

## IN MEMORIAM



Moment de convivialité lors de séjour sur le terrain, août 1983, Novaci (Gorj), Roumanie. De gauche à droite: Alexandru Sigheti (informaticien), Radu Răutu, Vintilă Mihăilescu, Ioan Oprescu (linguiste). Courtesy of Radu Răutu.

## For Vintilă

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## Vintilă Mihăilescu: Respirer et écrire<sup>1</sup>

De l'ethnographie à l'anthropologie

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Vintilă Mihăilescu écrivait comme il respirait. Et plus que cela, il respirait comme il écrivait. Et il le savait bien, lui qui, confronté à une maladie redoutable, se voyait menacé d'être privé d'air. Pour lui, écrire était donc une fonction vitale. Et il a écrit "jusqu'au bout du chemin".

Dans *Ambos Mundos*, l'essai sur son voyage à Cuba, qu'il a choisi pour être traduit en français<sup>2</sup>, Vintilă rappelle les trois étapes bien connues que distingue Claude Lévi-Strauss dans son *Anthropologie structurale*: ethnographie, ethnologie, anthropologie. En pratique, certains, *ethnographes* de vocation, font un travail de terrain remarquable mais ne vont pas nécessairement au-delà de la collecte des données. D'autres considèrent le terrain comme une étape obligée de leur carrière, afin de pratiquer une *ethnologie* nationale (dans le cas des Pays de l'est, pour le moins)<sup>3</sup>. D'autres (ou les mêmes) enfin, souhaitent construire, à partir des deux premières démarches, un discours comparatiste et universel sur "l'Homme en société", bref, une *anthropologie*. Ces trois étapes, parfaitement complémentaires, sont rarement exercées de manière égale par un seul et même chercheur.

Pourtant, Vintilă était cet anthropologue complet, et il le fut avec constance et passion. Passion du terrain: qui a partagé avec lui cette expérience ne peut qu'avoir constaté sa jubilation à se trouver en immersion dans un milieu paysan ou urbain. Passion, aussi, pour la lecture, à la découverte

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1. Sous-titre d'un ouvrage du Dr. F.B. Michel (*Le souffle coupé. Respirer et écrire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984) consacré à de grands écrivains ayant souffert de pathologie respiratoire.

2. Voir Vintilă Mihăilescu, *Ambos Mundos. Court traité d'anthropologie borgésienne*, traduction de Marianne Mesnil, Paris, Ed. Petra, 2020.

3. Voir Vintilă Mihăilescu, sous la direction de, *De ce este România astfel? Avatarurile excepționalismului românesc* [Pourquoi la Roumanie est-elle "comme ça"? Les avatars de l'exceptionnalisme roumain], Iași, Polirom, 2017.

de réflexions sur l’“Autre” par les autres. Passion, encore, pour l’écriture qui l’incitait à exercer une *anthropologie du quotidien* dont il faisait la matière première de ses célèbres “*Pilules*”, chroniques hebdomadaires de la revue *Dilema*. Passion enfin, pour la transmission orale à travers un enseignement qui a suscité, chez ses étudiants, nombre de vocations.

Et à travers toutes ces pratiques, Vintilă se révélait cet homme complet “à trois niveaux”: profondément *roumain, balkanique et universel*.

### *Veillée aux quatre coins du monde*

La disparition de Vintilă Mihăilescu était prévisible. Jusqu’au bout, on avait voulu croire que le Héros tuerait le Dragon de la Mort! Mais on savait trop bien qu’il n’en serait pas ainsi. Et pourtant, lorsque, au lendemain du printemps, la nouvelle apparut sur les réseaux sociaux, ce fut une onde de choc qui parcourut la constellation de l’anthropologie roumaine. Partout dans le monde, là où les anciens étudiants de *Domnul Profesor* s’étaient établis, s’organisa une *priveghi* (veillée funèbre) par Internet. Et ceux qui s’y sont exprimés ont dit leur désarroi, leur sentiment d’avoir été abandonnés.

### *Ne méprisez pas!*

Pourtant, les relations de V.M. avec son milieu professionnel furent loin d’être un long fleuve tranquille! Et l’on peut aisément le comprendre si l’on pense à ce que fut la carrière du chercheur avant 1989. Sans vouloir m’appesantir sur ces années de plomb, il faut imaginer ce que fut, pour cet intellectuel, héritier d’une tradition familiale où l’on parlait quatre langues “à la naissance”, ce qu’était la confrontation quotidienne avec la bêtise et/ou l’opportunisme néostalinien. Le domaine de l’“ethnographie et du folklore” (dénomination officielle jusqu’en 1989), fut particulièrement touché par l’emprise idéologique qui s’accentua encore dans les années 1980. Dès l’apparition du Festival *Cîntarea României* (Le Chant de la Roumanie), en 1975, ces instituts de recherches cessèrent de faire partie de l’Académie Roumaine pour être rattachés au Ministère de la Culture et devenir un outil de propagande à la gloire du *Danube de la pensée!* Fort heureusement, V.M. avait une formation de psychologue. Et, à ce titre, il avait obtenu un poste de chercheur à l’*Institut d’anthropologie* (physique) *Francisc Rainer*. C’est dans cette “niche” qu’il réussit à couler des jours relativement tranquilles loin des terrains de récolte du “nouveau folklore” dans lequel les travailleurs, paysans et ouvriers confondus en un *Homme nouveau*, étaient censés chanter les louanges du *Conducator*. Ce sont ces années que V.M. mit à profit pour effec-

tuer ses propres recherches de terrain et rédiger sa thèse de doctorat qui (pour raisons de “mauvais dossier” à la *Securitate*) ne put cependant être soutenue à l’Université de Bucarest qu’après 1989, dans un climat d’hostilité peu banal dont j’ai gardé le souvenir!).

Personnellement, je n’ai connu Vintilă que tardivement, quelques temps seulement avant la Chute de Ceaușescu. C’est à “Elefterie” (la rue où habitaient alors ses parents, tous deux médecins), que Radu Răutu (lui aussi, “réfugié” à l’*Institut Rainer*, échappant ainsi au “folklore nouveau”) m’a fait connaître Vintilă. J’ai le souvenir de cette brève rencontre plutôt distante, pas vraiment enthousiaste et par trop solennelle, où V.M. nous reçut “barriqué” derrière l’imposant bureau de son père! Rien alors, ne pouvait laisser supposer que résulterait de cette entrevue, une collaboration de plus de trente ans! Le dernier acte de celle-ci fut la traduction en français de l’un des derniers ouvrages de V.M., celui qu’il a lui-même choisi pour se faire connaître en occident: *Ambos Mundos. Court traité d’anthropologie borgésienne*, est une sorte de Journal où, dans ses réflexions anthropo-philosophiques, à l’occasion de son séjour à Cuba, il croit bon de revenir avec insistance sur cette expression: *Ne méprisez pas!*

Sans doute, n’en déplaise à ses relations privilégiées avec ses étudiants ou anciens étudiants auxquels il réservait toujours un accueil privilégié, V.M. a-t-il trouvé matière à réflexion sur une certaine “culture du mépris” qui n’a pas fini de traverser les relations sociales en Roumanie!

### *L’explosion de Noël 1989*

Revenir à Bucarest dans les mois qui ont suivi les événements de décembre 1989 était une expérience unique. Ce fut, pour moi, l’occasion de revoir tout le milieu des ethnographes et folkloristes que j’avais fréquenté durant les vingt dernières années. Ce fut un véritable choc de redécouvrir ces collègues qui, à l’image de la ville elle-même, semblaient émerger de la grisaille pour se parer de sourires et de couleurs vives! On osait s’embrasser, se parler; les visages ternes et fatigués avaient fait place à une vie débordante, trop longtemps contenue, qui ne demandait plus qu’à s’exprimer. Les projets fusaient de toute part, on se coupait la parole... Bref, j’assistais à la résurrection d’une ville<sup>4</sup>! Et c’est dans ce contexte que j’ai revu Vintilă.

Comme la plupart de ses collègues, il sortait de ce long isolement et avait hâte de rattraper le temps perdu. L’heure était à la collaboration. Toutes les propositions furent adoptées: la Société des Européanistes (créée à Bruxelles

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4. Malheureusement, cet “état de grâce” fut de brève durée. Un an plus tard, l’enthousiasme et l’espoir avaient déjà fait place à la désillusion.

dans les années 1980) ouvrait son antenne à l'Est et V.M. en devenait le représentant. Se succédèrent les *Journées d'Ethnologie européenne comparée* de Bucarest, Sofia, Budapest et les publications qui ont suivi; les programmes européens de *Tempus* et *Copernicus*; et surtout, les *Terrains croisés* destinés aux étudiants, dans un triangle d'échanges particulièrement actif entre Bucarest (Vintilă Mihăilescu et les *Caiete de etnologie*), Perugia (Cristina Papa et la *Missione etnologica italiana in Romania*)<sup>5</sup>, Cagliari (Giulio Angioni et la revue *Europaea. Journal des Européanistes*) et Bruxelles (Marianne Mesnil et les "Correspondances" de *Civilisations*).

Mais tout cela ne fut, pour V.M., qu'un volet de son activité. Il fut de tous les colloques, de toutes les réunions, de tous les séminaires où se développait un intérêt pour l'anthropologie d'une Europe de l'Est devenue soudain "accessible".

Dans le paysage des sciences humaines de Roumanie, il y aura, incontestablement, un "avant" et un "après" Vintilă Mihăilescu, même si l'Université de Bucarest n'a jamais offert à cette personnalité majeure de l'Intelligentzia roumaine d'être ce *Domnul Profesor*, titre qui lui a été attribué "ailleurs", à nouveau, dans une "niche"<sup>6</sup> où il a pu s'adonner pleinement à sa passion d'enseigner.

Et puisque, dans ces jours tristes, c'est le moment de se souvenir d'un beau dicton roumain qui incite à "faire de l'humour à propos du malheur" (*sà fac haz de necaz*), rappelons cette petite blague qui circulait dans le milieu des étudiants en anthropologie de Bucarest:

Quelqu'un demande à un jeune homme ce qu'il veut faire dans la vie. Réponse: anthropologue.

A quoi il s'entend répliquer:

Mais on en a déjà un: Vintilă Mihăilescu!

En ce début de printemps 2020, Vintilă Mihăilescu a cessé d'écrire et de respirer. Mais il a semé à tout vent: des livres, beaucoup de livres. Et, surtout, une nouvelle génération d'anthropologues qui a surgi en Roumanie et parcourt aujourd'hui le monde en prolongeant son enseignement. Longue vie à cette postérité!

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5. Voir notamment *La ricerca antropologica in Romania. Prospettive storiche ed etnografiche*, sous la direction de Cristina Papa, Giovanni Pizza, Filippo M. Zerilli, Napoli, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2003.

6. Vintilă Mihăilescu a enseigné l'anthropologie au SNSPA (École Nationale d'Études Politiques et Administrative, Bucarest).



## Du terrain au concept

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Ma collaboration avec Vintilă Mihăilescu commence par une rencontre basée sur une interminable histoire de recherche de terrain, chacun de notre côté, avec notre propre expérience (moi avec une expérience de terrain ethnographique et folklorique, et lui avec son expérience de terrain sociologique), une histoire qui s'est ensuite concrétisée à travers une amitié personnelle et professionnelle. Je me souviens du moment où s'est passée cette entrevue décisive. C'était durant la période de grande pénurie, vers le milieu des années '80 du siècle passé, dans un contexte que je qualifierais aujourd'hui d'humoristique. Le mazout de chauffage faisait alors défaut du fait que le régime communiste avait décidé de faire des économies drastiques pour rembourser la dette extérieure en un temps record (ce qui, c'est un comble, a pu être réalisé avec succès). Dans sa nouvelle demeure de la rue Teleajen à Bucarest, Vintilă se chauffait au mazout, une denrée que chacun tâchait de se procurer au marché noir. Pour lui, se posait en outre, le problème de l'installation de chauffage dont l'injecteur tombait souvent en panne et prenait feu. Il fut donc contraint de trouver un autre moyen de se chauffer. Une amie commune, A.L., qui nous avait déjà fait nous rencontrer étant donné notre passion partagée pour la recherche de terrain, a suggéré à Vintilă de m'appeler à l'aide pour lui fournir un chauffage électrique. Et c'est ainsi que s'est consolidée notre amitié...

Je passe sur les avatars d'une expérience personnelle, une syncope dans ma biographie: je fus congédié de l'Institut d'Ethnographie et Folklore de l'Académie Roumaine pour la "faute" d'avoir eu une soeur partie en France afin de subir un traitement contre le cancer. C'est suite à cela, et après un long enchaînement d'événements heureux que je suis arrivé à travailler dans l'équipe d'anthropologie culturelle de Vintilă au Laboratoire d'Anthropologie de l'Institut Victor Babeș de Bucarest. J'ai participé avec lui aux recherches faites dans la zone d'Olténie subcarpatique - zone de Gorj, montagneuse et pré-alpine, recherches finalement concrétisées dans le volume *Fascinația diferenței. Anii de ucenicie ai unui antropolog* (Fascination de la dif-

férence. Années d'apprentissage d'un anthropologue), signé par Vintilă. Aux recherches faites à Novaci (région de Gorj) ont participé nombre d'invités, personnalités de la vie scientifique et culturelle, ou collaborateurs de Vintilă qui ne travaillait pas encore à l'université, mais amenait néanmoins des étudiants en vacances d'été pour les initier à l'anthropologie de terrain. L'une de ses idées, qu'il a poursuivie avec persévérance avant de se retrouver à l'université, fut l'importance qu'a le terrain dans la formation d'un véritable anthropologue.

Après 1990, lorsque Vintilă quitta le Centre de Recherches Anthropologiques de l'Académie Roumaine Francisc I. Rainer (le Laboratoire de l'Institut Babeş avait acquis son indépendance, en étant directement lié à l'Académie Roumaine) pour devenir conférencier auprès de la Chaire de Sociologie de l'Université de Bucarest, puis professeur d'anthropologie et directeur du Département de Sociologie de l'École Nationale d'Études Politiques et Administratives (SNSPA), l'expérience estivale s'est poursuivie avec les étudiants, donnant ainsi naissance à une véritable École de jeunes anthropologues. De fait, il a réussi à créer une section d'Anthropologie dans le cadre du SNSPA. Dans ces expéditions/expériences de terrain, se sont impliqués (à l'invitation de Vintilă), de vieux et prestigieux professeurs, tel que l'académicien Vladimir Trebici, apportant avec lui l'expérience directe de l'École de Dimitrie Gusti, tout comme celle du professeur Mihai Pop lui aussi, ancien membre des équipes du célèbre sociologue.

C'est à l'instigation du professeur Mihai Pop, et selon le souhait et l'initiative de Vintilă, qu'un beau matin de mars 1990, dans le bien connu bureau du professeur Mihai Pop de la rue Caragea Voda, au cœur du quartier huppé de Bucarest, a pris forme, dans un enthousiasme collectif, la Société d'Anthropologie Culturelle de Roumanie (SACR), enregistrée sous cette appellation par la Décision 750 du 15 mars 1990, au Tribunal du Secteur 1 de Bucarest. Le professeur Mihai Pop ayant refusé d'être président de la société, c'est tout naturellement Vintilă Mihăilescu qui l'est devenu et le professeur Pop en a été membre d'honneur. Je figurais parmi les vingt membres fondateurs... Ont suivi d'innombrables discussions, rencontres scientifiques et même, l'organisation de congrès avec participation nationale et internationale. Nombre de nos communications et articles ont trouvé place dans le *Year Book of the Romanian Society of Cultural Anthropology / Annuaire de la Société d'Anthropologie Culturelle de Roumanie*. En 1993 eut lieu une réorganisation plus méticuleuse, tant en ce qui concerne le statut organisationnel et administratif, que l'aspect scientifique, le projet étant notamment de créer un site internet, ce qui, chez nous, pour l'époque, était une démarche pionnière.

Un exemple du “style” de Vintilă, apparaît dans la formulation de son invitation à participer à la construction de ce site, où il indique que l’on peut adresser “des commentaires, suggestions et injures; cordialement, Vintilă Mihăilescu”.

Après que Vintilă ait quitté le Centre d’Anthropologie, en 1993-94, nos préoccupations scientifiques se sont diversifiées dans d’autres directions, Vintilă poursuivant une trajectoire de plus en plus fructueuse, qui l’a conduit à jouer de nouveaux rôles socio-culturels (directeur du *Muzeul Țăranului Român*-Musée du Paysan Roumain-, bourses de recherches...) et il a commencé à écrire de manière de plus en plus approfondie mais aussi plus attractive. Ses chroniques hebdomadaires dans *Dilema veche* d’Andrei Plesu, rassemblées pour la première fois dans *Socio hai-hui*, semblent avoir préparé le terrain pour l’apparition d’autres volumes tels que: *Antropologie. Cinci introduceri*. (Anthropologie. Cinq introductions); *Scutecele națiunii și hainele împăratului* (Les langes de la nation et les vêtements de l’Empereur); *Povestea maidanezului Leuțu* (Histoire du chien de rue Leutsu); *Despre noua ordine domestică și criza omului* (A propos du nouvel ordre domestique et de la crise de l’Homme). Dans *Hotel Ambos Mundos*, il met face à face l’expérience communiste en Amérique Latine avec l’expérience communiste roumaine. Son amour et sa passion pour le culturel et social vivants ont malheureusement eu pour couronnement son dernier livre, paru en 2019, intitulé: *În căutarea corpului regăsit. O ego-analiză a spitalului* (A la recherche du corps retrouvé. Une auto-analyse de l’hôpital). L’exploration du monde hospitalier semble venir en préfiguration de l’expérience pandémique que nous vivons tous actuellement.

Par une ironie du sort, la vie professionnelle de Vintilă a gravité autour de deux coordonnées fondamentales de la société roumaine en transition: l’éducation et la santé, longtemps absentes de l’agenda public de la politique roumaine, bien que fondamentales pour la société et son avenir. Il s’est dédié avec générosité à la construction d’une Ecole de jeunes anthropologues, car il avait compris que l’éducation est la pierre angulaire d’une société fonctionnelle et démocratique. D’une certaine manière, Vintilă nous a laissé le deuxième thème comme dernière volonté, en confiant à son ami Andrei Pleșu qu’il est “entunnelé” dans l’univers hospitalier...: il effectue une analyse fine du système sanitaire, de la réforme duquel dépend, en dernière instance, le sort de chaque citoyen roumain, qu’il soit lui-même politicien ou homme d’affaire versé dans le capitalisme d’Etat. “Homme social” possédant un sens aigu des réalités, Vintilă savait ce qui est possible d’un point de vue bureaucratique et ce qui ne l’est pas; c’est ce qui lui a permis de réussir là où



d'autres auraient échoué dans leurs projets. Lors d'une émission célèbre (*Garantat 100%*, TVR), Vintilă a qualifié avec humour l'évolution du pouvoir économique en Roumanie, avec la note d'optimisme qui le caractérisait: il existe en Roumanie des entrepreneurs qui construisent leur succès grâce à un travail assidu; il en connaît quelques-uns, donc probablement qu'il y en a beaucoup d'autres mais, sûrement, comme il le reconnaissait également à demi-mot, d'un point de vue social, ceux-là proviennent, sans exception, des rangs de ceux qui "ont été en bons termes avec le régime précédent".

## Vintilă, antropologo e museografo impegnato

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Vintilă Mihăilescu apparteneva alla mia generazione, anche se era un po' più giovane di me e invece nel rapporto con lui mi pareva ci fosse un distacco quasi generazionale. Vintilă aveva l'aspetto di un uomo d'altri tempi, con una barba incolta che lo faceva assomigliare a un personaggio risorgimentale, i capelli ribelli e lo sguardo per lo più accigliato e perplesso così che dimostrava più anni di quanti non ne avesse. Ma ciò che mi faceva percepire quel distacco, quando lo conobbi, era il fatto che aveva trascorso tutta la sua vita sotto un regime autoritario quello di Ceaușescu, un'esperienza che io, nata in Italia nella fortunata generazione del dopoguerra, non solo non avevo avuto ma che riuscivo con una certa fatica a immaginare, archiviandola in un passato remoto. Ho incontrato molte persone che avevano vissuto quel periodo ma ciò che rendeva Vintilă straordinario, anche a differenza di altri colleghi universitari romeni, era la sua consapevolezza di quello che stava accadendo e di quanto era accaduto e una grande capacità di riflessione critica. Una consapevolezza che era maturata nel suo ambiente familiare, una famiglia di intellettuali e professionisti, il più noto il nonno un importante geografo umano, da cui aveva preso il nome, poliglotta e con frequenti rapporti internazionali come accadeva agli intellettuali romeni più in vista prima dell'arrivo di Ceaușescu, ed evidentemente anche nel suo lavoro di antropologo.

Incontrai Vintilă quando per la prima volta andai in Romania, a due anni dalla caduta di Ceaușescu, per partecipare al convegno internazionale *Ethnologie de l'identité, identité de l'ethnologie* che si tenne a Bucarest tra il 3 e il 6 luglio del 1991. Il convegno era organizzato dalla Société des Européanistes e dalla Societata de Antropologie Culturală din România da poco costituita, presieduta da Mihai Pop e di cui poi Vintilă divenne il secondo presidente. Marianne Mesnil era il trait d'union che collegava le due società. A lei mi aveva presentato Italo Signorini all'Università di Roma La Sapienza l'anno prima, dove da poco avevo cominciato a insegnare Storia delle tradizioni po-

polari. Marianne Mesnil, un'antropologa dell'Université Libre di Bruxelles, studiosa da tempo della Romania aveva incontrato Vintilă nei suoi soggiorni sul terreno e da allora si era costituita tra loro una intensa solidarietà scientifica, in cui io fui coinvolta attraverso le molteplici iniziative, che Marianne animava, la più importante delle quali fu la Société des Européanistes.

Nel 1995 Jean Cuisenier introducendo il numero di *Ethnologie française* dedicato alla Romania (*România. Construction d'une nation*) descriveva il clima di quegli anni in Romania osservando che "ciascuno a partire dalla posizione che occupa è più o meno impegnato nel processo di rottura con il vecchio regime o all'inverso nel processo di restaurazione di questo regime" (Cuisenier 1995: 334). Vintilă, quanto a lui, era impegnato nel processo di rottura e non si preoccupava di assumere in modo appassionato posizioni scomode o conflittuali. La prima rottura su cui si impegnò era quella con l'etnologia praticata in Romania durante il regime comunista dal Secondo dopoguerra all'89, che era improntata a un folclorismo ingessato nell'esaltazione di un mondo contadino privo di contraddizioni, depositario dello spirito popolare e della nazione che si identificava con il villaggio isolato e montano e di cui la famosa ballata *Miorița* è diventata esemplare. La difficoltà ad avere rapporti con l'esterno e l'utilizzo da parte del regime della cultura popolare come forma di legittimazione della nazione e del proprio potere rendeva l'etnologia romena, che io incontrai agli inizi degli anni Novanta, particolarmente chiusa alle influenze esterne e impermeabile ai cambiamenti che erano intervenuti nelle etnologie europee. Vintilă non fu mai un folclorista e la sua battaglia, a lungo isolata, si identificò con l'affermarsi dell'antropologia culturale in Romania. Il faticoso sviluppo di questa disciplina in questo paese è bene esemplificato nell'articolo scritto da Vintilă nel numero già citato di *Ethnologie française*, dove ricorda le sue prime ricerche in alcuni villaggi romeni quando poco più che ventenne era ricercatore al Laboratorio di antropologia di Bucarest. Si trattava di un laboratorio composito, dove per antropologia si intendeva l'antropologia fisica, in cui erano presenti filosofi, psicologi, sociologi, eredi della tradizione di Gusti, un laboratorio si potrebbe dire di scienze sociali a cui Vintilă apparteneva in quanto psicologo di formazione. L'articolo racconta un percorso iniziatico in cui gli interrogativi legati alla comprensione dell'alterità umana e alla costruzione delle differenze via via si sciolgono superando una serie di ostacoli e di inciampi, mettendo a confronto tradizioni di studi diverse, affrontando le critiche più o meno indulgenti. Alla fine di questo percorso si trova l'antropologia "dalla psicologia all'etnografia, passando per la linguistica o la biologia a forza di coabitare e comunicare, abbiamo inventato la nostra antropologia" (Mihăilescu, Răutu 1995: 356).

Un percorso dunque non scontato fatto di tentativi e di aperture, l'opposto di quello della etnologia romena del tempo costruita sui canoni e sulle certezze, e che ha condotto l'antropologia culturale in Romania a confrontarsi con quanto avveniva fuori dai propri confini nazionali e a trovare una propria strada. Vintilă favorì e promosse l'incontro con le antropologie di altri paesi sia europei, in particolare la Francia, l'Italia, il Belgio ma anche gli Stati Uniti. La sua scelta si inseriva perfettamente all'interno delle politiche dell'Unione Europea che dopo l'89 si indirizzava verso l'allargamento dei propri confini favorendo la circolazione dei giovani, l'incontro e il confronto a livello universitario, della ricerca e dell'istruzione. È lungo questa strada che con Vintilă abbiamo organizzato convegni, stage di terreno con studenti e docenti di varia nazionalità, i "terrains croisés", scambi di docenti e studenti e abbiamo dato vita nel 2005 al Dottorato internazionale di etnologia e antropologia (AEDE). Si è trattato di una esperienza promossa dall'Università di Perugia in collaborazione con l'Université Libre di Bruxelles, l'Université di Paris X-Nanterre e la SNSPA di Bucarest, dove Vintilă insegnava alla facoltà di sociologia e a cui ha contribuito con passione e intelligenza. Un'esperienza, in cui si sono formate, attraverso il confronto tra diverse tradizioni di studi, nuove generazioni di antropologi, che oggi insegnano nelle università europee e statunitensi.

Un'altra rottura non meno importante fu quella che vide impegnato Vintilă sul fronte museografico in particolare nel periodo 2005-2010 in cui fu direttore del Museo del contadino romeno<sup>1</sup>. Sul fronte museografico si combatté una battaglia che non fu solo scientifica ma anche politica. Le innovazioni introdotte da Horia Bernea un artista divenuto direttore del museo dopo la riapertura furono radicali. A Bucarest nel 1991 visitai la mostra *La croce*, una mostra di grande effetto che si ispirava alla museografia di Hainard a Neuchâtel. Una museografia concettuale da un lato perché sollecitava a comparare e riflettere, dall'altro che mirava a suscitare emozioni attraverso una attenta scenografia e scelta degli oggetti. Questa radicalità suscitò una reazione sia in una parte dell'opinione pubblica che di alcuni dei funzionari del museo tanto che alla sua morte cinque anni dopo si aprì un periodo di restaurazione che vide diventare direttore uno storico che tornò a far valere i classici canoni museografici. Toccò di nuovo a Vintilă, grazie al prestigio e

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1. Nato come Museo nazionale delle antichità nel 1864 a Bucarest, divenne nel 1906, essendosi arricchito di molte collezioni etnografiche, Museo di etnografia, arte nazionale, arte decorativa e industriale. Venne chiuso nel 1951 durante il periodo comunista, per fare posto al Museo del partito comunista romeno, mentre le sue collezioni furono trasferite nel Museo del villaggio, museo all'aria aperta sempre a Bucarest. Dopo l'89 il museo riaprì nella sua sede originaria con il nome di Museo del contadino romeno.

alla notorietà nel frattempo acquisiti a livello di opinione pubblica e come interlocutore delle istituzioni nazionali, cinque anni dopo assumere il ruolo di direttore e portare la ricerca antropologica al centro della riflessione museografica confrontandosi nello stesso tempo con gli orientamenti museografici a livello internazionale. Vintilă, un uomo che non si sottrasse alle sfide del suo tempo, un intellettuale combattente oltre che antropologo fecondo. È così che mi piace ricordarlo.

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## Vintilă and the roundtable

The “antropological” moment 1986

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I must confess that I have not come to terms with Vintilă’s departure. He meant a lot more to me and to our independent research group, the “Gusti Cooperative”, than people know. Therefore, I cannot convey here how much we will miss him.

On the other hand, I know that this brief consideration cannot be postponed. He was not the books he published, just like no talented field researcher can render everything s/he has lived. In fact, he was in the field all the time – in villages and in cities, on construction sites and at conferences, in pubs and in hospitals: everywhere. In Gorj<sup>1</sup> and in Cuba.

And he has constantly been a catalyst, ever since his student years, when he took part in the setting up of the student journal *Universitas*, through the immense effort of organizing a research team in the 1980s, and especially of getting the party research approval, to establishing, after 1989, a real trend in anthropological research, without significant institutional support.

In this short note I recall an event that took place in 1986, when I published, in a cultural magazine, the text of a roundtable with a group of researchers who worked at the Department of Cultural Anthropology from the Bucharest Institute of Anthropology. It was a time when, alongside other distortions, the discipline of sociology had entered a period of downturn and I, as editor of social sciences, started to tackle certain topics from an anthropological perspective. I myself had adopted this approach in the attempt to reconstruct the daily life of the Gustian school<sup>2</sup> using oral history.

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1. County in Southern Romania.

2. Dimitrie Gusti was a Romanian sociologist who, during the interwar period, started a new trend of empirical sociological investigations in villages of Romania, leading a large group of multidisciplinary researchers.

Consequently, I asked Vintilă to gather his colleagues for a discussion about the research carried out by the group. It was not easy, because the group included a few psychologists who had been traumatized by the “transcendental meditation” scandal<sup>3</sup>. Eventually, the dialogue was a success, for it reflected the group’s by and large anthropological approach, despite their mostly philosophical and psychological education. Those who took part in the discussion were Matei Stîrcea-Crăciun<sup>4</sup>, Gheorghîță Geană<sup>5</sup>, Mihai Golu<sup>6</sup>, Vasile Dem. Zamfirescu<sup>7</sup>, Vintilă Mihăilescu and I. It would, of course, be worth publishing and examining the entire roundtable transcript, but in the space provided here I will only include Vintilă’s responses and provide a summary of the debate.

The roundtable dealt rather intensely with the scholarly identity of cultural anthropology. The discussion started with a presentation of the development of various anthropologies starting in the nineteenth century. Despite the obvious differentiation, in Romania, at least in the 1980s, physical or biological anthropology was still the best-known, especially because of Francisc Rainer’s research activity; he was also the founder of the Institute of Anthropology. Precisely Rainer’s research was the topic of the heated debate that ensued around the old topic of whether it was possible to link anthropometrical data to cultural manifestations. Then the discussion was widened to the relationship between nature and culture and, unsurprisingly, to philosophical anthropology, which had important representatives in Romanian culture. The dialogue also included opposite opinions vis-à-vis the development of autonomous anthropologies versus the necessity of their integration, going as far as expressing hopes regarding the help provided to anthropology by the new trend in ethology.

It was at this point that Vintilă stepped in:

I believe that the independence, the autonomy of branch disciplines was fostered not only by the lack of research methods, but also by the nature of human behavior. Since there is behavior connected to culture and behavior connected to biology. The use of ethology can emphasize one course or the other. I am not sure whether such a position can be supported, but the truth is

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3. Name given to the anti-intellectual reprisals undertaken by the communist regime in 1981, which eventually resulted in the dissolution of the Bucharest Institute of Psychology.

4. Matei Stîrcea-Crăciun, researcher at the “Francisc I. Rainer” Institute of Anthropology of the Romanian Academy.

5. Gheorghîță Geană, researcher at the “Francisc I. Rainer” Institute of Anthropology of the Romanian Academy, after 1989 he supervised PhDs in philosophical anthropology.

6. Mihai Golu, psychologist, professor at the University of Bucharest, he was minister of education and later minister of culture in the beginning of the 1990s.

7. Vasile Dem. Zamfirescu, psychoanalyst, professor at a private university in Bucharest.

that not even anthropologists themselves know exactly where this vast field begins and where it ends. However, in my opinion, this is natural and rather easy to explain. In the course of its history, anthropology, as a discipline, defined itself in situational, not in logical terms. For the British who did social anthropology, the key issue of research was explaining kinship and only at that point they started to move closer to culture. The Americans were interested in the careful examination of culture, but they constantly tried to build bridges between the different dualities, dichotomies, such as those implied, for instance, by the relationship between individual and society. This is why they initiated a separate orientation that dealt with the relationship between personality and culture. To what extent they succeeded in overcoming these opposites is a totally different matter. Fact is that they rarely managed to maintain a balance. The research often deviated to sociology or psychology. Several research fields were professed as independent disciplines, which further contributed to this feeling of fragmentation.

For instance, urban anthropology has its own institutions and its own separate congresses. There is linguistic anthropology, political anthropology, anthropology of education, geographic anthropology, etc. But I believe they have a common denominator. And the common denominator in all of these is nothing more than an anthropology perspective, even if it is not explicated as such. Of course, we should elucidate what an anthropology perspective means. In my view, it is a distinct reading or understanding of human behavior, in which a person is studied and described in certain temporal and spatial contexts. And I emphasize “certain” in referring to the spatial and temporal context, because anthropology has always been preoccupied by the direct or indirect attempt to rethink the concept of human nature. So far, human nature has been understood in terms of the category put forth by philosophical anthropology, but there is a growing demand now to empirically elucidate this concept.

In this respect, it is worth calling to Margaret Mead’s research, which showed that puberty – viewed as a natural and therefore necessary stage of development – is merely a cultural construct, because its features, its characteristics could not be unequivocally identified within the sample of cultures under investigation. As a result, it was once more proven that the human phenomenon must be explored in real existing historical contexts or – as I have already mentioned – the human being must be considered under certain temporal and spatial coordinates. This perspective is common in all anthropological approaches. However, what sets them apart can be reproached or attributed to the fact that no anthology has been put together in order to unify the various approaches. Currently, there are only fortuitous alliances between the different fields of research, for instance between philosophical anthropology and social anthropology.

His speech stimulated the debate even further, so the psychoanalytical perspective was brought up we talked about the results achieved by Bronisław Malinowski, as well as about the contrasting ones, reached by Géza Róheim. Then the discussion went on to emphasize the comparative method in anthropology, which should, however, lead to criteria, models and

principles that would unify, and not set apart the different branches of anthropology. At this point of the debate, one of Vintilă's questions – "But this need, does it not require a new definition of the human being?" – guided the debate towards the topic of philosophical anthropology. Thus, the issue of the human being was outlined – from Aristotle to Arnold Gehlen, in this way wishing to overcome the traditional view about the human being, common in the philosophy of culture.

At some point, the roundtable discussions moved toward the relationship between individual and its surrounding objects. These topics were hardly investigated at the time and led the dialogue to applied anthropology, such as ergonomics, etc. In this framework, we talked about the misperception of the research field of anthropology and its use in politics, indicating that the anthropologist could be misjudged as colonial public officer. Quite the opposite, we surmised, anthropology contributed to overcoming the Eurocentric perspective in approaches to cultures, thus bestowing moral value upon science.

Towards the end of the debate, we talked about the studies undertaken at the institute. We spoke, briefly, about the research carried out in Vrancea region<sup>8</sup>.

Vintilă complemented this synthesis, articulating more clearly the study he directed:

We cannot take on an exploration of the individual as a whole, we can, at best, try to explore as many aspects of human existence as possible. How successful that is, it remains to be determined. But I want to tell you that we have investigations undertaken not only in Vrancea, but also in the county of Gorj. However, here we follow a somewhat different model and that is why our endeavor cannot be considered ethno-psychological. We aim at building bridges over the chasm between nature and culture. This is the reason we tried to put together a truly multidisciplinary research team.

Alongside social and physical anthropologists, the team includes specialists in various fields, such as sociology, psychology, linguistics, folklore, and philosophy. Each of us is working in his own field but is also actively aware of the anthropological perspective. This perspective is our common denominator. By analyzing the results achieved from a multitude of perspectives, we will be able to reveal the idiosyncrasies of the forms of behavior. From social aspects to values, from cultural representations to demographic behavior, all human manifestations can be analyzed. The relationship between them leads to a new anthropological type. The cooperation between several approaches and professions is necessary, because, insofar as an anthropological type arises, it will immediately be transferred to another level of analysis, problematization,

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8. County in Central-Eastern Romania.

approach. If fifty years ago Professor Rainer only guessed that the results of his research could be correlated to results attained by social scientists, now we can undoubtedly ascertain that we benefit from hypotheses that testify to the relationship between different levels. We do not have certainties, but we are discernably closer than Rainer was.

The roundtable concluded by recalling the plan of an encyclopedia of anthropology that the team from the institute was working on.

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I hope that remembering this moment (published in Bucharest, in the Hungarian cultural magazine *A Hét*, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 1986, year XVII, nr. 12, pp. 8-9) is only the beginning. The duty of Vintilă's friends is to reconstitute his extraordinary life.



## Vintilă on Vintilă and the current crisis

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Vintilă is gone, but Vintilă remains... in our hearts, our thoughts of history, culture, and language, in our reminiscence of our own passages and transitions. For the two of us, he was instrumental in our meeting and our marriage, in our careers and our writing, in our understanding of society and our place in it. We write to summon him one more time to broaden our lives and understanding by his authenticity, decency, verve, and criticality.

Beyond the personal, generalizing Vintilă Mihăilescu's contributions is daunting. Vintilă was protean. At one and the same time he was scholar, teacher, public intellectual, institution builder, linguistic avant-garde, and above all father, husband, and friend. We are at a loss for words to approximate his significance—to ourselves, to Romanian social science, and to the legions of individuals whose lives he affected. However, knowing Vintilă, he would categorically reject our hesitancy to write. We can hear him now, in his high-pitched interrogatory, an espresso in one hand and one of those silly slim cigarettes he chain-smoked before becoming ill this last time in the other: “What are you waiting for? Get on with it.”

Vintilă's oeuvre helped to essentially create and define social anthropology in contemporary Romania. Monographs and readers offered meditations as varied as those on sociological reasoning and social change (*Socio Hai-Hui*, 2000) and the recent take-down of Romanian exceptionalism (*De ce este România astfel*, 2017). Meanwhile the regular columns he wrote for *Dilema Veche* chronicled the fads and foibles of Romanian society as it made its rough passage from Ceaușescu's Epoca de Aur to the challenges of post-socialism. Any attempt to categorize his contributions seems condemned to insignificance by the reach and complexity of his ideas, the play of his language, and the joy and exasperation with which he approached each of his concerns.

Thinking of this challenge to speak to Vintilă's meaning for us, for others who knew him, and for those who didn't, we recognized the futility of a broad analysis of his contributions. Instead, we decided to shift our gaze to examine some of his own thoughts and words about the meaning of his own life. Vintilă's last book, *În căutarea corpului regăsit: O ego-analiză a spitalului* (2019), roughly translated as "In Search of a Found Body: A personal analysis of the hospital" seems especially well suited for this endeavor. The title consciously reflects Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (Romanian: *In Search of Lost Times*) and, in keeping with Proust's spirit, is often a meditation on seemingly small, but significant moments of Vintilă's life seen through the lens of his on-going hospital stay. For example, remarking on the many people who cared for him in the hospital he analogized the nurses who watched over him with an innkeeper where he stayed when he was a student, who funded a party for his student guests, without concern for payment.

Though the package is Proust, the substance of Vintilă's understanding of his circumstances and their meaning to him, integrates Foucault on biopower, expressed in the totalizing institution of the hospital, and Freud on how the ego responds when confronted with mortality. Taken together this approach brings to the surface Vintilă's lifelong concern, both personal and professional, for the circumstances and experiences of individuals encapsulated, shaped, and in many instances oppressed by formal institutions of power. His work at SNSPA (the Romanian National School for the Political and Administrative Sciences) and as Director of the Romanian National Peasant Museum echoes his hospital experiences. Though Vintilă was more a subject of creation than an object of interest in the institutions in which he practiced, his frustrations at both institutions, even in the midst of his setting them on solid footing, provide a vivid analogy to his intellectual "success" at making sense of the hospital and medical system even as his biological self was waning.

In the midst of his waning physical being Vintilă was particularly critical of Romanian medicine generally, though not in a blameworthy way, but more in a sigh of resignation for its failure to either treat illness or patient effectively. We read his critique of medicine as one of post-socialist Romanian institutions generally. Thus, he rejected totalizing institutional control by refusing to provide personal information to the doctors, and instead wrote such information in his journals (with those notes resulting in this last book). Vintilă was especially critical of the neoliberal turn in medical practice (and Romanian life) which, he says, Romanian medical institutions adopted to avoid responsibility for the provision of timely and

effective care. As a broadside against the present contradictions of Romanian life, Vintilă claimed it folly to encourage self-actualization and self-management of individual health where people are often poorly informed about medical actualities and illness is often treated folklorically; wearing garlic to escape one's ills, seeking out miracle beet juice treatments, or subscribing to anti-vaccination with alacrity.

This critique of Romanian medicine must be understood in the context of Vintilă's Romanian identity. Throughout his career he was constantly committed to improving the country by a critical gaze at its institutions, cultural peccadillos, and shortcomings of leadership. This spirit of Romania suffuses through the volume in small ways and large, as it does in Vintilă's many other works, both in celebration and critique of diverse aspects of Romanian life. Some hospital observations were painfully humorous, like Ana's visit to the commissary seeking an envelope, where she was informed that there were many different sized envelopes since there were many different sized bribes necessary for medical personnel.

Ana, it must be noted, was more than a supporting player in Vintilă's life. She was also Vintilă's interlocutor, sounding board, amanuensis, helpmate, partner-in-crime (sneaking him an occasional cigarette) and co-sufferer. Her strength and wisdom throughout Vintilă's life, and especially in the midst of the grief and pain of his extended hospital stay, are noteworthy and her contributions to his thought and work deserve mention in their own right.

Ever the anthropologist, Vintilă's hospital musings emphasize his approach to knowledge that recognizes how the field is everywhere we are. He inspires us with the idea that "To understand the hospital, you have to live within it." His sociologically informed analyses layered with nuanced anthropological approaches, such as in his analysis of hospital admission as a classic rite of passage, reinforce his commitment to Aristotle's maxim that "the unexamined life is not worth living." Throughout the volume, as in his books, his teaching, and Dilema commentaries, he inspires us with close attention to the social and cultural significance of small things. For example, philosophizing on the need for personal space and intimacy in the decidedly non-intimate atmosphere of the hospital launches him on an extended discussion comparing his hospital bedside nightstand with the chest at the foot of his bed in his childhood bedroom. His observation (and photograph) of the artistry of a transfusion bag as the sun filters through it is simultaneously redolent with sadness and beauty, like so many of his other musings on Romanian life.

The book's lengthiest chapter by far concerns "Illness, hospital, and defense mechanisms." This chapter's heft is a clear sign of Vintilă's abiding interest in how best to come to terms with his own impending fate.

Distanced discussions of the psychology of defense mechanisms of patients, family members, doctors and other health personnel pair with lengthy ruminations about personal experiences. Not surprisingly, as his students, friends, and colleagues could readily attest, Vintilă most often called on humor to confront his fraught circumstances and he probed deeply about its attraction and personal and social meaning. Invoking his childhood, Vintilă sees his sense of humor as an effective means to escape his father's domination. As he writes, humor helped him to know his place... to not worry about being a powerful person, but a measured one, thus allowing him to contend with the powerful, but to still keep them at a distance. As Vintilă observes, humor especially enables the solidarity necessary to confront hierarchies of power. But this effective confronting of power is lost in the contemporary transformation of humor, a social mechanism, to "having fun," an act stripped of both psychological and political affect.

Above all, as Vintilă says of himself, humor enables one to be neither overwhelmed by death nor inebriated with life. Thus, reading this last effort from this most authentic man in the midst of the global coronavirus pandemic, offers us essential tools to meet the current challenge; criticism, laughter, personal introspection, and an ethnographic sensibility. Thank you, Vintilă, for your insight, your fortitude, and your humor. You are sorely missed.

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## Midwifing cultural anthropology in post-communist Romania

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Like others invited to honor Vintilă Mihăilescu's memory, I too, will rely on personal encounters with him. I met Vintilă in the early 1990s, while I was an undergraduate student in sociology at the University of Bucharest. At that time, some of my colleagues were talking about a “hip” or a “cool” guy, who was teaching in the Department of Psychology but was rather inclined towards sociology and anthropology. To begin with, his bearded, jeans-wearing, hippie-look made him stand out among other professors. (His funky vests and flowery shirts also deserve special mention.) He had established an independent research center called “The Social Observatory” and, during summer vacations, he was organizing fieldwork trips for students willing to go native in Godforsaken villages or in derelict, deindustrialized, and poverty-stricken cities throughout Romania. I did not know what was he actually doing during these fieldwork trips but his students were speaking highly (if not religiously) of him. In fact, the fascination with him earned his students the nickname “Vintilă's Witnesses” – a nickname that, obviously, circulated only among his group's outsiders, like myself.

Through some fortunate circumstances, Vintilă invited me to present a research project at the second annual conference of the Romanian Society for Cultural Anthropology, which he co-founded. After that conference, we grew close and I began to understand some of the reasons why he was so loved by his advisees, even though I never became a “member” of his “Witnesses” group. First, in contrast to other Romanian academics of his generation, Vintilă was a down-to-earth and open person. With his gracious wife Ana, he would organize parties for his students at their home – something that was non-*professorial* by local “academic distancing” standards and therefore awesome. Second, he always seemed to have time for his students and conversations usually took place in fairly unconventional settings, over a coffee or a drink, at some beer garden or in a hip bar.



Students would bring to the table not only their academic issues but also their personal troubles. Third, he had a remarkable patience. He was able to listen for hours to fairly preposterous, vaguely formulated, and/or outright aberrant research ideas coming out of his students' mouths. And, to my total bewilderment as a chance witness to few such discussions between him and his students, he would do this with a straight face. His comments were non-judgmental and always generously encouraging (again, to my astonishment). Retrospectively, I think that his heroic patience was due to his curiosity about people and the desire to learn about new things. During these conversations, Vintilă would also cast his net, fishing for bright minds, fresh ideas, and news about current trends among his younger interlocutors. I came to realize that his curiosity was the real engine behind his dedication to anthropology and his efforts to organize, over the years, tens of fieldwork sessions for his students. Fourth, in contrast to other people from his "generation," Vintilă did not seem to have power ambitions. In the early 1990, some local social scientists rapidly achieved positions of power in the new government or in institutions of higher education. Vintilă, however, was not among these new powerful academics of the day, even though, as far as I know, he did possess the symbolic capital to claim such positions of authority in the new regime. Actually, he seemed rather amused by the post-communist grandstanding of some of his peers, whom he knew intimately from before 1989. Also, "authority" was something that Vintilă liked to mock and playfully undermine, especially when dealing with arriviste colleagues who were power tripping post-1990.

After graduating from the University of Bucharest in 1996, I went to the Central European University for a Master-degree and subsequently to Stanford University for my PhD. During my eight years of absence from Romania, I stayed in touch with him mostly indirectly, through some friends who were former students of him. Every now and then, when I was visiting Romania, our paths crossed. Things in the country were changing at more rapid pace than in the early 1990s and so was Vintilă's career. He had moved from the Department of Psychology at the University of Bucharest to the Department of Sociology, within the same university. His popularity among students, his irreverence towards authority, his independent stance and his non-conformism brought him into conflict more rigid and powerful colleagues in the Department of Sociology as well. He eventually left the University of Bucharest for the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), where he co-founded the Sociology Department and the first Masters Degree program in the country in (cultural) Anthropology.

During all this time, he continued to do what he knew and loved best: teaching new generations of students and initiating them in what he believed to be the amazing world of doing fieldwork. Vintilă – a city boy from a well-to-do, reputed family of academics – seemed fascinated with the rural world, with all its traditions, superstitions, and – at times -- odd ways of life. A *bon viveur* who always fancied a glass of *țuică* (a homemade plum brandy), a peasant-style lamb steak or a fish soup prepared by locals from the Danube Delta, Vintilă, however, did not glorify “tradition.” He deemed “tradition” something that was “invented” in the sense of Hobsbawm (1992). Furthermore, in a pure anthropological tradition, he was interested in the clash between (communist and post-communist) modernization processes and “traditional” practices and mindsets. Thus, he would persistently search for the unintended effects of the decoupling processes between new and old institutional forms. Such effects were more visible in rural parts of the country but he found and analyzed them in urban settings as well (see, on this point, his works on urban ethnographies and his collaboration with architects and urban planners).

By the early 2000s, many students from the first two generations of his “Witnesses” had gone to continue their studies at different universities in Europe and the US, with notable results. While informally, Vintilă was well known and appreciated by students and academics throughout the country, his association with the intellectual weekly *Dilema* (*The Dilemma* subsequently, *Dilema Veche* [*The Old Dilemma*]) made him famous among the large public. Specifically, since 1998 until his untimely death, this magazine would host his weekly articles in which he would analyze various (current) issues and controversies from a socio-anthropological perspective. The background title of his section was “*Socio hai-hui*” – a Romanian word-play that approximately means “Socio-wanderings.” It was through this weekly section that Vintilă brought sociology and anthropology to the masses, so to speak. Written in an accessible language without, however, vulgarizing matters, Vintilă’s vignettes challenged many classist, racist, and ethno-national stereotypes, which were widespread among the country’s highly educated, pretentious upper-middle class, which also formed the bulk of *Dilema Veche*’s readership.

In 2005, when I returned to Romania, Vintilă was one of the few people who lent me a helping hand. Having a PhD in Sociology from Stanford University did not mean much in the eyes of the local academic world. Instead of minimal welcoming gestures, my Stanford degree did not sit well with some people, especially those from my own generation, who had to craft their careers in Romania through politicking and playing nice to the

senior professors who, like in the old days of communism, were still calling the shots in many parts of the local academia. Thanks to his recruiting efforts, I eventually became an assistant professor of sociology at SNSPA, in the Department of Sociology, having Vintilă as my “boss” (i.e., Head of the Department). Along with him, other colleagues, and hundreds of students, I participated in numerous research projects that were enthusiastically initiated by him, such as the “Social Mapping of Bucharest”. During the years spent as his colleague, we fought together several battles against political maneuverings and against absurdist bureaucratic regulations.

During the last ten years or so, Vintilă changed. Although he remained dedicated to students and continued to organize fieldwork sessions, he started to allocate more and more of his time to his editorial projects. He would publish or coordinate various volumes feverishly, at an amazing pace of one book per year. His works sold well, especially those that dealt with public anthropology, in the style of his articles from *Dilema Veche*. Seeing him so absorbed in his writing efforts, a good friend commented that he acts as if he is preparing his own posterity. To us, this was odd because, in our eyes, Vintilă was still young and somewhat immortal. Why would a person like him prepare for posterity? There was still wine to drink, fieldwork trips to take, stuff to discuss, and life to enjoy. Posterity?!

Along with other contributors to this issue, I am now in the difficult position of talking about Vintilă in the past tense and discuss about his legacy. First of all, obviously, there are his books and articles. On this aspect of his legacy, I think that his works will stand the test of time aided by Vintilă’s playful, accessible writing style, and his unmatched, insightful descriptions. Second, through his efforts and writings, Vintilă had a crucial contribution to the birth and institutionalization of cultural anthropology in Romania. Along the lines of Michael Burawoy’s (2005) calls for a public sociology, Vintilă believed that anthropology too should not remain confined to academic ivory towers. In his view, anthropology had to provide answers to the challenging questions raised by the current, rapid global transformations. Finally, Vintilă’s most important legacy, in my opinion, is represented by the generations of students he enthusiastically nurtured to professional maturity. Many of them now teach anthropology or conduct anthropological research in various public and private institutions, in Romania or abroad. For quite a few people I personally know, meeting Vintilă was a life-changing event, which literally saved their then-seemingly hopeless careers, and helped them find their calling.

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## Hommage *in fine in-fini*

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Vintilă nous a quittés. Cela ne devait pas se produire, il était trop jeune, il avait mille projets à accomplir encore, tant de choses à observer, tant de choses à dire, à nous dire, à nous faire dire. Et c'était inévitable, car il était une espèce en voie de disparition.

Je l'ai connu en 1999 par le biais d'un autre de son espèce, le prof. Christian Giordano, aujourd'hui disparu. Les deux spécialistes du "bloc soviétique", aujourd'hui disparu, avaient joint leurs forces pour un séminaire de troisième cycle organisé par les départements d'anthropologie de la Suisse romande et pour laquelle la jeune docteure que je ne suis plus a servi de coordinatrice.

Vintilă ne croyait pas dans la notion de "bloc", Christian ne croyait pas dans celle de "soviétique", et ni l'un ni l'autre dans la notion de "professeur". Mais c'était beau, et bien, et bel et bien dans leur compagnie qu'une dizaine d'étudiants et moi-même avons passé deux semaines ensemble en Roumanie, une équipe à Cluj, une autre à Timișoara, une troisième à Bucarest. Nous avons flâné, visité, bavardé, bu, dansé et rebu: c'était magique, nous étions transportés. Mais transportés où? Comment décrire les espaces où Vintilă savait nous amener, des espaces qu'il voyait et créait, qu'il créait en voyant, des espaces plus vrais que réels?

Ce n'est pas simplement qu'il avait du charisme. Sa capacité à créer des espaces était plus qu'un talent personnel, une compétence issue de la force de sa personnalité énorme, même si c'était également cela. Plus fondamental à mes yeux était la conjonction de son regard, en même temps actif et témoin, avec le monde qu'il voyait. Plus que le "savoir-voir", il pratiquer l'"oser-voir"; voir sans rationalisation mais sans banalisation, sans héroïsation mais sans misanthropie. Joueur, un brin cynique, Vintilă prenait ce monde absurde et tragique au sérieux.

C'est ainsi qu'il voyait le Palais du Parlement créé par Ceaușescu, qu'il prenait la pleine mesure de sa monstruosité et qu'il nous la rendait présente. C'est ainsi qu'il voyait les ruses et les ressources des populations rurales qu'il étudiait – roms, gadje, paysans, ouvriers, tous insistant sur leurs origines locales datant des temps immémoriaux mais prêts à quitter leur pays natal à la première occasion. Attendri et agacé, il respectait leurs vérités; il voyait des créatures créatives et il voulait nous les présenter. C'est également ainsi qu'il se promenait avec nous dans les rues de Bucarest, attirant notre attention tour à tour sur des balcons et des pots de conserves, des plantes vertes et des meutes de chiens errants, comme pour dire: "c'est notre présent que je vous présente, mais je ne vous garantis pas qu'il soit présentable".

Depuis 1999, j'ai n'ai eu que quelques occasions de passer du temps avec Vintilă: lors de colloques essentiellement (à Montréal, à Paris, à Tartu), lors d'un séminaire de recherche que j'ai organisé sur le patrimoine immatériel, et lors d'une soutenance de thèse dans mon institut à Neuchâtel – ville dont il disait sans détour qu'il préférerait mourir qu'y vivre tant elle manquait de "vie". Je me suis également rendue à Bucarest à quelques reprises pour diverses raisons, où j'ai constaté avec admiration sa capacité à survivre à des situations politiques multiples et variés en gardant toujours le cap, et en maintenant sa pratique d'une anthropologie rigoureuse, attentive aussi bien aux grandes dynamiques de la mondialisation qu'aux minuscules appropriations des acteurs locaux. Le respect qu'il suscitait autour de lui était palpable – toujours du respect, jamais de la crainte ni de la flagornerie.

Toutes ces occasions m'ont marquée et m'ont laissée sur ma faim: j'aurais voulu plus, plus de temps pour flâner, visiter, bavarder, boire, danser et reboire. Nous avons parlé à plusieurs reprises de projets à monter ensemble, toujours avec un enthousiasme perceptible et un calendrier vague. Avec le recul, je crois que ce "plus" dont je rêvais était également celui du monde dont venait Vintilă, un monde aujourd'hui disparu, dont on se souvient à peine – et cela d'autant moins que nous vivons l'hallucinante crise du coronavirus – mais qui a bel et bien existé, contrairement au "socialisme réel". Ce fut un monde façonné par la Guerre froide, soit par la croyance, partagée par les deux "blocs", dans le progrès technique et civilisationnel, dans la linéarité de l'histoire et dans son heureux dénouement. Quelle folie, vu d'aujourd'hui!

Spécialiste de la Chine, ayant vécu en République populaire pendant la période maoïste, je voulais travailler avec Vintilă sur les "posts": sur les nouvelles formes d'expérience et d'existence rendues possibles par la chute du

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communisme, mais également sur les pertes – des espoirs, des simplismes, des grands récits, de la croyance dans une amélioration possible du fonctionnement des sociétés humaines. Je voulais aussi travailler avec Vintilă sur l'avenir, car j'avais besoin du regard qui voit sans esquiver. J'aurais tant voulu discuter avec lui des menaces et des souffrances qui nous guettent, de la poignée de fous qui nous gouvernent, de la sur-rationalisation des institutions, de la virtualisation des espaces, de l'instrumentalisation des discours.

Et maintenant? Comment vais-je faire pour voir dans un monde où il n'y a plus Vintilă pour regarder?



## Do you like where I brought you?

Disenchantment and re-enchantment in Vintilă Mihăilescu's anthropological teachings

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In the summer of 2002, I (Bogdan) travelled with Vintilă to Rovinari coal mining area, his first fieldwork site back in the 1980s, that was also to become my first fieldwork. I was part of the second class of the MA in Anthropology, founded by him in 2000 at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration. We travelled in an old second-hand BMW which he had received from a friend. I was terribly nervous to be traveling hundreds of kilometres in the front seat next to the man whose weekly *Dilema*<sup>1</sup>, column I had read every week and not know what smart things to say during my time as a co-pilot. The Joe Dassin album on repeat playing on the car's failing cassette player helped. Vintilă often had his head in the clouds and had left all other cassette tapes at home as he had hastily left Bucharest for Rovinari right after a mild heart attack had put him in the hospital.

We reached Hotel Rovinari (in fact a dormitory for the workers at the nearby thermal power plant) in the evening, on the background of a bleeding sunset caused by the coal dust that was filling the air. We took a short recognition tour through the town with rusty street stalls, grey buildings and fragmented pavement after which we returned to our "hotel". My colleagues were cleaning their chairs full of the ubiquitous black dust and were waiting for the cafeteria's opening hours, to sample its two-dish menu. After dinner, Vintilă invited us to a meeting on a patch of grass across the street, next to the railway, where we kept a close eye on the potential attack of mosquitoes

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1. A Romanian weekly magazine that covers culture, social topics, and politics.

and ticks. After everyone gathered, Vintilă asked in a dry, amused tone: “Do you like where I brought you? / *Vă place unde v-am adus?*” There was silence, broken by the occasional mine trucks that would stir the last clouds of dust in passing. It was not clear to us whether that was a trick question, so the answers emerged timidly. We had a field meeting which lasted until 4 in the morning, because Vintilă wanted to listen carefully, for half an hour each, all the first impressions of those who had arrived earlier. At 8:30 in the morning a new meeting would follow before the start of the first official day of fieldwork.

In order to save some of the research money to spend on food, Vintilă decided that he and I would share the hotel room. Vintilă stayed behind on the balcony, in the dim light, to put down some research directions to explore in the following ten days. Every now and then he would ask if I remembered what this and that person said. Around 5:00 in the morning I fell asleep in the whistling sound of the thermal power plant.

What followed was a week of interviews in teams of two with people who had either worked or were still working in the open mines of the area and were living in the town that had sprung up in the 1980s. Vintilă and his colleagues had done fieldwork there at the height of industrial development. We listened to the confessions of a world emerged from the coal mine, assembled hurriedly from scratch, with all the resulting social costs, further amplified by the policies of shock therapy of early postsocialism. In the evenings, Vintilă would listen, amused and slightly irritated, to our never-ending introductions: “they are all nostalgic for communism here, they all vote with Vadim!”<sup>2</sup>. He suggested that we might take a step back and try to understand the social causes that fuel these discourses: “You know, the *phantom of communism* cannot explain *everything*”.

A week after our return to Bucharest, Vintilă summoned us for a final research meeting. My colleagues, Ana, Raluca, Gabriel and I have confessed that we were considering returning to Rovinari as soon as possible, because we were fixating over the research topics that we had opened and failed to properly answer. It had been in fact Vintilă who had subtly but intensely fuelled our state of feverish unrest. He called us the next day to say that he had managed to secure a small grant to support our second week-long fieldwork trip. Our second trip to Rovinari resulted in four anthropological research projects for our dissertations and a plastic washing basin in which we used to wash our coal dust-soaked clothes during our stay. The basin was later auctioned at a raffle during a master party.

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2. Vadim Tudor, at that time leader of the ultranationalist party Partidul România Mare, PRM.

Fieldwork was a seminal part of Vintilă's view on teaching anthropology. We had the privilege to participate yearly, as either students or research assistants since 2002 (Bogdan) and 2008 (Monica): Dobrodja, the Danube Delta, Bukovina, Transylvania, Oltenia. The master's curricula would be adjusted every couple of years, but the collective summer fieldwork remained the backbone of the programme. Students typically looked forward to it with emotion and anticipation.

"Do you like where I brought you?" He would always open the fieldworks with this question. It was his way to explore the capacity of adaptation and of going out of one's comfort zone for a period of time that would allow for at least simulacra of the *depaysement* theorised by Marc Abélès.

The fieldwork would always deliver the expected effect: a transformative experience of decentring. At the end, participants had experienced the revelation of meeting the Other and had learned to overcome layers of physical, emotional and moral limits. The more precarious the fieldwork conditions were, the more radically transformative was the fieldwork. Always rural or small-town based, the fieldwork had a cathartic effect on students, especially since many were coming from those urban, middle-class backgrounds prone to either idealisation of the countryside or to a complete lack of awareness about poverty and marginality. Reaching out of one's comfort zone was but one of the lessons that Vintilă would seek to expose students to. Exchange, ethics, humility, solidarity, the confrontation of privileges and prejudice were additional take-aways. He would often let people learn their own lessons, but the fieldwork experience was not solely about personal transformations and self-referential intellectual revelations. Most times the researches would produce follow-up researches, academic articles, volumes and, often, a life-changing resolution to leave everything behind and become an anthropologist.

Vintilă's fieldworks were the lab from which several dozens of the Romanian anthropologists emerged, moving forward to worldwide PhDs and research and teaching careers.

What used to be the norm for the MA fieldwork increasingly became a luxury. In the last few years before falling ill, Vintilă was unable to come to terms with the culture of audit that squeezed the fieldwork experience into absurd standards that would force us to account for everything from fiscal proofs of official accommodation, food bills, bids for offers from providers of services. The opportunities for Vintilă-style collective fieldwork became more scarce as formal project applications became the only solution to finance them.

Lack of funding of social sciences worldwide, lack of students' time, overlapping projects, a relentless labour market, all meant that the revelations of the fieldwork became accessible to few and the academic career path was a less frequent choice for his students. What remained unchanged was his relentless pursuit to share anthropological knowledge to an audience as wide as possible, to make people from as many fields as possible – architecture, journalism, business, psychiatry, film making etc. – use the anthropological lens.

He was always close and informal in relation with his students. He was “Teach” to all of us and possessed the great skill of creating learning communities; he was the soul of the master parties, the late night beers and the fieldwork camp fire.

Back in 2000, the MA in Anthropology had been the first programme of graduate studies in Anthropology in Romania and to this day it remains one of a handful. Its creation was a great milestone in Vintilă's lifetime pursuit to professionalise anthropology and to establish it as a discipline in its own right, detached from the shadow of sociology and ethnology.

An avid observer of society and acutely aware of the shift towards image-based communication and the increasing need to document social realities with visual means, he pushed again for an institutional innovation. In 2013 he conceived and initiated the foundation of a new MA programme, in Visual Studies and Society, which has since functioned parallel to the MA in Anthropology. He was joined in this new adventure by Iosif Kiraly, prominent visual artist and professor at the University of Arts.

Always provoking, creating disruption, advocating for inclusiveness, questioning elite assumptions and often going against the grain of dominant intellectual voices, Vintilă's pedagogical lessons remain a source of inspiration for those whom he has shaped as students and influenced as colleagues. The bulk of the students still come from a diversity of professional and educational backgrounds, ranging from the humanities to technical fields. What they seek are answers; what we still aim to provide, in keeping with Vintilă's heritage, is the ability to ask the right questions and to think anthropologically, no matter the field.

“Do you like where I brought you?” Vintilă is the one who has brought many of us – professional or amateur anthropologists – here, in the realm of anthropological understanding and then left in pursuit of other destinations.

## Life is beautiful...!

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Working as an anthropologist both in the former Yugoslavia and Romania, I sometimes experienced subtle forms of what I would like to call academic “xenophobia”. By this I do not mean the explicit intolerance that comes from various nationalist circles or the extreme right (although that may exist in academic circles too). I am referring here to the vague discomfort or unease colleagues, especially from an older generation, in the countries where I worked (Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia or Romania) may express when some odd “foreigner” has things to say about their societies. How can an “outsider”, who does not even speak the language properly, possibly understand “us”, “our” mentality and culture. Nevertheless, I have also been lucky to encounter exceptions to this prototype, and one of these was the late Vintilă Mihăilescu, who, as soon as I was introduced to him – at the time he was director of the Romanian Peasant Museum – asked me whether I was perhaps willing to organise a workshop under the auspices of the museum, giving me *carte blanche* regarding the topic. It was in this welcoming atmosphere that I organised the Bucharest Urban Anthropology and Ethnography Workshop together with Liviu Chelcea and Vintilă. It brought together a group of scholars, anthropologists, sociologists, architects, and urban planners – including several of Vintilă’s students working in Bucharest – to discuss the pros and cons of ethnographic fieldwork in post-socialist cities<sup>1</sup>.

Vintilă opened the workshop with an introduction, reflecting on the trajectory of Romanian ethnology through the prism of his own career – moving “from the village to a block of flats”. After doing fieldwork in a village, as Romanian ethnologists were traditionally supposed to do, he began exploring a neighbourhood in Bucharest; this anthropological “displacement” was not unproblematic, as he told, as it raised eyebrows amongst colleagues who

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1. An overview of the topics and themes discussed at the workshop was published in: *Colloquia. Journal of Central European History* (Cluj-Napoca), XVIII, 2011, 131-149 (“The Bucharest urban anthropology and ethnography workshop”).

were of the opinion that it was not the task of ethnologists to do fieldwork in urban settings. Through his non-conformist move into urban contexts, thereby pushing the “parochial” boundaries of his and other disciplines, he established himself as a free-thinking innovative anthropologist who embraced the entire human condition. A continuous thread of his career was indeed the exploration of rural and urban connections, identifying urban footprints on rural communities, under-mining the notion of rural homogeneity.

This is indeed what I remember best about Vintilă Mihăilescu: his open and curious mind, his unpretentious and inclusive embrace of people, of whatever social standing and background, be it (foreign) academics or non-academics. As he pointed out at the workshop, in the village the ethnologist may have had the pretension to be “somebody” (especially in the light of his or her expected role in terms of helping to facilitate the ongoing process of nation-building), whereas in the city the ethnographer was a kind of “nobody”, surrounded by so many other scholars from various competing disciplines. Vintilă did not care being a “nobody”, on the contrary, he accepted the challenge and preferred this position of relative freedom and lack of obligation towards some proscribed national agenda.

Although as a scholar, he was rooted in his local (Bucharest) and national (Romanian) context, he was genuinely open to the rest of the world, spoon-feeding his many “pupils” (generations of master and doctoral students in anthropology, urban studies, architecture, landscape design, and other disciplines) the same principles. The fact that Bucharest has a vibrant community of smart young (and sometimes not so young anymore) anthropologists, is certainly one of his key achievements. He was not only a very good communicator and imaginative author, who wrote numerous thought-provoking essays and books for large audiences until the very end of his life, he was also an inspirational teacher, who “fathered” dozens of admiring “children” raising them to intellectual maturity. I always was impressed by the way students simply adored him, and saw him as their intellectual beacon and reference point. He attracted students from many other disciplines, like architecture, urban planning and landscape design: he was indeed a role model and an outstanding example of how it is possible to cross disciplinary boundaries, engage in public debates, and make the discipline relevant in an interdisciplinary field. He had so much believe in the discipline, that he never succumbed to the self-referential and “esoteric” theoretical leanings characteristic for quite a few contemporary anthropologists. Vintilă Mihăilescu was, as it were, the Romanian version of Thomas Hylland Eriksen.



He was on top of theoretical trends in the rest of the world, and fresh and uncomplicated in his responses, hardly ever without a bit of irony and humour, and a boyish, slightly naughty and always disarming smile on his face. He was in his element doing fieldwork, as I experienced a number of times. For several years in a row, we spent some days together in the town of Câmpulung-Muscel, where we were tutoring (although “un-disciplining” would have been the better word here) international groups of film-makers, who already had experience in making films, in a summer school for anthropological cinema (Longocampo Dox, later the Cineimpact Film Summer Academy) organised by film-maker (and Vintilă’s student) Ionuț Pițurescu. I discussed the specifics of anthropological research in small cities and Vintilă’s task was to introduce participants into the intricacies of Romanian (domestic) life showing them the large houses Romanians build nowadays. Our last joint initiative, which was in fact Vintilă’s idea, was to organise a comparative workshop on these post-socialist “pride houses” in South-Eastern Europe, paid for by remittances from abroad, for which he himself coined the apt, and fun title “Home Big Home”. Although we did receive funding, we were forced to postpone and finally cancel the workshop, since Vintilă fell ill.

One of the last times we spent some more time together, “in the field” as it were, was in the Autumn of 2017 in Regensburg, where we presented the ten best films produced at the Film Academies in Câmpulung-Muscel, during a two-day festival in a local cinema (under the title “Romania raw: innovative documentary cinema”). I remember our visits to several traditional beer halls, such as the “Brandl Bräu”, one of the very oldest in town, where at the end of the evening (as almost all guests had left) a waitress joined us at the table, donating a last round of schnapps, and yet another one, extending the nice and convivial conversation she had with this professor from Romania into the small hours. The following evening, we were to be found in the “Kneitinger” on the Arnulfplatz, which was packed with locals dressed up in “lederhosen” and “dirndls” singing and drinking beer, surrounded by a deafening sound of Bavarian brass music. Sitting at a table near the entrance, where Vintilă could smoke his cigarette, we had one or two drinks. He enjoyed and welcomed this outburst of local folklore with a smile as yet another once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do some participant observation in another “global village”. He did not say this aloud, but his sparkling eyes exclaimed “Life is beautiful...!”. I must admit, it has now become a bit less beautiful without him.



## Le maître et l'art de tisonner

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*Le feu est intime et il est universel*  
Bachelard

Une photo, un terrain, d'innombrables souvenirs.

C'était il y a une vingtaine d'années, dans les montagnes Parâng, à une vingtaine de kilomètres de la ville principale du bassin minier de la Vallée du Jiu. On s'y trouvait nombreux – quelques enseignants et deux bonnes dizaines d'étudiant.e.s en sociologie ou en anthropologie venu.e.s de Bucarest, Sofia, Bruxelles et Perugia – à l'occasion d'un stage de terrain collectif et plurinational de trois semaines. C'était le cinquième "terrain croisé" organisé par la Société des Européanistes depuis le milieu des années 1990. Un des plus difficiles aussi, selon le professeur Vintilă Mihăilescu, l'un des fondateurs de ce projet singulier dont l'objectif pédagogique présentait une caractéristique particulière: l'apprentissage de l'enquête ethnographique était intrinsèquement lié à une confrontation des regards des apprentis anthropologues du pays d'accueil et étrangers. Au terme d'une semaine de recherches dans le bassin minier, les tensions étaient devenues, pour certains, insupportables. À l'inconfort du dispositif d'enquête qui exigeait, d'une part, d'incessantes négociations au sein des équipes et une remise en question permanente de ses propres certitudes, et d'autre part, diminuait les possibilités de trouver une position "hors-jeu" pendant les temps hors-travail, s'ajoutait l'inconfort d'un terrain en temps de crise: nous étions tous en proie à un sentiment croissant de frustration et de confusion face au désarroi profond des habitants d'une région secouée par l'effondrement brutal de la principale industrie locale. C'est pourquoi, à l'issue d'une semaine d'enquêtes, nous fîmes une petite pause et nous rendîmes à la montagne. On avait tous besoin de prendre du recul. On avait besoin de l'air frais et d'un cadre qui pouvait favoriser une décrispation des relations et un rapprochement au-delà des différences culturelles et d'approche théorique et méthodologique.

C'est pendant ce refuge à la montagne que fut prise une photo qui m'est très chère et dont je souhaite parler. Sur l'image, le dos courbé, penché au-dessus d'un amas de branchages, Vintilă Mihăilescu dresse soigneusement un feu de bois. Il glisse entre les bois quelques rameaux pendant que les flammes s'emparent timidement du bûcher. De son visage on n'aperçoit que son front large et ses sourcils bien denses et noirs, raidis par la concentration. Il est absorbé par sa tâche, il s'y applique. Ses gestes révèlent le savoir-faire, alors que sa posture indique la dépense du corps. Dans mes souvenirs, je le revois s'agiter pendant la soirée, chercher des branchages secs dans la forêt, s'assurer qu'on en a assez pour pouvoir raviver le feu et le faire durer, ou encore s'assurer qu'on a suffisamment de bières, viande, bananes et autres trésors à frire et à flamber, afin de pouvoir discuter, chanter et laisser libre cours aux rêveries jusque tard dans la nuit, en toute tranquillité. Éclairés par le flash de l'appareil photo, le feu et la silhouette de l'anthropologue se détachent sur le fond obscur de la petite clairière de montagne. En arrière-plan, on aperçoit quelques jeunes femmes et hommes, mes amis et collègues étudiants, assis sur l'herbe.

Cette image éclaire bien qui était ce professeur que les étudiants désignaient en toute amitié par son prénom ou tout simplement par l'abréviation *profu'* ("le prof") lorsqu'ils parlaient de lui. On n'y voit, certes, ni le sourire affectueux ni le regard perçant et généreux qui le caractérisaient si bien. On ne le voit non plus dans la posture d'enseignant, de maître à la parole envoûtante qui a converti à l'anthropologie de nombreuses promotions d'étudiants. On n'y décèle non plus, enfin, aucun signe témoignant de sa carrière universitaire entre 1990 et 2020, ou des multiples fonctions qu'il a exercées et qui ont contribué à sa renommée nationale et internationale: fondateur du premier master d'anthropologie à Bucarest; chercheur infatigable et écrivain scientifique au style fluide, imagé et bien personnel; fondateur de revues d'anthropologie offrant sans relâche son appui pour la création de collections de publications en sciences sociales; chroniqueur hebdomadaire apprécié pour une revue culturelle, et auteur de nombreux articles journalistiques où il s'attaque avec raffinement, et parfois avec virulence, à toute forme de dogmatisme; ou encore, personnalité publique engagée dans la vulgarisation anthropologique qui, dans ses écrits et conférences, décortique avec élégance les significations des faits socio-culturels les plus anodins ou les plus insolites. Sur la photo on voit, en revanche, Vintilă l'homme de terrain. Pas dans l'exercice proprement dit du métier d'ethnographe mais dans la pratique des chemins de détour du métier, qui étaient, pour lui, sinon plus importants du moins tout aussi formateurs et nécessaires que les activités de

recherche en elles-mêmes. Faire un feu de bois sur le terrain était, pour Vintilă – comme j’allais l’apprendre dès ce premier stage ethnographique auquel j’ai participé –, quelque chose d’indispensable. Qu’elle soit de quelques jours ou de quelques semaines, à la campagne ou en ville, l’enquête de terrain avec lui a toujours comporté au minimum une rencontre autour du feu. C’est là une des constantes de sa pédagogie du terrain. Faire un feu de bois lors de nos enquêtes collectives, le dresser, l’allumer et l’entretenir, c’est une responsabilité qu’il a toujours épousée avec joie et une fonction qu’il n’a pendant longtemps jamais déléguée à quelqu’un d’autre.

Je ne me souviens plus qui est l’auteur de la photo. Un oubli fortuit qui résonne avec l’émotion que je ressens lorsque je la regarde: l’image m’appartient, comme elle appartient, certainement, à toutes celles et ceux qui ont fait du terrain et ont appris l’anthropologie avec Vintilă. Elle saisit, d’une certaine façon, le sens profond de sa démarche: l’anthropologie a été pour lui intimement liée à l’idée de partage. Si son langage théorique et descriptif a souvent été celui du paradigme du don, cela est dû tout autant à un choix épistémologique qu’à un impératif intime: celui de faire don de soi. Vintilă s’est toujours donné entièrement. Ceux qui l’ont eu comme enseignant et directeur de thèse, l’ont aussi connu comme chercheur, écrivain, ami, fin connaisseur de musique et de littérature, amateur de romans policiers, danseur, gourmet, voyageur. Vintilă a été un de ces rares maîtres qui sont à la fois professeur, élève et ami. Un maître sans véritables disciples mais bien fourni en camarades et apprentis. Un intellectuel qui n’a jamais manqué d’humour et que j’ai souvent entendu dire qu’il n’a pas créé d’école mais un folklore, une sorte de folklore familial et de confrérie.

Je ne saurais rendre compte en quelques mots de l’héritage que nous a transmis Vintilă. Excellent connaisseur de la Roumanie et des Balkans, il a été néanmoins, avant tout, un généraliste ouvert à toutes les découvertes, prêt à étudier les objets les plus variés. Érudit doué d’une grande vitalité et d’une capacité de travail impressionnante, il a toujours manifesté une curiosité insatiable pour l’humain. Même pendant son confinement à l’hôpital il s’y est penché avec une attention aiguë – constamment revigorée par le soutien indéfectible d’Ana, sa femme. De cette épreuve ont émergé, en quelques mois, deux livres, deux derniers ouvrages où l’anthropologue tourne son regard successivement vers son propre corps et vers le monde qu’il habite. Dans le premier, intitulé “À la recherche du corps retrouvé. Une égo-analyse de l’hôpital”, Vintilă transforme son internement pour cause de leucémie foudroyante en une occasion inédite de faire du terrain. Les conditions d’enquête, dit-il non sans une vitale auto-ironie, correspondent au modèle malinowskien d’investigation: le dépaysement absolu, l’immersion de longue du-

rée et l'observation participante lui étaient garantis. Le deuxième livre, quant à lui, est né de la confrontation entre, d'une part, une préoccupation de longue date pour la question de la domesticité et pour ce que signifie être *acasă* (dont le français "chez soi" n'est qu'une traduction approximative), et d'autre part, l'expérience personnelle des retours à la maison après de longues périodes d'hospitalisation, retours chaque fois plus provisoires et incertains. C'est peut-être à la lumière de ce dernier ouvrage que la description que j'ai faite ici de Vintilă s'éclaire le mieux. Échafaudé patiemment et habilement, ce livre complexe et ludique non seulement rassemble – englobant aussi quelques textes d'anciens étudiants –, mais invite à continuer la réflexion sur le sujet traité. Un peu à l'image d'un feu que l'on ne voudrait pas voir s'éteindre.

## De neînlocuit

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*Vintilă este un mare iubitor de oameni*  
Ana Mihăilescu

Într-una din zilele trecute am discutat despre ce a însemnat Vintilă Mihăilescu pentru noi. Mai jos, gândurile noastre.

Corina: Îmi tot vine în minte o replică a profesorului Mihai Pop (mărturisesc că nu mai știu dacă am citit-o undeva sau mi-a citat-o cineva), care, îndemnat să-și scrie memoriile, a replicat: „De ce să-mi povestesc viața, când a fost atât de frumoasă?” Cam tot așa mă întreb și eu acum: ce oare să povestesc despre Vintilă și de ce, când ce ar fi de spus despre el este împrăștiat și împărțit, împărtășit și încolțit în amintirile, etapele de viață și experiențele atâtor generații de studenți, masteranzi, doctoranzi, colaboratori, toți fiindu-i, în feluri diferite, prieteni. M-am apucat și am făcut o lista (cam alandala...):

- În jurul lui Vintilă au roit oameni de tot felul. Așa cum era, colocvial și scilipitor, erudit (într-un mod subversiv) și ca peștele în apă, atât la crâșmă, cât și în comisiile de doctorat, și, în general, oriunde punea piciorul, Vintilă îi seducea pe cei care apucau să îi stea prin preajmă.
- A fost cel care a deschis poarta intrării antropologiei sociale și culturale în Universitatea românească. Nu cred că ar fi putut exista un alt om mai potrivit pentru a o face. Despre asta ar avea mai multe de spus Iulia Hașdeu, Alex Bălășescu, Gabriela Coman, Lena Stan, Adina Ionescu-Muscel și tot restul generației lor.
- În primii ani de la înființarea Muzeului Țăranului Român (ale cărui începuturi nu pot fi evocate decât ca niște „vremuri magice”, așa cum spunea Marius Caraman), Vintilă a fost catalizatorul principal al prezenței studenților lui din mai multe locuri și generații în viața muzeului. Grație lui, aceștia au putut colabora cu studenți străini și, tot grație lui, primii tineri români au plecat în „Occident” să învețe

(despre) antropologie în universități în care disciplina avea deja istorie. Și despre asta ar fi multe povești de spus. Cam atunci, prin 1991, l-am cunoscut și eu pe Vintilă. De abia venisem în muzeu. N-aș putea identifica o situație anume în care să fi înțeles, distinct și copleșitor, cu cine ai de-a face cu adevărat atunci când începeai să ai un dialog cu Vintilă. Știu doar că, în 1994, când mi-am început, practic, doctoratul, îmi era deja clar că formarea mea în antropologie nu (va) exista fără discuțiile cu el. Despre anii aceia își aduce foarte bine aminte și Dominique Belkis.

- A făcut parte din zeci de comisii de doctorat în Franța, Canada și prin alte părți. Vreau să spun că, pentru primele generații de antropologi români, era cam de neconceput o susținere de teză fără Vintilă în juriu.
- Cred că a scris sute de scrisori de recomandare. Mie mi-a scris-o pe ultima de care am avut nevoie acum câțiva ani. (Pentru că poziția de cercetător în instituția în care lucram era foarte joasă, am tot avut nevoie de „recomandări” până aproape de bătrânețe). I-am dat telefon și i-am zis: „Iartă-mă că-ți fac asta, că te pun la muncă de pe-o zi pe alta, dar îmi trebuie. Cred c-o să fiu nevoită să-ți tot cer recomandări până ies la pensie!...” Mi-a răspuns: „Sigur, se face!” A doua zi dimineața era gata scrisoarea. Solicitudinea lui era întotdeauna promptă. În situații de felul acesta niciun fel de „mulțumesc” n-ar fi fost de ajuns. Vintilă a continuat, până la sfârșit, să gireze și să protejeze dezvoltarea, pe toate ogoarele, a semințelor pe care el le-a sădit.
- A rămas aproape de toți cei pe care i-a format, de aproape sau mai de departe, fără ca vreodată să-i tuteleze. Despre asta nu știu ce ar mai putea fi spus. Așa cum îi ziceam într-un mesaj (după ce ne cam certasem), generozitatea lui (cu toate că e impropriu spus, pentru că nu era „un generos”, așa era el!), care se activa de câte ori i se cerea sfatul sau ajutorul, era imposibil de compensat, pentru că nu prea existau echivalente „la schimb” pentru ce avea Vintilă de oferit.
- Vintilă își împărtășea, își dăruia ideile, părerile, opiniile, așa cum respira (ca Irina Nicolau, de altfel).
- E teribil de frustrant, și mi-e greu, să vorbesc despre el la trecut.
- În pofida momentelor de dezacord sau de defazare, alături de Vintilă știam (și nu numai eu) că putem fi împreună în „echipa cu care trecem prin viață” (cu formula profesorului Aurel Codoban, în care nici el nu mai crede acum). S-a creat, în felul acesta, o rețea, o „lume a lui Vintilă”, cum foarte inspirat a numit-o Bogdan Iancu. Într-un fel foarte special, grație deschiderii lui față de oameni, mulți îl considerau prieten sau se considerau prietenii lui.

- Una dintre lecțiile importante pe care le dădea Vintilă celor care îi stăteau în preajmă era: să nu disprețuiești. E adevărat, simplu și direct, ce a spus Ana, soția lui, despre Vintilă. Putea să judece pe cineva, dar niciodată nu disprețuia. Putea să discute cu oricine, să înțeleagă pe oricine (nu cred că formația lui de psiholog avea vreun rol în asta, cred că așa era, pur și simplu, dăruit de natură). Așa că în jurul lui s-a format, prin tranzitivitate, un fel de spațiu lărgit al conexiunilor dintre oameni. Persoane mai mult sau mai puțin compatibile unele cu altele, oameni din medii diferite și de generații diferite, au ajuns să comunice în virtutea și în numele apropierii lor de Vintilă.
- Mai înainte de a fi un antropolog instruit (și un intelectual de mare ținută), Vintilă era un antropolog talentat. Era foarte prezent în cotidian, în viața generațiilor în formare, în viața studenților lui. O anumită categorie de sociologi, antropologi ori etnologi îi datorează formarea nu numai profesională, ci, mai în întregul ei, maturizarea personală. Sunt mulți cei care, fără să-i fie cu adevărat discipoli, de fapt, i-au fost. În sensul că aceștia sunt toți cei care, după dispariția lui au rămas în mod virtual, cum spuneam într-o rețea de posibile conexiuni profesionale.
- Avea o formă de generozitate, izvorâtă din convingerea că oamenii trebuie să aibă șansa să își dezvolte ce au mai bun în ei. Și îi și ieșea! Din cauza asta este astăzi de neînlocuit, independent de calitățile lui intelectuale, care și alea sunt de neînlocuit; independent de talentul lui pedagogic, care nu poate fi suplinit cu niciun alt fel de pedagogii.

Anamaria: Pentru mine, Vintilă Mihăilescu rămâne directorul meu de suflet. Câțiva ani după ce nu a mai fost director al Muzeului Țăranului Român am continuat să îi spun „Domnule director” și am găsit cu greu o formulă nouă de adresare; nu îmi fusese niciodată profesor, așa că nu-i puteam spune „Domnule profesor”. De altfel, aceasta a fost un regret al meu, însă am considerat că am avut parte de îndrumarea lui în toți anii în care a fost directorul meu. Cu atât mai mult cu cât, în tot acest timp, a știut mereu să ne dea tuturor celor din muzeu încredere în creativitatea noastră.

Cu orice propunere veneam la el, întotdeauna ne încuraja, pentru că vedea potențialul din ideile noastre. Când m-am dus prima dată să îi povestesc despre colaborarea pe care o aveam cu biologii suedezi, cu care deja de ani de zile mergeam pe teren, încă de dinainte să lucrez la muzeu, a fost atât de entuziasmat de ideea colaborării dintre cele două științe, biologie și etnologie, încât m-a susținut imediat. A început, astfel, cumva, instituționalizat, o colaborare minunată cu Anna Westin și Tommy Lennartsson, dar și cu Vintilă Mihăilescu, pe a cărui părere ne bizuam, mai



ales că era persoana care ne propunea de multe ori concepte, idei, soluții, cu care ulterior am lucrat intens. Așa a fost cu „cheese-scapes”, un concept pe care ni l-a oferit pe tavă în urma unor discuții cu privire la un posibil proiect despre relația dintre biodiversitate și practici pastorale. Apoi, îmi amintesc cu mare plăcere cum, într-un februarie geros din 2011, cu munți de zăpadă pe marginea drumului, Vintilă Mihăilescu a prezidat cu atât de mare căldură Conferințele de la Șosea (o idee care i-a aparținut tot lui), așa cum făcea de obicei. Cu ocazia aceea, Anna, Tommy și cu mine am prezentat primele rezultate ale cercetărilor noastre interdisciplinare. Tot ceea ce a spus atunci a fost atât de natural și atât de pertinent, cum numai Vintilă Mihăilescu știa să spună, pe orice temă de discuție pe care o aborda: din orice frază, cumva, transpărea experiența sa extraordinară. Chiar dacă nu mai era directorul nostru, însă tocmai pentru că a fost, cumva, mentorul nostru în cercetarea aceasta interdisciplinară, ne-am bucurat că a acceptat să inaugureze expoziția din 2016, „Tradițiile și tranzițiile fânului”. Atunci am venit spre publicul larg cu rezultatele cercetărilor făcute cu biologii suedezi, dar și cu o echipă lărgită, pentru că între timp ni se alăturaseră Bogdan Iancu și Monica Stroe. La propunerea lui Vintilă Mihăilescu, evident, pentru că unul din marile sale talente, așa cum spunea și Corina mai devreme, era să pună oamenii în legătură. În jurul său se creau rețele de oameni cu interese comune, rețele de oameni care nici nu ar fi crezut vreodată că au atât de multe lucruri care îi apropie.

Multe din proiectele și activitățile pe care le-am avut, iar pe unele încă le mai continuăm la muzeu, au fost propuse de Vintilă Mihăilescu. Așa a fost, de exemplu, cu proiectul „Puzzle. Povestea vecinilor”, când, în 2008, au fost organizate un număr de 10 seri culturale, în care minoritățile din București se prezentau, dar și în care un număr de aproximativ 80 de voluntari au descoperit aceste comunități. Un proiect cu rezultate memorabile, toate pornind de la ideea sa de a descoperi moștenirea culturală orașului nostru. Un alt proiect extrem de interesant, ultimul pe care l-a propus muzeului, a fost cel în care se puneau în valoare ceea ce a numit „tradiții creative”, noile direcții în care meșteșugurile sunt valorificate, într-un mod creativ, dar care, până prin 2017, parcă erau într-un con de umbră. Vintilă Mihăilescu le-a adus la lumină și le-a văzut potențialul. Le-a adus parcă în față, pentru a le pune pe un fâgaș nou. Cumva, ideile sale erau de fiecare dată revoluționare și vizionare.

Vintilă Mihăilescu a fost, mereu, cu un pas înaintea timpului său.

## The Go-Between

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It was the early summer of 1994, in an amphitheater at the University of Bucharest. Young students of Sociology were presenting their essays and research papers to a jury formed by mainly unknown professors to me. I was just finishing my first year of study, and my presentation was of an ethnomethodological experiment having at its core questions regarding the social perception of HIV/AIDS in Bucharest among students. *Philadelphia*, the movie treating the same social issue was just out. The presentation gained me two things: a comparison with young Tom Hanks (the star of the movie), and a meeting in the break with a bearded guy who was in the jury. It went like this:

I was talking to some of my colleagues, and this professor with 1970s glasses and a beard (whom I have seen watching me attentively from the jury stand during my presentation) approached me. He was surrounded by few students. He told me that he is doing anthropological research during summer time in Romanian villages, together with a team of students, and he asked me if I would like to join. I jumped instantly on the opportunity, for reasons that are perhaps a little too long to explain here. Suffice is to say that going to countryside for me was a first step into experiencing exoticism, and to heal my frustration caused by the fact that all my grandparents lived in towns and cities (as opposed to those of most of my childhood friends who had a “country” to go to every summer). It turned out that the bearded professor was Vintilă Mihăilescu, and that from that moment on I joined the “Social Observatory” team and embarked in a journey that ultimately lead me to earn a PhD in University of California, Irvine, and become an anthropologist ironically specialized in urban phenomena. As Vintilă Mihăilescu would say, quoting Devereux: it is your trip from anxiety to method.

Professor Mihăilescu had a unique capacity for networking. In the early to mid 1990s, the Social Observatory developed into a platform of exchange with other European Universities, and our countryside mini-fieldworks developed from local to international, and from self oriented to cross pollinating perspectives on the same phenomena observed. During these fieldworks students from Romania, Italy, France, Belgium, and Bulgaria would meet and explore both the realities of rural settings in various corners of Europe, and their own reality of young researchers from different backgrounds looking at the same social phenomena. These were the seeds of *Terrains Croisés* -- crossed fieldworks -- that became a tradition for a while. Vintilă had also a unique capacity to make us aware of the fact that the two realities are not separated, that the observer and the observed constitute a continuum generating the fertile soil for anthropology to emerge as discipline.

At that time, in the early 1990s, this was a trailblazing activity. The European mobility is now perceived as a normal fact of life among students in Bucharest. For our generation though, it was a pioneering activity that set the standards of what it was to come. Without exaggeration I can say that Vintilă Mihăilescu was one of the architects of European integration for social sciences, facilitating the contact and reflective practices between students from Romania, France, Belgium, Italy, and Bulgaria. The younger generations may perceive this differently, and add countries to the constellation. The certainty is that the students with whom he worked along the years became highly mobile, became in turn trainers for other people, be it in Anthropology or in other disciplines, and they contributed significantly to the field in Europe or the US.

Did Vintilă do all these programmatically or instinctually? I would say that it was a little bit of both, he programmed instinctually, and he instinctively programmed. And this is because after all he was the perfect go-between. He brushed fields, combining anthropology and psychology, he moved graciously between institutional environments and countries, he never missed an opportunity to combine theory and practice – most of the time letting theory emerge from practice –, and not least he moved between emotions and rationality in his pedagogic approach. What stayed with me is the fact that he taught anthropology as a method of inquiry that generates knowledge about the self and the other with the ultimate manifest goal of problematizing both notions and making them fuse in the end, and not as a set of predetermined notions to be learned. While he was not the most rigorous person I met in terms of academic discipline, Vintilă Mihăilescu

definitely excelled in applying this method to both the reality he lived and performed in, and in transmitting it to his students. It is the method of go-between, and he embodied it perfectly, in a way resembling *The Storyteller* character in the homonymous book by Vargas Llosa. Like the Storyteller (himself an ex-ethnologist), Vintilă kept telling stories to remind us that we are part of the same tribe, the vast tribe of humanity, despite differences, or precisely due to them. We'll miss his stories, this is a fact...

## On Vintilă Mihăilescu

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I first met Vintilă in 1980 while I was doing fieldwork on local village leaders at the Communist Party Training School Ștefan Gheorghiu. I was introduced to him by Nicolae Gheorghe, the Roma sociologist who found a sympatic relationship and intellectual support with Vintilă and his colleagues. For Vintilă to have a relationship with someone like me at that time involved some personal risk (my Secu dossier has photos of Vintilă and me), but he gladly took these risks in stride, as always with an optimistic attitude mixed with a bit of WTF. Through four decades, we remained in contact, meeting in Romania, in Copenhagen where I live, and at various international conferences. I followed Vintilă's career, especially after 1989, as he single-handedly set about establishing a modern cultural anthropology in Romania, as he fought with the intellectual Old Guard in the Romanian academic milieu, as he revitalized the Museum of the Romanian Peasant, and wrote books and articles for *Dilema*. Somehow, in between all this, he did teaching, defended Romanian intellectuals from accusations by Western colleagues, conducted a lot of field work, and organized field schools for students. He produced anthropologists who were colleagues, not disciples. He gave lectures on topics ranging from the anthropology of play (which we should take seriously), to the anthropology of *sarmale*. How did he get all this energy? He visits Cuba and writes a book. He reads that "Romania e altfel" and comes out with a response. He gets very, very sick... and trying to stay alive, and still manages to writes a book about his own body. He does more on his vacations and while he is sick than most of us do in our good, secure jobs. Where did this energy come from? It is an old story about the sources of inspiration. One kind of inspiration comes from others: we travel, we meet people, we read new books, do research, try new things, and we discover things, try to make sense of them, and then communicate to others in books, articles, newspaper columns, lectures. But there is another source of inspiration, it comes from being inside yourself, being in isolation, or

being around a small circle of people for a long time, the long meditations when you are chain smoking, as he did. This internal exile was certainly the case for many groups of Romanian intellectuals before 1989. It was also the case for Vintilă and his little *gașcă* of colleagues within psychology, philosophy, sociology and cultural anthropology. Perhaps it comes from being a chain smoker. Smokers are now forced to go outside, where they stand for 10 minutes in exile, with other smokers. It is a kind of enforced passivity (at least before we could look at our phones). But perhaps a kind of enforced inspiration. The last time Vintilă and I met was in 2018, at the Society for Romanian Studies meetings in Bucharest. Vintilă gave a keynote speech emphasizing the continued relevance of the Romanian peasant. You don't hear much about peasants any more. You hear about precarity, or welfare state, or resilience, or migration, or identity, or all this fucking neoliberalism. But peasants? Who cares. Vintilă cared. His lecture on peasants reminded me of Isaiah Berlin's famous essay, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*. According to an ancient Greek poet, a fox knows many things, but a hedgehog knows one important thing. Vintilă loved his peasants. He stayed with them. He was a hedgehog. But read his books and essays, have a conversation with him, and you find that he was also a fox. A hedgehog and a fox. Vintilă was both.

## The Man, the Teach, the Director

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As I am writing this piece from Vintilă's former home study, I am carried to evoke the man he was to me. I owe Vintilă one of my two jobs, and the house in which I live. In 2006 I graduated the MA program in Anthropology run by Vintilă in Bucharest and enrolled in my first state job. After only six months of persisting in a delusional belief that I could make use of my anthropological knowledge in a recently established state-run institution for Roma culture in Bucharest, I resigned from my position. That summer Vintilă warmly received me in his chalet in Bușteni at the feet of the Carpathian Mountains, where he used to retreat for his holidays. Over a cup of coffee, he compassionately listened to my complaints and disappointments, and offered me a new job at the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant (thereafter NMRP) where he was named Director one year before. I shall come back to the experience of working alongside Vintilă at the named museum shortly. For now, suffice to stress that Vintilă was forthcoming and caring, and not just on that one occasion. Ten years later he sold me, much below the market price, the house in which he and his family had resided for three decades. I basically paid for Vintilă's house, a one floor light and airy flat in an interwar building with a garden and a cozy study at the attic, a bit more than the price for which I sold my gloomy cramped flat on the ground floor of a communist block in Bucharest.

I somehow repeatedly failed to show my gratitude for Vintilă's gestures of the greatest kindness and gentleness towards me, since our relationship was oft-times restless and uneasy. Although Vintilă was a maverick and a free thinker, he did not particularly take a liking to other mavericks. He was a man of deeds and an exploratory pioneer of institutional changes; and he expected his deeds to be praised, not challenged. Once his tenure of five year directorship at the museum was over, Vintilă ran a PhD program in Romani studies at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, in Bucharest, and later contributed to the establishing of an



MA program in the field, dedicated to students of Roma origin. Although I have always advocated for the inclusion of classes on Roma history and culture in the University curricula, I was opposed to the enclavisation of Romani studies. I have thus entered into a debate with Vintilă that resulted in not being on speaking terms for quite a while. As his MA student, I also used to challenge Vintilă to the point of keeping a silent treatment towards each other for some time. Looking retrospectively and on the long run, Vintilă replied my rebellious streaks over his authority with gestures of human kindness.

As it happened with most of his students spread across several generational cohorts, it was Vintilă who ignited the flame of anthropology in me. He was the unconventional Teach who basically institutionalized anthropology in post-socialist Romania. In the early 2000, when I was doing my BA in Philology, students from different departments – and I include myself here–, sat in Vintilă’s classes at the Faculty of Sociology, University of Bucharest, taking in his lectures on the interwar Sociological School from Bucharest, and on the promises of rural studies. We all dreamt of doing fieldwork with Vintilă. He was not a field worker in the conventional sense of British anthropology, i.e. a lonely researcher dedicated to a field-site and its people for a long period of time. Following in the footsteps of Gusti’s School of Romanian Sociology that promoted interdisciplinary research in rural areas, Vintilă established the practice of collective fieldwork for anthropology students in Bucharest. Doing fieldwork with Vintilă became a rite of passage that many of his students undertook before going abroad for doctoral studies, and thus before undertaking their own individual fieldwork. Unfortunately I didn’t have the chance to do fieldwork with Vintilă. The year when I enrolled in – at that time only MA in Anthropology in Bucharest–, lead by Vintilă, he was much too caught in his new position as a Director of the Museum and did not find the peace and time to undertake the customary summer fieldwork. That very academic year, he was rather absent from the classes. Yet he had good grounds for being absent from the MA classes, being on a mission at the museum, as I was to find out once I started working there.

At the museum, Vintilă was a path-breaker of his times: he basically aimed at turning it from a museum - temple into a museum-forum, as he liked to frame it. To better illuminate Vintilă’s ideas about museography and about his undertakings at the NMRP, an abridged history of the museum is needed. The NMRP opened in the early 1990s, only several weeks after the downfall of Ceaușescu, on the premises of the ex-Museum of the

Communist Party. The latter in its turn replaced in early 1950s, a museum of ethnography and national art established at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. that reflected the epoch's preoccupations of making of the peasant a symbol of the local nationalism building. The MNRP was thus, ideologically speaking, both a victory over the communist past, and an ode to the inter-war ethnocentric cosmology. The handful of people who imprinted its vision were anti-communist fighters who sympathized with right wing ideas eulogizing the national ethos. The first director of the museum, artist Horia Bernea and his team conceived a (still in place) display in the form of a work of art whose aims were twofold, first to beautify the peasant and his material culture steeped in orthodoxy, and second to take the peasant out of his history and of his society. The result was an innovative display that did away with explanatory labels and museum cabinets for offering a sensorial phenomenological experience of the archetypal, ahistorical Romanian peasant. Since its inception the NMRP was both in its aesthetics and scope, a display of revanchism that targeted the restoration of the values confiscated from the bourgeoisie by the communists, and the attraction of an exclusivist audience of cultural elites.

Once he was named Director, Vintilă took pains in bringing a new breath to the museum. First he wanted to broaden the audience, by seizing the museum from the hands of the elites and opening it to regular people. In other words, he wanted the museum to cater for society at large, and he envisaged that the museum became as vivid as the society. He turned the cinema hall that used to run on a closed circuit, into one of the most popular cinematographs in Bucharest. Then, under his directorship a café-pub opened on the premises of the museum. These were spots that attracted the youth which Vintilă dreamt to draw close to the museum. These initiatives of him raised a wave of resentment amongst the conservatory senior members of staff that could not come to terms with the coexistence of the material symbols of orthodoxy with the café-pub, in the courtyard of the museum. Throughout his directorship, Vintilă had to navigate through the resistance to any slight change in the discourse of the museum, which the old guard showed. He started off a series of public conferences on the premises of the café, meant to broadcast anthropological research, to the large public: *Conferințele de la Șosea (Public Anthropology Talks)*. In the last years I have been doing my best to carry on with this series of conferences.

Vintilă strove for changing a museum of culture into a museum of society. Both in the public discourse, and in situ, Vintilă made daring attempts at debunking the a-temporal, archetypal Romanian peasant, and bringing him back on the track of history. In the mass media he trumpeted the “death of

the peasant”: that was, the demise of the unchanging peasant and its replacement with his transient hypostasis. This came as a crushing blow not only to the old guard in the museum, but to a whole Romanian conservative intelligentsia that relied on interwar imaginaries of that same archetypal peasant that the museum had been initially dedicated to. Under his supervision and in collaboration with young researchers and curators, I coordinated the manifesto project of Vintilă’s intellectual program of debunking the peasant: *Piața de artizanat (The Marketization of Traditions)*, comprising research, a temporary exhibition and an international conference housed by the museum. I keep lively memories of how reluctantly the conservative staff of the museum received the our exhibition that put on display contemporary heterogeneous kitschy handicrafts, instead of the customary aesthetic artefacts of national art.

Although the work on the above mentioned project was exhausting all the more so it was thwarted by the old guard in the museum, Vintilă succeeded in making it appear enjoyable and easy going. Either consciously or unconsciously, Vintilă gave a sense of play, to our work. He did away with institutional stringencies and allowed us to work remotely, which meant at that time, from the museum café, not from the office. Vintilă never interrupted the football games that my male colleagues played during office hours, and he sometimes stepped in the play. Either because Vintilă engineered the task assignment to feel like cooperation or because I have never ceased to learn from him, I always failed to address him with the formal “Mr Director”. Even as my superior he was still my Teach. At the end of an exhausting year of work during which I never came to grips with the conservatory minded staff and just before leaving Bucharest for undertaking PhD studies in London, I wrote a letter of resignation from my job at the museum. Looking into my eyes, Vintilă tore it up and ensured me that I shall be grateful to have a job upon my return from London – which I was. Vintilă the man secured a job, and then a house – two places of stability – for me the restless.

## Vintilă rămâne

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Zeci de studenți ai profesorului Vintilă Mihăilescu, care începeau aventura descoperirii antropologiei culturale la master de antropologie, toamna, chiar din primul an, erau aduși de el și expuși chiar din primele săptămâni la experiența Astra Film Festival în Sibiu, într-un oraș din Transilvania, unde trebuia să se deplaseze din București. O săptămână de vizionare de filme documentare produse în toată lumea, care expuneau pe ecran mare realități din habitate etnoculturale / sociale diverse din lume, de la perspective și abordări macro și până la surprinderea celor mai fine intimități ale trăirilor într-o ecuație socială dată. Spațiul festivalului s-a potrivit de minune să introducă masteranzii pe terenul de unde se situa el, și de unde privea lumea, și unde era în elementul lui, profilului profesorului Mihăilescu. În primul rând pentru că Vintilă a rămas intelectualul geniu, care, surprins de un fenomen social în mod natural, era incitat să găsească o explicație, o citire săpând adânc, observând asocieri bazate pe detalii aparent minore. La discuțiile care se încingeau după filme, fie în sala de proiecție, fie la un pahar de vorbă participau și studentii. Era cea mai bună introducere a lor în gândirea și practica antropologiei culturale.

Îmi este imposibil să-mi amintesc toate ipostazele din cei 26 de ani, în care el a fost permanent prezent la Astra Film Festival în Sibiu. Împletea vorbe, conecta oameni, înfiripa noi și noi dimensiuni ale ideilor. Vintilă la un pahar, și cu tigara/pipa, înconjurat de studenți, Vintilă în juriul festivalului sau cu microfonul în mână în fața audienței, contribuind în multe feluri la devenirea și menținerea aventurii Astra Film, și, nu în ultimul rând, prin prezența lui împreună cu zeci de studenți la festival.

În aceste momente, rememorez povestea începutului prieteniei noastre, înainte ca el să fie un renumit profesor și un antropolog deschizător de drumuri, iar eu director de festival și regizor de documentare.

L-am întâlnit pe Vintilă la o conferință la Baia de Fier, în 1986. Din start, am simțit că avem multe în comun, că împărtășim aceeași viziune asupra lumii și, din două vorbe, am înțeles că el este omul cu care în sfârșit pot să discut și să reflectez asupra culturii pastorale în care eu trăiam atunci, dar pe care o și studiam în același timp.

Imediat s-a născut ideea pentru prima noastră aventură. Ca profesor într-un sat din Mărginimea Sibiului, aveam intrare la oameni, iar Vintilă avea o camera de filmat video, un VHS, o chestie rară pe vremea aceea, primită de la fratele lui din Elveția. Așa că am pus la cale să filmăm nunțile ciobanilor. Era un amestec de mai multe chestii pe care le împărțeam: ne plăcea terenul, ne plăcea să privim, să observăm viața, viața de la sat, era și o distracție într-un fel. Evident era și destul de obositor și stresant de cele mai multe ori. Filmam amândoi toată noaptea. Trebuia să umplem două casete de câte 3 ore fiecare. Înainte de-a se face ziuă, scoteam ultima casetă din cameră, montată gata, și o predam mirelui. Apoi făceam “aruncările”, ne lingeam rănila și împărțeam frățeste câștigul.

Nu cred că am fotografiat cu noi doi acolo, ca filmangii de nunți ciobănești. Avem nenumărate poze cu el la Sibiu, la Astra Film Festival. Avem însă o fotografie cu fetele noastre și cu copiii lui Giorgio Ficarelli, în vara lui 2006, când Giorgio ne-a invitat la casa lui de vacanță la Copșa Mare. Giorgio a chemat un căruțaș din sat pentru o plimbare, toți copiii au vrut în căruță, dar dintre adulți doar Vintilă s-a încumetat să meargă cu căruța. El era gata tot timpul să iasă “la teren”. Ar merita să facă cineva un eseu mai larg despre ce însemna pentru Vintilă terenul. Sunt sigur că pofta și disponibilitatea lui de a merge pe teren, de a ieși din confortul obișnuinței, l-a inspirat, a făcut din Vintilă un gânditor creativ. Unul care avea capacitatea de a analiza, de a pătrunde în esența lucrurilor, de a tălmăci și de a traduce sensurile adevărate ale anumitor cutume și tradiții din mentalul colectiv.

Ne-am văzut ultima dată la AFF Sibiu 2017, ne-am amintit de vremurile în care am fost filmangii de nunți și am plănuisit să adunăm de la miri toate casetele VHS filmate de noi înainte de '90 și să facem un film despre nunțile ciobănești din vremurile alea. Dar n-a fost să fie.

Nu întâmplător se folosește pentru prima dată priveghiul online tocmai la Vintilă. Cel dus, în cultura populară, avea parte 3 zile și 3 nopți de priveghi, înconjurat de familie și de comunitate, pentru rememorarea vieții lui.

Multe, multe povești și proiecte vom continua cu Vintilă, asta e sigur, oriunde și în orice formă va fi posibil. În primul rând fiindcă el a reușit să sădească emoția și pasiunea citirii lumii folosind cheia gândirii antropologice la zeci de studenți, care răspândiți în România și lume duc mai departe această minunată practică de reflexie, pe care el a cultivat-o de atâtea decenii.

Vintilă – profesorul, Vintilă – antropologul, Vintilă – un minunat partener de dialog în vorbe și în scris. Vintilă al fiecăruia personal și al tuturor.

Drum lin, prieten drag!

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