



## THE ANTHROPOLOGIST INVERSED

### LAUDATIO

#### FOR DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR KATHERINE VERDERY, CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK, GRADUATE CENTER, ON THE OCCASION OF THE AWARD OF THE DOCTOR HONORIS CAUSA TITLE OF BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY

IRINA CULIC<sup>1</sup>

*Pro-rector, Vice-president of the Senate, Professor Verdery,  
dear colleagues and students, ladies and gentlemen,*

I have the special honour and great joy to pronounce the *laudatio* for Professor Katherine Verdery in the name of the Department of Sociology. For most of its members, grown as sociologists and anthropologists after 1989, her work has been constitutive. The professional field that we embraced, learning the power of ideas, the practical form of knowledge, and the relational and historical character of the social world, has been considerably shaped by the nuanced and complex understanding that she gave us through her studies. They have Romania as site of empirical investigation, and socialism and its successors as space of theoretical elaboration.

Professor Verdery is Julien J. Studley Faculty Scholar and Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York since 2005, and Acting Chair, Department of Anthropology, City University of New York. Her extraordinary professional trajectory developed in two of the core centers of American academic Anthropology, at Johns Hopkins University, in Baltimore, Maryland and University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor.

She received a BA in Anthropology from Reed College, Portland, Oregon, and an MA in Anthropology from Stanford University, Stanford, California. In 1977 she is awarded a PhD in Anthropology from Stanford University, for a

---

<sup>1</sup> Sociology Department, Babeș-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, email: [irina.culic@socasis.ubbcluj.ro](mailto:irina.culic@socasis.ubbcluj.ro).

thesis based on seventeen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Transylvania, carried out between 1973-74 in the village of Aurel Vlaicu – Bințiți, in Hunedoara county, Romania.

The 1970s represented an important interval of reappraisal for the two parts divided by the Cold War, to which the presence of a number of social anthropologists in Romania contributed in a very distinct way. Katherine Verdery, alongside Gail Kligman, Sam Beck, David Kideckel, Steven Sampson and others, aimed to understand how actually existing socialism functioned, in its own terms (Verdery 1983: 18-26). Through their work in Romania, they opened an important space of critique of the capitalist forms, engaging theoretical positions from the margins (Verdery 1983, 1991). They set about to “combat both the stereotypical, propagandizing notions of it so common in the U.S. media and also the utopian and idealized images held by Western leftists who had not experienced living in it” (Verdery 1996: 11). By the essence of the profession itself, to know a society through the immediate and profound experience of its lived life, these researchers performed the double task of interpreting and translating the society into which they entered, through and for the society from which they came.

Meeting the Other at the level of everyday interaction, in a context of existential dependence, generates continuous conceptual decentering and recentering of the social and cultural categories employed. The political tension of the Cold War marked significantly what could be asked and explored, where and how this could be done, and the historically situated self of the anthropologist.

After four more months of fieldwork and archival research during 1979-80, the social history of the village of Aurel Vlaicu was published at University of California Press in 1983, as *Transylvanian Villagers: Three Centuries of Political, Economic, and Ethnic Change* (Verdery 1983). The book recounted little about the socialist system in Romania at that moment, partly owing to author’s ethical dilemmas on how to answer the generosity of the Romanian government, and the villagers alike, during the time they had hosted her in their home (Verdery 1983: 20-25; 2013: 37). What Verdery did, however, was to assemble a formidable narrative unfolding on several scales, that brought together historical, sociological, and ethnographic material to describe the evolution of villagers’ lives throughout three centuries. The book investigates how three types of relations weave together and are spoken out: relations with political layers that succeed each other culminating with the modern state; economic relations within feudal structures that are absorbed into the peripheries of global capitalism; and relations among groups who identify in different ethno-national terms (Verdery 1983: 3).

Meanwhile, the observation that the most sensitive topic debated in the Romanian public sphere was national identity defines the next research project with which Katherine Verdery returns to Romania for eleven months in 1984-

85, completed with another five months in 1987 and 1988 – the role of history-writing in crystallizing national consciousness (Verdery 2004: 140; 2013: 38). The project gradually transforms when, disturbed by the constant interference of the Securitate surveillance, the work moves from the village to the city. It acquires ideas and interpretations that connect the books and newspapers read in the libraries, with the conversations held with Romanian intellectuals, and with the experience of everything that happens around her. The project grows, and the gaze expands towards the whole field of cultural production. Detailed, nuanced, and precise analyses expose the struggles among historians, writers, philosophers, literary critics, and sociologists, and the representatives of the authorities, that mobilise symbols and meanings of the nation. They reconstruct and perpetuate the national ideology, which, gradually, will erode the discourse of Marxism and its forms of legitimation. The resulting book, *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania* (Verdery 1991) is sent to the press on November 8, 1989 with the conviction that its publication will make impossible the return to Romania. The following day the Berlin Wall is torn down.

This work, together with the next book, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next*, published by Princeton University Press (Verdery 1996), consecrate Katherine Verdery as one of the most influent voices to give an understanding of how socialist societies functioned, and into what forms they were recomposing. In tension with the theories and methods of political science, the dominant discipline to provide models during the Cold War and after the fall of the Eastern bloc (Verdery 2013: 41), her analyses are built on notions and explanations produced by authors formed in the socialist systems of Eastern Europe, and are supported by years of engaged interaction with the people and their institutions.

Her prodigious work of this period, which comprises, next to a large number of influent articles, two edited collaborative volumes (Bananac and Verdery 1995, Burawoy and Verdery 1999), calls for suspending judgment about the outcome of post-socialist transformation, and for questioning the ideological layers of concepts like market, civil society, or privatisation, rather than automatically taking them on and reinforcing them (Verdery 1996: 10-11). The understanding of socialist systems and of what succeeded them enables the development of the critique of Western economic and political forms, through the eyes of those who are living their construction, in a perpetual quest to devise and appreciate habitable alternatives of social arrangements.

Translated into Romanian several years after their publication, *Compromis și rezistență. Cultura română sub Ceaușescu* (Verdery 1994) și *Socialismul. Ce a fost și ce urmează* (Verdery 2003b) had a huge influence on the Romanians who read them – different generations, for whom the experience of the present, the

memory of the past, and the imagination of the future are very different things. Such objectifying mirror, which takes apart and recomposes our notions of our identity and of the traces we leave in the world, generates self-interrogations and repositionings, bringing pain, frustration, revolt or rejection, but also understanding, compassion, reflection, enchantment.

Enchantment is what Verdery proposes with her 1999 book *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (Verdery 1999), published in Romanian in 2006 as *Viața politică a trupurilor moarte. Înhumare și schimbare postsocialistă* (Verdery 2006). The wish to animate, to enliven, a field of political analysis become bland is the source of inspiration for this study, which searches the meanings of frequent movements of dead bodies in post-socialism: the repatriation, circulation, disinterment, and reburial of the bodies of personalities or common people, and the overthrow, removal or relocation of statues of former leaders and ideologues. On the one hand, the study of post-socialist transformation is reinvigorated by bringing in the symbolic-cultural interpretive dimensions, and the classical analytical entry-points of anthropology; on the other hand, the places of political action and political processes are discovered in less expected areas. Nationalism is thus explained as part of kinship, spirits, ancestor worship, and the circulation of cultural treasures, rather than as a matter of territorial borders, state-making, "constructionism," or resource competition; legitimation processes are seen as reorganisations and reorderings of a meaningful universe (Verdery 1999: 26).

*The Vanishing Hectare*, published in 2003 (Verdery 2003), occasions a forceful re-entry on anthropology's playground. The book contributes one of the most valuable analyses of post-socialist transformations, pivoting around the political process of land property reform. De-collectivisation, or undoing the socialist agricultural property, is followed at the level of people who live it every day. Their experiences, feelings, actions and relationships are located in local power structures, specific regional dynamics, governmental policy constraints, and directives of financial international organisations. In this book, Verdery gives, and copiously illustrates with ethnographic material, an unparalleled conceptualisation of the notion of property as cultural system, organisation of power, and set of social relations, which emerge in social processes. This work receives large professional recognition and is awarded numerous accolades. A year later, the question of the constitution and re-constitution of property, and its relation with the value it generates, is examined as a central element of global relations in the collection co-edited with Caroline Humphrey, *Property in Question: Value Transformation in the Global Economy* (Humphrey and Verdery 2004).

Paired with this research is another large-scale professional adventure taken up by Katherine Verdery at the beginning of the 2000s, together with her fellow Romania scholar and friend Gail Kligman, Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles. They invite representatives of several disciplines – History, Anthropology, Sociology, Law, and Literary Critique – to form a team of fifteen scholars, who will investigate the process of the collectivisation of agriculture in Romania. Most of them are working within institutions in Romania; two of them, Călin Goina and Virgiliu Țărău, are members of our university. The project is interdisciplinary and international, but also intergenerational: alongside established researchers, the team included five Romanian doctoral students, three of whom were studying with Verdery and Kligman. Their investigation takes them to twenty one localities spread all over the country, and employs research techniques and sources from all the disciplines represented, especially archival material, official statistics, legislative documents, and oral history interviews – an intense process of mutual learning and shared field experience.

Within the space of this project one can grasp, at scale, the influence of Professor Verdery's work in Romania. First, she gave shape and face to anthropology, and to its specific method, ethnographic fieldwork, in a professional space where what bore these names was limited to one aspect of discipline's scope only. Her research projects, all carried out in Romania, represented exemplary practice - of anthropology and beyond anthropology, when their purpose relocated into other areas of the social sciences, in times of adversity. Traversing disciplinary boundaries left decisive marks on the methodological strategies and the epistemic constructs of Romanian history and sociology. Second, Verdery engaged the scientific work of her Romanian colleagues, attenuating the colonizing and self-colonizing forms of scholarly work done in the region, before and after 1989. Her analyses, minutely assembled, vividly documented and supported by an alert and precise reflection, often overturned autochthonous ideological versions or heroic stereotypes about facts, people, symbols, and social processes, circulated within the Romanian political and scientific fields alike. At the same time, she offered Romanians a phenomenal mirror into the past and into the present, the result of countless hours and days and months of life lived with and through them.

The study of collectivisation produced an important number of reports, narratives, interpretations, articles and books by the participants in the project. In 2005 was published the volume *Țărănimea și puterea: Procesul de colectivizare a agriculturii în România, 1949-1962*, edited by Dorin Dobrințu and Constantin Iordachi, under the coordination of Kligman and Verdery (Dobrințu and Iordachi 2005), later translated to English as *Transforming Peasants, Property, and Power: Collectivization of Agriculture in Romania, 1948-1962* (Dobrințu and Iordachi 2009). It comprised a general depiction of the process of collectivisation, and the set of

case studies. In 2011, after almost as many years as the collectivisation itself had lasted, the book *Peasants under Siege: The Collectivization of Romanian Agriculture, 1949-1962* came out at Princeton University Press (Kligman and Verdery 2011), and was soon translated to Romanian as *Țăranii sub asediu: Colectivizarea agriculturii în România* (Kligman and Verdery 2015). This work is saluted by the academic community and beyond, and rewarded prestigious prizes in recognition of its value.

While doing documentation work in the Securitate Archive, Verdery is urged to claim her own file. Opened in 1974, and active until 1988, it contains 2769 pages of notes and reports from over seventy people - friends, collaborators, and persons met by chance. The encounter with this material is an unusual occurrence for the anthropologist, because it completely reverses the angle of investigation and the position of the relation between researcher and her subject.

The strategies we use to arrive at formulations that express knowledge of the social realm are variable, from discovery to construction, representation and revelation, recuperation and salvation, indicating different points of view and relations with the object under study, and particular concerns of the researcher. For the anthropologist, empirical data are not found on an abstract plane, in objective form, waiting to be discovered, collected, and processed. Her material is exactly what she generates in everyday interaction with her subjects, in the life lived alongside them, and which engage her equally emotionally and physically, as well as intellectually. Her person - her body, sentiments, reactions - is the main instrument of investigation employed by the anthropologist. What she has to confront on field are both the exaggeration, disinformation, deception, and resistance from the researched, as a reaction to the particular symbolic violence exerted by the anthropologist, as well as her own vulnerability or repression. This common space of signification, between the anthropologist and the other, implied by ethnographic work, is one that gets reconfigured continuously. The understanding and the knowledge generated by the anthropologist is predicated on interruptions and eruptions, on the constant unmaking and remaking of the liminal common culture constructed by the anthropologist and her subjects in their interaction (Rabinow 1977: 153-54). In this space, her emotions and her reactions, when the anthropologist strives for critical distance and reflexive temperance, may effect mindful and bodily dispositions that allow deeper access to the layers of the real (Culic 2010: 201).

Read in this key, the Securitate file that Verdery had in front of her was a turning point as anthropologist. The blow, the feeling of betrayal, the pain of this unexpected reality that has always already been there, are immense.

All of a sudden, an inversion takes place. Her own person is produced as source of data and object of investigation, exactly like her own subjects were transformed into field notes. The objectifying researcher becomes the researched

object. Securitate's methods are strikingly similar to those of the anthropologist. Verdery is presented precisely with an ethnography of her own person, of what she was representing at that moment politically – the West. The Enemy.

The inversion happens on several planes. From author interpreting the reports of her subjects she becomes the subject of their reports. Their modes of interpretation are determined by the reporting conditions that the Securitate's presence within the Romanian society created. Anthropologist's presence modulates not only the space of interaction between her and her subjects, but alters their whole relational space – with the others, with the authorities, with themselves, by forcing them to an examination of their own conscience when the Securitate request for collaboration is made.

During this period of pondering, suffering, and revolt, the stake that remains is to maintain the personal and the professional integrity. Verdery does this with consistency. She takes the inversion straight to the original point of anthropological practice and methodology. She transforms Securitate's acts of violent extraction and the emotional and physical reactions they produce into as many occasions of intellectual reconsideration and further reflection. But, just like with the classical anthropological terrain, the anthropologist cannot engage in questioning and redefining twenty-four hours a day (Rabinow 1977: 38). The experiences triggered by this ethnography get normalized. Out of these chronicles of projections and introjections, the personhood and wholeness of the person evoked, and of those who evoked her, are recuperated (Culic 2010: 200). They cannot be separated from the social conditions of their production. Life almost confounds with the field – a dialectic between reflection and immediacy (Rabinow 1977: 38).

For all these, for her presence here, the ceremonial of induction into the Babeş-Bolyai University family formally avows what had happened already, imperceptibly, just like with her families in Vlaicu. This ceremonial is a public declaration that she belongs here, and a moment of shared joy. Thank you.

## REFERENCES

- Banac, I., and Verdery, K. (eds) (1995). *National Character and National Ideology in Interwar Eastern Europe*. New Haven: Yale Center for International Studies.
- Burawoy, M., and Verdery, K. (eds) (1999). *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Everyday Life in the Postsocialist World*. Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Culic, I. (2010). Autobiography as Ethnography. Doing Fieldwork at Home Away. *Studia Sociologia*, 55 (2): 195-206.

- Dobrincu, D., and Iordachi, C. (eds) (2005). *Puterea și țărănimea: Procesul de colectivizare a agriculturii în România, 1949-1962*. Iași: Polirom.
- Dobrincu, D., and Iordachi, C. (eds) (2009). *Transforming Peasants, Property, and Power: Collectivization of Agriculture in Romania, 1948-1962*. Budapest: CEU Press.
- Kligman, G., and Verdery, K. (2011). *Peasants under Siege: The Collectivization of Romanian Agriculture, 1949-1962*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kligman, G., and Verdery, K. (2015). *Țăranii sub asediu: Colectivizarea agriculturii în România*. Iași: Polirom.
- Rabinow, P. (1977). *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Verdery, K. (1983). *Transylvanian Villagers: Three Centuries of Political, Economic, and Ethnic Change*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Verdery, K. (1991). *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Verdery, K. (1994). *Compromis și rezistență. Cultura română sub Ceaușescu*. București: Humanitas.
- Verdery, K. (1996). *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Verdery, K. (1999). *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Verdery, K. (2003a). *The Vanishing Hectare: Property and Value in Postsocialist Transylvania*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Verdery, K. (2003b). *Socialismul. Ce a fost și ce urmează*. Iași: Institutul European.
- Verdery, L. (2004). Anthropological adventures with Romania's Wizard of Oz, 1973-1989. *Focaal* 43: 134-45.
- Verdery, K. (2006). *Viața politică a trupurilor moarte. Înhumare și schimbare postsocialistă*. București: Editura Vremea.
- Verdery, K. (2013). An anthropologist in communist Romania, 1973-1988. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 60 (4): 35-42.
- Verdery, K. (2014). *Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of the Romanian Secret Police. The Natalie Zemon Davis Lectures for 2012*. Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Verdery, K., and Humphrey, C. (eds) (2004). *Property in Question: Value Transformation in the Global Economy*. Oxford: Berg.