

Fieldwork after Fieldwork in Bucharest. Ethnographic and Applied Roles in Anthropological Practice*

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The paper deals with a research of applied anthropology within a neighborhood in southern Bucharest, in 2000-2002. A succession of roles – ethnographic, then applied – are discussed upon, as a contribution to the anthropological methodology of fieldwork, with the argument that ethnographers need to alternate their enrolment in the field in order (1) to identify social problems specific to a given community, and (2) to implement the solutions they consider to such problems. Through a network analysis, a case study is outlined at the level of a marketplace, a factory, and a school, with a particular emphasis on the relationships that the anthropologist engage between the local social groups and the authorities concerned in each of the three sites.

When oriented to practice, anthropologists inevitably come into contact with the state or private power structures. The central issue (equally ethical and technical) is how to collaborate with authorities when anthropological research is holistic and may bring into question what the authorities do, their role and competence in the social structure? According to Wolf (1999, 132),

[Anthropology] remained peripheral to the play of powers [because of the] anthropological insistence on observation. Observation has allowed us to separate norms from behavior and to see the relation between the two as problematic. [...] This often assigns to us the unwelcome yet vitally needed role of questioning the certainties of others, both social scientists and policy makers.

Concern with power leads to discussion of the social role of anthropological fieldwork, since the "entry permission" asked by any ethnographer among his informants is expected to be followed by specific reports and "recommendations" on the part of the applied anthropologist. Could such field reports – meant to provide practical solutions to local management – remain scientifically accurate while describing all the levels of a community or organization? Anthropological literature still vacillates between ascribing an employee role for the applied anthropologist, and asking for more autonomy of his or her research in relation to the "client". As Butcher argues (1987, 41-2),

[...] the applied anthropology, almost by definition, works for a client. Work interests are, to a major extent, dictated by the client through often in consultation with the applied anthropologist. [...] The applied anthropologist cannot implement anything on his own, as he has neither authority, nor the resources. Therefore much thought has to be put into identifying not only what should be done, but how to present it to the client so it will be accepted.

But, as Feldman observes (1981: 227, 234), "contract anthropology" is also interested in studying the client:

In doing contract work for any local branch of a federal agency, the anthropologist is inevitably affected in this work by decision, modus operandi, and pressures present not always seen from the national headquarters of that agency. [...] The researcher has another option: to point out to the agency that a problem can only be fully explored if the agency itself is allowed to be part of the research problem investigated.