (Murra, 1972).

László Fosztó's essay analyzes the interactions between international and local researchers with particular focus on issues related to the Romanian Roma. Fosztó tries to reconstruct the perspective of the Romanian authorities by offering a critical reading of recently published documents from the archive of the Romanian secret police. Fosztó argues that the authorities denied the existence of

‘the Gypsy problem’ (namely: the lack of cultural and political recognition of this minority group, the daily racism Roma were subject to, and the persistence of their socio-economic marginality). This denial of what was essentially a social problem led them to associate most of the Roma’s secular and religious activities with hostile attitudes to the regime, branding them as a particular form of anti-state ‘nationalism’. Using examples from Nicolae Gheorghe’s file, Fosztó shows how officers of the *Securitate* and their informants did not just monitor scholarly interactions. They actively intervened in order to rupture relations, suppress, and discourage exchanges between locals and foreigners.

These papers show that there is still much to be explored in the history of sociological and anthropological research in Romania, especially regarding the collaboration, reciprocal influences, and tensions between international and Romanian scholars. These interactions are not only shaped by theoretical or methodological differences, but also by an interplay of political, institutional, and cultural factors that have had a profound impact on the way research projects based on fieldwork were carried out. In fact, these aspects were also examined by Enikő Magyari-Vincze in *Întâlniri multiple. Antropologi occidentali în Europa de Est* (Multiple Encounters. Western Anthropologists in Eastern Europe), a collection of essays coedited with Colin Quigley and Gabriel Troc.<sup>4</sup> In the afterword, Magyari-Vincze points out that international scholars doing fieldwork in Eastern Europe “anthropologized” the region and helped build the formal and informal networks and institutions of anthropology in Romania (Magyari-Vincze, 2000).

With this special issue, *Studia Sociologia* continues a series of fieldwork “revisits” recently inaugurated with the awarding of Doctor Honoris Causa Title of the Babeş-Bolyai University to Gail Kligman and Katherine Verdery, two distinguished American anthropologists who also conducted research in Romania starting with the 1970s. In her acceptance speech, Gail Kligman talks about the impact of her research in Romania on her understanding of current US political events. Kligman also explains how for most Romanians she interacted with, she has remained a good example of the “social construction of identity” in that she helped bring forth this theoretical approach to fieldwork in Romania and that her immersion in the life of the people she studied and her interaction with Romanian scholars helped her become more attuned to her own professional development (Kligman, 2017).

Similarly, Katherine Verdery talks about how her life and research in Romania made clear “the overwhelming importance of the social relations that construct not only people’s lives—but also knowledge about it”; coming full

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<sup>4</sup> Four of the editors and contributors to this special issue also collaborated to the publication of *Întâlniri multiple*: David Kideckel and Steven Sampson contributed essays while Gabriel Troc and Viorel Anăstăsoaie did editing and translation work.

circle, like John Cole before, Verdery also reflects on the state of the field at the time of their arrival: "since American-style anthropology did not have a disciplinary partner in Romania, [her] project fell between two stools: too sociological for folklorists, and too folkloristic for sociologists." Paying homage to both academics and personal friends, Verdery concludes her acceptance speech by emphasizing the significance of mutual academic and personal exchanges. She stresses that: "the great honor awarded today should not be conferred on me alone, but *on our collaboration*" (Verdery, 2017).

Continuing the conversation about this type of collaboration, the papers collected here show the importance of personal fieldwork narratives, of archival research, and of new sources, such as state documents, private archives made public, and personal archives (fieldnotes, correspondence, interviews). Both the editors and the authors of this special issue consider that these resources should be thoroughly inventoried and widely shared so that interested scholars could conduct research projects meant to reconstruct Romania not only as a society, but as a field of study in the last decades of the socialist period.

It was long believed that international scholars had been driven by research agendas designed in their universities and careers, and that they were completely impervious to significant local research agendas and traditions (see Hofer 1968 for a similar claim regarding foreign anthropologists and local ethnographers). As the following papers prove, visiting scholars were indeed responding to relevant issues for local scholars, such as the impact of the administrative reorganization and of industrialization on rural communities. Their research projects, perhaps designed with a more comparative and competitive bend, were conducted without sacrificing the principles of academic integrity and freedom of expression which were not easily available to native scholars burdened by (self)censorship, political control, and internal competitions for symbol status or state resources.

Indeed, international scholars did calibrate their research agendas to connect with and integrate themes, methodologies, and relevant local scholarship into their work. For example, David Kideckel engaged with Traian Herseni and the research tradition of Dimitrie Gusti's School of Sociology. Sam Beck collaborated with Nicolae Gheorghe in the exploration of the politically sensitive research theme of the ethnic identity of Roma communities. In turn and on their own terms, local researchers benefited from these exchanges by obtaining relevant literature and by participating in international debates that were not easily accessible on this side of the Iron Curtain. In contrast, however, there was also the more pervasive tendency of Romanian authorities to use the work of visiting scholars for ideological purposes in an effort to legitimize the openness and independence of Ceaușescu's regime both at home and abroad or, more perversely, of the *Securitate* officers to claim the importance of their mission surveilling international scholars.

Last but not least, the guest editors wish to give thanks to their own collaborators: to the four members of the UMass Romanian Research Group for their continued interest in the field of Romanian Studies and to Gabriel Troc and Sorin Gog for generously providing the platform to make these contributions widely available.

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