



Sociologie Românească

ISSN: 2668-1455 (print), ISSN: 1220-5389 (electronic)

***DO YOU LIKE WHERE I BROUGHT YOU? DISENCHANTMENT
AND RE-ENCHANTMENT IN VINTILĂ MIHĂILESCU'S
ANTHROPOLOGICAL TEACHINGS (25.05.1951-22.03.2020)***

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Sociologie Românească, 2020, vol. 18, Issue 2, pp. 180-183

<https://doi.org/10.33788/sr.18.2.11>

Published by:
Expert Projects Publishing House



On behalf of:
Asociația Română de Sociologie

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IN VINTILĂ MIHĂILESCU'S
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(25.05.1951-22.03.2020)**

Bogdan IANCU*, Monica STROE**

Abstract

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 legacy, is the ability to ask the right questions and to think anthropologically, no matter the field.

Keywords: Vintilă Mihăilescu, legacy anthropology lessons.

In the summer of 2002, I (Bogdan) travelled with Vintilă to Rovinari coal mining area, his first fieldwork site back in the '80s that would 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 travelling hundreds of kilometres in the front seat next to the man weekly *Dilema*² column of whom I had read every week not knowing 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.

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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 and ticks. After everyone gathered, Vintilă asked in a dry, amused tone: “Do you like it here, 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 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 ‘80s. 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 Vadim³!”. 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.

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) in Dobruja, 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 it, 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 some time that would allow for at least simulacra of the *depaysement* theorised by Abélès⁴ (2000, 9).

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, and bids for offers from providers of services. The opportunities for Vintilă's-style collective fieldwork became scarcer 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 it, 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.

Notes

¹ A first version of this article appeared in ANUAC journal, 9(1), 2020: <https://ojs.unica.it/index.php/anuac/article/view/4212>.

² A Romanian weekly magazine that covers culture, social topics, and politics.

³ Leader of an ultranationalist party.

⁴ Abélès, M. (2000). *Un ethnologue à l'Assemblée*. Paris: Odile Jacob.