

# Cameras and other gadgets. Reflections on fieldwork experiences in socialist and post-socialist Hungarian communities

My purpose in this paper is to provide a retrospective analysis of anthropological fieldwork in Hungarian communities in Hungary and Romania by discussing how fieldwork possibilities have changed in these two countries.<sup>1</sup> My concluding discussion will suggest some of the important research and theoretical questions facing former state socialist societies to which we, as anthropologists and fieldworkers, should pay closer attention as we embark upon constructing them, both in reality and into texts (Atkinson 1990; Wolcott 1995).

By establishing the similarities and differences of conducting fieldwork in socialist and post-socialist Hungarian communities, I argue that the socio-cultural context of the transition in East-Central Europe needs to be problematised differently than hitherto; more open systems call now for renewed ethnographic 'practice'. Clearly, earlier theories and fieldwork methods under state socialism are no longer adequate for studying the post-socialist era (Buchowski 1996; Kligman 1998; Kürti 1996; and Kürti and Langman 1997; Sampson 1996; Verdery 1996). Aside from the new cultural setting, one of the most serious questions to answer is whether earlier anthropological practices can now be accepted without serious critical revision of their foundations and backdrops. In order to specifically clarify why, I will provide – from a particular 'native anthropologist' perspective – a comparative retrospective analysis of my own fieldwork before and after socialism in Csepel, a working-class district of Budapest, and in Transylvanian Hungarian communities in Romania.

1 This paper was originally presented at the seminar 'The anthropology of post-communism' at the Nordic Anthropology Conference, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen, Norway, on 13 September 1997. I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me as well as the participants for their courteous hospitality and the challenging discussion from which I have benefited a great deal. Fieldwork in Hungary and Romania carried out in 1985–6 was sponsored by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX); in 1992–3, it was funded by IREX and a Fulbright Visiting Professorship. In the late 1990s, research in Romania and Hungary was sponsored by the Research Support Scheme (Open Society Institute, Prague) and The Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation (New York). The conclusions, opinions and other statements herein are mine and do not represent the opinion of these funding agencies, whose generous support I would like to acknowledge.

The title of my essay will ring a bell for students of anthropology: on the one hand it pays homage to Evans-Pritchard (1973: 241), who used 'Cameras and other gadgets' as a subtitle for a well-known essay, and on the other to Paul Rabinow, whose *Reflections* (1977) provided one of the first approaches to self-reflective fieldwork practice. As Evans-Pritchard (1973: 235) noted, 'we record what were the material, physical circumstances in which the fieldworker of the past conducted his research, because these circumstances surely have to be taken into account in evaluating its results and assessing their significance'. In this context Leach (1971:1) writes:

the essential core of social anthropology is fieldwork – the understanding of the way of life of a single particular people ... [this is] an extremely personal traumatic kind of experience and the personal involvement of the anthropologist in his work is reflected in what he produces.

This 'traumatic experience' is even more punctuated when we consider that 'fieldwork is situated between autobiography and anthropology. It connects an important personal experience with a general field of knowledge' (Hastrup 1992:117). One looks in vain, however, for the disclosure of these experiences in the anthropology of eastern Europe, a reason why this is stressed in this article.<sup>2</sup>

Theory and fieldwork practice may seem oxymoronic in relation to personal experiences in former Soviet bloc countries. The former eastern bloc and its successor states – the far-away field 'Out There' as Raymond Williams puts it (1983: 87–93) – sadly demonstrate the truth of this premonition. While research conducted on eastern Europe has had the potential to offer penetrating glimpses into societies both planned and unplanned, these studies are far from the core of anthropological theory, even though such experiences, when written and elaborated upon adequately, provided ethnographies which replicate neither those written about Third or Fourth World backgrounds, nor those describing western states.

For the accounts of what went on in existing socialist countries, how they have been transformed and how anthropologists have been able to record and analyse them, belong to the very core of the discipline's epistemological make up. Anthropologists studying the socialist societies could have been placed at the centre of anthropology's leftist legacy, either to support or critically rethink the role of Marxism in anthropology. This mission has not, however, been fulfilled. The anthropology of eastern Europe – or to use Chris Hann's term, the anthropology of socialism – has been unable to contribute substantially to the Marxist/materialist, the symbolic/structuralist or the later postmodernist debate. What is more, the anthropology of Europe in general, and the anthropology of eastern Europe particular (despite the efforts of Bringa 1995; Hann 1993; Lampland 1995; and Watson 1994) has remained marginal to mainstream anthropology.<sup>3</sup>

What are the reasons for this? For one, the anthropology of the east, which was at best eccentric and at worst parochial, wished to study the specifics of otherness in the Soviet bloc, thus replicating rather than criticising the dominant Eurocentric anthropological enterprise. Most earlier monographs seemed to agree with state ideology

2 In fact, there are very few publications about fieldwork experiences in the former eastern bloc. For the few exceptions, with reference to Romania see Sampson and Kideckel (1989) and Kligman (1998); for Poland, Nagengast 1991; and for Hungary, Hann (1987; 1994; 1995) and Stewart (1997).

3 I have dealt with some of the specific problems of eastern European anthropology, its nature and content, in another paper (Kürti 1996).

carefully avoiding problems of the planned communist experiences on the local level.<sup>4</sup> While anthropologists of Third- and Fourth-World cultures have been championing human and minority rights, ecological and developmental dilemmas – often acting as expert go-betweens for their communities, the state or international organisations – such attempts have been lacking in the anthropology of 'socialism'.

This odd situation was created in part because some anthropologists who had (latent or manifest) leftist leanings were intent upon studying the socialist experiment and simply were not critical enough of the states, governments and institutions they were studying. While human and minority rights were all over the media and in the *samizdat* – do we still remember this word? – publications of the east, western anthropologists were either accepting the bafflement eastern European bureaucrats expressed about such problems or, since they took the Marxist-Leninist project for granted – remember 'working men have no country' – they could not indulge themselves by studying such 'non-legitimate' subject matter.<sup>5</sup>

The nature of fieldwork practice and an obvious ideological divide are surely what is also at the heart of separating so sharply the 'foreign anthropologist' from the 'native scholar', concepts which have been interrogated recently by a number of scholars (Kürti 1996, 1997; Hastrup 1993, 1996; Kristmundsdóttir 1996). In his early (1968) article 'Anthropologists and native ethnographers in Central European villages', the Hungarian ethnographer Hofer proposes, perhaps too naively and simplistically, sharp differences in personality, interests and specialisation between North American anthropologists and European 'native' ethnographers. Opposing such traditional ethnographic points of view, and writing in another context while looking back on his own fieldwork, Renato Rosaldo (1993: 245) questions the anthropological category 'native point of view' when he writes:

Surprisingly, discussions of the 'native point of view' tend not to consider that so-called natives are more than reference points for cultural conceptions. They often disagree, talk back, assert themselves politically, and generally say things 'we' might rather not hear.

This conflict, which was missed by both 'native' ethnographers kind and his western counterparts, must be addressed before progressing any further (cf. also Pálsson 1995). These distinctions – the kinds of questions asked, tools and methods utilised and areas of knowledge emphasised – presuppose genuine interest in, and thorough identification and engagement with, the 'others' who are the purported subjects of study, even if they are supposed to be one's fellow citizens.

In a sense, this duality between the 'native' ethnographer (although in Anglo-American anthropological practice 'indigenous anthropology' is preferred) and the 'foreign anthropologist' means that since the anthropologist feels that she/he has a 'real home' as opposed to the far-away fieldwork site – the dialogic anathema of Williams's

4 The parochial or eccentric nature of eastern European anthropology is easily discernible if we realise that the view from the village was, and seems to continue to remain, a core concept for western anthropology. As a natural consequence, then, large segments of society, as well as important aspects of societal processes, were left out of anthropological inquiry. From Dracula's castles to blood-feud, from ritual mid-winter dances to social structure, the list is long; for earlier examples, see Hammel (1968); Halpern (1967) and Winner (1971); for a more recent example, see Boehm (1987).

5 Chris Hann makes an apt point concerning this when he discusses American anthropologists studying Romanian society in the 1980s (Hann 1994: 241).



'Here' as opposed to 'Out There' (1983) – she/he may choose any set of identities or degree of engagement with those studied, and might claim a degree of detachment from them in accordance with the current direction of theoretical concerns. Thus, the anthropologist acquires and even assumes the 'liberty' (or power) to decide just how 'native' she/he wishes to be; moreover, she/he holds a powerful and advantageous position to select informants and topics at will. Yet, such a positioning of the anthropologist may be extremely problematical if not outright Eurocentric, classist and egocentric. As Lévi-Strauss (1961: 58) pointed out in *Tristes tropiques*: 'Never can [the anthropologist] feel himself 'at home' anywhere: he will always be, psychologically speaking, an amputated man'. Such gender bias notwithstanding (Callaway 1992; Kulick and Willson 1995), even if such an 'amputated' anthropologist has the freedom to 'go native', what measure of freedom has the native-born ethnographer who, having departed, returns to that native community in the guise of a foreign anthropologist?<sup>6</sup>

To answer this dilemma, and to provide the backdrop for the above reflections, I will utilise my multiple fieldwork experiences in Hungarian communities over the past decade.<sup>7</sup> By so doing, I hope to share my ideas, neither as an amputated nor as a 'halfie' (Abu-Lughod 1991:139), but simply as a professional anthropologist – albeit one uneasy of his self-identification at this postcolonial/postcommunist/postmodernist moment -traversing various boundaries (cf. Holy 1996), the 'third timespace' as Lavie and Swedenburg would have it (1996:165). Lavie and Swedenburg, combine the notion of 'third space', as suggested by Homi Bhaba (1990) as a possibility of anti-modernist theoretical exploration, and Trin Minh-ha's 'third space/time grid' (1991) to suggest the third timespace for the politics of location in the examination of the everydayness (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996: 174).

## Fieldwork in Socialist Csepel

'Social anthropology is packed with frustrations,' Leach notes (1971: 3), and, surely, no research can take place without frustrations, trial-and-error procedures and grave mistakes. This is a proper motto for the anthropology of Hungary, a sub-field which is a minuscule part of the anthropology of eastern Europe, a region sandwiched between the more prestigious anthropology of the Mediterranean and western Europe (Goddard, Llobera and Shore, 1994; Herzfeld 1997; Macdonald 1993; Wilson and Smith 1993). From its inception, anthropological fieldwork in Hungary has been centred on peasant communities (Bell 1984; Hann 1980; Lampland 1995; Vasary 1987). Its 1970s and 1980s foci of anthropological interests emphasised collectivisation, the peasant-worker, and other aspects of life that differentiated Hungarian socialist peasants either from other peasants or from their predecessors in Hungary. But nowhere do we find a systematic explanation whether socialist societies' differences 'Out There' came being under ideological strain from Marxism-Leninism or from the theoretical/ideological disposition of the anthropologist fieldworker.

6 Hann analyses some of these points in greater detail (1987:139–153); see also Balzer (1995) for useful insights with reference to the former Soviet Union.

7 Although 'fieldwork' has long been a hallmark of anthropological endeavour, as post-modern cross-disciplinary fertilisation took place throughout the 1980s, practitioners from other disciplines appropriated the term to signify other concepts and practices (Atkinson 1990; Fox, 1991). For the defence of traditional fieldwork practices, see Moran 1995.

When I arrived in Hungary in 1985, with the aid of an International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) doctoral dissertation grant, I felt modestly self-assured, although slightly intimidated by most of the political science-influenced anthropological literature on the 'cold' realities of the Soviet bloc, and what I remembered from being a child and teenager. As I pondered a potential fieldwork site outside the mainstream village studies, I observed that no one could tell me what I wished to hear: that is to say, that an ideal factory town bursting with the appropriate organisations, heritage and working-class lifestyle awaited my attention.

Still more frustrating were the complaints of Hungarian sociologists and political scientists about the economic situation in Hungary, the impossibility of conducting surveys, and the presumably valueless effort of carrying out fieldwork and participant observation among workers. The more I tried to comprehend this, the more I clung to my 'otherness', my 'difference' from them; after all, I was educated to believe that I was an American, and an anthropologist. At such times I wanted to be an outsider; I wanted 'them' to see me as somebody who took the leading role of the working class in society for granted. As Paul Rabinow has written, being an outsider 'is incessantly apparent' and 'the cloud of official approval always hung over me' (1977: 79). However, this distinction was accorded to me in a different style; in many instances, I was made to feel a 'halfie' – someone neither from 'Here' nor from 'Out There'.

One sure sign of being placed into the third timespace had to do with official seals of approvals; or, as Nancy Ries recalls her experiences in Moscow (1997:13), often by exhibiting the unofficial conduct. Many of us who conducted fieldwork in the former Soviet bloc know all too well that official permissions, ministerial and collegial approvals were of primary importance. One could not do much without them, even if they were absurd and ridiculous. Once I had to obtain permission to enter the 'Closed Section' [*Zárt Osztály*] at the National Library in Budapest. The stamped letter simply stated that an anthropologist needs to look at historical records – and with that paper all doors opened up for me. Informal networks and unofficial paths, however, have aided anthropologists just as often.

For a number of reasons, the native ethnographers of Hofer's kind did little to improve my outlook. Ensnared in museum offices, among dusty nineteenth-century objects, or seated at desks in the ethnographic institute atop Buda Hill, most remained insulated from my concerns. Those devoted to traditional ethnography and folklore did not fare any better: to them, working-class culture, translated through the 'dreaded' words of 'workers' culture' and 'workers' folklore' (*munkáskultúra* or *munkásfolklor*), was inherited from the Stalinist 1950s. These were not grounded in their own chimeric science: the Hungarian 'proper peasant'. They argued, for example, that the Csepel ironworks was too large, ill-suited for an in-depth study and no longer a functioning community.

Despite this discouragement, Csepel attracted me as it has fascinated writers and travellers far beyond the borders of Hungary. To evoke its impact, I quote here two sources that bear testimony to its enduring symbolic power. Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1989: 104–5) describes it as follows in *Europe, Europe*:

Today the ironworks of Csepel is one of the dinosaurs of the socialist planned economy. Red Csepel is also a symbolic place for the economic reformers. For them this state-owned concern is not the engine of the economy but a brake block, an unprofitable, immovable relic of Stalinism. The machinery still dates, in part, from the forties; the fittings and infrastructure are obsolete. In

truth, Hungary's crisis can be read quite literally from the dust in the passageways, from the resignation in the faces, from the rust in the factory halls.

Another traveller in the early 1990s (Zanetti 1992: 14), when the state enterprise was slowly being dismantled as the result of the 1989–90 transformation, saw it thus:

According to a 1990 map, the short little 'Grass-street' in Csepel ends at a square where the statue of V. I. Lenin stands. However, one looks in vain for Vladimir Ilich Lenin: instead we find a few, beaten up containers, dog droppings and patches of grass here and there. The bronze statue of the leader of the revolution was removed in March 1990. Where? No one knows. One thing is sure: it is gone now. To rework the past is not what people think of these days. The market economy is at the doorstep of the country requiring the full energy of all; clearly new times are coming to Csepel.

Seeing the Csepel ironworks for the first time in the mid-1980s, I, too, was struck by its behemoth size, ear-splitting din and lively atmosphere, and the contradictory images it projected. People moved in and out of the factory, and at the gates, through which only those with identification badges could pass, banners, signs and packed stores signalled a strong life-force. Outside the main gate, single-family workers' houses with small vegetable gardens reminded the visitor of the remnants of inter-war working-class culture; the main square, with its Catholic church, police station, city hall, MSZMP (Hungarian Socialist Workers Party) and KISZ (Communist Youth Association) headquarters, stores and bus stations, exuded a sense of importance and centralised power. Farther away, huge ten-story apartment complexes dominated the city's landscape, results of the 'glorious victory' of Stalinism and state socialism over bourgeois capitalistic individualism, terms so freely mentioned even during the mid-1980s.

Regular daily visits to Csepel and its young workers slowly transformed me into what Rosaldo (1993: 7) calls the 'positioned' and constantly 'repositioned subject'. Just like the socialist state bureaucracy itself, interviews had to progress hierarchically from the top down. In fact, my first informants were company managers, party and communist youth organisation secretaries and trade union stewards who were genuinely eager to learn what 'this American' wanted to do in Csepel. But fieldwork does, and should, challenge prevailing notions about theory. Feeling like a heretic, I became more and more convinced that state socialism and Marxist-Leninist Ur-texts presented a world that were to be found nowhere; neither in Csepel's reality, nor in Hungary. It was to be found, literally, in the world of 'Out There', a space of neither here nor there but simply somewhere out there.

Young Csepelers' complaints about the rigid industrial hierarchy, excruciatingly slow advancement processes and hectic work tempo undermined all the theoretical foundations of socialism. So what was to be done? To whom could they turn? There was, to be sure, a trade union, but young workers were not included among its higher ranks. There were organisations – the MSZMP and KISZ – which they knew very little and whose power they only vaguely sensed, and whose leaders descended unannounced on the shops like demigods from time to time. In the course of such daily problems, anthropological theory made little sense.

From the approximately one hundred individuals with whom I came into contact in 1985–6, I selected a manageable group for in-depth inquiry based on availability, on willingness to contribute to this study, and on the personal chemistry required

between fieldworkers and their informants. Following these workers through their factory life, I learned of their involvement in various political and cultural organisations, of their relationships with other workers and management, and discovered how – and on what – they worked. Their world of labour was equally fascinating and, in a sense, complex, even chaotic. The absurd images of Ridley Scott's *Bladerunner* seemed to be superimposed to the world of George Orwell's *1984*.

Added to this hodgepodge of ideological superstructure and everyday life was the conflict between my interest in them and their life and immediate concerns for privacy and intimacy. Although the camera was not a novelty to them – many were avid amateur photographers – they shied away every time the camera pointed at them. It was not as if they did not want to be preserved; on the contrary, many enjoyed it enormously when a few weeks later they saw the colour pictures of our times together. Most simply complied with the written/unwritten rule about the 'western anthropologist' and being photographed. Such a rule was clearly elaborated for me by factory management asserting the no-photography-inside-the-factory-gates rule. No people, no machines, not even seemingly innocent bystanders in an alley were considered proper subjects by my guides. An ironworks was considered a minor military installation (in fact most industries in state socialist societies were so categorised); the workers themselves were simply cogs in the wheel. What this meant was that the foreign anthropologist's technological violation of the workplace added a considerable distance between natives (them) and outsiders (me).

As more and more time went by, and more material was collected, I came to the conclusion that accomplishing a single, descriptive factory ethnography would be impossible. The industrial complex was composed of many factories, vast and complex organisms requiring many different vital connections to maintain themselves. From socialist brigades to factory rituals, from vocational training to club events, the connections among the various 'body parts' forced me to connect workers' factory existence to their non-factory life.

This took me on a separate, but not wholly independent, mission, opening up yet another new world. The blue overalls, noisy shop-floors and strict institutional frameworks disappeared, to be replaced by many individuals, different clothing, new frameworks and new ideas. It was as if the world of labour was non-existent for these young people as they expressed different ideas and values. Most frequented discos (not punk concerts) and smoked and drank incessantly (not cognac, but beer and *pálinka*, the local, home-brewed plum-brandy); some visited churches (not museums); many read science fiction (not Gogol), attended soccer games (not classical concerts) and watched crime movies as well as bed-time folktales on television.

However, as I spent more time with them in their favoured *kocsma* (pub), hang-out or weekend hide-away, it became obvious that the worlds of labour and private life were neither distinct nor wholly isolated in their minds. When they spoke of their ideas and aspirations about better working conditions and higher salaries, or when they analysed the latest soccer game, these aspects formed parts of the same process in their discourse. They were startled when I pointed out that in many interviews they criticised political, bureaucratic structures and complained of factory conditions while continuing to talk about 'bosses', 'work to be performed' or 'the next political gathering' during their leisure activities. 'Oh, you don't understand anything,' argued one youth. 'Complaining is not only a favourite Hungarian past-time, it's also part of being young.' Flippant as this may sound, the young workers' lack of interest in state



ideology was one of the main causes of the collapse of the state socialist system at the time of the Velvet Revolution.

### Post-socialist experiences. The workers of Csepel

In 1992–5, I was able to continue my analysis of the changes that had taken place since 1989 and discover what had happened to the workers of my earlier fieldwork. Because of 1989 and 1990 – the Springtime of the Peoples as many western observers referred to it – much had changed in Hungary, just like elsewhere in the former Soviet bloc. Most countries became free from Soviet domination as the Soviet Union itself collapsed, and single-party rule was abandoned in favour of multi-party representation. Hungary had its first free elections in more than forty years; it elected a president and, with the aid of a new constitution, legitimised a parliamentary representative system. In 1990, a new law came into effect which made illegal the presence of political parties in workplaces and allowed the dismantling of former state enterprises. This affected all state factories, including the Csepel ironworks.

Csepel suddenly became a non-communist city: in 1990, the workers' party was voted out of office; mostly non-communist leaders now filled the seats of the district's council and mayoral office. But Paul Rabinow has correctly suggested that 'one cannot engage in questioning and redefining twenty-four hours a day' (1977: 38). Trying to catch up with my former informants was no easy feat. Many worked outside the district, as the result of the large-scale dismissal of workers from privatized companies; others worked in two or three jobs. Their time, which had formerly been regulated by the party, trade union or communist youth league was now under the constraints of the market and money. Monitored by the stock exchange, multinational corporations, and transnational trade agreements, the Hungarian economy and working life was slowly transformed.

For the anthropologist, this make-over meant several heretofore unexperienced realities. There was no possibility of conducting interviews on factory premises (as was possible in 1985); outside, if workers went to the local bar or restaurants, time was very short and conversations seemed abrupt. Factory officials, now called managers, did not dismiss my research; they simply did not find ample justification to validate my presence inside the factory.

Many signs of the old system had been demolished and removed both inside and outside the work place, an aspect of east European life noticed by anthropologists elsewhere (Bodnár 1998; Rausing 1998). The large Lenin statue at the entrance to the factory had been removed from its pedestal and shipped to a warehouse. As a friend admitted, it was not the anti-communists who took it down but, contrarily to popular opinion, members of the communist party and its youth brigade who had decided that, rather than wait for a large-scale riot, which would be embarrassing to them, they would take it down by themselves.

Similarly, street names had been changed, a practice which was widespread in Hungary in 1989 and 1990. All the old communist names had been exchanged, either for their pre-war names or for new ones; these statues, plaques, and signs may be seen now in the local historical society's little museum.

Despite these 'revolutionary changes', however, as one of my former informants told me, a lot had not been transformed by the dismantling of the party-state. For

example, I still had to apply for a special entrance document permitting me to visit various shops and offices. There were still some company documents that were off limits. Cameras were still illegal and taking fieldnotes on factory premises was almost impossible. Most of the old guard and former leaders were still working in the factory. One of the KISZ secretaries had been 'promoted' to a management position involved with hiring new workers; another made it to shop-floor foreman; and a woman secretary, who had managed to get an engineering diploma, made it into the white-collar ranks, a position she had not been interested in during the mid-1980s.

The most fundamental change, however, was the nature of the newly hired workforce. This time they were younger, better educated, more aggressive workers. And, interestingly, since no party official told them why they should help me, many simply refused to be interviewed. This was the real amputation of the anthropologist in me: to recognise the validity of Margery Wolf's statement about 'the construction of a partial and incomplete version of a reality' (1992: 87). In essence, a reality scenario for all my potential youthful informants had to be constructed.<sup>8</sup> This involved a great deal of explanation on my part, convincing them that their lifestyles were interesting to me and that giving interviews was not in vain. In 1985–6, it was much easier: the KISZ secretary's approval gave me access to the membership. But now that there was no youth organisation, getting to people meant a one-to-one reality construction as well as 'selling' myself to them.

Adding to the frustration was the fact that some of the hard-core party and KISZ members I interviewed at length in the mid-1980s were suspicious: first because they wanted to know what had been done with my previously collected material; and, second, because their past was known to me – a past which had been ridiculed and delegitimised in the early 1990s. So they were wary about what they should and should not tell me. This knowledge of their former lives in the 'movement', made them feel uneasy and closed, forcing me to realise that previous fieldwork experience did not guarantee immediate entry into the lives of my 'new', or even my former, informants.

Previous immersion in the local culture might even hamper anthropological inquiry. For many, the anthropological knowledge of the 'truth' – i.e. their involvement in the communist movement – was a problematical reality. Knowing little in the field is ridiculous; knowing too much may be frustrating, if not outright suicidal. Some people, especially those with anti-communist sentiments, did not feel sympathetic to my questioning; others, on the contrary, felt that they did not know any details worthy of my attention and turned away. These new attitudes on the part of my informants forced me to rearrange my interviewing techniques as well as my networks, a reorientation that I did not have to make in my research among Hungarians in Romania.

### Post-socialist experiences. Hungarians in Transylvania

Transylvanian Hungarians have been in the anthropological literature since the debate in *Current Anthropology* about the fate of Hungarian minorities under Ceausescu's

<sup>8</sup> The nature of writing fieldnotes, what they mean and how they give meaning to ethnographic accounts while taking on their own lives, has been a fashionable topic recently (Sanjek 1990; Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995; and Pálsson 1995).

rule.<sup>9</sup> Although I was able to visit Romania several times in 1985–6, none of these trips could be counted as ‘official’, since entering with a tourist visa and paying the same exorbitant fees and charges as every other western tourist, I was not accorded special anthropologists’ treatment.<sup>10</sup> What made fieldwork in eastern Europe special, and different from western European fieldwork, was awareness of the ever-watchful eyes of the state. Since the early 1980s, regulations forbade foreigners to stay overnight with families in villages: one had to report residency immediately.

Travelling extensively in Transylvania and residing with Hungarian families, who never turned me away, was only possible with the secret contract between fieldworkers and locals. Playing that kind of hide-and-seek game with the authorities – sleeping in barns and hay-stacks, running ahead of the Romanian police and lying to the border guards when leaving the country about where one stayed and what one carried out – had its own romanticism.<sup>11</sup> Although not able to stay in Romania as an ‘official anthropologist’, I was able to conduct miniature research projects in Hungarian villages. Eventually these experiences made their way into publications (Kürti 1987; 1990a), even though an uneasiness lingered with me that as ‘legitimate’, funded fieldwork had not been conducted, these experiences should not be expressed openly. Yet, these clandestine semi-fieldwork trips helped me develop an ethnically based and nationally reliable network. Hungarian priests, teachers, students and writers, as well as ordinary villagers, all came to my aid – just as all ‘good’ informants are supposed to do – to provide data and connections with far-away settlements. These connections proved invaluable for me in the years that followed.

With changing times in Romania, I applied for a grant and won official recognition. In my working hypothesis I argued that by analysing the renewed ethnopolitical movements in Hungary and Romania – their similarities as well as differences – one might witness how official language and political actions, however inadvertently, perpetuate and even exacerbate former resentments and stereotypes of the ‘other’ while claiming to contradict them. In an earlier paper, for example, I had argued that the exacerbation of the conflict between Hungary and Romania was historical, in part because of the failure of state socialism, specifically that of Kádár and Ceausescu, to cope with problems of ethnicity and majority-minority relations (Kürti 1990a).

However, in the early 1990s it became evident that antagonism between the two states over their ethnic minorities was not simply a survival of old, historic debates, although history is constantly manipulated and contested by all sides. Many meetings

9 This refers to the article by the Hungarian emigré anthropologist Michael Sozan, which was rebutted by the Romanian Research Group’s essay also published in *Current Anthropology*. I have analysed this debate more fully in Kürti 1990a and Kürti 1995.

10 Americans had to pay \$30 for a visa of thirty-days and \$10 for each day staying in Romania. In addition, gasoline tickets had to be purchased with dollars and, as the law required, foreigners had to be housed at a hotel, which charged separate prices for foreigners and native guests. However, times are changing in a strange way: in the summer of 1995, when I left Romania I was forced to pay a gasoline tax, a spurious amount of money the validity of which I was not able to check in any official documents. Hungarian friends, however, assured me that it was a regular customs procedure at the Romanian border. Others, however, resorted to an old adage: borders have no laws. The gasoline tax was lifted during the summer of 1998.

11 Film and notebooks were taken away from me on numerous occasions, just as I had to pay fines for embroideries and pottery considered by Romanian border guards to be invaluable ‘art objects’ of the national treasury which had to stay in Romania.

with scholars and cultural workers in both Hungary and Romania made me realise that the 1990s have provided a different setting from the 1970s and 1980s for rekindling nationalist arguments (Verdery 1994). Most of these earlier decades were almost free from nationalistic hatred and tension, or so it seemed from the major publications available.

With these troubling thoughts and epistemological riddles, I settled in the Transylvanian city of Cluj in January 1993, with the help of an official contact at the local Romanian Academy of Sciences office. Being a ‘foreign scholar’ (they did not really grasp what anthropology was), I found it a constant struggle to make my points and get along with them. In contrast, a much more friendly and collegial relationship had developed with the head of the sociology department at the Babes-Bolyai University, the late Professor Ion Aluas. He was a key person in obtaining for me a letter which gave me all kinds of freedom.<sup>12</sup> This affiliation proved extremely valuable for meeting both Hungarians and Romanians, and gave me the upper-hand when dealing with local bureaucracy.<sup>13</sup> The passage of years notwithstanding, the striking link between my Csepel and Transylvanian research was the need to obtain an official permit.

Mobility and exchange of information with Romanian and Hungarian colleagues in Cluj was not without its difficulties and funny moments. For example, bureaucrats at the Romanian Academy of Sciences office wanted to know all my movements and contacts. I pleaded with them by citing the profession’s Fifth Amendment: the right to remain silent about informants, their names and subjects discussed. In return, my official hosts cited their own rights and responsibilities: in order to be paid for my travels, the exact route had to be revealed; to be paid for the rent, local hosts had to be named. Things started to be more and more uncomfortable.

As anthropologists we must be willing to compromise and find other ways to handle such sensitive and embarrassing issues. So I willingly complied with the wishes of my official hosts and revealed all the names and addresses of the locals who gave me permission to do so (there were not many). However, one of my village hosts smiled about this hide-and-seek game, arguing that the Romanian secret police knew everything anyway. One thing is sure: fears die hard in the field and ‘secrecy’, whether for the anthropologist or his or her informants, is one of the most neglected issues in

12 Professor Aluas – a younger colleague of Henri H. Stahl (1901–91) – was a kind and extremely knowledgeable man. He was of the old rural sociology school, following in the footsteps of D. Gusti (1880–1955), who wanted to understand the Hungarian-Romanian conflict. Aluas was instrumental in bringing Hungarians to the Department of Sociology at Cluj, one of the most important being perhaps József Venczel (1913–72), a Hungarian scholar of the Gusti school who spent years in jail on trumped up charges (Venczel 1993). Ioan Aluas was an important figure who was key in reforming sociology at the university of Cluj, including bringing ethnic studies into the curriculum and developing a centre for studying inter-ethnic relations in Transylvania (Aluas and Rotariu 1992).

13 I treasure this letter. It is written, of course, in Romanian; it has three official signatures and stamps on it. It also ‘allowed’ me to move freely in parts of Romania. Aluas asked me one morning: ‘And where would you like to travel?’ ‘Mostly in Transylvania,’ I answered with bafflement. ‘No,’ he said, ‘I mean *where* in Romania?’ So he ended up writing Transylvania as well as Moldavia as the main research site of my fieldwork. After all, a Hungarian-American anthropologist could not just conduct fieldwork in Transylvania about Romanian-Hungarian interethnic relations; not in 1993 at any rate.



debates about the place of fieldwork in the anthropological enterprise (Mitchell 1993).

In the county seat of Cluj, I experienced renewed and curious conflicts between members of the Hungarian minority and the Romanian majority. Focusing on cultural and political institutions as well as elements of everyday culture – such as the politics and the question of native language education – made it obvious that the conflict between Hungarians and Romanians had become open and vicious as a result of the mismanaged policies of the Iliescu government. In daily life, cooperation between the two groups was not easy to discern.

Surprisingly, while aggression and hatred were minimal, and mostly avoided in the open, this was not because of democratic thinking on the part of the population at large but because of the two groups' insistence on separate spheres of existence. In cultural and religious life, for instance, Hungarians and Romanians have continued to live in two separate 'realities', supported by the churches' religious world views as well as radical leaders. In everyday culture, Hungarians have visited their own cultural institutions like theatres and clubs, but less so cinemas, which play only Romanian or western films that have been synchronised or subtitled. Hungarians, to give another example, have frequented the Hungarian Theatre, but rarely the Romanian National Theatre, often waiting instead for visiting theatre groups from Hungary.

At the market-square in Cluj, Hungarians often select those sellers who commute from nearby villages and are themselves of Hungarian ethnic background. Yet this too, seemed to be the case with Romanian city-dwellers. After a little chat, a closeness is established between sellers and buyers, and trust develops that allows the transaction to take place. Needless to say, some native producers were bilingual and fooling city residents.

These markets were lively locations for observing the interaction of the various nationalities. Gypsies utilised their language skills to communicate fluently with Hungarians and Romanians alike and some of them were extremely skilful at begging money from foreign tourists. The Cluj market was also a place for testing the level of liberalisation and democracy in Romania. Street-signs and Hungarian name-plates had almost disappeared, some smeared with paint, others knocked down. Cameras and videos were still looked at with distrust and trepidation. Filming was often impossible as people asked me to put away the camera, once literally shoving the camera away from my face.

Clearly, the past decades of totalitarian terror and state indoctrination had had such an impact that Transylvanians still felt uneasy about being filmed.<sup>14</sup> While in Csepel, my laptop computer elicited awe in my youthful informants; on the Romanian border it caused a minor havoc in 1994. The camera, however, continued to remain in the eyes of the state bureaucrats a weapon for authenticating reality.

For a long time the recording of anything the state and the police deemed

sensitive, including the nationality situation in Romania, was out of the question. By the mid-1990s, however, it seemed rather odd that there should be such misgivings about a recording device. Yet, as it was, even in 1996 – not long after the signing of the bilateral treaty between the Hungarian and the Romanian governments that September – issues relating to the Hungarian minority were still too sensitive to be recorded, especially by a foreigner. In Romania, a foreigner is even more dangerous if he/she comes from Hungary, or drives a car with Hungarian licence plates.

Such people are doubly burdened by identities both of their own and those foisted upon them by the state and the majority population. Clearly, crossing such state and national borders and having to deal with several ascribed and assumed identities places the anthropologist in a special category of being in the shifting configurations of the actual third timespace dimension mentioned earlier.

Such minor incidences aside, it became clear to me that language has been used as the most important cultural marker to identify, and especially divide, the Romanian majority and the Hungarian minority. Book and newspaper reading and church visiting (all language-based) are also other characteristics that separate the two groups. At the main square of Cluj there are newspaper stands which cater strictly for Romanians and do not carry any Hungarian-language newspapers, and vice versa. This is not only because of the recent politicisation of national identities that has followed in the wake of the resurgence of transnational and diaspora identities discernible all over Europe.<sup>15</sup>

There is a continuing tradition of separateness and distance between these nationality groups; as a natural consequence, the printed and the electronic media cater for these. Family stories and individual life narratives are filled with mythologising themes, creating as well as manipulating such distance. These focus on the period they conveniently term the 'Hungarian world/time'. Since in Hungarian these ideas are expressed by one word (*világ*), to them it is natural to reminisce that during the time of the Hungarian occupation of Transylvania, between 1941 and 1944, the whole world was transformed. Equally true was the follow-up period, when the Romanian communist party did everything in its power to diminish ethnic and national identities other than the majority Romanian. Listening to these memories made it clear that everyday actions or inactions, when it comes to the lack of correspondence between the two groups, are rationalised through the real or perceived facts of what it is to be a member of a minority group living under extreme conditions and suffering from the side-effects of state-supported nationalism.

In addition to my fieldwork in Cluj, I worked and lived in a Hungarian village, about 35 kilometers from the city, where nationalistic perceptions were rather different. Even though Crapanzano has called the term participant observation 'meaningless' (1992:139), living in a settlement of about 400 people has its own advantages and disadvantages. But, as in Csepel, what was important was the personal experience of being there and being able to learn through trial-and-error. Every fieldworker has to realise that time is precious and defined according to the rhythm of local time. So it came as no surprise that, although many people were willing to communicate with me, only a few families were able (or willing) to sit for hours and answer my questions.

15 See, for example, the recent works by McDonald (1993; 1996), Wilson and Smith (1993), Kideckel (1995), Kürti and Langman (1997) and Stewart (1997).

14 Having a lap-top computer when crossing into Romania was no easy adventure either. Twice I was asked to fill out papers declaring it, together with the video camera, and both serial numbers made it on to my visa papers. I guess much of this is simply following the law and trying to counter the illegal transportation of these high-priced products. Yet, knowing the area and the country's totalitarian past, one cannot but wonder how far the state can go in keeping both citizens and travellers alike in a state of constant fear, as well as under surveillance by limiting their access to technology.

These results have revealed how implications of ethnic stereotyping and nationalistic, ethnocentric rhetoric are embedded in popular consciousness. In questions about stereotyping Romanians, Hungarian villagers expressed disdain and their wish to remain separate. Despite all the democratic rhetoric emanating from Bucharest – both from the Romanian government and the Hungarian political party – most Hungarians do not want to live with Romanians. To the question: 'Would you mind it if Romanians bought land in your village?', about 50 per cent of Hungarians answered 'No'. (More men than women answered in the affirmative.) When asked whether they had misgivings about Romanians moving in and buying a house next to them, 95 per cent of Hungarians answered 'Yes'. My survey's initial findings reveal a comparable intolerance on the part of Hungarians toward gypsies as well.

After living in Transylvania, it became clear to me that in present-day Romania there are very few institutions that are designed to bring the majority and minority groups closer to each other. A few individual and elite artistic circles do exist, but even at the Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj, Hungarian students form separate cultural, political and artistic clubs and circles. This separate existence became even more acute from the beginning of 1997 when many Hungarians came out in favour of splitting the university into a Romanian and a Hungarian half. The Hungarian party in Romania, under the able leadership of B. Markó and L. Tőkés, has been intent on pressuring the Romanian government to make concessions: specifically, some ethnic Hungarians want acceptance of the full autonomous status of the Hungarians in Romania (Bíró 1995, Kürti 1995).

These ideas, which to the Romanian leadership are tantamount to full-scale separatism even after the thaw brought about by the new government in office since the beginning of 1997, were expressed to me on a daily basis. Aside from the elite, villagers do not use jargon such as 'separatism' or 'autonomy' in their vocabulary. Yet, for many, these have been translated to simple acts of cultural preservation, heritage and frictionless co-existence with the majority Romanians. My landlady in the village where I lived for six months recounted a story which she asked me not to tell anyone – but by knowing my work and telling me, she meant the opposite. While this story concerns her solely, it is extremely important, for it reveals the continuation of some of the hidden tensions between the two nationality groups.

In late autumn 1996, she needed medical care and was sent to the local county hospital for a check-up. At the hospital a young doctor enquired about her condition, and the elderly lady tried to explain to the best of her knowledge how she felt. Not finding adequate words in Romanian to describe her condition, she resorted to Hungarian. The doctor replied sarcastically that she should learn Romanian well enough to communicate with doctors: it is, after all, the state language and she might otherwise not be treated by Romanian doctors.

This little story also made me aware why Hungarian villagers sometimes abandon county hospitals and prefer to travel 60 or 70 kilometres to another town where they can rely on the care of doctors who are Hungarians. With such stories behind me, it became easier to realise that these new times force Hungarians and Romanians to cope differently with everyday realities and shape their conceptions accordingly. Naturally, this has also meant a redefinition and repoliticisation of identities and inter-ethnic relations. Unfortunately, the tension and distance between the two populations in Romania has been continuing ever since, and despite recent governmental changes, both my village and city informants' statements about the different spheres of

existence reality in present-day Romania are sad but true (Gallagher 1995; Kürti 1995; Kürti 1997).

To learn all this has given me a feeling of success – albeit an unhappy one – not evident from anthropological works written in the west, save for some notable non-anthropological exceptions. My committed involvement with my friends and colleagues, as well as my own national identity, allowed me to gain sensitive information which would have been unthinkable a decade earlier, and not necessarily available to a western scholar.

### **A new anthropology of the New East?**

Writing about these past experiences naturally raises the question: what does all this entail both for anthropology and the communities in question? For one, with the fall of the Berlin Wall way behind us and the former communist countries begging for NATO and EU membership, we now may begin to create a new ethnographic practice which will be fitting for the new cultural tapestry of Europe in general (McDonald 1996; Kokot and Dracklé 1996; and O'Dowd and Wilson 1996) and eastern and central Europe in particular (Danforth 1995; Brumen and Smitek 1995; Giordano 1997; Kirin and Povrzanovic 1996; Kürti and Langman 1997; Ries and Warner 1998; Schwartz 1996; Tishkov 1997).

At this post-socialist moment, and in the changing political, economic and cultural landscapes, we can never just simply return to our earlier fieldwork sites, areas of existence which were not only transformed but often erased in the tumultuous years after 1990. Returning enables anthropologists to reflect back on the changing times, how things were and how much they have changed, but earlier visits cannot, and for that matter should not, be reproduced.<sup>16</sup> As anthropologists we should also be aware of using earlier material uncritically without developing a new vocabulary and theoretical apparatus to deal with the societies which have undergone such tremendous transformations.

Yet for anthropologists working in eastern Europe there are even more burning questions. What are we to make of those communities, institutions and cultural practices we once termed 'state socialist' or 'communist' which are no more, even though the informants once connected with them are still around? How are we supposed to justify the lack of Marxist-Leninist Ur-texts, making these societies work and reproduce according to a master plan; or how, moreover, are we supposed to feel about our past work pigeonholing millions into peripheral and technologically backward existing state socialist societies? Can we make a flippant statement that, yes, once these communities were state socialist, but now, with the availability of recent technological gadgetry, they are truly European, Internet-user democracies ready for NATO and EU memberships.

Returning to my earlier point, about whether anthropological fieldwork really is concerned with gaining first-hand and personal experiences of the peoples' lives we study, one serious question remains: if it was not state socialism, as many scholars and laymen in eastern Europe and the west now claim, what did we as anthropologists understand and participate in for all those years? If state socialism can collapse in a few

16 For an insightful account of return visits and changing perspectives on fieldwork among the same populations, see Kenna 1992 and Pálsson 1995.



months, how could it have lasted for so long? With whose support? The people's? The anthropologists'? And, finally, if anthropologists truly understood the intimate and everyday lives of the people they studied, how could they not notice it would not last very long? Clearly, anthropologists – both foreign and indigenous – have their work cut out: to relearn the socialist past and to engage in its retheorising by re-evaluating their relationships with the people studied.

Aside from these rather unkind questions, we might begin also to rethink several of our earlier notions about European anthropology and eastern Europe. Conducting fieldwork under the watchful eyes of state and local bureaucrats, with special permits needed to participate and observe, and writing under the constraints of state socialism, was difficult. For such issues reach to the very heart of the anthropological enterprise: what we do and why, and how much we care about the societies we study. Thinking about our fieldwork locale in the 1980s and telling (now almost folkloristic) stories may elicit a few intellectual whimpers, but back then most of us took the power of the party, the police, and the informers a bit too seriously. Even the anti-government and the policemen jokes seemed funny and dangerous at the same time. Yet, in retrospect, I hesitate to add, we may have been a little too naïve and our monographs attest to that. Critical reflections are the order of the day now. By not taking this seriously we endanger the idea that we take anthropology seriously.

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