

**When one door closes, another one opens?
The ways and byways of denied access, or a Central European liberal in
fieldwork failure***

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My Hungarian psychoanalyst told me she was depressed when she heard that I was finally denied access to do research with Polish border guards.¹ I had wanted to know how they made sense of the lived experience of the many transitions that mark their subject position: The collapse of the socialist regime in 1989 prompted their change into a police service modelled on the German example. The EU and Schengen enlargements² made them the protectors of the EU Eastern border. They have now become a type of a migration service not only checking passports at the border but chasing their targets throughout the country.³ I found them fascinating: ‘little sovereigns’ ostensibly at the edge of things. Commonly depicted as

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¹ In contrast to traditionally Freudian psychoanalysis, which insists on the neutrality of the analyst, relational psychoanalysis which I engage here considers the analyst as co-constitutive of the analytical situation. Relational psychoanalysis sees motivation for action more in interpersonal relations, early and ongoing and always partly fantasised, than in instinctual drives which are the core of traditional psychoanalysis. For a classic introduction see Steven Mitchell, *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis: An Integration*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); see also Donnel Stern, *Relational Freedom: Emergent Properties of the Interpersonal Field*, (London: Routledge, 2015).

² Poland joined the European Union in 2004 and the Schengen zone, that is an area of free movement, in 2007. As the result of the latter, the Polish Eastern border became the EU Eastern border and the Polish Border Guard assumed the responsibility to protect it.

³ In their now enlarged mandate in line with the EU border management paradigm, the Polish Border Guard have the prerogative to check the legal status of foreigners throughout the country.

committing acts of exclusion on behalf of their sovereign, they must, I thought, have investments of their own in performing exclusion.

In summer of 2018, I was tricked by one of the local border guard commanders into applying for approval for my research to the headquarters. I speak of being tricked, although in fact, as it turned out later, this was more of covering his back in a politically and administratively volatile situation. As the illiberal Law and Justice party was voted into majority in 2015 in Poland, they set about cleansing military and police structures,⁴ instilling a regime of what some call neo-authoritarianism.⁵ The ‘good change’ (‘dobra zmiana’), as the change of power is popularly called with varying undertones across the political spectrum, features increased administrative discretion and an arbitrary use of law, also known as ‘the rule by law’, characteristic of authoritarian regimes taking on legalistic trappings. Filing my request had to be followed up by numerous calls to locate it. Once I managed that, I liaised with a person from the unit involved in clearing sharing security sensitive information. He was curious, understanding, and available. He once called me back at 7.30 am CET which was 6.30 am in London. He had no legal objections to research that centres around private reflection by individuals. He intimated though that they did not know what to do with me. I did not send a standard questionnaire that could be scrutinised and distributed to different units. I wanted to talk to people about their experience. They were not sure which procedure to initiate and who should be in charge. I was finally asked to come to the headquarters in Warsaw to sign a confirmation of filing the request which would have been considered according to the Polish Administrative Procedure Code from 1960.

By that time, I already had a case officer who requested very politely a detailed description of the research. He then struggled to figure out what I meant by reflexivity as the central concept of the project: “Is it from sociological theory?” I didn’t know anymore, but confirmed. I flew to Warsaw. When I showed up, I was greeted with a reserved, overtly gendered courteousness—which I had expected. One of the assistant officers restrained himself from kissing my hand, as is an old-fashioned sign of Polish chivalry. I switched on the fieldwork mode and got a little nauseous with anxiety. The officer from the security bureau was summoned by phone: “Ms. Professor is here.” He came in wearing civilian clothes, although I realised he held the rank of colonel while my case officer was a young major in uniform. The colonel was wearing red socks which I remember seemed amusingly out of place, but also commanded my sympathy. On they went with a vigorous exchange. About local commanders, one of whom sent me to the headquarters like a lamb to the slaughter, my supporter pronounced: “They do not know their rights. They are just covering their backs. The point is not to make it difficult for citizens such as Ms. Professor. We are an institution like any other, with the only exception being that you have to go through the pass bureau to enter.⁶ You have to write a summary note to the commander-in-chief that explains it.” “You do not have to explain it to me,” my case officer flushed. And I felt a pang of the almost forgotten pain of becoming collateral damage in an argument between males of different ranks. “Ms. Professor,” he turned to me, “don’t take it personally, but I could not care less whether you’ll get the permission. I am a clerk. That’s the clerk way,” he added.

My supporter left and I was left with the clerk to complete the confirmation of filing the request. Maybe he softened a little. “Do you need to walk me back to the pass bureau?” I

⁴ Piotr Niemczyk, *Szósta Rano. Kto Puka?* [6 am. Who is knocking at the door?] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2018).

⁵ Marcin Gdula, *Nowy Autorytaryzm* [New authoritarianism], (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2018).

⁶ This is, however, and obviously, a fundamental difficulty. No one will traverse that pass bureau if they don’t have proper credentials, usually an appointment cleared in advance.

asked when it was time to leave. “I don’t have to but I will do it with pleasure,” he said. I did ask him what he thinks on the way out. “No one before has applied for this kind of permission,” he said. And then, “It’ll be an entirely subjective decision by the commander-in-chief. And there’ll be no appeal.” When I received the rejection to conduct the research and called my case officer to ask what scope of my research is being restricted, the reply was: “As per the initial letter.” The initial letter asked whether the headquarters had anything against my approaching Polish border guards for a conversation. They could not explicitly forbid the research, hence the formulation. I could not quite decide whether it was clever or lazy to formulate it like this. But once the commander-in-chief spoke, I could not retrace my steps to local units I had researched before. If in doubt, restrict. The door was closed.

As we talked with my analyst, I was sitting on the floor in a flat in Aberystwyth—something of a mythical place for critical IRists. This year, I was fortunate enough to be living there while on a prestigious fellowship. But the department was undergoing ‘restructuring’ and the staff were traumatised in the best neoliberal manner. Jobs were on the line. Resentment for the seeming underappreciation of commitment was brimming in private. The stiff upper lip was otherwise kept in place. My analyst and I were speaking on Skype, physically disconnected by the fact of my fellowship funded by the European Commission. Politics and history had been increasingly catching up with us, in our own little corners of the world. In the spring and summer of 2017, before I left Budapest for Aberystwyth, we had found ourselves considering shifting session times to attend another demonstration against the Hungarian government’s restrictions on democratic freedoms. As neo-authoritarianism was closing in on us, its pressures revealed more explicitly certain psychosocial wounds which had thus far remained in the background of our conversation.

Being a child of Central Europe,⁷ one might say, I had something of a personal problem with the region, which found associative if not captive audience in the analyst with the lived experience of transition in the region. Two generations of Central European liberals were struggling in and with the illiberal moment, not uncritical towards self-declared liberals who spearheaded the transformation. We were united in contempt towards the illiberals who put us in a difficult situation. Her country was going down the neo-authoritarian drain. My employer Central European University (CEU) in Budapest was being thrown out and going into ‘exile’ in Vienna.⁸ I was losing an adopted home. She was stuck. My original home had just swept me along its neo-authoritarian shift: I had successfully done research with Polish border guards in the past, which was the basis for granting me the fellowship. But times changed, and I found myself in a situation, not uncommon but routinely unexamined, of ‘fieldwork failure’. The ‘oh so’ technically tweaked and perfected research project crumbled upon a two-liner from the Polish Border Guard Headquarters: “In response to your request to initiate scientific cooperation in connection with a project about the Polish Border Guard, I politely inform you that the Commander-in-Chief does not approve your request.”⁹ There was no justification, as

⁷ The most famous pronouncement coining the notion of Central Europe remains Milan Kundera’s passionate, and apparently racist, plea published by the *New York Times* in 1984 for recognising the region as a cultural configuration with its own history and variable geography, as a ‘kidnapped and displaced West’, different (and supposedly superior) to the other civilization of Russia to the East.

⁸ In spring 2017, the Hungarian Parliament introduced in an expedited manner a higher education law officially aiming to unify regulations on foreign universities but, in fact, targeting CEU as ideologically averse to the illiberal project of the ruling party. For the most extensive account, see Zsolt Enyedi, ‘Democratic Backsliding and Academic Freedom in Hungary,’ *Perspectives on Politics*, 2018, 16(4): 1067-1074.

⁹ In original: “W odpowiedzi na Pani prośbę o nawiązanie współpracy naukowej w związku z projektem o Polskiej Straży Granicznej, uprzejmie informuję, że Komendant Główny nie przychylił się do Pani prośby.”

such is not legally required, and there was no appeal, as such is not legally granted. “Makes for a good cover of a future book, with names redacted,” I half-joked with a friend.

So, what to make of this personalised perspective on a geopolitical moment? As I see the liberal fantasy apparently crumbling in front of me and the authoritarian grip tightening on so many fronts, I would like to complicate the basic critical diagnosis of the illiberal shift by bringing my own disposition to the equation. My experience is of two encounters with the Polish Border Guard: first in a relatively open context in 2011 and 2012 when access was not an issue; and, second, in the changed circumstances of 2018. I would like to add to the all-too-obvious critique of creeping authoritarianism a series of additional analytical steps. I wish to situate the almost too-easy explanation of the decline of the liberal state at the discursive and experiential level of the subject and her contradictions. My concern, particularly, is with identifying an irritation that upsets the historically contingent but deeply sedimented wish or fantasy of liberalism or the desire for the liberal other in the researcher confronted with denied access.

The stronghold of my own investment in the fantasy of liberal emancipation fixates around a particular story: That of the ‘closed beaches’ that border guards serving in the North of Poland under the socialist regime liked to tell me, and which I cherished. I felt instant affinity on many levels. I was born in that region and remember barbed-wired beaches equipped with towers manned by armed soldiers patrolling the waters around the clock. A flashback from early childhood, re-enacted in research. The task of the soldiers was, as I only learned during the research, to thwart any escapes to Bornholm in Denmark. The state did not want to let anybody out to the west. But many wanted out, ‘to freedom,’ and devised creative means of escape by sea or by air, pilfering agriculture planes from the nearby collective farms for example. “Why did we shoot those buggers?” wondered one of the commanders who ran the transformation of the Polish border guard from the military to police service at the beginning of the 1990s. “What difference did it make? We should have let them go.” The border guards were, arguably, ‘civilised’ by turning into a law enforcement service that do not shoot those trying to escape the regime. I, arguably, escaped the closed beaches thanks to being of the generation that was encouraged to get out and see the world, first via the political transformation that opened borders, and then absorbing “the normative power Europe”¹⁰ discourse. An alliance was formed.

It is recognised in psychoanalytical theory that there are often areas of collusion in analytical alliances. Collusion comes from the Latin ‘com-,’ together and ‘ludere,’ to play and occurs mostly unconsciously as an unavowed acting together to alleviate some conflict or fear. It is frequently unbearable to face confrontation with certain fears and the ‘partners in play’ delegate to each other different forms of enacting ambivalence around them. Collusion is common in research, too, sometimes where sympathy towards the research subjects and the desire by the researcher to ‘give voice’ need to be protected from doubt. Areas of collusion in my analysis and research relate to the simultaneity of affirmation and disavowal of the ‘Central European dream,’ that is, the hope of liberal transformation in this region after the end of the Cold War. They pertain to the contradictions between the fantasy of what became popularised by Francis Fukuyama as “the end of history,” the profound ahistoricity and ultimately folly of this thesis, and its apparent hegemonic origins. The contradictory pulls of

¹⁰ The term was initially introduced by Ian Manners in his seminal article from 2002 arguing for the EU’s capacity for liberal transformation of its associates, ‘Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?’ *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40(2): 235-258.

my own enactment of the 'Central European dream' are coloured through conflicting investments: the socialisation into the critical academic discourse on liberalism, the experience of the western paternalism embedded in the post-Cold War transformation, and the exasperation with the Central European rejection of the western liberal consensus that hinders 'the catching up with the civilizational shift.' In the meantime, the ruling social relation seems to remain that of serfdom. The post-Cold War 'liberal moment' apparently failed to bring about social emancipation. The tenacity of social relations underpinned by serfdom, that is paternalism and symbolic violence, rather prepared the ground for the entrenchment of neoliberalism. Rumour has it that managers in multinational corporations call their Polish colleagues 'bullterriers' for the strong grip in which the latter like to hold their subordinates.¹¹ But who holds whom in what grip in a multinational corporation?

A past made in unfreedom inhabits a different future to be made. In my particularities as a 'Europeanised' Central European scholar, I now see two conditions that affect knowledge production in this situation. 'Auto-racism' which reflects the internalisation of oppression, or a sense of deficiency, which turns into a deprecating image of self-other relations: I will compare my compatriots negatively to the ideals supposedly embraced by the citizens of western democracy. And 'post-coloniality' which I learned through the emancipating western critical discourse: I will rebel against any form of paternalism that essentialises my compatriots as irreparably politically backward. A formula that spans both these conditions is, "you are not like us, you are to become like us."¹²

"We are all Germans, aren't we?" a former border guard trainer winked at me as I was leaving his office after an interview. This somewhat inscrutable statement seemingly referred to a range of markers we spoke about or alluded to in the interview. German police had won an EU tender to help reform the Polish Border Guard service towards meeting western European standards of border management. The process was pervaded by a keen sense of tension between emancipation and paternalism. I would hear a claim (to my ear, desperate) that Polish border guards deliberately accepted the initial patronising in order to see "what's on the other side [of the border]."¹³ I would, however, also witness a build-up of camaraderie across Polish, German and Ukrainian border guards which fits the thesis about the ever-growing realm of "professionals of unease" who accumulate unchecked power across borders.¹⁴ But many who experienced this transition look back with irony: at themselves, at prejudice, at serfdom. This particular interlocutor of mine, as I learned by accident, had worked as a 'political' officer during the socialist times when border protection was part of territorial defence. His task was to maintain the integrity of thought about the socialist state among the ranks. "He has a way with words," I heard. He certainly gave me some.

Auto-racism and post-colonial subjectivity breed shades of resentment ever ready to be acted out, particularly on quasi-informal occasions. This was reinforced to me on one such occasion: a dinner hosted by a liberal internationalist in honour of a US neorealist theorist who questioned the rationale of the EU's enlargement to Central Europe earlier at Central

¹¹ Andrzej Leder, 'Relacja folwarczna' [Feudal relations], *Krytyka Polityczna*, 24 December 2016, <http://krytykapolityczna.pl/kraj/leder-relacja-folwarczna/> [Last accessed: 5 January 2018]

¹² Amal Treacher, 'On Postcolonial Subjectivity,' *Group Analysis*, 2005, 38(1): 43-57.

¹³ Xymena Kurowska, 'Practicality by Judgement: Transnational Interpreters of Local Ownership in the Polish-Ukrainian Border Reform Encounter,' *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 2014, 17(4): 545-565, p. 558.

¹⁴ Didier Bigo, 'Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease,' *Alternatives*, 2002, 27(1_suppl): 63-92.

European University. At the dinner, the scholar continues the monologue initiated at the lecture, joined by a western European diplomat who elaborates on how the enlargement weakened the European project. The rest of the table is populated by: an Estonian academic, a Polish academic, a Hungarian spouse, an American spouse, and a Romanian academic. A couple of counterfactuals get floated on the Central European part of the table: What would have happened, including to the right-wing forces and neo-authoritarianism in the region, if the enlargement had not materialised? Is Western Europe free from neo-authoritarianisms, or perhaps it is the Central European cultural form of authoritarianism that fosters the Western version? This elicits no reaction. Here, I hear myself saying: “Is there a basement in this house? Should I go to the basement now?” (The dinner takes place in a penthouse.) The famous theorist’s face remains unengaged. It is difficult to say whether he believes he already answered this in his monologue, or whether he does not understand its logic. The diplomat remains antagonised for the rest of the evening, and the liberal internationalist seems amused at my remark: “Aren’t you a bewildered nationalist?” Well, is it the wilderness of nationalism that I am lost in? What’s the situational distribution of complicity here? Central Europe is certainly not unique in housing the resurgence of nationalism. Much can be said about the re-orientalisation of the Central and Eastern Europe in international politics and studies. And yet it hurts to be put on the spot as the barbarian at the table. It brings out a ‘difficult woman’ in me.

I wish I could be more of a difficult woman. But this clashes with my ‘Central European’ unwillingness to confront or denounce.

You look for something and it refuses you. How do you react?

What ‘internal’ refusal gets activated by the ‘external’ one?

Primers on fieldwork say that access is a social process that relies on cultivating relationships rather than obtaining formal consent. The process of obtaining the formal consent is analytically generative as it reveals the living social order. Lee Ann Fujii wrote of ‘accidental ethnography,’ which makes sense of unplanned moments, those outside of arranged conversations and premeditated observation, as suggestive of the larger political and social world in which the researcher is embedded.¹⁵ Developing fieldwork sensibility for such moments, she argues, “can deepen [the researcher’s] understanding of the research context and [help] gain local knowledge.”¹⁶ There is still much affectivity and opaqueness in such moments. And, as not knowing is hard to tolerate, interpretation presses on. Critical hermeneutics can be self-justifying. If someone refuses your will-to-knowledge, you can cast them as the villain of the story by claiming you can see through their nefarious motivation.

Who is the authoritarian then?

Drained by the living social order and its moments of revelation, and in the heat of the moment, I shifted from despondency to rationalisation. I decided that, given what I had experienced in my earlier research, where access was granted, the subsequent refusal by the headquarters shows the historical neo-authoritarian shift in the Polish state. This comes, logically, with increasing control over the society, cultivating the domination rather than openness of state institutions, exacerbated in the case of a border guard agency by the local political cleansing of cadres and an intensification of the migration threat construction. So

¹⁵ Lee Ann Fujii, ‘Five Stories of Accidental Ethnography: Turning Unplanned Moments in the Field into Data,’ *Qualitative Research*, 2015, 15(4): 525-539.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 526.

reformulated, my initial shock would surely come off as naïve to any well-tooled critical theorist. I would justify myself: Such shock should be seen from within a particular subject position. A political child of the 1990s in Poland, I was brought up in an historical moment that led us to believe that every generation will be a bit more open, a bit more citizen-friendly. And that democracy equals liberalism. Authoritarianism was taught to be a deviation from the free, open and democratic normal. From this level the present is a backsliding and a deviation. What if, however, liberal democracy was the deviation, something dependent on a fragile institutional setup, historical momentum and social consensus? At the conscious level, I am a critical scholar who does not buy into the end of history thesis. Yet I did not expect an illiberal slap-in-the-face to happen to me, on so many fronts. As critical scholars, we are quick to denounce teleological expectations of liberalism. Yet we are shocked when the linearity of progress fails us. This shock manifests how the liberal claim to criticality is above all a visceral claim of self-identification.

Over time and conversations, I have complexified the rationalisation. Being denied access confronted me more vociferously with the crisscrossing of the personal and political, that is, with the psychosocial, of my subject position. The social and the psychic processes demand to be understood as always implicated in one another. Hallway defines the psychosocial as a project “[...] to understand the mutual effectivity of psychological and social realms in the production of identity, action and relating.”¹⁷ The subject is a site of continuous conflict, a dynamic outcome of, simultaneously, social control and the unconscious. But it is also “the ground for subjects to think through their circumstances and to feel through their contradictions.”¹⁸ Liberalism, as a political ideology and a system of governance, is a fertile ground to confront such contradictions. In my discipline of International Relations, it has been denounced for its arrogance and the crypto-hierarchy that enables interventionism.¹⁹ Liberalism embodies the mutuality of inclusion and exclusion: Only the already free are worthy of the freedom. If they are not, they need to be brought up to that enlightened standard by those already there. Yet, even if it is ‘Political Theory 101’ that liberalism does not equal democracy, such a premise remains something of a challenge for a ‘child of the Central Europe,’ who is also a ‘Europeanised’ Central European scholar. This is how an ideological formation works. I am wary to say it aloud at the moment when Central Europe has become, to use a Latourian phrase, “a matter of concern” again.²⁰

The irony of the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, and the responsabilisation of the recipient of the liberal gift struck me in the first encounter with Polish border guards. They were telling me stories of their experience of emancipation from the authoritarian socialist regime, mixed with paternalism by their western trainers who were to bring them up to snuff, and the responsibility to ‘give back’ what they had received. Back in 2011 and 2012, I had no problem gaining access, both in the headquarters and in local branches. Doors appeared to be open and pride was taken in the way the Polish Border Guard had changed towards less discipline and less hierarchy. As a result of that early encounter, I might have, in some respect, idealised Polish border guards. They seemed and presented themselves as I also

¹⁷ Wendy Hollway, *The Capacity to Care: Gender and Ethical Subjectivity*, (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 15.

¹⁸ João Biehl, Byron J. Good and Arthur Kleinman, ‘Introduction’ in *Subjectivity: Ethnographic Investigations*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 14.

¹⁹ E.g. Chris Reus-Smit, ‘Liberal Hierarchy and the Licence to Use Force,’ *Review of International Studies*, 2005, 31(S1): 71-92; Meera Sabaratnam, ‘Avatars of Eurocentrism in the Critique of the Liberal Peace,’ *Security Dialogue*, 2013, 44(3): 259-278.

²⁰ Bruno Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,’ *Critical Inquiry*, 2004, 30(2): 225-248.

wanted to see them, as positive agents of change who had shed the militarism of the socialist regime, and were helping Ukrainian border guards do the same.²¹ With their reflexive attitude to the past, they confronted me with my own co-optation to the discourse of ‘becoming European’ in an experiential fashion, somewhat more embodied than a scholarly declaration of refusal to be co-opted to “the normative power Europe” discourse.²²

I became invested in revealing the futility of pure explanations. I saw such controlling purity in the normative argument about the success of liberal transformation, the neo-colonialism of liberal interventionism but also in the structural argument about subjectivity being determined by dominant discourse. I was rather annoyed by a remark made by a reviewer of my 2014 piece who, in a sweeping classificatory move, labelled the case of Polish border guards as, simply and unremarkably, a shift from discipline to governmentality. In the current condition of the neo-authoritarian turn, are they retracing their steps back to discipline, as it would appear in a reverse sweeping classificatory move, or there is a new formation in the making? What use are such grand, sweeping structural categories when actually existing regimes waver back and forth between them over the span of just a few years? Should we not infer from this that there is more going on here than the quasi-teleologies of our most esteemed theories can tell us?

The denied access in 2018 got me re-evaluating. Perhaps my interlocutors were not entirely honest with me, or they could not have been, partly consciously and partly unconsciously struggling to inhabit the discourse of the time, as they also do now. And, wasn't I now flipping from romanticising to demonising them? Haven't I reduced them to an inner object of fantasy invested with living the Central European dream, which I overtly disavowed but which constitutes part of my psychosociality? Now I react with aggression concealed as despondency to their apparently unreasonable or cowardly objections to living this dream for me in the open. They disappointed me, and I was taking revenge.

Part of my shock and surprise at the denied access comes from liberalism's greatest issue – that is, contempt. Liberalism stigmatises such states of mind as hatred, apparent subjection to hegemony, or the desire to retaliate. It mocks those that experience them, which in turns exacerbates hatred. The liberal elite instruct, hector and lecture, as though the 1990s had never ended. The lecturing has no real positive effect, but there is much to benefit from it on the liberals' side. It bestows a sense of moral justice, an idealised self-image that helps handle the feeling of helplessness. Lecturing often also comes with a sense of superiority which - perfectly recognised by those being instructed - aggravates their rage. The liberal internationalist felt contempt for what he saw as my primordial reaction to hurt national pride. I felt contempt for the officer who handled my case. I have it in my notes that he came off as a peasant, in contrast to the sophisticated colonel wearing red socks. I took notice of how my officer exchanged greetings with others we passed in the corridor: The greeting phrase²³ was a military salute, although the military repertoire is supposed to have been long discarded. Combined with the green uniforms, traditionally associated with the military in Poland, that

²¹ Kurowska, 'Practicality by Judgement,' pp. 545-565.

²² Xymena Kurowska, 'When Home is Part of the Field: Experiencing Uncanniness of Home in Field Conversations,' in Brent Steele, Harry Gould and Oliver Kessler, eds, *Tactical Constructivism: Expressing Method in International Relations*, (London and New York: Routledge), forthcoming.

²³ Polish: “Czołem!”

border guards still wear, it made an effect: “Once a military subject, always a military subject,” I thought.²⁴

My reaction was an enactment of certain countertransference.²⁵ A Hungarian-French ethnologist and psychoanalyst, Georges Devereux, argued that we analyse the ‘disturbance’ caused by the researcher’s unconscious as an integral part of knowledge production.²⁶ We learn a great deal from the way others react to our presence. We learn even more by observing our own reactions to their reactions. While Freud regarded countertransference as the main problem undermining the scientificity and credibility of psychoanalysis,²⁷ for Devereux the results of our research are the product of a game of reactions and counter-reactions between observed and observer. Theories are scientific only if they question the role of the observer, their observational choices, theoretical assumptions and operations performed to generate data, as well as the strategies used to face the ‘anxiety’ in the encounter with the other.²⁸ So countertransference is itself ‘crucial datum’ – a conceptual tool to explain the involvement of every observer in relation to the object and the field of research. This is a step further from Gadamer’s hermeneutical proposition that trying to escape from one’s own concepts in interpretation is not only impossible but manifestly absurd. To interpret means precisely to bring one’s own preconceptions into play.²⁹ Both Devereux and Gadamer still however display considerable optimism in the possibility of discerning and de facto control of the prejudice (in Gadamer’s terminology) from which we interpret. There is much opaqueness in countertransference, however. The understanding of where our reactions towards others’ reactions come from is not immediately available. How can they be trusted if they appear obvious? One of the forerunners of relational psychoanalysis, Donald Winnicott, also talks about hate in countertransference by examining ubiquity of hate and its denial in ordinary relationships. You cannot get close to the other without a close-up on your hatred, he argues.³⁰

I never met again the young officer who handled my case. But, as it happens in fieldwork, I heard of him later through others, former commanders-in-chief who, similarly to me, are now barred from contacting active officers. They were full of praise and appreciation for the officer’s sophistication and open-mindedness. They said that I would hit it off with him. He did, as Paulo Ravecca picked up while reading this piece, relate to reflexivity as a concept not only from sociology, but from sociological theory. But my immediate sympathy lay with the colonel who spoke the liberal speak.

Psychoanalytically, there is always something else, or more, going on, some investment that is hard to place or is hidden. The intractability that psychoanalysis introduces is not akin to saying that we could create a different narrative, or that another interpretive frame entirely

²⁴ My interlocutors suggest, as a rule without being prompted, that the reason why the Polish Border Guard have kept green uniforms rather than switch to the police navy blue was financial.

²⁵ Transference is the process whereby the patient’s feelings are projected onto the analyst. Countertransference is the analyst’s reactions to what the patient says (and doesn’t say).

²⁶ Georges Devereux, *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioural Sciences*, (Den Haag and Paris: Mouton & Co., 1967).

²⁷ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Origin and Development of Psychoanalysis,’ *The American Journal of Psychology*, 1910, 21(2): 181-218; Léon Chertok and Isabelle Stengers, *A Critique of Psychoanalytic Reason: Hypnosis as a Scientific Problem from Lavoisier to Lacan*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

²⁸ Alessandra Cerea, ‘Culture and Psychism: the Ethnopsychanalysis of Georges Devereux,’ *History of Psychiatry*, 2018, 29(3): 297-314, p. 306.

²⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (London: Sheed & Ward, 1989), p. 415.

³⁰ Donald Winnicott, ‘Hate in Countertransference,’ *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 1949, 30: 69-74.

could be applied. Rather, it is about the subject not being autonomous over the self. The unconscious makes it untenable to only be accountable for one's declared subjective intentions.

From such positions, the discourse on reflexivity in International Relations³¹ can be approached with appreciation for its constitutive aporia, as *impossible but necessary*, emancipatory and oppressive at the same time. Critical research must involve a self-questioning on the part of the interpreter, because as social beings we all to some extent participate in upholding practices of exclusion and dehumanisation, even though we may be subject to such practices ourselves.³² Yet reflexivity is a heroic endeavour. If one 'only' confesses complicity, it is a sterile move. It risks a double slip: of implicitly claiming authority and credibility,³³ and of absolution when the catharsis of self-awareness turns into a cure for the problem of representation.³⁴ The psychoanalytical intractability introduces a caveat. It de-realises access to the knowledge of oneself, which is otherwise the source of the Bourdieusian worry that auto-ethnography smuggles in the positivist sentiments about the truth.³⁵ But it radicalises that worry as well: If we are opaque to ourselves, can we claim to hover over the other to get a better view of the hegemony they are subject to? As reflexivity becomes mainstreamed in the critical academic debate and thus a measure of criticality, it also becomes a site of struggle for academic subjectivity. We can become a subject through reflexivity but we are subject to the discourse of reflexivity, too.

From psychoanalytical positions, reflexivity needs to come to terms with the occlusion within the self. This could help renounce "the self-celebratory 'hermeneutics of suspicion,' which elevate us [researchers] to a position of knowing what we deny others to be aware of," hegemony, for example.³⁶ But such reconciliation can bring paralysis to conventional modes of knowledge production. It undermines the process of making authoritative claims. If relational psychoanalysis is epistemologically debilitating, why use the setting of psychoanalytical psychotherapy to think through processes of knowledge production? How configurations that emerge in such settings matter for, on the one hand, forging research relationships, and, on the other, narrating the intertwinement of liberalism and authoritarianism, as in my case? What else, or what more, may be going on when I agonise over the denied access which brings my analyst to share her feelings?

I get to experience the effect of theory in the relational analytical setting. When I slip into theorising in some of my many ways, my analyst yawns: "It is becoming very boring." We become estranged.

³¹ For an overview see Jack Amoureux and Brent Steele, 'Introduction. Reflexivity and International Relations' in Jack Amoureux and Brent Steele, eds., *Reflexivity and International Relations. Positionality, Critique, and Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 1-20.

³² Lene Auestad, ed, *Psychoanalysis and Politics: Exclusion and the Politics of Representation* (London: Karnac, 2012).

³³ Linda Finlay, 'Negotiating the Swamp: The Opportunity and Challenge of Reflexivity in Research Practice', *Qualitative Research*, 2002, 2(2): 209-230.

³⁴ Wanda Pillow, 'Confession, Catharsis, or Cure? Rethinking the Uses of Reflexivity as Methodological Power in Qualitative Research', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 2003, 16(2): 175-196, p. 182.

³⁵ For an articulation of this worry see: Inanna Hamati-Ataya, 'Transcending Objectivism, Subjectivism, and the Knowledge in-between: The Subject in/of "Strong Reflexivity"', *Review of International Studies*, 2014, 40(1): 153-175.

³⁶ Klaus Krippendorff, 'Ecological Narratives: Reclaiming the Voice of Theorized Others,' in José V. Ciprut, ed., *The art of the Feud: Reconceptualizing International Relations* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2000), p. 16.

An encounter is an act of transference-countertransference dynamics: “When two personalities meet, an emotional storm is created.”³⁷ We do not interact with the real other but transfer on them an interpretation before we can observe. The researcher-self is as impenetrable as the researched other and yet has a lot to do with what becomes a knowledge product. She brings to the interview situation unconscious influences and conflicts. Transference unsettles the notion that she can ‘read off’ the other by listening carefully, even if the parties want to be open and genuine. As both parties are embedded in a shared social context, such dynamics extend to integrating contradiction and ambiguity as key features of socio-political lives. So where do my interpretations come from and why do I select a detail from a narrative and exclude other factors?³⁸

Theory intervenes. In analysis as much as in fieldwork with others, confusion and dealing with only partly conscious pressures is hard to tolerate. An encounter with the other threatens anxiety. The researcher seeks to protect herself against it by “omission, soft-peddling, non-exploitation, misunderstanding, ambiguous description, over-exploitation or rearrangement of certain parts of his material.”³⁹ Interpretations are in this context “often given out of the analyst’s need for his (sic!) own sanity, fortifying and fortified by his theory [...]”⁴⁰ But theory estranges the other. Rendering the other amenable to being pinned down through an interpretive frame of the researcher does not need to be an apparently hostile exercise, for example under the banner of social critique which depicts border guards as “the automaton executors of neoliberal discourse and creators of ever-more-fearsome institutional practice.”⁴¹ The estrangement also happens when we use theory in the service of our own wish-fulfilment – as I did in my interpretation of local reformers as agents of change who emancipate themselves from the oppression of an authoritarian regime.

We need the minds of others to think through our interpretations, even if partly unconsciously. There is not necessarily more transformation in the self than there is intransigence in such engagement. We are still trapped in the repetition, rather than the supersession, of traumatic formations. We are pulled to repeat those patterns that uphold the very social norms that cause psychic distress in the first place.⁴² But the encounter confronts the self with her outside and helps develop critical thinking about the place of the self. Exploring one’s experience in such settings is not the same as consuming confession, constructing a narrative, or successfully ‘working through’ trauma. It mobilises imagination in the self and actualises the other as possibly imagining otherwise, as invested in obscure ways, as unavailable.

I delegated to my interlocutors an enactment of a dream I could not myself handle explicitly. At some point, they were keen delegates, striving to prove to me how well they did in this transformation business. At some level, connected to their psychosociality, they invested in meeting my expectations. At that point, we needed each other for validation of experience and colluded to keep the trappings of ‘the Central European dream.’ I could both consume the dream and hover above its liberal hegemony as a critical researcher. The denial of access, and the modality in which it happened, was not only a blow to a research project. The two-line

³⁷ Wilfred Bion, *Clinical Seminars and Other Works*, (London: Karnac Books, 1994), p. 321.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 54&57.

³⁹ Devereux, p. 44.

⁴⁰ Kenneth Wright, 'The Suppressed Madness of Sane Analysts,' in Lesley Caldwell, ed, *Winnicott and the Psychoanalytic Tradition: Interpretation and Other Psychoanalytic Issues*, (London: Karnac, 2012), p. 168.

⁴¹ Xymena Kurowska and Benjamin Tallis, 'Chiasmatic Crossings: A Reflexive Revisit of a Research Encounter in European Security', *Security Dialogue*, 2013, 44(1): 73-89, p. 75.

⁴² Lynne Layton, 'Racial Identities, Racial Enactments, and Normative Unconscious Processes,' *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 2006, LXXV(1): 237-269.

rejection punctured the safe stability of my simultaneous embracement and disavowal of ‘the Central European dream.’

No one was physically hurt when I was denied access and as neo-authoritarianism had been closing in on us. My analyst and I were two comfortable individuals linked through one of the most bourgeois alliances there is. In the run-up to the denied access I had been busy milking the dire state of affairs in social and academic contexts. At Brussels-ised⁴³ dinner tables I would ask, “In 2018, I live in the three worst countries in the EU. What are they?” That is not a riddle, is it? But there is a privilege of living in three EU countries, jet-setting across the globe from them, and mocking that status at a Brussels dinner table. Such privilege is also a hide-out. Academically, I started to weave an analytical tale based on the lived experience of, on the one hand, the neo-authoritarian turn in Hungary and the entrenchment of neoliberalism in the UK, both affecting the university in particular and arguably somewhat consonant ways. Another hide-out:

“The meeting and melding of neo-authoritarianism and neoliberalism, a new neo-neo synthesis of sorts,⁴⁴ reminds scholars,” I would claim, “that they are part of the same world as their subjects, subject to similar pressures and trading similarly contradictory pulls. Researchers often declare their awareness of the structural inequality of the fact that their mostly high-status passports allow them to leave the field any moment. Others remain where they are, often in situations of danger and precarity. Such acknowledgements are, however, becoming insufficient in a condition when politics have caught up with us, regardless of what passport we may have. The neo-neo synthesis breaks through the comfortable Cold War image of safe/liberal west and backwards/reactionary east. Now, even more clearly than usual, the field is part of home, and home is part of the field. In this respect, we are our own subjects. This across-the-board levelling effect situates one’s own location more firmly in the broader circulation of power. But while we are all situated within structures of power, and cannot jump out of them to study others (and our interest in others is dictated by interests of power), our investments in these structures are only partially transparent to us. In the condition of the neo-neo synthesis, we, as much as our subjects, can be involved in enacting both subjection and defiance at once. We may in the process realise that we submit in ways that we would call hypocrisy, neoliberal self-regulation, or lack of reflexivity in our subjects.”⁴⁵

On 3 October 2018, CEU announced in a press conference that the university was being forced out of Hungary. Much effort had been made to comply with the new arbitrary legislation about higher education but nothing could satisfy the desire of the Hungarian authorities. At that press conference, a journalist from *Magyar Idők*, a Hungarian newspaper associated with the Fidesz government which had been at the forefront of a smear campaign

⁴³The term ‘Brusselisation’ used to be commonly applied in scholarship on EU inspired by sociological institutionalism to describe a certain “fusion of horizons” among Brussels-based elites regardless of their citizenships and formal allegiances.

⁴⁴ Originally, the term “the neo-neo synthesis” refers to the convergence of the neorealist and the neoliberal schools of thought in IR which, regardless of their apparent paradigmatic differences, rely in fact on the same ontology.

⁴⁵ This is a verbatim extract from a contribution to the roundtable ‘The Return of Politics to International Relations,’ at European Workshops in International Studies, Groningen, 6 June 2018.

against CEU, asked: “Why didn’t you try harder?” That is, why did you not humiliate yourself further to atone for your arrogance, privilege and flamboyance?

The theme of unfair privilege had been the main official justification of the Fidesz government for introducing the new higher education law. Humiliation against arbitrariness has a value in the liberal repertoire, reasserting a higher moral ground. Just days before the conference, an Aberystwyth departmental email congratulated staff and postgraduate students on yet another successful performance of Crisis Games, which is the department’s flagship simulation for undergraduate students “to provide insight into the complexities of national and international politics and a greater appreciation of the difficulties faced by decision-makers when confronted with an international crisis.”⁴⁶ It is also a recruitment tool. Weeks before the press conference, students from CEU and other major Budapest universities ELTE and Corvinus together with the Hungarian workers alliance had been performing Szabad Egyetem (Free University but also a free gathering for lectures in Hungarian) in front of the Hungarian parliament. They were organising teach-ins and simply camping in a doomed but morally elevating protest against the Hungarian authoritarian turn. As I was following Szabad Egyetem, the email about Crisis Games felt like a slap. The Department of International Politics at Aberystwyth University never sent a letter of support to CEU, unlike hundreds of other higher education institutions and public intellectuals across the globe. I resented that. I wanted my victimhood recognised and valorised. This neoliberally tortured but still privileged institution was contriving political situations for their students to imagine doing politics. Ours were becoming political subjects in the streets of Budapest in protesting against a neo-authoritarian regime. “Why wouldn’t you take notice?” I struggled. Why wouldn’t you check and atone for your privilege while we sunk? I was looking for affirmation and, as it was not coming, I turned to reproach from a morally elevated position. Takes one to reproach one.

CEU has financial support to leave the authoritarian regime and its people behind. Humiliated by authoritarian arbitrariness, it wins the moral battle. The realisation of the Central European dream shifts its location to Vienna. Vienna is the location of a novel that has been formative to me—*Malina* by Ingeborg Bachmann. The nameless narrator, *Ich* (I), is a forty-year-old Viennese, writer and intellectual. *Malina* is, on the face of it, a novel about submission of the female narrator to three male figures: her Hungarian lover, Ivan, who loves only his children, the authoritarian father and the fascist society it represents, and Malina, her companion and alter ego. Nothing much happens on the surface of the novel as the narrator smokes and waits for Ivan, dreams and remembers her father’s silencing of the past, realises her condition, and disappears into a crack in the wall. Malina stands as the evident perpetrator of what is explicitly called a murder, but Ivan and the father are surely implicated. This setup would seem to realise Bachmann’s political conclusion that “[fascism] does not begin with the first bombs that are dropped, nor with the terror that can be written about in every newspaper. It begins in the relationships between human beings. Fascism is primary in the relationship between a man and a woman.”⁴⁷ Still, the novel has been a foil for feminist anger: *Ich* succumbs to emotions, cannot articulate her own subjectivity, and submits to debilitating relationships with the egoistic Ivan, the cruelly analytic alter ego Malina, and the sadistic father-figure.⁴⁸ Collusion with patriarchy, in other words. But such critique operates with the

⁴⁶ <https://www.aber.ac.uk/en/interpol/supporting-you/undergraduate/crisisgames/> [Last accessed: 5 January 2019]

⁴⁷ Ingeborg Bachmann, *Wir Müssen Wahre Sätze Finden. Gespräche und Interviews* [We must find genuine sentences. Conversations and interviews.], (München: Piper, 1983), p. 144.

⁴⁸ Stephanie Bird, *Women Writers and National Identity: Bachmann, Duden, Özdamar*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 64.

certainty and fixity of the binary of the victim and the perpetrator. It leaves out the complicity of the narrator in both her own self-destruction and in enabling destruction. There is a revealing exchange between *Ich* and Malina where he asks why she sought to protect her father from the police. “I don’t know. I did it. Then it was right for me to do it.”⁴⁹ Although *Ich* is an apparent victim of the crimes of the father, she is not herself uninvolved in their perpetuation. One is always implicated in one’s oppression. Paralysed by the past, she cannot simply start a new life.

Although Malina is an apparent perpetrator in the novel, his insistence on constant enquiry enables the narrator to speak about her perceptions without having to deny them. It brings her in contact with the outside of herself. Although it is not entirely clear whether he asks questions to keep *Ich* afloat or to inflict pain, his analytic mode makes it possible to imagine other stories, to undermine rigid certitudes which lead to estrangement from reality. At a closer look, Malina and *Ich* have moments of mutuality which go beyond the utopia of reconciliation. Their coming together occurs not by the triumph of one version over the other, however. It occurs when they transcend the doer/done-to scheme, are temporarily free from the usual pulls of either submission or resistance to the other, and can surrender to the process.⁵⁰ This is, in a way, an ‘aliberal’ moment, as liberalism operates on the assumption of transparency and the ultimate harmony of interests. It denies its own implication in violence. The ‘aliberal moment,’ in contrast, stays with ambivalence. It is an encounter where the self is there not to simply (be able to) know herself, or the other. The relationship mobilises the capacity to disidentify with any one voice as ‘I’.⁵¹ Subjects destabilise each other’s self-certainty or can be destabilised at any moment.⁵²

From this perspective, what appears to be a dislocation of the self as a knowing subject who disappears under the burden of the hegemonic discourse – patriarchal, political, or that of self-reflexivity – turns into relational knowledge production through acknowledgment of complicity and opaqueness. The question of ‘access’ changes here. We are already in, we are our own subjects. But the research is not akin to self-analysis. It is not about the monological control of the other through the claim to knowing him, either. The shifting self is articulated through specific social interactions and what we therefore research is our relations with the researched.⁵³ The image of ‘disappearing into a crack in the wall’ is about surrender to that process, not about annihilation.

A Hungarian forerunner of relational psychoanalysis, Sándor Ferenczi, spoke of patients who “[...] are unmasking the doctor’s unconscious by identifying the analyst’s countertransfereential need to be his patient’s patron or knight.”⁵⁴ I cast my interlocutors in a role in which I served as their liberal “patron and knight” while also realising my own investment of living ‘the Central European dream’. But once they flipped, so did I. Liberalism gave me resources to do that. My bifurcated interpretation – their being liberal agents of change and then disciplined subjects of the authoritarian sovereign – happened because I am

⁴⁹ Ingeborg Bachmann, *Malina*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), p. 217.

⁵⁰ Jessica Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done to: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third*, (London: Routledge 2017), pp. 23-25.

⁵¹ Margo Rivera, ‘Linking the Psychological and the Social: Feminism, Poststructuralism, and Multiple Personality,’ *Dissociation: Progress in the Dissociative Disorders*, 1989, 2(1): 24-31.

⁵² Benjamin, 3.

⁵³ Gillian Rose, ‘Situating Knowledges: Positionality, Reflexivities and other Tactics,’ *Progress in Human Geography*, 1997, 21(3): 305-320.

⁵⁴ Sándor Ferenczi, *The Clinical Diary of Sándor Ferenczi*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 188.

invested in the very features of liberalism that enabled both parts of the interpretation. But I kept these parts separate because, I believed, you are either a liberal or an authoritarian, never a contingent mixture of both.

Dauphinee concludes that therapy is one of the motivations of all writing, in all IR traditions, “insofar as writing attempts to identify and rectify the wrongs of the world.”⁵⁵ I would like to suggest another use, which is not about repair. It relates to a momentary suspension of the doer/done-to certitude and a glimpse of one’s own complicity, including in one’s oppression. For Lacan, the analysis terminates when one both discards one’s analyst as the all-knowing expert and re-identifies with the kernel of one’s symptom.⁵⁶ This re-identification is not synonymous with a ‘cure’ in the sense of being free from an illness. ‘Working through’ is not about healing. It consists in a little disenchanting. My analyst and I could not help but, under certain psychosocial pressures, collude in feeding each other’s liberal fantasy. This is how an ideological formation works. ‘Traversing the fantasy’, a Lacanian phrase that made a career, is not literally possible, of course. But it can be explored. For this, we need the minds of others, often those that deny and refuse us. Negation, or just asking questions, is a productive irritation.

My fieldwork failure was a series of productive irritations in this respect. Most fundamentally, it confronted me with the psychosocial of an ideological formation. Most immediately, the situation of denied access brought out the liberal complicities of my ambivalent enactment of ‘the Central European dream’. I am now examining a re-identification with the liberal entrenchment. Some offer consolation that the failure of a planned ethnographic project will get me to do more theoretical work which is what ultimately matters for careers in International Relations. Which is perhaps where my disposition lies. That’s a re-identification with a symptom of authoritarianism in me, with “my dictatorship.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Dauphinee, ‘Narrative Engagement and the Creative Practices of International Relations,’ in Jack Amoureux and Brent Steele, eds., *Reflexivity and International Relations. Positionality, Critique, and Practice*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 46.

⁵⁶ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 66-68.

⁵⁷ See Ravecca’s discussion on how dictatorships can be located in our subjectivity, and in the (disciplinary) stories we tell and are told, rather than solely in the system of government: Paulo Ravecca, ‘The Intimate Architecture of Academia,’ in Naeem Inayatullah and Elizabeth Dauphinee, eds., *Narrative Global Politics: Theory, History and the Personal in International Relations*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).