

# STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL ANTHROPOLOGY: POST-TRUTH, SECRECY AND SILENCE IN SOCIETY AND ACADEMIA IN HUNGARY

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Anthropological interest in secrecy and silence – and in related aspects, such as lying, knowledge, memory and forgetting – has been both long and ambivalent. Through what may be called personal anthropology, in this article I describe both private and professional anthropological experiences including family memories, fieldwork sites and academic practices. By recalling state socialist ideology, censorship and family secrets, I illustrate how citizens have relied on each other in order to counter state hegemony. I highlight how surveillance in Romania expressly encouraged my informants, as well as the secret police, to engage in mutual intelligence and observation as evasive tactics. Building on these strategies, I argue that Hungarian academic life is not immune to secrecy, silence and covert action. I introduce an anthropologist who worked for the Hungarian secret police, and consider how academic life continues to rely on covert programs and an institutionalized hierarchy to promote and maintain its structures and interests.

KEYWORDS: secrecy, silence, surveillance, personal anthropology, academic hierarchy, Hungary

”Real power begins where secrecy begins.”  
(Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*)  
“The Fake News is working overtime.”  
(Donald Trump, tweet, May 9, 2018)

A recent public controversy concerning Hungarian journalists’ attempts to obtain information about corruption and the embezzlement of public funds has prompted me to continue my investigation into the ways in which Hungarian politics and society continue to evolve in worrisome ways (Kürti 2016, 2019a). Since the beginning of 2021, a new law known as the Drone Act (Act CLXXIX of 2020) requires registration and special permits to operate drones in residential areas. Although largely in concert with EU safety rules, especially Regulation 2019/947 on the use of drones, the new Hungarian law has a more sinister story to tell. For the incident that prodded the Hungarian government to act involved reporters who were accused of obtaining illicit data by taking drone videos of a private estate of Hungary’s richest entrepreneur, Lőrincz

Mészáros, a close confidant of the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. The billionaire businessman filed a criminal complaint against the journalists for securing drone videos without obtaining the owner's permission, claiming an invasion of privacy.<sup>1</sup> It would thus appear that the government can change the law at will, by dint of prior legislation on private property, in order to guarantee secrecy for cadres and close associates who are suspected by reporters of misusing public funds for personal gain. As the lawyer representing the journalists put it: "If criminal proceedings will indeed be instituted against journalists for a drone video of a house, it will be a confession on the government's part that it is the privacy of politicians and oligarchs that is protected by law, and not the freedom of the press."<sup>2</sup> I propose in this article that the Drone Act directs our attention to larger issues of special interest to anthropologists studying East-Central European post-socialist and post-transitory states in general, and Hungarian society and culture in particular.

Secrecy and silence have long been interesting and exciting subjects for scholars, and as Max Forte has observed: "Anthropologists are no strangers to secrecy, obtaining secret documents, working with secret documents, respecting local secrets, and debating the unethical practice of doing secret research" (Forte 2010). Anthropologists have also been involved with government and military intelligence agencies, as David Price suggests in his study on culture and personality orientation during World War II and subsequently in the anthropology of the Cold War (Price 1998, 2002). Of still more concern is the fact that the relationship that anthropologists have addressed between silence and explanation seems so precarious and ambivalent; moreover, questions relating to secrecy and silence seem to be a recurrent and unresolved concern, as can be witnessed in special issues of *Current Anthropology* in 2015, a year later of *Ethnologia Europaea* and in 2019 of the *American Anthropologist*.

In what follows, I will present past experiences both from my youth and various fieldwork settings; in so doing, I intend to interrogate the reasons for an apparent abyss between our professional existences and our private lives. As professionals, we conduct research, teach in academic positions and, as required, uphold a professional code of conduct in order to maintain our integrity by living within the limitations of institutional regulations. As citizens and members of our immediate and extended relationships, we are obliged to be lawful, pay taxes and adhere to duties that are either assigned or taken up voluntarily. This does not represent merely a clear separation of public and private spheres, although that is also part of what intrigues me here, but requires a steady maintenance of various identities, of public and private selves.

1 See the Law on Privacy, 2018. évi LIII. törvény a magánélet védelméről, <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogsz-abaly?docid=A1800053.TV&searchUrl=/gyorskereso> (accessed 03.05.2021).

2 „Freedom of the Press. Journalists might go to prison from next year for camera drone recordings of private property.” Átlátszó, English: <https://english.atlatszo.hu/2020/12/22/journalists-might-go-to-prison-from-next-year-for-camera-drone-recordings-of-private-property/> (accessed 03.02.2021).

Bearing in mind these multiple practices, I focus on the power relations that determine the said and the unsaid, the known and the secret, or that keep our professional and private lives constrained. Secrecy is a constituent element of both political and social relations, and forms a significant component of our everyday activities. To paraphrase Michael Taussig who, in a different context, writes that knowledge about secretive facts is never rigid and constant, we may well note that trusted insiders “knowing what not to know” (Taussig 1999) are constantly needed to guard, operate and disseminate information. In order to discuss secrecy and its myriad incarnations, I begin by discussing childhood and family cases, before then turning to the beginning of my professional, anthropological encounters with silence and secrecy and finally to the secretive world of academic conduct. These vignettes are by no means exhaustive or unique – many similar precedents exist elsewhere as well – yet they nevertheless offer evidence that we as professionals, as well as citizens, are not and cannot remain immune to the power play of secrecy and silencing no matter whether it be in a political, academic or private context.

#### SECRECY, SILENCE AND LYING INFORMANTS

At least since Milan Kundera’s highly acclaimed 1978 novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, we are aware of the fact that states and governments use forms of mass culture and aestheticized political propaganda as potent instruments of silencing and organized forgetting. Structurally related to these political strategies are the concepts of secrecy and lying, which also constitute an integral part of human existence. As Georg Simmel wrote more than a hundred years ago, secrecy “is one of the greatest accomplishments of humanity” (Simmel 1906, 462). As a child growing up in communist Hungary, I gradually learned about remaining quiet and keeping secrets. As I recall, one of the foremost taboos was that of the repressive nature of the socialist regime, especially with regard to the 1956 revolution and the terror that followed it. Equally dangerous topics concerned the (eroding) power of the communist party (“You pretend to pay us, we pretend to work”, was a muted joke), and being identified and labelled as an internal enemy of the state (Kürti 2013, 78–79). Other equally risky subjects ranged from sexuality to the Treaties of Versailles and Trianon, and from poverty to rampant alcoholism.<sup>3</sup> As teenagers, we only whispered about The Voice of America or Radio Free Europe as stations of “foreign imperialists”. We discussed excitedly the internal problems of our communist state and listened to the latest LPs produced by American

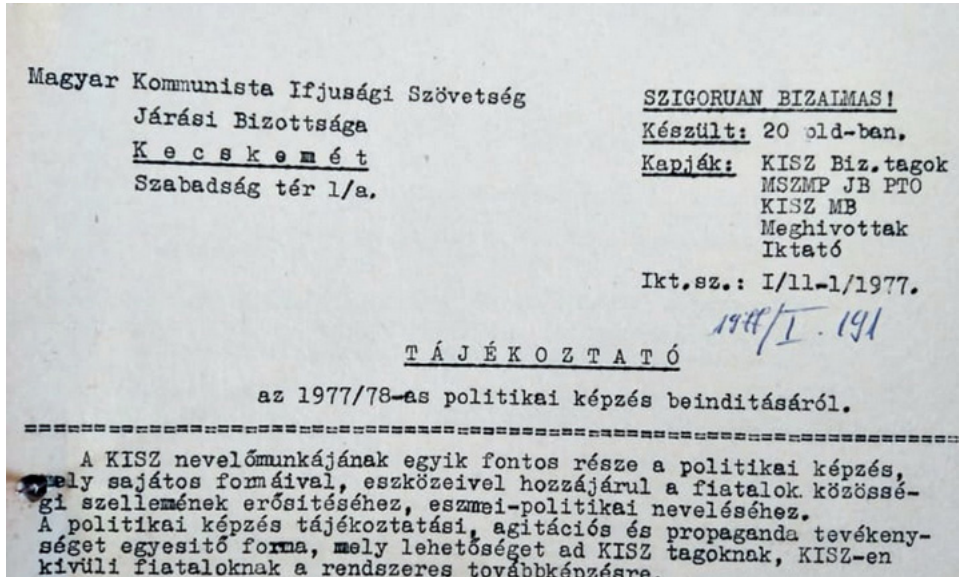
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3 For an anthropological treatment of the Treaty of Versailles, also known in Hungary as the Treaty of Trianon, and the historical controversy between the Romanian and Hungarian states over Transylvania, see Kürti (2001), especially Chapter 2.

and British rock singers and bands. Even today, this whispered or “hidden silence” (Nakane 2012, 159) seems quite reasonable, especially as it is succinctly summarized in Hungarian proverbs, such as: “One person knowing something is a secret, two people become a council, and with three people the entire world is involved”, or another: “Never-ceasing lies turn into truth”. These sayings also reinforce the idea that issues of silence and secrecy are anchored in ideology and repression, and that a condition of ignorance functions by shutting out truth and information from elsewhere (Dilley and Kirsch 2015). State socialism, like fascism and post-fascist dictatorships, operated through lies and corruption by limiting freedom and suppressing information, in particular by means of widespread censorship. In this way, the maintenance of the privileges of the East European communist parties and their trusted elites was assured. At least in Hungary, this situation persisted until the late 1980s, when workers’ and civil rights movements and democratic oppositions, both within and outside the party structure, were able to emerge and then play a significant role in the eventual demise of communist power in 1989-1990.

Throughout my academic life, both east and west, I have learned that lessons derived from the above proverbs accompany professional conduct whether we wish it or not. Silence and secrecy of various forms, some altruistic, others used in the service of ideological or sinister purposes, persevere in higher education and research institutions, colleges and universities, as they protect their interests, and by so doing guard their knowledge production. In progressing from graduate student to full professor and conducting several multi-site fieldworks in North America, Romania and Hungary, I have survived by dint of the “knowing what not to know” power paradigm. My doctoral fieldwork in the mid 1980s in Hungary was conducted in Csepel, the industrial, 21<sup>st</sup> district of Budapest (Kürti 2002, 2018). In addition to mingling with youthful workers, I was also invited by the management to production meetings on one condition: taking notes and pictures was forbidden, and the matters discussed were not to be communicated to anyone. These high-level meetings were held on Monday mornings and attended only by selected representatives of the “Four-corners” (*üzemi négyszög*) Trade Union, the Socialist Workers’ Party, the communist youth organization and factory management. Crammed into a smoke-filled room, about a dozen individuals discussed targets or, more often than not, why targets were being missed, personal conflicts or how shabby machinery bogged down production. An especially noticeable feature of these closed meetings was the circulation of several dossiers, all sorted according to level of importance, with different headings: “internal use only” (*csak belső használatra*), “confidential” (*bizalmas*) and “strictly confidential” (*szigorúan bizalmas*). These I was never allowed to touch or read, and no permission to take photographs inside the premises was ever granted. While the secrecy at Csepel Works was specific, as it had been designated a *sui generis* military installation, such secrecy was ubiquitous and salient in communist era Hungary: every political organization, even

the communist party's youth league, the KISZ, espoused the officially imposed silence. It is instructive to compare this all-pervasive secrecy with one of the commandments of the Young Pioneer organization, "The Young Pioneer does not lie, and acts justly" (*Az úttörő igazat mond és igazságosan cselekszik*), that we were all made to memorize as children.



Strictly confidential, a circular for party cadres about a regional political education of Communist Youth League leadership, 1977

At that time, this role of secrecy or confidentiality in official business seemed quite logical to me, even though the Central Statistical Office published data annually on industrial outputs and the changing labour force. With workers and their family members, with whom I established close working relationships both inside and outside the factory gates, I was able to converse about these matters freely. As I discovered, workers, both blue- and white-collar, had their own "little secrets" in opposition to "real" company secrets (*vállalati titok*): reasons for absenteeism, alcoholism or slow work tempos were accepted subversive actions that circulated as quite elaborate stories. Among the employees, in workers' youth clubs or at home, these "small secrets" (*titkocskák*) served to alleviate the stresses of work and assisted them in cementing a special camaraderie across age, occupational and gender lines.

In the late 1980s, I managed to travel to Romania as a tourist and investigated ethn-national relations and cultural identity in Hungarian settlements in the north-eastern,

Transylvanian part of the country (Kürti 2001). Crossing the Hungarian-Romanian border by train or car at that time was an exasperating activity well-known from contemporary descriptions. I do not exaggerate by stating unequivocally that citizens of both countries were involved in intricate clandestine transactions, transporting illegal goods to friends, family and business associates. Even research unauthorized by local government was illegal, and staying overnight with families could result in hefty fines. Both Hungarians and Romanians, while suspicious at first, slowly warmed to me during fieldwork, often informing me about tragic personal and family stories during a period renowned for the terror and anti-minority repressions enacted by the totalitarian regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu. One of the important lessons taught to me by locals was that one does not talk in the presence not only of strangers, but of anyone who was suspected of being a police informer (Kürti 2001, 68). Some indicated specific individuals who were suspected of being collaborators or spies (*besúgó, spicli*) of the dreaded secret state police, known as the Securitate. Others resorted to silence, but remarked that there were certain individuals who should be treated simply as “lying informants”. The latter, as Frank Salamone has argued (1977), often prove to be prominent characters identified by anthropologists in various cultural contexts.

The proliferation of evasive or distorted narratives made perfect sense as I was well-aware that urbanites and villagers alike existed in limbo, in perpetual fear of surveillance by secret police or their collaborators. The situation at this time in the Romanian borderland region was truly an existential *1984*, just as George Orwell had imagined it in his novel. I mean this not only in terms of the ubiquity of Orwellian ‘newspeak’, or simply boastful, empty and distorted language, but more importantly in an essential role of silencing: in this context, silencing meant not only keeping quiet in the presence of duplicitous individuals, but also maintaining an unambiguous and absolute separation between private and public lives, keeping the former muted and secret at all costs. At least since George Simmel’s work, we know that secrecy is both a powerful means and institutionalized tool in the hands of the state, but that it can also be quite subversive as well (Simmel 1906). Anyone conducting research in state socialist Romania learned quickly that the government of Nicolae Ceaușescu forced a style of discourse on its citizens that fundamentally altered all aspects of social relations. The more the state sought to disclose what ordinary citizens engage in and think about, and in the process camouflaged its practices in order to obtain as much information about this as it could, the more individuals endeavoured to hide everything from the state. Moreover, ordinary citizens also desired to secure information concerning those who were involved in covert police activity. In a true cat-and-mouse game, state and citizens were locked into a system of double surveillance in which people were eager to know as much as possible about each other’s secrets, lying and spying. Naturally, the Romanian case was not a unique one: all communist dictatorships used secret police to monitor their citizens. In this context, the East German Stasi and the Romanian

Securitate were the two most dreaded institutions, alongside the Soviet KGB and the Hungarian AVH, known after 1962 as the III/III subdivision of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.<sup>4</sup> How could a researcher deal with ethical issues in those years? Even during officially sanctioned fieldwork, although I fully disclosed the communities I studied, I resorted to evasion and at times outright lies as the only effective means to protect informants' identity and privacy. Some interlocutors were quite forthcoming about their participation in my research, but interestingly they argued that, if questioned by the authorities, they would willingly deny everything that I said or wrote about them. We both came to the conclusion that this sort of secrecy or denial functioned as a "good lie" for a good cause (*jó kis hazugság lesz, de megéri*). Even though many anthropologists do not like to admit this practice, I am certain that this has long been a standard method used in order to protect anonymity.

The above experiences are revelatory not only of actual secretive and unmentionable elements in different contexts, they also point to another issue of central concern for our discipline: that of anonymity. The primary method of anthropologists when conducting fieldwork is to observe even the mundane aspect of informants' lives, and in so doing they needed to obtain informed consent in order to protect informant identities and data gathered at all costs. In this context, secrecy functions as part of a two-pronged approach: the first we might term permitted seclusion, or in other words a permission to allow certain information/knowledge to circulate among trusted participants. The second aspect is a refusal or denial of the right to know. Even the ASA ethical guidelines state: "Participants should be made aware that it is rarely, if at all, legally possible to ensure total confidentiality or to protect the privacy of records."<sup>5</sup> As also illustrated in my Transylvanian case, one of the most debated ethical practices in the social sciences has been the anonymization or removal of identifying information in order to protect informants and their communities (Thomson et al. 2005). From the second half of the twentieth century, this has been an accepted ethical norm similar to obtaining informed consent, but one that is variously implemented. Depending on the fieldwork context, anthropologists disguise the specific locations of fieldwork sites and camouflage the names of informants. Of course, this practice is anchored in the anthropological idea, or ideal, that anonymity is one of the necessary ethical

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4 For scholarly treatment of the communist secret police of East Germany see Gieseke 2014, and on Romania see, for example, Deletant 1995, Vatulescu 2010 and Verdery 2018. Steven Sampson also documents this topic in several earlier papers on his home page, <https://stevensampson.com/> (accessed 02.28.2021). For an interesting revelation on how the Securitate utilized members of Hungarian communities to spy on their fellow countrymen, see Könczei 2019. On the operation of the secret police in Hungary, see Takács 2013.

5 The Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice, adopted by the Association at its Annual Business Meeting in March 1999. [https://www.theasa.org/downloads/ethics/Ethical\\_guidelines.pdf](https://www.theasa.org/downloads/ethics/Ethical_guidelines.pdf) (accessed 03.02.2021).

features (together with honesty, objectivity and peer-reviewing) utilized in order not to harm those involved with the research or allow anyone to take advantage of them. But there are enormous differences in how successfully anthropologists can maintain confidentiality and keep things secret from the authorities or colleagues, or even from other natives not directly involved in the research.

Naming the exact research location, be it a city, a village or a particular neighbourhood, offers anthropologists a legitimate *raison d'être* for writing up data and claiming authenticity (“I was there, I know, I have the evidence”). Yet, as Bellman puts it: “The production of secrecy is always a problematic concern of participants because some are much more successful than others at practicing it” (Bellman 1981, 1). At times, and with the possibility of subsequent fieldwork in the same location by other researchers, the identity of any given informant could eventually be disclosed anyway, or on the contrary, anonymity of location may skew important socio-economic, political and historical details (Nospor 2000). The trailblazers of anthropology in Hungary have utilized various tactics with regard to their actual research sites. For instance, Chris Hann, representing the best of Malinowskian social anthropology in his pioneering work on Hungary, has not shied away from disclosing the name of his “village” (Tázlár), a settlement in south-central Hungary where he conducted fieldwork in the late 1970s (Hann 1980). His revelation of location is in fact so conspicuous that the name of the village appears in the title of his book, in which can also be found plenty of statistical data and three maps assisting readers in locating the settlement in its proper historical and socio-cultural context. Two more anthropologists, Martha Lampland and Ildiko Vasary, also both identify the community they studied (Lampland 1995, Vasary 1987). The German sociocultural anthropologist, Tatjana Thelen, has continued on this trajectory; her communities are openly disclosed in her book published in German (Thelen 2003). Other anthropologists on the other hand, such as Peter Bell and Marida Hollos, also produced monographs on Hungary, but both used pseudonyms instead of real names for their fieldwork sites (Bell 1984, Hollos 2001). Hollos worked in central Hungary, while Bell carried out research in the northern part of the country, but both provided rather insufficient anonymity in their books: for anyone looking at the demographic and historical data could easily locate the Hungarian settlements described. Maya Nadkarni, an American anthropologist, has opted for a unique identification procedure: she has conducted fieldwork in Budapest, as she readily reveals, but also visited a “village” whose identity in her published work remains hidden (Nadkarni 2020).

Maintaining invisibility not only renders authority dubious, it also flies into the face of an opposite practice wherein certain individuals are singled out for an entire chapter (as key informants) or even an entire monograph, and thus endowed with celebrity status both within the profession and in the informant’s local or national community. Anthropologists must undoubtedly select a more moderate and appropriate solution



when situating their participants somewhere between the Scylla of anonymity and the Charybdis of stardom. It is helpful in this instance to recall here the Cheshire Cat of Lewis Carroll who, in a cunning response to Alice's request for direction, replied: "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to." The moral is clear: what to disclose is up to the researcher, and depends on what he or she wants to do with the material presented, in what context, for what kind of theoretical persuasion and for what goals he or she wants it to serve.

In my own publications, I steadfastly utilize the official toponyms of the fieldwork sites I have researched. However, a different dilemma arises when participants are indifferent about their locale's identity or official name, especially when several historical toponyms exist. Similarly, as I have learned, informants – both rural and urban citizens – are sometimes adamant about the printing of their names. For instance, when my two-volume monograph on the local history of the town I have been researching for the past two decades was published, it took only a few months before a few individuals approached me. As custom would have it, I listed all the names of individuals who assisted me, including those who were my informants and interviewees (Kürti 2019b). Several people complained about why their names were omitted while those of others were printed in my book. During initial interviews, participants willingly offered their full names and provided details of who and what could be seen on family photographs. In specific cases, however, my interlocutors wanted to "leave out" certain aspects from their narratives: "Do not write this down", they often expressly requested. Interestingly, some of such statements concerned hefty fines and prison terms received during socialism that to them were "unjustified" or "politically motivated", but nonetheless considered too "personal", or often too shameful, to be included in the published monograph. As one man in his seventies put it: "I was jailed on trumped-up charges. I did not steal anything from the cooperative farm: we simply distributed surplus corn at the end of the harvest to co-op members as we have always done." And this latter point is important. Workers that I interviewed at the co-op all agreed that "stealing" from the company was not theft *per se*, as such an action was "an open secret known by all" (*nyílt titok volt, mindenki tudta*), but they nonetheless did not want such information to be disclosed in a publication. On the contrary, other aspects of their lives were full of memories of impudent bravado, whose inclusion in the book actually generated a sense of empowerment. A man in his sixties, for instance, bragged about his clever scheming in obtaining sizable arable land during the 1994–1995 land restitution process. A woman in her seventies boasted about her excellent organizational skills as a minor trade union representative at the state collective firm: "When I told my co-worker 'girls' (*lányok*) about extra volunteer work during the weekend, they all heeded my call. We were always a real team (*egy igazi csapat voltunk*). I was a real organizer and they followed me, because they liked and trusted me." She specifically requested this statement to be included in the section depicting the workings of the socialist cooperative firm

where she had worked for two decades. At the same time, she remained evasive about her private life and resisted disclosing details about her marriages (she was married three times). With a single sentence – “Oh, it’s not that important, I made mistakes” – she brazenly and abruptly finished the interview. I respected her wishes and this aspect of her life is not in my book: I refer to it for the first time here.

#### ANTHROPOLOGIST AS A POLICE INFORMER: THE BORSÁNYI CASE

Anthropology in Eastern Europe has a chequered history – in an earlier text, I termed it an “intellectual enigma” – one of the main reasons for which is its overtly centralized, state-controlled nature (Kürti 2011, 126).<sup>6</sup> But this is nothing specific to anthropology. All cultural and educational institutions were nationalized and centralized after 1948, the year in which the communists took full power in Hungary. After the suppression of the 1956 revolution, the work of the secret police became especially important in maintaining state hegemony and order. People of all walks of life were approached and successfully recruited by the police into its ranks. This came to light after 1990, when the archives were opened and police files revealed the names of many individuals who had worked as secret collaborators; incriminated politicians and illustrious filmmakers, musicians and literary figures all made the headlines, whereby some attempted to lie about their involvement, while others grudgingly admitted their complicity. One Hungarian anthropologist, by the name of László Borsányi, was among them. I knew László Borsányi (1944–2014) quite well, as we had first met in the late 1980s when he visited the United States and later, when I moved to Budapest, we became friends. Indeed, I lived in László’s Budapest apartment when he was conducting fieldwork in New Mexico on Native American popular culture. In the 1990s, he was instrumental in assisting me in finding employment in Budapest; it was not his fault that I could not find work, and later we both became employees of the University of Miskolc. In Miskolc, we often discussed his work and especially his publications about fieldwork methods and observational techniques, but not once did he mention to me his student years in Budapest. I did think that his early trips, first in 1974 and then in 1980–82 to stay at the University of New Mexico, were somewhat suspect as it was extremely difficult to obtain visas to travel to any western countries, and especially to America. Citizens could obtain two kinds of passports, a red one for traveling to communist countries and a blue one for western states; the latter was a possibility only once in every three years. The question of how he was able to leave several times for the United States of America baffled me. Answers to my query came only in 2005, when a historian

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6 For an alternative and more elaborate versions of this argument, see Sárkány 2016 and Hann 2015.

revealed that Borsányi had been a collaborator working for the III/III division of the secret police (Szőnyi 2005).

I tried to ascertain answers from László Borsányi, but he opted for early retirement from Miskolc and stopped all cooperation with his former colleagues. I could gather only some answers to my questions by looking at a brief response to his public shaming that appeared in national newspapers. Barely 19 years of age and only beginning his first year of study in Budapest, Borsányi was approached by the secret police and agreed to spy on his classmates as an informer (*ügynök*) of the III/III division under the alias György Fung. Through his acquaintances, he was successful in infiltrating various alternative youth groups, and artistic and music gatherings, his prime target group being a special circle of friends, called Indians: a group of intellectuals who organized summer camps to play at being Native American Indians. Borsányi was pressured by his supervisor officer (*tartótszt*) to collect as much incriminating evidence as he could not only against those glorifying Indian ways of life, but especially against those suspected of being “Maoist anti-communists and anti-state activists” (Borsányi 2009, 65).<sup>7</sup> After his clandestine activity was made public, Borsányi defended his past by pointing to threats of a lengthy jail sentence and the termination of his student status forever if he refused to cooperate with the authorities. One of the people in whom the state was especially interested was István Poór. Poór was adamant about organizing an alternative musical club in Budapest, and this put him in constant conflict with the authorities. This “reckless” youth was eventually kicked out of the Eötvös Loránd University for immoral behaviour not consistent with the socialist ethic. Constant harassment forced Poór to defect from Hungary in 1972, whereupon he settled in the United States of America, specifically in New York City where he embarked upon his life-long dream to become a film director.<sup>8</sup>

After the publication of the Szőnyi book, it became very clear that Borsányi’s willingness to collaborate had paid off: he obtained his degree, immediately found employment as a “propagandist” museologist at the National Museum of Hungary (*Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum*) and was able to secure grants to conduct several trips to the United States to continue his fieldwork among Southwestern Indian tribes.<sup>9</sup> Soon after the public controversy concerning his secret service activities, however, he opted for a retirement plan and lived a rather private existence for the rest of his life. If there

7 The entire Borsányi case can be read online: <https://anblokkegyesulet.wordpress.com/megfigyelesi-ugyek-2009-3/> (accessed 02.26.2021).

8 I happened to meet István Poór (1945-) in NYC when he became involved with a Hungarian amateur dance ensemble and jazz band; he was fond of playing the tárogató and the hurdy-gurdy. After 1990, he has repatriated to Hungary and is presently involved in filmmaking. László Borsányi never disclosed to me whether he was able to reconnect with István Poór.

9 In this context, it is revealing to read the political tone of his publication concerning public relations and museum organizational activities (Borsányi 1976).

is a moral to this secret life of a colleague, it is one of courage: for Borsányi was able to look in the mirror and face the consequences. He willingly confronted his accusers and told his own version of what happened and why he collaborated with the police. What makes his case so compelling is the fact that he was both an anthropologist and a part of the secret police operation: he was indeed a collaborator. Unlike Katherine Verdery or Steven Sampson, who were spied on by the Securitate in Romania (Sampson 1983, Verdery 2018), László Borsányi actually worked for more than ten years as a secret agent for the police, and although his story does not have a happy ending, it points to the possibly dangerous choices with which one may be confronted at a key moment in one's life. How would we act in such a case: do you know?

“IT’S A ROTTEN JOB, BUT SOMEBODY HAS TO DO IT”<sup>10</sup>

My final example concerns my experiences living and working in various academic environments since the early 1990s. Sustaining silence as a normative feature of academic enterprise has many ramifications and has been with us for a long time. Every company employee has to be familiar with its Nondisclosure Agreement: such agreements exist also in Hungary (*Titoktartási kötelezettség*), including in universities. These agreements mean that employees are required by law to keep confidential – internal – matters secret. In fact, I am not so sure that by writing this now I am not in violation of Hungarian law. This is not the end of the story, as most academic business, ranging from hiring to promotion, from evaluation to auditing, and even writing letters of recommendation is cloaked in confidential correspondence, meetings and “doings”. Most of these simply constitute parts of the everyday functioning of the legal system, both state and institutional; others, meanwhile, are closely related to the functioning of secret societies within academic life. One of Simmel's propositions (1906, 462–463) might well hold true for the forms that this institutional secrecy takes in both socialist and post-socialist Hungary: the oppressive or totalitarian nature of the state encourages the development of more institutional secrecy in other (educational, health, cultural, business) areas as well (Kürti 2020).

Since 2010, first the Bologna declaration caused havoc, and then a few years later various conservative program directives have generated far-reaching changes in higher education (Kürti 2011). All these innovations in the organization of university education have been overtly politicized: tuition fees have been raised, the number of state-funded admissions has been curtailed, university programs and departments have been eliminated and new quality control procedures have been established. What has not changed

<sup>10</sup> This phrase, which tends to be uttered colloquially as ‘It’s a dirty job, but somebody has to do it’, originally appeared in Agathe Christie’s 1929 crime novel, *The Seven Dials Mystery*.

is the pervasive secrecy that remains part and parcel of scholarly engagement: ranging from evaluating grant and job/promotion applications or manuscripts to writing chapters for colleagues' Festschrifts or even adulatory remembrances of one's colleagues. All these necessarily involve a compliant group of scholars: all those who agree on being silent and secretive and, as needed, use language that is highly bureaucratic, evasive or oracular. Dissimulation, an artful language of opinion, can be seen in Edmund Leach's recollection of his education and references to his former colleagues. Even though he is adamant "to put the record straight" on some issues, he refrains from mentioning certain names, and especially from critiquing his seniors: the "sensitivity of British scholars" made him realize that to do so "is simply not practical" (Leach 1984, 3).

In my own academic life, I have experienced a similar sensation: as is well known, while sitting on various boards often what goes on behind the scenes is more important than what is publicly revealed. Written evaluations, for instance, can be a far cry from what has been said in committee meetings. At times, certain committee decisions, as is also the case in national parliaments and local councils, are made during what is called closed sessions (*zárt ülés*): the minutes of such meetings are rarely, if ever, made public, and even if they are, such records are never true reflections of the actual proceedings of the meetings in question. Personal conflicts are bound to arise after such meetings or when someone decides to speak out, or conversely they can also emerge when all involved agree on remaining silent. I have seen – or have myself been – a candidate whose application was not funded and who was provided with bogus reasons for rejection.

Progression within the academic hierarchy is plagued with institutional secrecy and anonymity. Aside from those directly appointed for their political loyalty to the state or government, the neoliberal Hungarian educational system is built on a slow progression up the academic ladder (*ranglétra*). Advancement is based on academic performance, teaching and publications accumulated over the years. In general, there is little or no transparency of appointment or promotion, and both low and high-level decisions are rarely, if ever, open to everyone. Even if a department advertises a position opening, as required by law, open searches are non-existent as positions are set aside for those insiders who are eligible to rise up to the next rank. Evaluators are instructed to write about the applicant following strict guidelines and to act according to professional standards, whatever that means, even if they know that the whole process is awash with irregularities. The oscillation between formal and informal evaluations is just one of the academic "myths", to use the term in which F. G. Bailey described the ethos of the behind-the-scenes world of academia (Bailey 1977). My experience has been quite unequivocal: anonymity or secrecy has rarely, if ever, persisted for an extended period of time. I agree with Graham Jones who argues that secrecy and risk are fundamentally intertwined, especially as "concealment entails the possibility of unwelcome revelation" (2014, 54).

Individual candidacy for grants or promotion, or procedures for establishing new departmental programs are a convoluted process tethered to quality control, or what anthropologists Chris Shore and Susan Wright call “audit culture” (Shore and Wright 2015). In the post-socialist higher-education bureaucracy, this is framed as modernization, increasing effectiveness and establishing due democratic process. The reality of the past twenty years, as I can attest from my previous involvement as an evaluator of professorships and proposals for academic degree programs, both activities modestly remunerated by the Hungarian Accreditation Committee (MAB), has been otherwise. In fact, what David Graeber calls the bureaucratic and marketization process of the new capitalist university (Graeber 2014: 77–78) has arrived in Hungary. Both individual and team evaluation proceedings have been shrouded in mysteries, with the latter in particular being similar to rituals of tribal secret societies wherein only anointed members are allowed to participate. At the university level, a similar evaluation of colleagues is an equally taxing procedure: which is why I have declined on numerous occasions to serve in such a capacity. It seems natural that we accept confidentiality as paramount in the status quo of academic life, knowing well that such procedures involve information about colleagues that at some time may be utilized at the discretion of others. Yet, engaging in such clandestine academic business raises many questions, not the least of which is: what happens to trust and openness?

Evaluation is one of the prime testing grounds of academic business that transcends institutions by following the trendy path of neoliberal audit culture. Measuring scholarly performance has turned largely into a numbers game in which primacy is afforded to measuring publications in national and, more importantly, international academic, specifically ranked disciplinary journals. Since the 2010s, evaluating scholarship has emerged as a quasi-mathematical science based on a system called quality control. Journals are peer-reviewed, which assures measurement through metrics, impact factor and rankings from Q1 to Q4. It turns out that the northern hemisphere (Western Europe, the UK, and the US) leads the way by publishing most of the Q1 English-language journals, with a select number of individuals on their advisory or editorial boards most of whom are scholars from universities within the same specific geographical terrain. The outlook for East European scholars publishing in such leading knowledge-producing (and maintaining) journals is bleak, and almost all academic periodicals published in East-Central Europe are relegated to the level of Q3 or Q4, with a few Russian and Slovenian periodicals included in Q2.<sup>11</sup> Peripheralization, or

11 Russian periodicals ranked in the Q2 category include *Etnograficheskoe Obozrenie* (*Ethnographic Review*), a journal known previously as *Soviet Ethnography* and published by the Russian Academy of Sciences. The Slovenian *Slovenski Etnolosko Drustvo* is also placed in the Q2 category. Q3 journals include *Collegium Anthropologicum*, *Etnolog*, *Folklore*, *Traditiones*; and examples of Q4 are the Czech *Cesky Lid*, the Polish *Etnografia Polska*, the Hungarian *Ethnographia*, the Croatian *Narodna Umjetnost* and the Romanian *Revista de Etnografie si Folclor*.

even ghettoization, works both ways: privileged Western journals maintain their status by utilizing a large reserve army of Western scholars, and thus *de facto* relegate minor anthropological traditions within their respective national academic cultures to the margins. Curiously, this Matthew effect – or the rich get richer complex – seems to continue unabated, as scholars who have managed to publish in Q1 or Q2 journals seem to generate more visibility in other academic pursuits as well (Demeter 2020).

Evaluating colleagues or writing a review about their work can be emotionally onerous, despite the standard practice of anonymous peer-reviews. The key to this game of hide-and-seek is well-known to all participants: authors' identities are secret for the reviewer and reviewing is a clandestine act known only to editors. According to Michael Herzfeld: "Academics familiar with the peer review system will immediately recognize the phenomenon: the anonymity of authors and reviewers creates a civic fiction (since the chances are great that the identity of each side is known or at least accessible to the other), one that is designed to avert unseemly conflict while permitting the free expression of critical disagreement" (Herzfeld 2009, 138). While internationally it is easier to achieve anonymity and secrecy, my experience within the Hungarian academic community has been rather negative. A lack of general standards, unethical review processes and hasty decisions, instead of anonymous peer-reviews and rigorous editorial judging, mar academic publishing. For instance, one editor of a prominent Hungarian journal wittingly engaged in a double clandestine operation, both revealing my authorship to reviewers and, in turn, disclosing to me the names of the two reviewers tasked with evaluating my manuscript. Further exacerbating my frustration was the fact that both colleagues praised my article, suggesting publication in the journal and, some minor revisions aside, emphasized the important contribution of the manuscript to the field of Hungarian anthropology. When I decided to raise the seriousness of this issue, a colleague involved with the journal seemed nonchalant about the question of anonymity, ethics and professionalism, arguing: "This is a small country and a small field, what is the purpose of playing anonymously? Everyone knows everything about everybody anyway" (*úgyis mindenki tud mindent mindenkiről*). When I replied to him that this harkens back to the darkest days of a Stasi or KGB system and is unbecoming of post-socialist academic business, we both burst into laughter. Laughter, however, is a double-edged sword (*pace* Milan Kundera), and mine was rather acrimonious. As the entire process smacked of hypocrisy and unprofessionalism, I have declined any further business with the journal.

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON POST-TRUTH AND ANTHRO-LEAKS

My purpose in this article is not to sound a wake-up call for scholars about secrecy, silence, truth (or post-truth) or lying; that has already been done by others (Mair 2017, Sidky 2020). Truth, ethics and objectivity have been our moral guiding lights, even

though we all well know that both are susceptible to personal motivational biases. Yet we all stake our careers on our analyses of other societies, especially other peoples' lives, based on ethnographic accuracy and impartiality. In so doing, we aim to preserve anthropology's scholarly status, even if it is a "monstrous" one as Edmund Leach once famously observed. In this endeavour we also adhere to the rules, and rules as well as rulers are many. But we are also not separate from our fellow citizens, friends, neighbours and family members, as our life is not, I like to think – even though democracy can acquire monstrous forms (Kürti 2020) – genetically monitored in a petri dish.

Moving beyond the binary of memory and forgetting, truth and post-truth, I would argue that silence – its many definitions notwithstanding – is a purposeful action of knowing when to remain reticent, when to play the game in order to keep the system alive. We know, of course, that there are many kinds of silence – villagers hiding from the secret police or the Borsányi-case are only a few that I have offered above – as high and local politics influence the ways in which such behaviour is valued. Yet while we question a lack of transparency and openness in politics, we have seemed less eager to do so in our academic proceedings. Thirty years after the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and of living in a democracy, a persistent question remains: how can we analyse and understand democracy and openness in science and society in the post-Wikileaks age? I suggest that, while we live in a fully-fledged democratic polity, based on openness and civil society (founded on transparency), this is only an aspirational state as continual and unquestioned secrets, both institutionalized and individual, continue to function as ideological Berlin Walls that serve limited interests. For secrecy "is controversial because it seems inimical to democracies, where open discussion and accountability serve as touchstones" (Chinon 2009, 1). Or, as Eva Horn similarly argues: "Secrecy serves to protect and stabilize the state, and as such it is the precondition for the functioning of the law; but at the same time secrecy opens a space of exception from the rule of law, an exception that can breed violence, corruption and oppression. [...] On the one hand, the state secret acts as a constituent element of power; on the other hand, it fuels its excess; it marks or, more precisely, secretes the state's vulnerable spot, the turn into violence, corruption and chaos" (Horn 2011, 4–8).

It may well be that a similar catch-22 exists for scholars, especially fieldworkers whose claim for authenticity – being there and knowing what is not to be known – may be undermined by redundant anonymity, secrecy and silence. Is there a way to dissolve this inherent contradiction without evasion, make believe or lies? It would seem unlikely. The inability of scholars to face the vicissitudes of academic existence and secretive lives has remained one of the major obstacles in legitimizing transparency that also prevents new perspectives in anthropology from advancing studies on secrecy in a novel way. Affecting the social sciences in general and anthropology in particular, a new intellectual agenda should promote further democratization in the discipline, as well as challenge state ideology and governmental policies that create



a wedge between nationalized academic disciplines and the international community. To be sure, secrecy, anonymity, mimicry and truthfulness are parts of our existence, either as written disclosures in the form of ethical standards or as good guidance for fieldworkers, especially those whose work involves human subjects. As Thomas Beidelman has argued, “Something is always hidden, always a secret; if we expect a society to work, nothing should ever be utterly and entirely known, anymore than Goethe’s Faust could bear to confront the horror of the true visage of the Earth-Spirit” (Beidelman 1993, 46). But there are other, lesser known, or rather silent or muted conventions that, whether we wish it or not, act as countervailing forces. Scholarly life is prone to follow established or fashionable standards: even if these are often in direct contrast to earlier practices, this tendency makes it difficult to transform academic hierarchy and bureaucracy due to its close association with the powers that be, more often than not greedy corporations and the state. I began by recalling proverbs about secrecy and close with a Biblical adage, one that notwithstanding its optimistic overtone might serve to guide us: “Everything that is hidden will eventually be brought into the open” (Mark 4: 22).

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