

CONTESTED DOCUMENTS: A NEO-DOCUMENTALIST APPROACH TO SECRET POLICE FILES IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA

Abstract or Résumé:

This paper is about a certain type of contested documents (the secret police files known as “informative notes”). It employs a neo-documentalist framework and thematic analysis to examine informative notes on four major intellectuals in communist Romania. The paper focuses on three emerging themes: the power effects that the materiality of informative notes has had, after 1989, on Romanian society; the reasons informers interpreted the writing conventions of this textual genre in radically different ways; and the epistemic aspects of this type of document. I emphasize that, despite their nature as historic documents, secret police files have uncanny relevance for understanding the present-day societies of mass surveillance.

1. Introduction

This paper is about secret police files as contested documents. It raises questions about the challenges of conducting information research of sensitive topics, such as the impact of certain types of documents on people’s identities and moral status in the society. It shows that, even though they concern documents from the past, secret police files have uncanny relevance for understanding our present societies of mass surveillance.

The fall of the secretive and repressive Communist regimes of Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s has impacted, among other things, the social lives of a wide range of sensitive documents. Specifically, in the wake of this major historical event the newly elected regimes opened up the previously closed gates of the secret police archives and enabled people to learn about the existence of their *dossiers of informative surveillance* and access them (Apor, Horváth, and Mark 2017; Glajar, Lewis, and Petrescu 2016; Vatulescu 2010; Verdery 2014, 2018). A *dossier of informative surveillance* is a type of complex document comprising other, more basic types of documents, such as informative notes by individuals (police officers, relatives, friends, and so on) whose job was to be part of a surveillance assemblage for recording the life events of a “target” individual deemed hostile to the regime. The political decision of making such *dossiers* available for consultation and research has been a much needed, though also a highly contested measure. As a result, secret police files have started following new and unexpected trajectories in the public sphere: they have been destroyed or stolen, then copied and often utilized for advancing or destroying political careers of friends and foes (Svenonius and Björklund 2018).

2. Background

In this study, I focus on the *informative note*, just one type of contested document which has taken on a new social life during post-communism. To shed light on these lives, I am approaching informative notes within a neo-documentalist framework (Frohmann, 2004; Lund 2004, 2010; Lund and Skare 2017; Olsen et al. 2012). According to Lund (2004), a document is not a static and isolated object. On the contrary, it can be usefully studied by looking at its three basic attributes (producers, means of production, and modes of production) along three complementary axes (the cognitive configuration, the social connections, and the physical

construction of the document). To give just one example of the social effects of informative notes: they were obviously meant to be secret (often known only by the case officer and his/her direct superior officer), but ended up flooding the post-communist public sphere in various forms. For instance, in Romania, a history of collaboration with the *Securitate* (the Romanian communist secret police) prevents citizens from occupying public offices of higher importance. If candidates to public office wrote informative notes before the fall of communism, these documents can be used now as blackmailing tools and, thus, can act as genuine “time bomb” devices encouraging corruption and deceit. It is obvious, in this regard, why such documents are contested grounds not only for citizens, but also for whoever intends to study them for scientific purposes.

3. Methodology

For this study, I analyzed informative notes gathered in five volumes published by Romanian publishing houses (being a native speaker of Romanian, I was able to examine them in the original). Four of these volumes contain notes produced by various informers involved in the surveillance of four major Romanian intellectuals, while the fifth collection comprises notes written by a Romanian writer who agreed to work for the Securitate and inform on other writers. I used thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998; Braun and Clarke 2006; Joffe and Yardley 2004; Patton 2002) to examine these documents, identify codes, as well as to find, define, and name emerging themes.

4. Findings

In this paper I develop a few of the themes resulting from my analysis. First, I reveal the *power effects* that the materiality of informative notes has had on current Romanian society: these documents have been shaping its political practices, identities, and moral statuses of both ex-targets and ex-informers. In particular, I look at some of the responses of the targeted intellectuals who learned about surveillance operations either before or after the 1989 Revolution. At least one of them (philosopher Gabriel Liiceanu) has decided to come to terms with the quasi-traumatic experience of reading his own file by writing a book of philosophical reflections on friendship, trust, privacy, and betrayal, among other things.

Second, I look at informative notes as a textual *genre* and explore how and why the informers interpreted the writing conventions of this genre in radically different ways: some informative notes display the kind of “wooden language” that defines patterns of verbal interactions in heavily bureaucratized and/or ideologically loaded environments, while other notes are deeply poetic, composed as they are by authors with limited success in the art world, who found an unexpected venue for their writing abilities.

Finally, I discuss the issue of the *truth* and the *knowledge* values of these documents. For instance, most informative notes were supposed to provide evidence for the official working assumption that their target was, say, a traitor. As such, their evidential character is deeply problematic, actually building up what I call “fake biographies.” In this case, whether a statement is true or false depends not so much on carefully described facts, but on the interpretive filters the authorities employ to frame those facts. Given this, we may ask about what kinds of information these documents really convey to the present-day researcher. In other words, what kind of evidence do secret police files represent? In this respect, my paper is a reflection on one key topic of the conference, namely “contested grounds in data collection, data interpretation and study findings.”

5. Conclusions and Implications

My study has implications for understanding the importance of certain types of documents not only in the political lives of post-communist regimes, but also in the current climate of pan-surveillance. For instance, as far as the latter aspect is concerned, one can reflect on the fact that apparently insignificant details about a “target” person’s life had unexpectedly deleterious effects on her well-being (i.e., on her relationships, social status, professional career, among other things), depending on the interpretative filters that communist authorities employed. By analogy, we may wonder what unexpected effects the personal information we disclose to various data collecting and processing agencies through our daily online behavior may have.

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