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Review Of "Secrets And Truths: Ethnography In The Archive Of Romania's Secret Police" By K. Verdery

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Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania's Secret Police

Nearly 3,000 pages of photographs, informer reports, activity logs, transcribed telephone conversations, and similar materials compose the Securitate surveillance file for the target known as Vera, Folclorista, Katy, Vanesa, Kora, Viky, or Venera: the anthropologist Katherine Verdery, who spent more than three years in the 1970s and 1980s conducting ethnographic research in communist Romania. In 2006, Verdery requested a copy of her file, and the experience of making sense of the political and epistemological principles that organized its production is one of the inspirations for *Secrets and Truths*. Originally presented for the annual Natalie Zemon Davis lecture series at Central European University in 2012, this ambitious and wide-ranging set of essays reverses the gaze of the security apparatus by treating its archive not as a source of information about its targets, but as an ethnographic object in its own right. Verdery draws upon the files of herself and others, as well as recent scholarship on state security services across the former Soviet bloc, to offer a vivid and nuanced analysis of the "world view and practices" of the secret police and their informers (p. 40) – and thus to contribute to a historical ethnography of the socialist state itself.
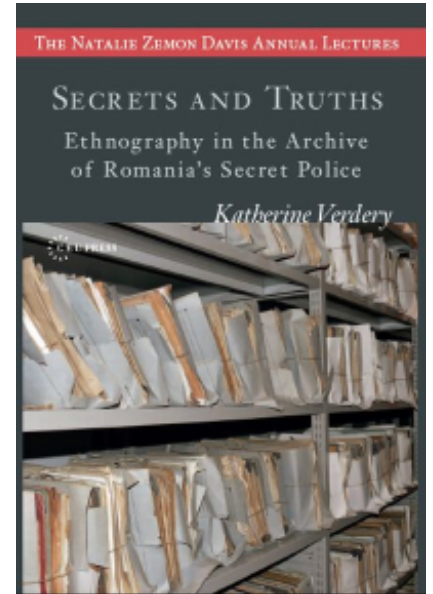
In three chapters that examine the secret police and its archive in terms of material practices, modes of secrecy, and forms of knowledge production, Verdery dismantles many commonplace assumptions that have structured the post-socialist life of the files over the past two decades. Chapter 1, "An Archive and Its Fictions," argues that neither the secret police nor its files were as monolithic as they have usually been perceived. "Conspirativity" (*conspirativitate*) – the demand for compartmentalization that kept each officer's informers and activities a secret from his colleagues as well as the public – produced a remarkable degree of organizational incoherence and inefficiency, as officers unknowingly duplicated each other's efforts. Given this segmentation of work practices, Verdery argues, it was solely the production and circulation of the physical files themselves that helped to constitute those employed by the Securitate as a collective actor, united through the shared labor of contributing and annotating reports and analysis. Indeed, because conspirativity dictated that full access to the files was limited to a handful of high-ranking officials, it is perhaps only now that the files are open to post-socialist public scrutiny that both the Securitate and its archive can be analyzed as the "coherent, unified entities" that they were not in practice (p. 68).

Chapter 2, "The Secrets of a Secret Police," extends this discussion of the consequences of conspirativity to examine more broadly the role of secrecy within the socialist state. Secrecy was central to the state project of Soviet communism, whose origins as a persecuted illegal movement gave heightened emphasis to the need to protect state secrets and root out hidden enemies. Rather than limit her task to the hunt for scandalous secrets that characterizes much post-socialist inquiry into the secret police archives, Verdery suggests that the content of the secret may be less important than understanding the historical, cultural, and social-structural relations that produce it. To pursue this argument, she considers the Securitate as a secret society, drawing comparative examples from the anthropological and historical literature to analyze Securitate recruitment practices as a form of ritual initiation and to illuminate the political and social conditions that enables such secret societies to flourish. She then explores state socialist secrecy as a practice structured by technologies of exclusion, obstruction, and – ironically – revelation, with spectacles of unmasking and denunciation that did not undermine the power of the secret but only helped to enhance its mystique. This mystique and the fear that the secret inspired, Verdery concludes, was crucial

to concealing the sometimes-chaotic inefficiency produced by conspirativity within the Securitate, as well as the conflicts and tensions behind the imposing façade of the party-state.

Finally, in Chapter 3, "Knowledge Practices and the Social Relations of Surveillance," Verdery analyzes the knowledge practices revealed in the files. Because personhood in socialist societies was understood as socially embedded rather than autonomous, Verdery argues that the true object of state surveillance was not the individual, but his or her social networks. Building on Foucault's formulation of power as productive as well as repressive, she demonstrates that the Securitate's task was not merely to destroy existing loyalties and attachments. Instead, it sought to reforge social relations with the party-state as mediator – and thus to alter "the very kinds of human beings [these networks] enmeshed" (p. 201).

Uniting these three chapters is an important critique of the role of the archives in processes of transitional justice. Verdery argues that attempts to use surveillance files as a source of truth-value fail to appreciate the practices that composed the archive itself: "Informers reported under duress, out of malice, or inaccurately; case officers made tendentious interpretations that suited their ends; destruction of files left enormous lacunae in the corpus; agents opened files on people even when their 'recruits' refused to cooperate; the demands of the planned economy set performance targets that compelled sloppy work; competition among officers and branches of the secret service aggravated that tendency; and so forth" (p. 71–72). Moreover, Verdery maintains, given that the Securitate targeted social networks rather than individuals, the call for individual accountability fundamentally distorts the very nature of informing (p. 210). Verdery thus joins other anthropologists of the archive, such as Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Ann Stoler, to advocate examining the files not as a "*source* of knowledge but "a *form* of it" (p. 159). In so doing, her analysis reveals that the officers' practices of knowledge-gathering followed a performative logic rather than a descriptive one: that is, the secret police produced the category of enemy and then "populate[d] it with real people" (p. 64). The role of the file, therefore, was to substantiate a guilt that was always already presumed.

Yet, as Verdery also notes, the assumption that their target was an enemy did not free these officers from the work of amassing and analyzing evidence to determine "what kind of enemy she is" (p. 162). Another key contribution of *Secrets and Truths* is thus her insistence that we understand the secret police not as the embodiment of absolute evil, but as "serious practitioners of a form of inquiry" (p. 74), with their own knowledge practices and cultural categories. Without either surrendering to or relinquishing moral outrage at the harm the Securitate caused, Verdery argues for practicing anthropological estrangement in order to analyze the secret police as an institution within the party-state bureaucracy possessing its own internal politics, professional challenges and rewards, and "unfolding historicity" (p. 28). One of the many advantages of this approach is that it enables Verdery to uncover startling parallels between the work of the secret police and her own research as an ethnographer: both trained to "make close examinations of everyday behavior and interpret what they found" (p. 7). This uncanny formulation of the police as fellow ethnographers (albeit ones constrained by an interpretive grid that pre-determined what they found) enables Verdery to reconsider the very premises of her own ethnographic practice – and thus to offer a model for future anthropological research on the archive.

The origin of *Secrets and Truths* as a lecture series means that it raises a number of provocative questions that I look forward to seeing Verdery address in greater detail in her forthcoming book, *My Life as a Spy: Memoirs of a Cold War Anthropologist*. For example, I am curious to learn more about her conversations – or confrontations – with those who informed upon her, and how they understood the role of the secret police in their lives. As Verdery's analysis makes clear, due to the organizational constraints of conspirativity, there was more room to maneuver and even refuse than most potential recruits realized. Knowledge of such possibility, however, is only available now in retrospect, through memoirs of the courageous and reports in the files themselves. Further discussion of her informers' perceptions and decision-making could help to augment Verdery's analysis of fear as a social fact, by providing an ethnographic perspective on the Securitate's manipulation of affect, and how it impacted both social relations and understandings of personal agency.

Similarly, while outside the intended scope of her study, the anthropology of post-socialism has so much to learn

from Verdery's rigorous historical ethnography that it might be fruitful to explore in more detail the role the files play in the present day. In her conclusion, Verdery does discuss the contemporary implications of her findings by observing that surveillance practices are not merely part of the communist past, but the West's present and future as well, given corporate data-mining and the ever-expanding "war on terror." While both the nature and the technology of surveillance practices have changed since the end of the Cold War, Verdery convincingly argues that the most crucial shift has been in the subjects produced by these technologies, who now mostly view them with complacency as the inevitable cost of living in convenience and safety. Verdery's goal here is to draw new and surprising links between seemingly incompatible examples – communist past and contemporary West – but this comparison also inspires questions about how post-socialist experiences of neo-liberalism and the "security state" may be intersecting with the legacies of state socialist surveillance and the uses of its files today. Why has the archive – both its status and its contents – become increasingly central to the way the socialist past is remembered and debated? What politics of knowledge drive the post-socialist desire to see these files as the source of truth, however misguided this desire may be? And what contemporary understandings of selfhood, morality, and the relationship to the state underpin attempts to blame the injustices of the past upon individuals whom, as Verdery argues, may deserve as much compassion as condemnation (p. 211)?

At once astute analysis and compelling auto-ethnography, *Secrets and Truths* is a key addition to two emerging genres of interdisciplinary scholarship on communism's state security archives: studies of the politics and aesthetics of the knowledge produced by the secret police (Andreas Glaeser 2011, Cristina Vatulescu 2010) and personal recollections and reflections by the targets of that surveillance (Timothy Garton Ash 1997, Sheila Fitzpatrick 2013, as well as numerous memoirs from within the former Soviet bloc). The book's contributions, however, go far beyond its regional scope. The unexpected parallels Verdery draws between traditional "secret societies" and the secret police, for example, offer a welcome advance within the anthropology of secrecy. Moreover, Verdery's critique of the archives as a source of historical truth and thus justice is of vital interest to historical anthropologists, and also poses a valuable intervention within the interdisciplinary scholarship on transitional justice and reconciliation across the globe.

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