



## **SPEECH GIVEN ON THE 25th OF MAY 2017 ON THE OCCASION OF BEING AWARDED THE DOCTOR HONORIS CAUSA TITLE OF THE BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY CLUJ-NAPOCA**

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Pro-rector David, President of the Academic Senate Chirilă, Dean Hărăguș, members of the Department of Sociology and Social Work, honored guests and friends, and dear students:

Thank you for these laudatory words, deeply appreciated if perhaps unmerited. I am profoundly honored by this extraordinary recognition of my academic contributions. For forty-one years, I have been doing research in Romania. How did I - then a doctoral student from the United States of America, an imperialist country, - end up doing research in a formerly communist one? I would like to take advantage of this special occasion to share with you some thoughts about my intellectual history, as well as some of my experiences while I pounded the streets of Romania's cities and wandered about the paths of its villages. I would also like to reflect briefly upon the impact my research here has had on my understanding of what is currently happening in the United States.

Knowing that some of you are not English speakers, I will give my talk in Romanian, asking your indulgence for whatever mistakes you hear and for my accent, most surely a mixture of American English and the vernacular speech of the region to which I will always remain affectively attached, „my” Maramureș. I proudly refer to it in this possessive form - my - because in 1994, I was made an honorary citizen of Ieud, a large village with a rich history, located in the Iza Valley.

A question is often posed to me, both here and in the US, „why Romania?” As far as I know, my family has no roots in Romania. What then accounts for my having come here? When I was a graduate student at Berkeley, I wanted to pursue my dissertation research on the medical system in what was then the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia. At the time, the Yugoslavs were seemingly suspicious of the work of two American anthropologists, in consequence of which they

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informed me that while I was welcome to carry out my fieldwork there, I would be accompanied while doing it. That is hardly ideal for ethnographic or sociological research. Then Romania approved my application, as it had for many others from the West. In the 1970s, Romania in comparison with other socialist states was relatively open to the presence of foreign professors and researchers. As you know, Romania did not participate in the invasion of Czechoslovakia, after which the West looked favorably upon Ceaușescu. He was considered to be an „independent” leader, even though his courageous refusal simultaneously signalled the nationalism that guided his politics thereafter.

Hence, in 1975, I came to București, supported by an official fellowship. Everyday life was completely different than that in which I had grown up: a shortage economy, long lines, secret police, the internalization of self-censorship, which I too came to practice. Foreigners (especially from the West) were suspected of being spies. In that first year, I was always accompanied on fieldtrips by a colleague from the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore who was obligated to account for me and my activities. But since I did not really speak Romanian then, it was unclear to me what state secrets I could have discovered! (In this regard, see Professor Katherine Verdery’s forthcoming book on her secret police file, *My life as a spy: investigations in a secret police file.*) I was concerned about the secret police, who followed me all the time when I lived in București, often just a few steps behind me. I was not worried for myself per se, but rather for my Romanian colleagues and friends with whom I met. Unofficial meetings between Romanians and foreigners were discouraged. I began to understand bit by bit how Romanian citizens lived their daily lives, uncertain about who might be a potential informer

In București, I settled into an apartment building where other grantees were also housed; it was easier for a Romanian neighbor on each floor to „watch” us (that is, surveil us). I soon understood how urgent it was for me to learn Romanian, however rudimentarily. My inability to communicate is well illustrated by an anecdote that, with hindsight, is amusing. My first visit to Cluj happened some two months after I arrived in Romania. I had time to spend before an academic appointment scheduled for nine in the morning, so I went to the outdoor market. I always enjoy going to markets wherever I am, even when there is little in them. There, I took some photographs of a peasant woman ladling out cream for someone. A *milițian* unexpectedly appeared and escorted me to a local police station. I was terrified! You can imagine the scene: sitting at a desk was an imposing man in uniform, his broad chest decorated with medals. Clearly, I was supposed to say what I had done. With no small degree of desperation, I recalled some words from a restaurant menu, and using hand gestures to indicate taking pictures, I recited „carrots,

potatoes, cucumbers... etc.” The imposing figure behind the desk burst out laughing and called for his colleague who had dutifully brought me to him. Still laughing, he gave me permission to take as many pictures as I wanted at the market while I was in Cluj. That is how Cluj welcomed me! And as you see, I have continued to return.

In București, I was sent to Professor Mihai Pop, director of the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore. I had met Professor Pop when he taught as a visiting professor at Berkeley for one trimester. And since then -1975 - I have remained in contact with his extended family. Indeed, I am honored by the presence today of one of his daughters-in-law, Lia Pop, who is originally from Cluj. Similarly, I am deeply touched that my very dear friend and colleague, Professor Zoltan Rostaș, has come from București to be here today; Professor Pop introduced us in 1978 and we have remained friends since then. There are also others present from Cluj, Ieud, Sighetu Marmăției, and Vișeu de Sus, whom time does not allow me to name. They are among those who welcomed me with open hearts and form my „adoptive” families in Romania.

With time constraints in mind, I now turn to an overview of my ethnographic research in Romania, including snippets of the methodological and ethical issues I have encountered over time, in part as a foreigner. A verse which I cited in my book, *The Wedding of the Dead: Ritual, Poetics, and Popular Culture in Transylvania*, seems apposite; the multiple meanings of “being a foreigner” or “stranger” in Romanian traditional culture, “alienated from one’s own,” and “living among strangers” have never been lost on my own status:

Foreigner, foreignness  
Long have you been my sister and brother  
As you will be until death.

*Străină, străinătate  
Mult mi-ați fost soră și frate  
Și mi-or și pînă la moarte.*

Coming here in the mid ‘70s until 1988, no one other than Professor Pop could have had any idea of my life in the United States. I was actively involved in the lives of my Romanian “surrogate families” and friends, but they could only know me through our interactions here. The macro politics of the times made reciprocal visits impossible. Since 1989, colleagues, some of whom have become such close friends, like family, were able to visit me at home in California and also in Maramureș. In this regard, I want to mention Professor Adriana Băban, of UBB’s Department of Psychology, with whom I have collaborated academically for many years and who has become like a sister to me. But for most Romanians, I have remained a good example of the “social construction of identity,” issues on which I elaborated in my aforementioned book, *The Wedding of the Dead*.

Yet after forty years, how much of a foreigner am I really? Students present today in many respects know considerably less about Romania’s

recent past than I do. After all, if they were alive when the regime fell, they were very young. For sociological or ethnographic research, longitudinal experience is a plus. Unlike what ethnographers call “revisits” - when a researcher returns to a place previously studied by another scholar and reassesses or reinterprets the analysis - I have never really “left” Romania despite circumstances that certainly challenged my commitment.

As Professor Marius Lazăr has so generously discussed, my research over the decades in Romania has always explored the relationships between politics, culture, and gender before, during, and after the Ceaușescu regime. I wanted to understand the complex interplay between the state and its citizens, and the disjuncture between official discourse and everyday practice. My first two books - *Căluș: Symbolic Transformation in Romanian Ritual*, and *The Wedding of the Dead* - focused on the dramatic changes of peasant culture in an industrializing socialist state, analyzed through the lenses of calendar and life cycle customs. Both addressed the relationship between ritual practices, beliefs, and religion, on the one hand, and the official ideology of communism, on the other. The socialist state was opposed to such popular ritual practices and superstitious beliefs, promoting scientific rationalism instead. Accordingly, during the Căluș period, people often first disclaimed that they did not, of course, believe in superstition, but then went on to recount how they had nevertheless been possessed by *iele*, spirits active during that period. To counter the Căluș rites, the state celebrated the spectacular dances associated with them at an annual festival, *Călușul românesc*, held in the Olt region, in which groups of Călușari perform the energetic dances in competition. In 1999, a group of Călușari participated in the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington DC, and I was delighted to be able to introduce them to the crowds. I was also able to tell a younger generation of Căluș dancers about the ritual’s history, much to my amusement and their astonishment!

I would like to mention that when I finished my dissertation in sociology, I realized that no one on my committee had the cultural competency to evaluate what I had written about the Căluș ritual itself. Having been awarded the doctorate, my excitement gave me the courage to write to Professor Mircea Eliade, asking if he might read my dissertation and share his comments with me. Much to my great surprise, when I was in Ieud doing post-doctoral research, the postman delivered a letter from him. He concluded his comments expressing the hope that we would meet, an opportunity that presented itself when I was appointed as a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago where Professor Eliade taught in the Divinity School. It was a privilege to have known him and to discuss diverse subjects of mutual interest.

Just after I filed my PhD toward the end of 1977, I returned to Romania. I had hoped to work with a sorceress whom I had met when I had

visited Maramureş during that first year. Party tenets about scientific socialism notwithstanding, under the cover of darkness, local Party members went to seek the “witch’s” advice. Unfortunately, she died soon after my return, so I had to change projects. Fortuitously, I ended up in Ieud, where I spent thirteen months doing ethnographic fieldwork on weddings, funerals, and death weddings. This research resulted in an analysis of the cultural semantics of life and death, of how individuals and communities make sense of these life-changing experiences.

When I arrived in Ieud, unbeknownst to me, my beloved hostess - may she rest in peace - was reluctant to accommodate me. According to State Decree nr. 225, it was illegal for an unrelated foreigner to stay in the home of Romanians; approval had to come from Bucureşti. My living there would bring attention to this family that already had a complicated history, having had their property expropriated as “wealthy peasants” in the 1950s. Nevertheless, the Director of the Ethnographic Museum of Maramureş, Professor Mihai Dăncuş, who became like an older brother to me, insisted that I stay there, that “Aunt” (*Mătuşă*) Juji not only had a way with words, but who was also a good cook and homemaker. Furthermore, her mother had been a village midwife before professional midwives existed. And my hosts had many godchildren in the village. People were always coming to the house, meaning that my presence in Ieud would quickly become known through the traditional communication system, namely, through village gossip networks.

Among Mătuşa Juji’s understandable concerns was that being an American, I might have pretensions to living conditions they could not provide. She later confided that she had initially agreed to a one-week trial period. Luckily for me, we hit it off immediately, and thus began a process of negotiating my integration into the family so that she felt she was respecting my status according to local social norms and I did not feel so alone and isolated. (For example, I was expected to eat by myself in the “guest” room; I, however, insisted that I join the family. Similarly, I insisted on making my own straw mattress bed.) Her husband returned from his job in Sighetu Marmătiei on the weekends. Uncle Ştefan was a well-respected and thoughtful man. He and I had long discussions into the night about the pros and cons of our two systems: capitalist/democratic versus socialist/Ceauşescu’s “original democracy.” Uncle Ştefan was what Antonio Gramsci would have labeled “an organic intellectual.”

If anyone thinks that an ethnographer is the only person doing research, she or he is sorely mistaken! As a researcher, I was as much researched as those whose lives I had come to study. For the inhabitants of Ieud, I was certainly a curiosity. “What does she eat?” “Does she drink our double-distilled brandy, ‘horinca’?” Were the little embroidered flowers on my underwear “sewn by

hand or by machine?" Moreover, with my notebook always at the ready, everyone was eager to help me learn the local vernacular speech, their dialect. (One of my favorite words is from the village of Breb, in the Mara Valley: *brozbuță*, for *sarmale*/stuffed cabbage.)

While I was settling in, colleagues and friends in București wondered how I could live in Ieud without running water, electricity, "conditions". While everyday life was certainly different for me, unlike many living in Romania's cities, there was a wood burning stove, which meant that water could be heated, as could a brick to put under my cold feet while I worked late into the night when everyone else was already asleep. I slept under a heavy, warm woven blanket that eventually people in București were eager to buy from the women from Maramureș who made the trip to sell them in the Piața Unirii. In view of how harsh life in Romania had become, mine were in many ways the easier of circumstances.

As a foreigner, this project exposed me to the rhythms and rigors of daily life in a way that being in a city on my own could not have. Living with a family was a living lesson in the reach of the Party-state in all aspects of daily life. As an additional household member, I was also an additional mouth to feed, so I officially requested a ration card to supplement the family's allotment of eggs, oil, butter and the like. I learned early on that villagers had been told that they should not talk about the collectivization period with me, alerting me to the silencing of history, but also to the need to respect such externally imposed boundaries. Over time and with increased trust in me, younger couples discreetly asked about contraception in the U.S. I also became aware of the effects both of class and religious warfare that had transformed local social relations and social organization, although I did not then know the complex details of these struggles. The context in which things happened also mattered. What people said in the privacy of their homes often differed from what they expressed in public. I became ever more aware of the normalization of auto-censorship and *dedublare* as aspects of being. Back then, I could not have known that in the future, I would do research both on reproductive issues and the period of collectivization.

These first two projects on ritual also highlighted for me certain methodological distinctions in ethnographic practice. In Romania, following in the great tradition of the Gusti School, a team of researchers went to villages and stayed days or weeks, collecting material on different topics. Having jobs and families, it was not feasible for them to spend six months or a year away doing research. (They also did not have grants to support them.) My Căluș fieldwork was more in keeping with that Romanian tradition: I did not do fieldwork on my own, but with others from the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore (which was definitely helpful given my limited language ability). We went to many villages,

interviewing Călușari, musicians, and villagers about the ritual. We never stayed more than a few days in one place. While I did learn a great deal about Căluș and its role in people's lives and in socialist society, I knew very little about people's everyday experiences living in a socialist state. By contrast, in Maramureș, I lived with a family and slowly became more integrated into village life. I both observed and participated. Immersed in life there equipped me with invaluable experience and insights that led me to formulate more clearly that my research ultimately constituted an "ethnography of the state."

And thus, after the fall of the regime, I embarked on *The Politics of Duplicity*, which is both an ethnography of the state - Ceaușescu's Romania - and an ethnography of the politics of reproduction, analyzed through the lens of the regime's political demographic policies. This research project enabled me to better understand the process by which the state penetrated into the intimate lives of its citizens, and the social atomization that resulted from and remained a legacy of Ceaușescu's "golden era." Moreover, this project underscored how and why natality was so central to the regime's socio-political agenda, as well as the national and international repercussions that the obsession with birthrates provoked. I came to better comprehend the wide-ranging effects of banning abortion that were a hallmark of Ceaușescu's reign and which hold lessons for all who would follow in that regime's footsteps. The analytic insights that emerged regarding duplicity and complicity have influenced others' analyses of socialist societies.

Here I must note that this heart-wrenching ethnography of Romania's reproductive policies and practices today looms large in my thoughts as the U.S. government currently in power moves steadily toward banning abortion again; access is already quite limited. You may not know that before the 1973 Constitutional Amendment, only twenty states allowed abortions that met criteria for exceptions; thirty states had complete bans - worse than the provisions of State Decree nr. 770. After my research here, it is hard to imagine that the U.S. could return to such barbaric practices.

*Peasants Under Siege: The Collectivization of Romanian Agriculture, 1949-1962*, continued my interest in understanding Romanian communism in the form of an historical ethnography of the state. Having long wanted to do a project with Katherine Verdery, we co-organized an international, multi-disciplinary and multi-generational team of nineteen researchers to study the initial collectivization period. Two of our fifteen Romanian participants are here today: Professor Virgiliu Țărău, of the Department of History, and Lector Călin Goina, of the Department of Sociology, who then were doctoral students. Also present is one of my current host family members from Ieud, Ștefan Dăncuș, to whom I owe my sincerest thanks for the family relationship we enjoy and their generous assistance, which made the research for this project easier.

In predominantly agrarian countries such as Romania, the collectivization of agriculture was the first mass campaign through which the new communist regime inaugurated its radical program of social, political, economic and cultural transformation. Through collectivization, the nascent Party-state created its mechanisms of rule and authority, but not without push back from the populace. Collectivization may have been directed from the center, following directives from Moscow, but it was implemented locally.

Our team covered a large number of communities, enabling us to address some of the concerns posed about qualitative research such as variation and representativeness. Most participants did oral historical and archival research, each of which has limitations. Oral histories suffer the effects of time and memory distortions; interviews were retrospective, and also influenced by the political-cultural climate in which they were conducted when saying anything positive about the communist period was hardly in vogue. An individual's social origins and stage in the life cycle affected his or her experiences, opportunities, and recollections. Those who lost or suffered the most generally provided the most detailed histories; for many who had been physically abused or tortured, their memories were unforgettably embodied, imprinted in their bones, so to speak.

Archival documents were no less problematic. Access to local, regional, and national archives, as well as to the holdings of the CNSAS, was inconsistent. Documents had to be read critically, sensitive to Party and Securitate distortions and outright falsifications. Without knowledge of the context in which these documents were produced as well as the social and power relations behind them, it is not really possible to gain a nuanced understanding of what happened. Reading and interpreting a document on its own is not sufficient. Our multi-methodological strategy, while time consuming, was effective in triangulating data and analysis. I also note that Katherine's and my own deep relationships over decades in the villages where we did our research often made it easier for us than for the younger Romanians who were not from the villages they studied - an unanticipated advantage that made us aware that the debate in ethnography about the pluses and minuses of being an insider or an outsider are not as straight forward as they may seem.

Let me mention a few methodological "memories" from my own research for our project to offer a taste of the kinds of surprises and issues each participant encountered in one way or another. At CNSAS, reading through various penal files, I found an organizational chart that the secret police had prepared. It listed the members of anticommunist resistance groups operating throughout the villages of the Iza Valley. Their names proved to be an invaluable find for me, and I doubt I would otherwise have come across these individuals, most of whom I



was then able to trace and interview. I also found confirmation of the murder of someone whose children I know and who was shot in the back and killed by the secret police. In the statistics about the “terrorists” from Ieud, this man was listed as “disappeared,” not “deceased” (like others). That classification flagged an interpretive issue. The category of “disappeared” is notorious in authoritarian regimes, Argentina being a good example; “disappeared” often effaces or hides the political crime of murder.

One last example, again from the penal files, raised an ethical issue for me, especially as a foreigner. I had applied to look at particular files, with the consent of living family members, but many other people appeared in these files. One such person was a woman then in her seventies. Upon meeting her, she asked how I knew of her. I assure you it is an unusual experience to tell someone that you “met” her through a reading of her secret police file! There is an ethical responsibility in this, it seems to me. At her request, to the extent that I had information that could be helpful to others whose names I came across, I shared it. That said, there was some information that I did not feel was my place to divulge. All of these concerns require - or should require - careful consideration.

It is, of course, very gratifying that my research in Romania is used in courses here as well as abroad, and that with expanding access to archival material, young researchers have built upon my work to provide greater understanding of these issues. I have not, admittedly, thought that much about how my work in Romania might one day inform my understanding of what is happening in my own country. On a personal note, I learned a great deal, for example, from Ieudeni and their deep humanism about death, in particular. Before 1989, I was incensed by my fellow American citizens who did not exercise the right to vote, but were so quick to condemn communist regimes where people could not vote freely. It was - and remains to this day - a hypocrisy I find unacceptable and one that fundamentally compromises democratic practices.

In November 2016, only 58% of Americans eligible to vote cast ballots. The outcome of the election has altered the political climate dramatically. With every passing day, we no longer know what awaits us. I could not have imagined that I would one day hear a President of the United States proclaim that the „ media [the free press] is the enemy of the American people” (February 17, 2017). Katherine and I wrote a great deal about the enemies of the Romanian people; the discourses of authoritarian leaders frequently invoke the category „enemy.” But in the U.S.?

The President foments his own rather incoherent version of „class warfare,” in which he alone represents the salvation for those forgotten by globalization processes. Among his enemies number a series of politicians who fill the „swamp” of our capital, as well as Muslims, immigrants - especially the undocumented - and anyone who does not share his views. Unmaskings

and denunciations have re-appeared in our politics (having been characteristic of the McCarthy era, 1947-1956). Like your „genius of the Carpathians” and other all-knowing leaders such as Kim Jong Un, the current President of the United States has declared that he is „a smart person,” knows better than others, and does not need daily briefings from specialists.

His promises often contradict scientific data, which, for him, are often but „alternative facts.” Recently, there was a picture of the President surrounded by miners, happy that he had promised to reopen the shuttered mines. He visits factories, making promises that may also be accompanied by threats. I was reminded of the photographs that used to appear in *Scînteia* (the Party newspaper), or of the difference between what the President declares and what people experience in their daily lives. Various members of the President’s family now occupy positions of power, even though they lack necessary training, in contrast to members of the Kennedy and Bush clans. The entwined familial relations in D.C. today remind me of the PCR, the acronym not only for the Romanian Communist Party, but also for „pull, connections, and relationships,” and „Petrescu, Ceaușescu, and relatives” (Petrescu being Elena Ceaușescu’s maiden name). While we do not benefit from the equivalence between letters, names, and what they signify, nevertheless, nepotism and ethical conflicts are flourishing in the White House.

The very fact that we can think of such things is stunning enough. Clearly, our system is bolstered by the consolidation of democratic institutions over the course of two hundred and forty-one years. Many people are now politically engaged; the public sphere is invigorated. Still, the government is dysfunctional. As in Europe, the effects of globalization and neoliberalism, combined with the promotion of rights and dignity for the identities of diverse social groups, have contributed to the emergence of sharp social divisions and tensions. This is not the occasion, however, to go on at length about our politics. Yet, it is the first time in all the years that I have been coming to Romania that I have found certain similarities between what I know from my research about your country’s recent past and what is presently occurring in ours, similarities that I find profoundly disturbing. And we too are beginning to poke fun at our own troubles, to make *haz de necaz!*

In conclusion, I reiterate that way back, I had no intention of coming to Romania, but as I have recounted, I did, and the rest is history - my professional and personal history both here and in Los Angeles, where I live. When I met my personal physician, I learned that she is originally from Romania. How is that possible? In a city as immense as Los Angeles, with a population estimated between thirteen and sixteen million, how is it that I ended up precisely in her office? Such things happen to me quite frequently. After so many years, Romania and Romanians are simply a part of my life and will be for as long as I live.

I thank you so very much for this great honor and for the friendship you have extended to me through thick and thin all of these years.