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**Fia attent (Watch out!): Surveillance and Intimacy in Ethnographic Research**

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Several articles in the *Recalling Fieldwork* collection (Mateoc and Ruegg 2020) discuss the role of state surveillance and how it affected our ethnographic fieldwork. This was certainly the case in my own research in Romania in the decade from 1974-1985, where my secret police (Securitate) file ended up being over 600 pages long, and where I was blacklisted in 1985 due to hostile activities (Sampson 2020). Other ethnographers had similar experiences (Verdery 2018, Verdery and Kligman’s articles in *Recalling Fieldwork*). Here I would like to use these discussions and connect the role of surveillance with the ethnographic project of achieving some kind of intimacy with the people we study, as described among others by Besnier (2015). A state of ’intimacy’ is achieved when we have a multifaceted relationship with informants, when we get to know them not just as research objects but as persons, close friends or confidantes. This kind of intimacy can be the outcome of ethnographic fieldwork because we ethnographers, unlike other social sciences, use our very self, our person, as the primary instrument for understanding how people live their lives. In the socialist states, with their surveillance apparatus, most ethnographers were able to overcome these barriers and achieve some kind of intimacy with a few of the people they studied. Here I will discuss about three kinds of surveillance and how they affected our ability to establish, sustain and manage intimacy. These three kinds of surveillance are 1) the familiar state surveillance carried out by secret police against us and our informants; 2) the peer-to-peer surveillance experienced by all ethnographers who immerse themselves in small communities, where everyone seems to know everything about you and you about them; and 3) the self-surveillance that we conducted as we tried to figure out what was going on, whom to trust, what trust meant, and our subsequent guilt as we learned about the effect of our presence on innocent citizens because of their relationship with us. Under these conditions, intimacy was both a form of emotional release and a personal risk to us and others (this is nothing new, of course, being the stuff of countless novels and films).

As fieldworkers, all anthropologists are looking for intimacy. This is because intimacy is both emotionally rewarding, and because it ends up giving us better data about how people really experience their lives. But there is a dark side to even the closest relationships. To find the solution to this dilemma, we need to start asking some painful questions. We need to ‘fii attent’ (watch out/pass auf).

All societies are somehow societies of surveillance. States and governments watch us and our behavior, people watch their own state, looking for signs of trouble, conflict, instability or abuse; people watch each other, trying to figure out who has valuable resources they might use, whom to trust, whom to relate to and whom to detach from. These days, our own academic institutions watch us through various digital monitoring systems and research citation indexes; and private corporations watch us trying to predict our consumer tastes and what we will buy next. There are also some of us, influencers and web personalities, who want desperately to be watched, and who do everything they can to make sure that they are ‘followed’ by as many people as possible. For those of us who did fieldwork in socialist Eastern Europe, however, wanting to be followed was the last thing we wished for.

The various kinds of surveillance are now the object of a new discipline, known as Surveillance Studies. The field now has at least two readers containing ‘classic articles’ (Ball, Haggerty and Lyon 2012, Monahan and Wood 2018) as well as a leading journal, *Surveillance and Society*. Surveillance Studies now goes far beyond the famous panopticon of Foucault, the prison observation tower that he borrowed from the liberal philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who in fact also presented several kinds of benign panopticons, often overlooked.

When we anthropologists enter a society, we enter a surveillance landscape. We enter with the goal of getting to know a specific milieu, be it a community, a network, an assemblage, a group of people with special resources and interests, and a bunch of unique practices relating to nature, society and culture. We learn methods of watching and techniques of involvement, known as participant-observation. We know that as strangers with what seems to be an unclear purpose, that people are also watching us, so we prepare for it. In ethnography, we hope that we will be watched in the right way, so we learn in graduate school the importance of curating the watching of others, of making sure we are surveilled so as not to harm our research objectives. In Eastern Europe, therefore, we were told NOT to establish too intimate relations with informants, NOT to provoke hazardous political discussions, NOT to change money illegally, NOT to smuggle items into or out of the country, not to do this, not to do that. Our project as ethnographers from the West who had entered on formal exchange programs, was to show to the authorities and ordinary people that our physical presence, our interviewing, our participant-observation in the daily lives of others, that our motives were not malevolent, that we are not subversive, that we were truly there to find out how they live or act and nothing more, and that we did not have some kind of secretive, alternative project. In short, we tried to act and to show to others that we were who we said we were. That we were not spies.

Showing that you do not have an alternative project is difficult for ethnographers; because we often end up changing our field interests as we get immersed into the daily milieu. I know I did, and I think others did as well. We enter the fieldsite thinking that X is important, but the people are actually preoccupied with Y and Z, and you change your focus. You can call this confusion, or serendipity or improvisation. Or social science.

 This kind of improvisation becomes that much harder in societies that see evidence of spies or subversives everywhere, even in the most innocent activities or initial research confusion. In these societies, people concealed their real opinions. They looked for hidden clues or signs of what was really going on because they did not trust the government, the press, or the authorities. Nothing was as it seems. This was my experience in Romania in the 1970s and 1980s, and the experience of other ethnographers in various socialist countries, both in Europe and elsewhere. Both subaltern and elite communities can view researchers as secretive, powerful, or dangerous.

 My attempt to convince people and the authorities that I was not a spy failed miserably. After many months of preliminary study in a Romanian village, collecting family histories and studying the history of collectivization, I ended up pursuing my research on urban planning. The village happened to have a secret uranium factory nearby. The factory was not my interest; I wanted to stay as far away from it as possible. But alas, an American coming into a village like this, asking all kinds of questions and taking photos, well, there must be something more going on. The suspicions are indicated in my secret police files and in reports filed or collected from villagers about my activities. A few years later, returning as a postdoctoral researcher to study village leadership practices, I hung out at the communist party training school in Bucharest, interviewing village leaders, and eventually visited several villages around Romania, often escorted by a sociologist from the party school. I talked to a lot of people, once in a while directly about the Ceausescu communist party regime and about what was going on in Eastern Europe at the time (Solidarnosc in Poland). At the party school, I even explained Trotsky’s idea of the ‘degenerative workers state’ and his critique of Stalinism. I explained my project on village planning and local leaders dozens of times to different kinds of people, local peasants, village schoolteachers, local party leaders, Romanian sociologists.

 Nevertheless, the main surveillance archive I have, my Securitate file of 600 pages, contains page after page of interpretation that I have some kind of alternative mission. Near the end of the file, one of the high ranking Romanian Securitate officers, Colonel Vlad, writes in the margins of one report, ‘Is he a spy or isn’t he?’ .

 I ended up being refused entry into Romania in 1985, detailed on entry at the airport with my wife and children, and sent back on the next plane to Copenhagen, where I live. In the airport, in a brief encounter with the border officer, I asked him why I was being expelled from Romania. He answered curtly, ‘You know why’.

 This interpretation of my nefarious motives continued even after I was blacklisted. After some years, in the hope of returning to Romania, my wife and I applied, in March 1989, for a tourist visa. Our applications were rejected, the Romanian embassy in Copenhagen reporting that I was probably using my wife, a Norwegian citizen who did not need an entry visa, as a surrogate to carry out my secret mission. (I later learned that my persona non grata status was of temporary duration, to expire on December 31st 1989, which turned out to be six days after the Ceausescus were executed).

 Surveillance regimes, of whatever kind, have a direct effect on the anthropological project of obtaining data. For we obtain much of our data in the most intimate of ways, through daily personal contact with other persons, people who we used to call ‘informants’ but are now called ‘interlocutors’. Our goal is to get close, very close, to people’s everyday lives. The closer we get, the better data we are supposed to get. Engagement is good. Detachment is bad. We may also gather statistics, give out questionnaires or consult archives. But most of all, we are supposed to use our own bodies and persons as our research instrument. We get to know them, and they get to know us, or at least get to trust us. We celebrate this as successful fieldwork. But for any surveillance regime – both the most brutal and the most benign – there are obvious consequences. Surveillance becomes a risk factor in any attempt to establish the kind of ethnographic intimacy that we need in order to answer our research questions.

Surveillance regimes entail watching and being watched for various purposes. In our own societies today, some of us are being watched to make sure we do not commit crimes; others are being watched for our own good, to make sure we do not get sick or that we don’t run away from an old-age home; states watch citizens; organizations watch employees; citizens watch the state; parents watch baby sitters; Facebook watches us; Google watches us; and some of us do all we can to be watched by others. As recent works on surveillance have pointed out, surveillance is everywhere, all the time. Haggerty and Ericson summarize this trend as ‘the disappearance of disappearance’ (2000, 620).

Surveillance in Eastern Europe, however, and especially in Romania, was focused on strictly controlling the population by restricting knowledge about the country’s general situation and contacts with others. The goal was to prevent certain kinds of knowledge from spreading in society or abroad, and being used against Romanian interests. The knowledge could be what the Romanian regime considered a strategic secret, for example, how the uranium factory operated; or rumours of a mine explosion; but it could also be what we might call everyday knowledge of how things really functioned in Eastern Europe, corruption within the party or planning system, the extent of political protests; that is, knowledge that the regime felt was harmful to its reputation and stability. (After the events of 1989, we now know how fragile such regimes were).

 Anthropologists in Eastern Europe did not have access to what we considered ‘strategic knowledge’. We knew how things worked in small communities, we knew that people hoarded food, violated rationing regulations, bribed doctors, procured dollars on the black market, and developed other strategies for getting by (Sampson 1983-1987). But for us ethnographers, this was hardly ‘strategic information’ much less a state secret. Nevertheless, we were closely surveilled, as were the people with whom we were in contact. Some of our contacts, close friends and acquaintances were crudely harassed, others cooperated with the authorities in order to survive or maintain their privileges of contact with foreigners or going abroad, and still others found ways to avoid, evade or resist intimidation by the security organs. In my own file, I can see that some of these people were close friends or village informants; others were people whom we encountered in the course of research, at university, while eating at a restaurant, living in a hotel, or in my case when I purchased a bicycle at a Bucharest flea market. All these people had in common that they had some kind of relation with me, and were therefore of interest to the Romanian security organs.

 For some of these people, their contact with the security organs consisted of a short interview or writing a report. But for others the situation was more serious. Some close friends in Romania were intensely harassed as a result of their relationship with me. Let me provide an illustrative example:

 After ten years visiting Romania, I had made some close friends. Two of my closest friends were ‘Andrei’ and ‘Maria’ (pseudonyms). During my initial fieldwork in Feldioara, my wife and I had lived in the house of Andrei’s uncle, so we got to know each other at family gatherings. Andrei and Maria lived in the city of Brasov, 20 km away, in an eighth floor apartment, with their baby daughter. Andrei was an engineer in the Brasov tractor factory, and Maria worked in an architectural planning office. They were my age and very personable, and whenever my wife and I went to Brasov, we invited them out for dinner or just sat around and talked in their apartment. When I visited them, we could relax, gossiping about people in the village or talking about conditions in Romania (in a low voice). I would bring along some Johnny Walker Scotch whiskey, Kent cigarettes or Toblerone chocolate purchased from the ‘dollar shop’, where Romanians could not enter. Maria would serve sweet pancakes. Later on, when I visted from Denmark, I would bring baby clothes for their daughter or cosmetics for Maria. Over the years, we exchanged letters and phone calls, and I visited them whenever I came to Romania. At times I stayed overnight in their home, which was illegal according to Romanian law on contact with foreigners. Of course, we talked about them visiting me in Denmark, a procedure that required me to send them a formal invitation, after which they would apply for a passport to visit the West. This was not impossible; some years earlier, my ‘host’ in the village, a retired collective farm worker visited me in Denmark.

By the mid-1980s, my visits to Romania had become more stressful. I could not obtain a research permission, so I visited on a tourist visa for a week or two, sometimes with a Danish charter group going to a nearby ski resort in Brasov or to the Black Sea beaches, and then went off on my own. I tried to remain inconspicuous, traveling light and speaking as a Romanian. Visiting Andrei and Maria in their apartment at night, we talked softly. We did not go out anymore. I used the same procedure with other Romanian friends. They were cautious, I was paranoid. And as it turned out, naïve. As Brasov lay in the center of Romania, I also met friends from Bucharest or Cluj in their apartment.

 In 1983 I sent a formal invitation letter to Andrei and Maria to visit me in Denmark. With this invitation, they would now have to apply for a passport, which involved extensive investigation and interrogation by the passport bureau and by the Brasov security organs. For Andrei and Maria, my invitation thus led them to have several interviews with the passport police and security organs regarding their relations with me. Since I was not a relative, and since my name was already in their files, my invitation to them was suspicious. How did they know me? What had I asked them about the factory in the village? What about the factory in Brasov where Andrei worked? Did they know that I was a spy? Did not Andrei, an engineer in a strategic factory, understand that he was being used by me? Didn’t he understand that I had invited him to Denmark in order get secrets out of him? After several weeks, their application was rejected. Moreover, they were instructed not to correspond with me or meet with me if I came to Romania.

In the summer of 1984, I returned to Romania for a brief visit with my wife and baby daughter. I had written to Andrei and Maria that I was coming during these days. I landed in Bucharest, rented a car and made my way to their apartment in Brasov. But they were never at home. For several days, every time I went to their apartment, there was no answer. Their phone did not answer either. I figured that they must be on vacation, probably on the Black Sea coast. Some years later, they explained to me that they were terrified of meeting me for fear of the police. Every day for that week I was in Brasov, they had gone out into the forest for a picnic in order to avoid seeing me, remaining all day and into the evening, hoping that I would not show up on their return.

 Waiting to contact Andrei and Maria, I went out to the village, where people were more accommodating and happy to see me. I stayed with my former host family. I had brought a gift package for Andrei and Maria, some chocolates, toys and children’s clothes. Andrei’s mother lived in the village, so to be safe, I asked the young grandson where I was living to walk over to Andrei’s mother and give her the package with my greetings. The mother should tell Andrei and Maria that I was here in the village, and that if they were around, they could come around the corner to where I was staying. He never came.

The next day, walking through the village, I ran into Andrei on the street. He was visiting his mother. He spoke to me briefly and coldly: ‘Thank you for the package. No, we cannot meet. Please do not visit us. Don’t visit anybody, you’ll only make trouble for them. Good-bye’. Then he walked away. I had known things were getting bad, but it was not until now that I knew how bad. Here was a guy whom I had known for 10 years, having spent hours and days in their apartment, and he just walks away like I have some kind of disease. This was a period when any Romanian who spoke to a foreigner had to make a report to the police, and when others could inform on them for not doing so. On the other hand, I had met dozens of people who did not care about the law, including the family with whom I was staying. So I could never be sure who felt intimidated by these laws and who did not.

I later found out that Andrei and Maria, even though their request to visit Denmark had been rejected, continued to be called in for interrogation. Their situation was so serious, they explained later, that they contemplated suicide. Their relationship with me was making their life horrible. Andrei, he explained later on, had been threatened that he would not be promoted to chief engineer in the factory. Even worse, their daughter would not be allowed to enter gymnasium. Because of me, their life was falling apart.

Following my brief encounter with Andrei, I returned to Denmark, depressed and paranoid. Perhaps I could do something to alleviate the situation. In Copenhagen, ever the American optimist, I visited the Romanian embassy in an effort to try and renew my invitation to Andrei and Maria, and to ask the embassy attaché if they could intervene. I had been to the embassy many times, both for a visa and in connection with the Danish-Romanian Friendship Society, where I was a member. I explained to the friendly attache, that perhaps there was a mistake. One of the diplomats happened to come from the same village where Andrei had been born. He was impressed that I knew so much about his home district. I asked him if he could help with the invitation so that they could visit me in Copenhagen. The attaché said he would look into the case. Of course, nothing came of it. Instead, he also wrote a report about me in my secret police file, saying that I was suspicious. How naïve was I. After he retired, he actually wrote several books about his life as a secret police operative.

Since 1989, I have met frequently with Andrei and Maria. They always bring up this time of interrogation by the secret police. As a result of their intimate relationship with me, they have been marked for life. For an entire generation of Romanians, the socialist period of repression, the fear of informers, remains a vital part of their lives.

My story here is one where I succeed in achieving the kind of intimacy that makes for good fieldwork, but where a lot of things go terribly wrong. It is a story that many anthropologists or journalists could tell in various nuances. It reveals the dark side of intimacy, where states carry out surveillance with a specific purpose: to uncover subversive or dangerous elements infiltrating the country with uncontrolled resources, to control people who might exchange dangerous knowledge (books) or ideas (bibles) and perhaps with a project to extract knowledge (secrets) from the population. It is symptomatic of a regime that is suspicious of outsiders, and suspicious of its own population. In such a context, the demands for ethnographic intimacy become more complex. The closer you get to informants, the more dangerous it is for them. They become harassed, and you might be expelled or blacklisted.

 The surveillance described here is familiar to anyone who has read Foucault or Orwell, or the many autobiographies of East European dissidents. It is the familiar panopticon surveillance of the state against its citizens. Everyone working in Eastern Europe was familiar with this kind of surveillance. The state watched over its citizens for specific signs of disloyalty or subversion. And it watched over foreigners who could be automatically perceived as agents of subversion or spies. Anthropologists, regardless of how we thought of ourselves, were a uniquely dangerous kind of foreigner: we did not live in tourist hotels in major cities, making us harder to watch, and we could speak the local language, giving us access to new kinds of information. Everyone I knew in Romania knew about the Securitate, and everyone had an opinion about them, ranging from their omnipotence to their being ridiculous. In one instance I collaborated with a Romanian sociologist, the late Nicolae Gheorghe, who wrote a transcript of our discussions in an attempt to convince the Securitate the difference between ethnographic fieldwork and espionage. Obviously, he, too, failed. And Gheorghe was harassed constantly until December 1989. In another instance, I had a long lunch with a Romanian literary critic, the late Andre Brezianu. After being forced to write a report, Brezianu authored a long essay on American and Romanian literature, as part of our discussions (see Verdery 2018 for a longer exposition of how the secret police affected her research).

Being watched was not just a oneway street. Villagers also watched each other, and rumors about me could lead to a police investigation (as when the police came searching for a golden pistol that I had supposedly left behind in the house where I had lived). In addition, those who were watched also watched the watchers and understood the kind of information the security organs wanted. As a result, some Romanians provided what we now might call ‘content’, but this content was largely innocuous. Ordinary Romanians, including Andrei and Maria, wrote simply statements saying that we talked about our families and children, and that seemed to be sufficient for a time. However, the security organs had their own plan, which led to harassment of Andrei and Maria for no reason. Other Romanians in sensitive positions developed their own strategies. Party cadre in the village, and those in the party school where I was later on, each had their own strategy; they found me pleasant to be with, and sometimes a useful resource for buying cigarettes or translating letters, but they were also fearful of their own careers and families. And with good reason. The line between intimacy and me obtaining useful data was always unclear. And unclear lines can always be manipulated and exploited by the powers that be.

 Looking back, what should I have done otherwise? The Romanian regime was essentially spying on their own citizens, looking for some kind of ideological infection from me to them, and the organs assumed that I was out to obtain secrets from them (even if our mutual definition of ‘secrets’ was so strikingly different). In retrospect, it is a miracle that I, along with other American anthropologists, were allowed into Romania in the first place, this being East Europe’s most repressive regime (aside from Albania). Of course, we were there as part of a diplomatic agreement between the US and Romania, such that we were partly protected and had the support of our embassy (more on this in Sampson 2020). In 1980 and later on coming with Danish research funds on my own, I was not ‘protected’, I was a freelancer. I cultivated the networks and protection I could. By the mid-1980s, after publishing some provocative articles and giving presentations at conferences and in the media, my social capital eventually dried up. Spurred on by negative reports from other regime-friendly sociologists at the party school, by Romanian embassy personnel in Copenhagen, and by their own interpretations of who I was and what I was doing in Romania, the security organs decided that I was no longer useful, nor desirable.

 Looking back on the surveillance regime to which I was subjected, there were two kinds of state surveillance operating. First, there was the more brutal surveillance of the population, restrictive, controlling, intimidating and threatening. Many Romanians knew that relations with a foreigner would only bring trouble. In Foucauldian terms, this is pre-Panopticon surveillance, in so far it is crude repression of ‘the population’ as a whole, intended to keep them in line. It is first at the Panopticon level, following Foucault, that surveillance is takien down to the individual level, making people feel that they are constantly watched even when they are not, and it is this feeling that changes creates the governmentality that alters people’s behaviour. This second form of surveillance, what Foucault called ‘discipline’, is more sophisticated or subtle, altering people’s everyday ife in terms of who they will talk to and what they say. These two kinds of state surveillance were both present in Romania during my fieldwork. Villagers, for example, played the game of surveillance, but when out of sight, did what they could to avoid, evade or undermine the system; these practices have been described by many scholars, observers and anthropologists. Intellectuals and professionals, however, were subject to the second, more subtle type of surveillance. Their creative products could be censored, they learned to talk in code, as when Ceausescu, speaking of serious problems, spoke of ‘deficiencies and shortcomings’ (*lipsuri si neajunsuri*) that impeded ‘further perfecting’ (*perfectionarea*) of the system. The professionals thus learned dissimulation, the ability to say only what was expected; in this sense, Foucault’s ‘discipline’ reached down into the very essence of Romanians’ everyday lives and practices. Some people were afraid to say what they wanted, others not. Everyone made choices. Ultimately, this produced another, third kind of surveillance, a self-surveillance which was not dependent on the effectiveness of the security organs, but which also entailed that those being watched would watch the watchers and perform accordingly (Deleuze’s concept of ‘societies of control’, 1992)

Hagerty and Ericson (2000) speak of a ‘surveillance assemblage’, extrapolating from Deleuze and Guattari. This assemblage is a combinaton of persons, technologies, objects and flows which function together. It is not always discrete or hierarchical, which makes it more rhizomic than a hierarchic state institution watching over its subaltern citizens. Looking back on fieldwork in Romania, it is clear that the main surveillance was the state security organs watching the citizens. But the Romanian surveillance assemblage had other aspects. Supplementing the formal security organs was the party and its members, who in Romania constituted 20% of the adult population. Party members had special duties to detect suspicious activities in society, and even among each other. Such activities could include a comrade or work colleague who as a bit too friendly with a foreign researcher like myself. Party members could and did cooperate with the Securitate organs when asked, and they could also act on their own initiative. In this case, surveillance of others became a personal strategy that one could employ in order to safeguard one’s own career, show loyalty or obtain privileges such as traveling abroad.

 In the village of Feldioara and at the party schools I visited, it was clear that some people were more relaxed in my company, while others were tense or even jealous. This took the form of gossip about me and my activities, and also various appeals to do favors for others, procuring jeans, cigarettes, autoparts, Swiss army knives, certain books, and in one case, a Samsonite attaché case. Participating in such exchange networks – providing things or service in exchange for access -- is a common situation for anthropologists. And we often accommodate because our primary goal is intimacy, ever more intimacy.

Modern surveillance studies has emphasized the enormous technological capabilities of surveillance systems to observe, store, and classify large amounts of human behavior. Fortunately, this kind of sophisticated technology was not available when anthropologists began working in the socialist states. As Katherine Verdery writes about her file (2018) and regarding my own file, photographs and tapes play only a small part of our personal surveillance. Rather, it was largely in the form of observations and reports filed by security organs, or reports and interrogations of people with whom we contacted that constructed the Romanian official view of who we were and what we were *really* doing in Romania. There are photographs and tapes of me in Romania, and my file contains records of my published articles, conference presentations and letters sent and received to/from abroad. But the vast majority of surveillance consists of interviews and written reports about me written by people who had interacted with me, who knew me, and by people who interrogated those who knew me. There were people who observed my comings and goings from afar, others whom I met and interacted with in academic, interview or informal settings. All that was private became essentially public, in that it went into my file. Who we were was thus constructed on the basis of human observations of us, subsequently interpreted by other humans working in a surveillance/security bureaucracy with an incentive to dig up threats. By the mid-1980s, I had made the list of such threats.

Let me end this discussion by coming back to the intimacy prerogative to which all ethnographers are exposed. Ethnographic fieldwork is considered successful when we can show that we have established relations with the people we study. Relations are good. Isolation and detachment are bad. Recent anthropological studies have called into question this emphasis on relationality and the downgrading of detachment. Matei Cindea and colleagues (2015) and Marilyn Strathern (1996) have emphasized that detachment and distancing, cutting off ties, refusal to form ties, is itself as essential to social life as the formation of relationships.

 The problem of involvement and detachment (Elias 1956) is not new. Detachment is both a state (one is not related-never related) and a process (one ‘de-taches’ or separates from another). However, detachment is not a synomym for isolation. Donna Haraway, in a well known article on ‘Situated Knowledges’ (1988), makes a plea for a ‘passionate detachment’ in which we continually seek out solutions and linkages without falling back on the ‘god trick’ of false, depersonalized objectivity. Perhaps this passionate detachment could be a compromise solution in doing research in states where surveillance regimes are much more powerful and more dangerous than our efforts to achieve intimacy.

Perhaps in our research in socialist Eastern Europe, and in societies where the regimes did not allow people certain freedoms of association and where others could exploit these restrictions to create insecurity, that in these societies our urge to intimacy should have perhaps been tempered with more detachment. There would have been a price; perhaps we would not get all the juicy ethnographic data, but perhaps our informants would have been spared the hassle of being harassed or threatened by police organs, the local party secretary, or local village gossip. If detachment is just as important as engagement, then we need to rethink some of the basic premises of ethnographic fieldwork which presses us to ever more intimacy and involvement with our research population as an index of our success. The value of doing fieldwork in the socialist states, and in other repressive regimes, is precisely this. We are there to find out how people live, but finding out how they live might get a lot of people in a lot of trouble (not just us).

The first rule of any humanitarian intervention is ‘do no harm’. I think some of us did more harm than we realize when we did our research. Some people got in trouble because of us. Some relationships were poisoned even as others were intensified in a more positive way. There is a cliché that life is what happens when your plans don’t go the way you want them. Ethnography is like life. Perhaps we need to have a better balance between intimacy and detachment in our fieldwork. Perhaps intimacy has been overrated and detachment overlooked.

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