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# Socialist biography and post-socialist ethnography

***Socialist biography and post-socialist ethnography: on the ethical dilemmas of trust and intimacy during fieldwork***

It was a bright Saturday morning in spring. A fourteen-year-old girl straightened herself as she stood in a row with her taller classmates, sensing the presence of their families and teachers sitting behind them in the solemnly decorated community hall. Somehow her clothes felt too big, despite having been tailored especially for her and for this important occasion. In front of them was a string quartet; on stage stood the guest speaker behind a lectern bearing the German Democratic Republic (GDR/East Germany) coat of arms: a hammer, a compass, and a garland of corn. The girl's heart pounded as the speaker said the crucial words: 'So answer: Yes, this we pledge!' Her pastor's advice rang in her head as she lip-synched the response: 'Yes, this we pledge.' A tremendous silence filled the hall, and with it came the realisation that everyone had lip-synched, rather than spoken, the vow. She longed to be invisible. The speaker, the headmaster, and their class teachers looked down from the stage at the group of roughly forty adolescents, baffled. A slow, astonished murmur swelled up out of the silence; a voice from the back shouted: 'Answer!' Chaos broke out.

As a teenager, I had imagined this scenario in the run up to my own *Jugendweihe* ('youth consecration') in 1987. It was the reason that I never followed my pastor's suggestion that I mouth – rather than say – the pledge to the state and our socialist future. I was far too afraid that my classmates might have had the same idea, plunging us into a sinister silence and triggering the breakdown of the whole ceremony, which we had all been feverishly anticipating for months. Instead, standing in the front row as I had imagined, with the same string quartet and coat of arms in front of me, my heart pounding as I had anticipated it would – I pronounced the words loudly while keeping my fingers crossed, thinking: 'It does not count, I do not mean it.'

Almost exactly two and a half years later, on the evening of 9th November 1989, friends and I stood among hundreds of demonstrators in front of the *Johannis* Church in Gera, the third largest town in Thuringia, East Germany. A voice, desperate to attract our attention, shouted excitedly over the crowd telling us of the announcement just made on TV news, that one of the main demands of the ongoing protests for more civil liberties had been granted. From now on we were free to travel anywhere. We looked at each other in disbelief. It was as unbelievable as the disappearance of the country – the country we had grown up in and wanted to reform – would be, less than a year later.

However, Jugendweihe – the secular coming-of-age ritual during which eighth-grade adolescents had pledged allegiance to this country's future – did not disappear. Under the GDR,

adolescents aged thirteen and fourteen were educated in extra-curricular 'youth lessons' about their roles as socialist citizens in the run up to their Jugendweihe ceremony (ZAJ 1986: 46-56). Because of this link to the GDR state, the Church and many western observers assumed the ritual would vanish like the country with which it was so closely associated (Meier 1998: 7; Saunders 2002: 50).[1] Instead, Jugendweihe continues to be celebrated each spring, predominantly in eastern Germany, as an alternative to ecclesiastical coming-of-age rituals. The public ceremony involves an approximately eighty-minute festive programme during which adolescents take the stage and are welcomed into the 'circle of adults' (*Kreis der Erwachsenen*) – today without a pledge of allegiance (Wesser 2016: 43-50). This event – held in either a theatre or community hall – is followed by a large family celebration. The Jugendweihe ritual is the focus of my PhD project, in which I illuminate the connections between kinship and politics and how the socialist past shapes social life in contemporary eastern Germany.

In November 2012 I returned to my hometown for fieldwork. It was the first time that I had lived there for a prolonged period of time since I had left in 1999 to travel abroad and then to live in Scotland. Although the topic of my research was in itself uncontroversial, in the course of my fieldwork I experienced unexpected anxieties and doubts about whether what I was doing was ethical. I only began to grasp what the issue was almost a year into my fieldwork when the media re-engaged with the National Security Agency (NSA) scandal. It was revealed that the US American security agency had not only been spying on ordinary German citizens but had also tapped Chancellor Angela Merkel's mobile phone. It was through her oft-cited response to the media, 'Spying out among friends – that's a no go!', that it dawned on me what I had increasingly felt guilty of doing during fieldwork.

This paper's focus is on the intertwined issues of intimacy and trust and the way these became entangled in the course of my fieldwork. Trust is of ethical import for the ethnographic project but also a crucial value in familial relations and in political relations involving the state (see Introduction and Goddard this volume). Trust and intimacy are widely held to be co-constituents in social relations as Robert Paine's reflections on friendship remind us (Paine 1999: 43). Niklas Luhmann (1988) views familiarity as a precondition for trust. He defines a situation of trust as one in which a person chooses one action over another despite 'the possibility of being disappointed by the action of others' (Luhmann 1988: 97). If trust is disappointed, the trusting person regrets their own trusting choice. Trust, for Luhmann, is only possible in a situation of risk, that is, when a person considers an alternative action because they perceive their decision can influence the

outcome of that action. To trust then is closely associated with moral agency. Moral codes, however, are created within a historically specific context, and thus also in relation to – yet not necessarily in line with – the wider polity. In the former East Germany interpersonal trust was typically linked with the risk of political criticism (Thelen 2005: 11). Trust and intimacy are thus particularly relevant in the research context of eastern Germany because these values are not only crucial ingredients in social relations, both as part of and outwith the ethnographic project, but are also especially volatile due to the historical legacy of the State Security apparatus and its spying techniques. In exploring the nature of my fieldwork difficulties I will outline the parallels between these issues and that of my research project. I argue that the anthropologist and her interlocutors are historical subjects with a common understanding of a shared moral practice during state socialism associated with a particular configuration of the public/private dichotomy.

## *The Haunting Past*

About a month after Chancellor Merkel's statement, I sat with my friend Robert in his car with our heads bent over the photocopied version of what had been typewritten on greyish paper decades earlier. It seemed to be from a different world and yet so familiar. We were looking at the response he had received to his request to access his Stasi file. Robert is only a few years older than me, and – at the time – we had been friends for almost twenty years. Although I had spent the greater part of these years abroad, we kept loosely in touch. A week earlier I had agreed to join him at an event at the local Stasi Records Agency (BStU)[2] during which he also intended to speak with a staff member in order to gain some clarification regarding these documents. Like him, I could not make much sense of them, but I understood his concern about the date that was present on one copy. It appeared to be the date on which he was entered into the non-computerised database of the State Security. It was also the date of his parents' divorce when he was still a child. Unlike his father, his mother had been a convinced member of the GDR's ruling Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) and, though he loved her, his adolescence was marked by events for which he still could not quite forgive her. We did not know what the date signified but there was a silence in the car filled with doubt, anxiety, and disappointment. 'Let's just spit it out', I said, breaking the silence brazenly. 'What you are actually worried about is that there is a chance that your mother might have asked the Stasi to observe you, isn't it?' He stared ahead through the windscreen onto the almost empty car park then turned to me, his face wearing a troublesome smile: 'I don't even want to think that far.'

East Germany's infamous Ministry for State Security, better known by its acronym MfS but more popularly referred to as Stasi, had in 1989 approximately 91,000 official or full-time members, who were mostly regular officers and soldiers of the National People's Army (NVA) (Gieseke 1996: 21). Furthermore, there were an estimated total of 189,000 unofficial collaborators, who operated undercover – usually as civilians – in the GDR.[3] The Stasi meant different things to different people, and the majority of its members – including its unofficial contingency – were involved out of conviction in a greater cause: future communism. It was the unofficial collaborators (in short IM)[4] that made the Stasi appear to be omnipresent and created an environment of profound mistrust. These IMs, unlike the official Stasi members, are widely held to have acted immorally due to their strategy of disguise. If East Germans encountered an official Stasi member, they could change the subject or not articulate what they really thought, because it was obvious whom they were talking to, and that what they revealed might be used against them or against others. However, in the case of an IM East Germans were not aware of their 'part-time job' and, as such, might tell him or her anything because they would presume that they were in a trustworthy relationship with this person as he or she might have been their neighbour, colleague, teacher, friend or even their family member. Although transitional justice aimed at rebuilding social trust after the end of the GDR regime, mistrust seemed to intensify in the early 1990s. This mistrust was partly due to a lack of familiarity with the new system caused by the rapid transformation processes that also changed the type of risks (Berdahl 1999; Thelen 2005). But mistrust also increased because the extent of the Stasi's activities came to light. It was the intrusiveness of their monitoring strategies, how they had invaded family life and infringed citizens' right to privacy that became prominent in cases such as that of the civil rights activist Vera Lengsfeld, who learnt from reading her Stasi files in 1991 that her own husband, and father of their two sons, had reported on her (Lengsfeld 2011). The Stasi's encroachment into what is supposed to be the private or family sphere – free of state interference – became the focus of what GDR life was like, and also became well-known outside Germany because of, amongst others, Anna Funder's book *Stasiland* (2004) and von Donnersmarck's fictional film *The Lives of Others* (2006).

With this backdrop in mind, it is perhaps more understandable why Robert and I had played out the worst-case-scenario in our heads, though ultimately our doubts were not confirmed by the staff member of the agency later that day. Indeed, it was exactly because of this GDR legacy of suspicion and betrayal that I had anticipated that issues of trust could be a delicate matter during my fieldwork. For example, I avoided using the term 'informant', because people would make an immediate link to a Stasi informant. I expected to face difficulties in regards to gaining access to, and rapport with, my interlocutors, especially because I was interested in family matters. But I felt

rather unprepared for and overwhelmed by the way it became an issue for me and for what I was (supposed to be) doing. I felt that Robert was more likely to understand why fieldwork had posed an ethical dilemma for me and I started to explain to him my anxieties and doubts that had increasingly emerged and that I had struggled to make sense of. When I told him that I had even several times caught myself hesitating to ask certain questions, he played down my concerns and, to my surprise, asserted that this was an issue of my lack of self-confidence that he found puzzling. 'You just ask people', he suggested, 'and the worst that could happen is that they tell you: 'No, I don't want to answer that!'. But I insisted that it was more complicated, and I explained further what I was doing as an ethnographer: from observing people, partaking in their lives, to writing fieldnotes about these happenings and keeping my supervisors informed about my research. I elaborated that it was not so much the semi-structured interviews but the casual conversations that really troubled me. Those instances when people volunteered information to me because they momentarily forgot that I was a researcher; and that it was exactly these moments that anthropology thrived on because quite often it was then that you gathered the most intriguing data. I explained that anthropologists wrote a kind of diary in the evening about what they had experienced during the day and about the people they had observed and talked to. Yet I had struggled to write fieldnotes because in their banality – the writing down of people's everyday lives – lie the parallels to the Stasi reports. Robert quietly listened to everything and then asked: 'Surely you must not have so much of a problem with writing about people but with sending reports about them to your supervisors? At least, I would have more of a problem with that.'

Robert immediately made the connection to a Stasi report and implicitly confirmed that my anxieties about conducting fieldwork were not simply ascribable to personal insecurities, but to the wider social context. At the beginning of my research I had explained to members of the local Ritual Association that I was interested in how their organisation worked but also in what happened within the family since the ritual was seen as a family tradition. However, it was obvious from their comments that the ethnographic project remained somewhat obscure to them. This puzzlement led me to feel that I had failed to make myself clear and hence I questioned the extent to which their consent for me conducting research with them was in fact an 'informed' one. I decided to forward some links to German newspaper articles about Felix Ringel's anthropological study in Hoyerswerda in which he explained participant observation and anthropology at home.[5] The next time I was in the office, I inquired whether they had read the articles and whether what I was actually doing now made more sense to them. The sixty-year-old vice chairwoman dryly replied: 'Yeah, I think we got it: basically you are spying on us!'[6] Her remark, I presume, was partly triggered by the article's mention that the inhabitants of Hoyerswerda had nicknamed the anthropologist,

who had filled roughly 60 notebooks about their lives, 'IM Felix'. This comment, however, had not been the only such reference; the Stasi issue was palpable in everyday life. I overheard conversations in which people, as a point of reference, described an absent third person as *Stasimann*. I grew accustomed to my father using the same term whenever the popular actor Andreas Schmidt-Schaller appeared on television, after he had, in early 2013, admitted to having operated as an IM in the 1960s. I caught up with former classmates who, while reminiscing about our school years, suddenly begun to wonder out loud which of our teachers might have been an unofficial Stasi informant. I read in newspapers about new Stasi revelations and I watched fictional TV serials that focussed on how the Stasi infiltrated family life. And in this process, it seems, I internalised this issue of trust and betrayal so much that I could no longer see the difference between me and a Stasi informant.

However, Robert focused on 'the report' as a document authored by an observer who wanted to elucidate what a particular person *really* thought through participant observation and the jotting down of that person's articulations made in moments of trust. In the report people under investigation would be referred to by pseudonyms [7] rather than their real names. Indeed, anthropologist Katherine Verdery (2014) describes in her study of the archives of the Securitate, the Romanian equivalent to the Stasi, that it was a revelation when she read in a 1985 report in her files that the Securitate concluded that she undoubtedly has

> intelligence experience because in writing my fieldnotes I use a special code; I call the people I speak with "informers" and give them "conspiratorial names"; I always give the context and location of a discussion, the informer's attitude, and my questions; I keep taking fieldnotes on things well outside the limits of my research proposal…(2014: 6)

However, unlike Robert and me, Verdery seems surprised about these parallels.[8] She admits that it led her to ask herself whether in fact she was a spy, as she had to recognise that because the Securitate 'make close examinations of everyday behaviour' and 'employed a specific interpretative lens for what they gathered does not distinguish them from most other practitioners of the ethnographic method' (2014: 7).

While these aspects of the State Security's strategies mirror the ethnographic project, Robert, in his question about my supervisors, was less interested in the practice of gathering data but more concerned with how private data would become accessible to a third party that had the potential to harm someone. The difference between me and an unofficial Stasi member was that I did not divulge information to a third party, such as the state, in the knowledge that this information could potentially be used against them. Instead, for a great part of my fieldwork, I had already

sabotaged this possibility by not asking further questions, so that I could not gain certain information, and by not writing conversations down, I also limited the potential for that information to become available to others. These strategies, which meant that I preferred feeling inadequate as an ethnographer to feeling the sensation of reproducing the Stasi legacy, were counterproductive to my research project but were crucial to my own socialist past. Robert understood my concerns after I had explained about ethnographic research to him because both the practices and the terms attached to them resonated with an uneasy aspect of the socialist past. Our mutual understanding was not simply based on our friendship but on our belonging to the same GDR generation. As such, we had an understanding of a shared morality about historically constituted relations of trust and complicity, to which I now turn in a discussion of the public and private boundary during the socialist period.

## *Late State-Socialism Revisited*

The utopian goal of communism was the eradication of all social hierarchies, which was to be achieved through the creation of the 'new socialist man' and a socialist family model (Gal and Kligman 2000; Verdery 1996). The new socialist subject was not perceived as an autonomous individual but was to be, among other characteristics, 'thoroughly imbued with collective thoughts and deeds' (Fulbrook 2005: 115). Similarly, the family was not viewed as a private matter, but as 'basic collective' that would together with society develop progressively (Borneman 1992: 80-90; Gal 2002: 86). In East Germany, the Jugendweihe ritual was re-introduced in 1954 (ZAJ 1986: 11). Its extra-curricular preparation classes  aimed to educate teenagers in their role as 'socialist personalities' (ZAJ 1986: 177; Gallinat 2005: 295).  The public ceremony but also the private family function connected individuals, families, and the state, through which the latter hoped to win the 'hearts and minds' of the population for its ideological venture (Wesser 2016). As such, the socialist state's aim was to do away with the public/private dichotomy because what happened within the family was crucial for succeeding in its ideological project for a new and better future. While this endeavour had positive aspects, such as social policies that attempted to erase gender inequality, its main objective meant that the aspired-for 'socialist family' would eventually dissolve into a greater collective – the communist society. In other words, this process required what is deemed private and intimate to be rendered public, emphasizing the greater good of an equal collective over that of individuals and families. This aim was nicely condensed in the slogan '*Vom Ich zum Wir*' (From I to We) that the GDR state promoted in the 1950s to encourage the rural population to join the agricultural collectives (LPGs). This utopian project towards an equal but also homogenised collective was recognised by most East Germans, however many simultaneously questioned its

viability, not least because intimate relations are generally considered to be of a private nature. For example, the popular East German rock band *Renft* raised doubts about such processes of collectivisation in its ironic – but poignant – song '*Gänselieschen*' (goose maiden), released in 1972:

> Our agriculture collective has one hundred geese
> And one goose maiden – she is mine.
> Every morning they march up on the meadow,
> One hundred geese and the one hundred and one.
> […]

> The farmers appear to like it,
> But many of them question themselves:
> The one hundred geese belong to all of us,
> Why everything but the one hundred and one?
> […]
> Yet behind them on my tractor,
> Drive I, the tractor driver, and keep watch
> So that nobody turns
> My dear maiden into public property. [9]

As such, ordinary East Germans – like people in other socialist countries – did think in terms of public and private as oppositional categories. But the fact that the socialist state held a monopoly over public space made its purview inescapable. This omnipresence meant that ordinary people were in many ways always also part of the state because almost all work, political, and leisure activities were part of state ventures. Susan Gal (2002) has convincingly illustrated that we can understand the persistence of the public/private dichotomy in both scholarly and lay thought through a semiotic approach, which can help us analyse what has been for many scholars of state-socialism a challenge: 'How is it that public and private are so different in state-socialist societies and in capitalist parliamentary democracies, yet also eerily familiar?' (2002: 80). She suggests viewing the public/private binary as discursive and fractal in the sense that the distinction can be reproduced by projecting it onto a narrower or broader context. As a result, any private 'domain' can also include a public and vice versa, through a recalibration that make such nested dichotomies possible. For example, the privacy of the family home is contrasted with the public nature of the street outside it. Yet when our focus shifts to the inside of the home, the living room becomes 'the public part of a domestic private space' (2002: 82) because our change in perspective leads to a reapplication of the public/private dichotomy that again separates what was formerly entirely private into public and private (see also Gal and Kligman 2000).

None of the socialist states were successful in eradicating the public/private dichotomy, but this distinction under socialism diverged from that in capitalist democracies because it 'was aligned with a discursive opposition between the victimized "us" and a newly powerful "them" who ruled the state' (Gal 2002: 87). Indeed, what Robert and I had in common was our understanding of how this intertwined dichotomy linked to everyday ethics. We had been brought up in a society where everyone knew that colloquial terms such as '*VEB Horch und Guck*' (the People's Enterprise Eavesdrop and Peek), *die Firma* (the firm) or sometimes indeed just *die* (they), meant the State Security. These terms were used by way of making distinctions between 'us' (*uns*) and 'them' (*die*). The clear 'us' versus 'them' simplified social reality and allowed people to distinguish between a trustworthy, private, familial and an untrustworthy, public 'they' who run the state, which involved – often unconscious – processes of interweaving and constant embedding of these categories of public/private and them/us (Gal and Kligman 2000: 51). Put differently, what was referred to as public and private differed from that of capitalist democracies in its referential content. But the reference to the Stasi as the 'People's Enterprise Eavesdrop and Peek' appears to have simultaneously recognised and mocked what Gal and Kligman have pointed out as an irony, in that 'everyone implicitly knew, the "we" of the private and the "they" of the public were often the very same individuals' (2000: 51). This duplicity was recognised as is reflected in such jocular references to the Stasi but also in political jokes. For example:

> At the Berlin Wall one border guard asks another: 'What do you think about the GDR?'
> 'The same as you…'
> 'Well, then I have to arrest you.'

Such jokes make clear that the observable practice might be in opposition to the unobservable thought processes of individuals. Alexei Yurchak (1997) argues that during late Soviet socialism such political jokes (*anekdoty*) were not told by way of resisting the official state ideology, but that they served as a momentary release 'in which one admitted not only one's inability to struggle against the official ideology, but also one's inability to struggle against one's own simulated support of this ideology' (1997: 178). The reason for this, Yurchak holds, was that late socialist subjects were aware that official ideological representations did not tally with social reality but simultaneously experienced them as an immutable and omnipresent symbolic order, a 'hegemony of representation' (1997: 166). Thus a political joke was funny because 'it exposed the coexistence of two incongruous spheres, official and parallel, and the subject's simultaneous participation in both' (1997: 180). The majority, that is, 'normal Soviet subjects' – unlike dissidents or activists – participated in official practices as they appeared inevitable, but whether or not they believed in the

official ideological aims was less important to them. Therefore, Yurchak calls these strategies 'pretence misrecognition' (1997: 171) because 'normal people' pretended to misrecognise the falsity of the official stance, mainly in order not to make their lives unnecessarily difficult and to continue with parallel unofficial practices. The majority of 'normal Soviet subjects' therefore created an unofficial parallel culture that existed alongside the official state ideology. He defines the unofficial or parallel practices by type, such as the reading of a novel during an official party meeting – both in public space. These political jokes vanished during and after glasnost – like most of these types of jokes in eastern Germany – because they no longer needed to sustain pretence misrecognition and expose the socially incongruous, which was now substituted by a public and more explicit discourse.

My participation in Jugendweihe, as described in the introductory vignette, could be categorised as such a case of 'pretence misrecognition', and indeed most East Germans had adapted to social life in the 1980s in this way. Yet Yurchak's unofficial or parallel practices seem to be what Gal's semiotic approach defines as nested subdivisions. The previously entire public space is reframed into the (private) reading of a novel and the (public) proceedings of the party meeting. The public and private are referred to by their same oppositional labels, however, they are 'dependent for part of their referential meaning on the interactional context in which they are used' (Gal 2002: 80). What first drew me to study Jugendweihe was not simply its association with the GDR but that it served as a locus for connecting individual, family, and state. The ritual's adaption and continuation in post-Wende Germany simulated an unchanging continuity within the family not least because of the fractal nature of the public/private dichotomy which, as Gal explains, 'allows people to sense the family as stable in the midst of frightening political-economic change' (2002: 91). On close examination, however, it renders visible how social relations between individuals, families, and the new state have changed.

The recursive nature of the public/private dichotomy that enables us to conflate numerous nested public/private distinctions into a single one can be so narrowed down that we are left with the self, as in the case of the border guard. That the GDR state encouraged and promulgated identification with it – not only but also through Jugendweihe – led to a highly internalised personal identification with this state. I do not suggest that all East Germans were loyal citizens during the socialist period. Rather, it was with the disappearance of the country – not unlike with non-socialist states under threat or in crisis – that such identification became particularly amplified. As a teenager, I believed that everyone must have struggled to pledge allegiance to something they did

not truly believe in, partly because what we really thought was rarely – and certainly not openly – discussed. Even within my family, this issue of the pledge never came up in discussion with my parents, and I instead sought advice from my Lutheran pastor. At the time, I doubted my parents would have taken my concerns seriously because there seemed to be an unspoken rule: participation in certain state activities as part and parcel of not attracting unnecessary attention from state authorities, which in turn, could make life more difficult. However, to become a member of the state-ruling SED party or to even just consider such a move, that is, for personal benefit, was frowned upon in my family. Membership of a political party under state socialism was where my family's moral boundaries were drawn. Moral boundaries are always embedded in political and religious convictions and are not necessarily in line with the state project. The oxymoron 'voluntary coercion' (*freiwilliger Zwang*) that was frequently used in relation to participating in Jugendweihe is perhaps the best example of people's awareness that their participation was their own decision but was not an affirmation of state ideology. Some might have participated because they believed in the communist project. Others, though very few, openly refused participation due to their – usually religious – beliefs. Robert and I had participated in Jugendweihe – not out of conviction nor fear of repercussions – but because, like most children, we desperately wanted to become adults. We looked forward to being the centre of attention for a day, to receiving presents, to celebrating with our classmates, and to having a large family celebration. As a fourteen-year-old, I certainly felt uneasy about the pledge, but I never pondered over the symbolic significance of this public act either. For most, however, it was perfectly acceptable and not perceived as being dishonest to publicly pledge allegiance to the state. Rather it was indifference to state ideology – an ideology that 'was so at the forefront of everything that it seemed to have rendered itself meaningless' (Gallinat 2005: 299).

Yet, what was not acceptable was to pretend to be 'us' while being 'them' in situations that were regarded as safe: among friends or family. And because unofficial Stasi members occupied a double-position – being private and public at once – and invested more loyalty in the state project than the social relations with friends and family, they acted unethically in the eyes of ordinary East Germans. Such a betrayal is often just one side of the coin which reads loyalty to a (different) cause on the other. It is through this ethical ambiguity in which competing moral values might make conflicting demands on a person – whether loyalty to one's friends or family or to an ideological cause – that 'accusations of treachery often attract the most vehement, sometimes violent, condemnation' (Kelly and Thiranagama 2010: 1-2). Robert and I shared an understanding of this moral code because we belonged to the same late state-socialist generation. It is this insider knowledge that Michael Herzfeld (1997) describes as 'cultural intimacy' –

the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality, the familiarity with the bases of power that may at one moment assure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next moment reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation (Herzfeld 1997: 3)

As such, cultural intimacy is not tantamount to being acquainted with a culture but refers to the rather unpleasant parts of one's cultural identity (see also Herzfeld 2013). It is perhaps at this juncture that it becomes evident why Verdery – despite her in-depth knowledge of Romania where she has conducted research since 1973 – did not experience the same sort of gnawing on her conscience as I did during my fieldwork. Robert, on the other hand, grasped my concerns as a generational peer but our conversation also revealed how our familial 'biographies shoved up against each other', as Kath Weston puts it (in this collection). I never had any reason to doubt my trust in my parents. Yet the loyalty of Robert's mother to the former GDR's project allowed him to entertain this kind of mistrust of her when he found the date that coincided with his parents' divorce in his Stasi file. It was exactly because the Stasi not only observed self-confessed dissidents or regime critics – the enemy within society – but because it saw every citizen as a potential enemy of its cause. As 'Shield and Sword of the Party', it thus also observed those closest to the cause, its loyal SED members, whose families had perhaps the greatest potential to derail the progress towards communism because they were supposed to be role models for society at large. Families under state socialism were hence not homogenous partly because their members may have supported working toward the communist goal, opposed it, or have been somewhere in between. This stance toward the political elite not only determined how family life should be lived, it led also to tensions among kin, some of which reverberate in the present.

## *Conclusion*

The ethical issues related to trust and intimacy, values we hold dear, are dealt with by all anthropologists because we not only study social relations but we depend on them – they are our research tools – as is clear in other contributions to this volume (see Introduction and articles by Stafford and Weston). Every one of us has felt pangs of conscience, hints of betrayal, or uncomfortable sensations at some point during fieldwork or in the process of writing up. And of course, many of these sensations are there because we are aware that we also occupy a double-position: more often than not, we are both researchers and friends with the people who have shared parts of their lives with us. Yet, as I hope I have illustrated, there is a subtle but important difference

as to why fieldwork posed an ethical dilemma for me with such a vengeance. Like our interlocutors, we as anthropologists are historical subjects and hence our own experiences have shaped our understanding of the past as much as that of the present. Recognising the parallels in practice between that of an unofficial Stasi informant and that of an ethnographer made me mistrust myself and question whether what I was doing was ethical. It led me to repeatedly question whether I was really a good friend or whether my motivations were for some sort of personal gain, that is, for the sole benefit of my research project – betraying rather than protecting the intimacy of such social relations. Nonetheless, there was more to it. For instance, my hesitations – albeit infrequent – to ask more difficult questions about the past were not only due to concerns about not intruding too far into my interlocutors' privacy. I have come to believe that perhaps they were, at times, as much about protecting myself from being disappointed in people I felt close to – not unlike Robert, who was unsure about how much he really wanted to know about his own familial past. He attempted to understand it – unsuccessfully – through his very thin Stasi file, because conversations with his mother on this topic, of what he perceived as her greater loyalty to the communist cause than to her own son, remain still too hard to stomach for him – and perhaps for her too.

To be clear, neither I nor Robert – like the great majority of East Germans – have ever directly suffered at the hands of the Stasi. Similarly, Verdery explains that she had 'suffered less than many others' from the Securitate, yet she had dedicated not only her professional career but also 'much of [her] *emotional life* for forty years […] to Romania' (Verdery 2014: 5; my emphasis). Her 'collegial relations and friendships deepened, and like many anthropologists, [she] was "adopted" into quasi-kinship roles' (2014: 5). Her reasons for engaging with her 'file as an ethnographic object' were thus motivated by her difficulties in discovering 'who among my associates reported on me' (2014: 5). Indeed, this emotional investment in social relations is what unites all three of us – and, I suggest, all human beings. But by exploring these socialist pasts it is also rendered so much more tangible and painful to us that the 'possibility of betrayal is the ever-present dark side of intimacy, taking on new and ever more frightening forms in the context of state-building' (Kelly and Thiranagama 2010: 3).

Not unlike Verdery, I had chosen a research topic to understand the socialist past better, and with it my own positioning and that of the people close to me. For me, the reason was partly my own feeling of loss after the demise of the GDR, and my hope to find a more objective view through academic study. In his novel *89/90* Peter Richter (2015) traces the events of the *Wende* – the political change or turn – from the perspective of a male teenager, his sixteen-year-old main protagonist, who, incidentally, was not only the same age as Richter but also the same age as me at

the time of the fall of the Wall. On 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1990, a day before German unification and thus the last day of the existence of the German Democratic Republic, he describes a scene starting with the sentence that 'for the last time the sun set above the first workers-and-peasant-state on German soil, this little shit country that yet somehow was also *ours…*' (Richter 2015: 404; my emphasis). It was this latter part that I had been interested in understanding – how one could feel intimately connected to an abstract polity once it was gone, although one had not particularly liked it during its existence. These sensations of liberation and loss associated with the end of a political regime reflect the end of both citizens' constraints to its authority and that of an emotional bond between them (Borneman 2004).

This emotional bond to an abstract entity, however, is made up of those social relations that are always also created in relation to wider socio-historical processes. As such, the 'our' in Richter's words on the disappearance of a country is more than simply a symbolic emotional bond. States – and this holds particularly true for the GDR – do not only employ kin idioms or other symbolic forms to create such emotional bonds, as Herzfeld's concept of cultural intimacy seems to suggest. Rather, political elites create allegiances to a state project by using 'what is immediately intimate, the local, the familial, the neighbourly, the friend […] that are projected and enlarged by analogy to country, state and people' (Feuchtwang 2010: 227). Talking to Robert about his anxieties and about mine led me to see what was in front of my eyes all along and had been the focus of my research: the complex relations between kinship, politics, and the self – and in which I was a participant myself.

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## *Footnotes*

[1] On the ritual's contested nature in eastern Germany see Gallinat 2002: 36-67.

[2] Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former German Democratic Republic; in short *Behörde für Stasi Unterlagen (BStU)*

[3] This figure includes also 1,550 Stasi collaborators active in West Germany (Müller-Enbergs 2008). After a BStU historian challenged the number of 189,000 IMs (Kowalczuk 2013) a debate ensued that led to a BStU report published in June 2014 explaining: 'It needs to be emphasised that this is a statistic of a bureaucratic apparatus, which ultimately counts statistical processes, which cannot always be equated with the role of the people behind them. One of the greatest deficit of the IM statistics is due to the fact that it counted in the total – at all times – active IM registrations which were not actually active.' (Engelmann 2014: 5). The BStU continues to state on its website that "[b]y 1989 the State Security had about 189,000 unofficial collaborators – one for about every 90 GDR citizens." See http://www.bstu.bund.de/EN/MinistryOfStateSecurity/UnofficialCollaboratorsOfMfS/_node.html (accessed 07/01/2016)

[4] IM for *Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter* (unofficial collaborator); prior to 1968 they were called 'secret informers' (*Geheimer Informator*).

[5] She did not use *beobachten* as in 'to observe' but *bespitzeln* as in 'to spy on someone'.

[6] http://www.zeit.de/2010/51/S-Hoyerswerda (accessed 07/01/16)

[7] *Deckname* – alias/code name/pseudonym

[8] Verdery might have been well aware of these parallels before, and used this as a stylistic device to draw her readers into her intellectual journey through the Securitate archives. Yet the point I am trying to advance below holds, because Verdery apparently did not at the time experience the same sort of ethical dilemma in doing fieldwork as I did.

[9] Renft were banned in 1975 because of their critical song lyrics.