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Abstract

In recent years a number of calls have been made for a 'new paradigm' in Romani Studies. Sometimes referred to as 'critical Romani Studies', the proposed research agenda focusses on racism and its importance for Roma and Romani identity, as well as issues arising from inequalities and the structural discrimination of Roma. Drawing from post-colonial studies, feminist critique, intersectionality and 'critical race theory' the advocates of this approach have suggested that who speaks may be as or more important than what they have to say. In this contribution to the debate I question whether discussing issues around the 'authority to speak' will advance the substantive issues that ought to concern all scholars in this field, Romani and non-Romani.

Keywords: Romani Studies; critical race theory; intersectionality; anthropology; ethnography; activism and academic research; methodological nationalism.

Nothing about us without us, or The dangers of a closed society research paradigm.

Michael Stewart

Introduction

A conference that took place in mid 2017 at Central European University called for a 'new paradigm' in Romani oriented research.¹ This new paradigm would favour "inquiries into the forms of oppressions Roma are facing, the importance of racism for Roma and Romani identity, inequalities and structural discrimination of Roma, power relations and the need to contextualize the knowledge production' (<https://rap.ceu.edu/article/2017-03-17/conference-critical-approaches-romani-studies-call-papers>). It would do so by drawing on the fields of post-colonial studies, feminist critique, intersectionality and 'critical race theory'.

The conference was organised as part of the establishment of a unique Romani Studies offer at CEU, led for the first time by Romani scholars and activists. Less than a department but more than a pair of academic appointments, this initiative significantly expands the potential offer of Roma-focussed research and training at that university. But there was also a broader context. In response to Council of Europe initiatives such as the foundation of the European Roma Institute and the ongoing elaboration of European Union interventions, this call for a new paradigm in the field drew upon an emerging activist intervention in the academy that could have surprisingly beneficial consequences.

For nearly twenty years now, CEU has only offered two postgraduate modules that addressed, in substantive terms, the lives of Roma in Europe, one taught by myself on the Anthropology of Ethnicity and Roma and the other by the renowned Hungarian sociologist Julia Szalai on Sociological approaches to Romani issues. For a while, Legal Studies provided some coverage of ‘Roma Rights’, but in recent years even this had disappeared. The paucity of the CEU offer has been a strange lacuna in a university founded to promote civil rights, tolerance and liberal values in matters of ethnic and social issues in the former communist parts of the world. It was a further curious aspect of CEU’s Roma offering that both Julia and I were employed to teach within the imaginative Nationalism Studies program there rather than in our disciplinary homes. There was also a crucial annual summer school, but this was housed and funded outside the University structures strictu sensu. There, therefore, remained a sense in which, despite sterling Nationalism Study support, the field was oddly marginalised in a university that sits in the middle of those countries with the most significant Romani minorities in the world.² The creation of a new Roma-led program led by a new generation of scholars offers a chance for reflection and re-engagement.

Quite rightly – and also quite conventionally – the new generation behind ‘critical Romani studies’ attempts to define itself in opposition to the one that preceded them. For a start, they quite correctly point out that the elder generation largely failed to attract Romani scholars to their courses at CEU and the academic disciplines for which the MA and the Summer Schools offered preparation.³ Moreover, as Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka has pointed out,

the summer school at CEU had precious few Romani academic teachers (2015:42). The loss was all the greater since, as Mirga-Kruszelnicka observed, “the status of a researcher who belongs to the ‘subaltern’ group is often ambivalent, complex and challenging but also full of potential” (2015:43). So, today, the situation we confront is that an older generation of Romani Studies researchers have provoked a wave of reaction among activist Romani intellectuals that demand ‘Roma studies’ taught by Roma, that suggests research agendas should be controlled by ‘the Roma’ or whoever claims to represent them, and PhD projects in which there is always one Romani supervisor. ‘Nothing about us, without us!’, we hear with increasing urgency. ‘Who speaks for whom?’, the activist-intellectuals demand to know.

There is here a real challenge. The answer to these questions cannot be self-evident because of the rhetorical construction of the questions themselves, as I argue below. Academic knowledge production is not centres on speaking for, against or with certain populations but on entirely other grounds. In order to tackle the issues here I ask: how are those in established academic positions from the first generations of Romani Studies researchers to respond? What value is there in the criticisms that activists are putting forward? What is the most effective way to engage with them? In the context of deepening the field of Romani Studies, how can we continue to make issues that involve Roma a normal part of the university agenda? How can we mainstream these issues? And in what ways should Roma individuals or communities be involved in the shaping of the research agenda?

In this paper, I want to retrace the history of Romani studies to ask what the likely consequences might be, if the solution proposed by many of the participants at the above-mentioned CEU conference and similar fora - seeking support from post-colonial studies, feminist critique, intersectionality and 'critical race theory - were adopted by young Romani scholars. The new perspectives that could emerge from scholarship provided by young, engaged Romani researchers have the potential to broaden the entire research agenda by bringing to the table entire realms of experience that have hitherto been ignored by ethnographers and policy makers until now. My argument here is that such rejuvenation can only take place if the new scholarship is genuinely dedicated to the production of knowledge rather than the politics of representation and other adjacent agendas.

Notes towards the recent history of Romani Studies

Postcolonial studies - and its now more fashionable intellectual offspring, intersectionality - bring to the fore questions of identity and the control of identity - is it the coloniser or the oppressed who speaks? Can the 'subaltern' speak? Although its reigning deities, like Spivak and Chakrabarty, were concerned above all with the production of texts, they posed questions close to the interests of sociologists, social geographers or anthropologists who tend also to study 'subalterns' - people like those who filled the co-edited collection, *Lilies of the Field* (Day et al. 1998). In contrast to this latter 'modernist' work, the postmodern focus on identity pushes postcolonial

authors to become concerned with the question of 'authority to speak.' What, I would like to understand, is the historical context in which this kind of question has acquired such salience?

Ever since the 'system change' in eastern Europe in 1989, it has been clear to many scholars that the road to creating a viable social science of cultural difference in eastern Europe would run across the terrain of Romani lives. Communism was a social system that systematically denied the significance of culture and cultural difference in favour of addressing social difference and economic stratification. Notoriously, Marxism has been incapable of conceptualising the significance of vertical social cleavages, so fixated it is on the nature of horizontal divisions (Gellner 1983). The actually existing socialism of the Warsaw Pact countries differed not a jot, in this respect, from its 19th century textual model. With Romani populations constituting the largest minority in countries as diverse as Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Serbia, and where in each of these countries the Roma had been subject to a forceful, culturally homogenising communist public policy, it was inconceivable that a real anthropology or cultural studies could emerge in the 1990s in the former communist territories without putting the lives of Romani communities and their treatment by the majority at the heart of the research agenda.⁴

And yet, in the development of Romani Studies western European scholarship and institutions have played a disproportionate role. Arguably, this has been a consequence of the influence of the first generation of ethnographers of the Roma (Okely 1983; Piasere 1985; Williams 1982; Kaminski 1982). But even

after the system change, when scores of students went through the courses I have mentioned above and on to doctoral study, if only for reasons of better local funding options, students at western institutions have been more visible. It is mostly they, as junior or now mid-career scholars, who occupy the lectureships and research positions, in Europe and beyond, which provide much of the intellectual dynamism of our field. And where eastern Europeans have flourished they have done so in the Western academy. One direct consequence of this is that Romani voices in the field have been muted.⁵ This imbalance feeds a sense of injustice and inequality among younger Romani scholars – a feeling that is also shared by some majority social scientists from the region (Buchowski 2006).

This is one source of the frustration that finds articulation in conferences like the one recently held at CEU. But the broader setting in which Roma oriented research takes place has also altered in ways that few imagined back in 1989 and these changes have had a profound effect on scholarship. The huge change in the ecological position that Romani communities occupy in eastern European society was, with hindsight, the inevitable consequence of the end of a planned economy. Of course, this has not been wholly one-sided development. Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov are quite right to mock those who say that the transition has been an unmitigated disaster for all Romani communities (2011). There are many Romani families who have prospered since 1989, families who found new economic and political freedoms offering opportunity for enrichment and empowerment. The grand palaces of more than a handful of Romani communities in Romania attests to

such success. But many more have lost much of the security and all the meagre prosperity they enjoyed under communism.

We confront disastrous social conditions in some regions, and – due to the continuing failure, in countries like Hungary and Slovakia, to improve the employment rates of the uneducated and unskilled (Köllö 2013) - this has produced the paradoxical outcome that uneducated and unskilled Roma migrants can get jobs in high-wage Britain and not in low-wage Hungary or Slovakia. The fact that, 25 years into a market economy, little is improving for the Roma is a source of agony for all observers and enraging to those on the ground, the teachers, social workers and local authorities who deal with the consequences year in year out. And the inevitably ‘mute’ response of the totally disempowered poor Roma in these areas also shapes the mental universe in which scholarship operates.

At the same time, the changing political context in which Romani issues are discussed has caught all of the 1980s’ generation by surprise. Those who, as adults, witnessed the crumbling of the intellectually sclerotic and politically absurd dictatorships of that time were unqualifiedly optimistic that the fall of our then enemy would usher in an era of greater tolerance, multicultural openness and indeed emancipation for minorities like the Roma (and other national minorities like the Hungarians of Romania and Slovakia, for that matter). Twenty-five years on, we now look as naïve as the young communists of 1948 who thought the world would be made anew by the end of the first five-year plan. The rise, since 1990, of new and far more subtle forms of racism and discrimination – signalled in popular parlance by

poisonous popular idioms like the Hungarian ‘az etnikum’ or the Czech Republic’s ‘our fellow citizens’ – as well as the openly ‘redemptive’ anti-Gypsyism of recent years (Stewart 2012) profoundly shapes the experience of the new generation of researchers and their research agenda.

Whatever the heartfelt injustice around new forms of poverty and racism, I would urge all to remember that there has been a total transformation in the *academic field* over the past 40 years – and it would be an utter tragedy, indeed an absurdity, were this revolution in the field to be trashed as the banal legacy of ‘the white man’s perspective’. Herein lies one of the main claims of the present article.

Let me take you back for a moment to the world before ‘Romani Studies’ emerged. In the early 1980’s, when I set out on my doctoral research, I spent several fruitless and increasingly desperate weeks working along the shelves of the library in London’s School of Oriental and African Studies which housed the only open-access, complete run of the Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society (lasting from 1889 on and off through to 1973). Poring through the various amateur, first and second-hand materials that this quasi-academic journal had published over eight decades, I began to fear that there was nothing of any broader intellectual interest in the study of Romani societies – so hopelessly cut off were the contributors to the journal from the leading concerns of academic and public life of the twentieth century – and so totally alien were they from the Roma of the mid to late 20th century.

To a young student, the J.G.L.S., with its obsessions about ‘origins,’ ‘real Romanies’ and survivals of ancient practices, appeared like a publication sprung from the grave of 19th century ethnology, ready, zombie like, to devour me and my research. This living dead agenda was the stuff that my discipline, Anthropology, had been emerged out of, slaughtering its own parent without pity. So here, or so it seemed to me then, I was about to sacrifice my career to this monstrosity! I wanted to gain a sense of how Romanian, Hungarian or Serbian Roma had been living in the recent past, but there was almost nothing to go on – with the exception of the few translated works of Kamill Erdős (e.g. 1959) and some remarkable papers on the Sárrét, from the 1940s, by one István Nagy (1940).⁶

Without wishing to over-egg the lonely heroism of the 1980s researchers, the position of a young scholar setting out today could not be more different. In fact, nowadays, a novice doctoral student simply does not have the time to master all the theses that have made a genuine contribution to knowledge on the Rom of Europe. In 2017, Hungarian and Romanian universities alone will each produce a handful of PhDs dealing with the lives of Romani persons.

The European Academic Network of Romani Studies has over 400 members with nearly 250 doctorates in its midst and growing. The change I am pointing to is perhaps most strikingly demonstrated in the quality of papers that this journal has published since the outgoing Editor took over. In a recent paper in the campaigning magazine Roma Rights Mirga-Kruszelnicka (2015) claims that the apparently new scholarship of the past thirty years has embodied an unexamined continuity with Gypsy Lore practices of the early 20th Century. It

is a shame that the author focusses her attention on contributions to the still quaintly named Conference of the Gypsy Lore Society and does not cite the more substantive work published in this journal. Against Mirga-Kruszelnicka, I would suggest that this journal has in recent years and for the first time in the long history of Gypsy Lore Society publications, published work that merits the attention of people outside the narrow field of 'Roma' research – the sort of work that I will discuss below - and hence has played a crucial role in the great goal of mainstreaming Romani issues in the European academy.

Nothing about them with them

Today, no one ends up working about Romani communities or persons unless they are moved by an element of outrage at the treatment of Romani persons in our societies and a hope that their work will reduce the hostility with which such people are treated. So, I want to orient my further thoughts here around the relationship between the academic field, the real world of economic and political challenges and the new Romani social and political movements that have emerged in parallel with the development since the 1980s of the academic research I have mentioned above.

As always, to understand the present you have to see its roots in the past. With a few brief exceptions (such as Czechoslovakia under Dubcek, or the late Kádár regime in Hungary) the governing Communist 'paradigm' was constant. That paradigm had been fixed during discussions around the formulation of policies towards the Gypsies in the last few years of the 1950s

in each Warsaw Pact country. The resulting policy could be caricatured as based on the principle: nothing about them with them. In so far as there were Romani self-understandings, desires, aspirations for self-realisation as 'Gypsies' these were understood as part of a reactionary and dangerous social segment whose ethos challenged the proletarian ethic of the regime (Stewart 2001).

For instance, in Hungary state policy was based around an explicit rejection of the program of an autonomously organised Hungarian Gypsy Cultural Association, founded by the Rom woman, Mária László, in 1957. In its founding statement László had argued that the Gypsies' problems had to be solved by the Gypsies themselves, with the help of state organs.⁷ But by 1961, when a formal Communist policy was announced, the Political Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party stated, 'in our policies towards the Gypsy population we must start from the principle that despite certain ethnographic specificities they do not form a 'national minority'. In the resolution of their problems we must take into account their specific *social* situation' (Mezey 1986:242, my emphasis). What this meant was that Gypsies would not be allowed to represent themselves; involving the Gypsies in solving their own problems would actually slow down the resolution of their pressing issues.⁸

After this fateful decision, the way of life of the various 'Gypsy' populations of the region was officially understood not to be grounded in a culture, a set of value orientations, with a certain autonomy from economic and social conditions. Rather, in so far as 'Gypsies' had a distinctive take on the world,

this was a mere reflection of their lumpen social situation. Back in the early 1980s, beyond any purely academic anthropological task of understanding the way of life of a particular community of Rom, the public job of researchers was to argue that it is not possible to intervene in a community without an understanding of that community's terms of reference, of their cultural values and understandings. Romani speaking Rom as well as monolingual, apparently assimilated, 'Gypsies' had an understanding of what mattered in life and what did not and it was in terms of these '*Lebenswelt*' that they made sense of the Communist state's carrots and sticks. The consequence of the lack of fit of Communist theory and Romani life-worlds was a pretty mess.

Eastern Europe was, in the 1980s, on a path to becoming an ever more open and politically variegated community and there were some in public positions who did want to listen; if only within the limits of official policy. The striking thing about public policy at the centre of power was that the authorities felt no need to listen to expertise nor to local voices. This was a deliberate strategy of official ignorance. In Hungary Zita Réger, László Szegő, Katalin Kovalcsik, Gábor Havas, Ágnes Daroczi, Endre Tálos, to name but six were all on hand with between them several decades of research experience in the field. But they were almost entirely ignored. 'Power' at that time still believed itself to be in possession of a handbook that offered exclusive access to the inevitable course of history. It needed no intervention from pestilential intellectuals with their field-fresh data. 'Power' knew where the '*Cigány*' were going.

It seems to me that the calls today for nothing to be done or said about the Roma without the Roma, the argument that the social background of the

speaker matters as much as what they may say is, in part, a reaction to the memory and, more importantly, the legacy of those times.

The specificity of the Romani affirmation

What of the alternative research tradition that has been Romani Studies for a generation or so? What insights has this brought to the table through a process of empirical investigation of how actual communities of Rom live, talk, organise their economic life, cope with social change?

This is, I need to stress, a tradition of autonomous academic research – research conducted to ‘find stuff out’ not to serve anyone’s political agenda.

All the ethnographic work has been concerned with one central question: how do you maintain a way of life grounded in a distinct value system, a morality that is discordant with the majority society, when you live dispersed among the latter and often under pressure to surrender your way of life? This research has, therefore, with only a few exceptions, been concentrated among Romani speaking communities.

One recurrent answer was first identified by the French anthropologist Patrick Williams. In considering the position of the Manuš among the Gadžos, Williams notes that it is “hard to overlook the fact that Manuš affirmation has to occur in the midst of another society” (2003:29) and that the Manus live ‘in the world of the *Gadžos*.’ But this does not mean that they live *in the same world* as the *Gadžos*. The Manuš relate to the whole world outside their own,

nature included, through their relations with the *Gadžos*, but, while coexisting with the *Gadžos* the *Manuš* detach 'themselves from them,... put [...] themselves at a distance, which precisely cause them to become *Manuš* and the *Gadžos* to become *Gadžo*' (2003:29).

How Romani communities detach themselves, create a distance, varies from place to place and time to time. One of the central ways, we have discovered, through which many Romani speaking communities achieve this differentiation is through what we might call a move to invisibility.

Once again, I cite Patrick Williams, but here talking about the Kalderash of Paris: "In fact, it is in the moment of business contact that the Rom affirm their personal and ethnic identity strongly and originally. But for the non-Gypsies these identities remain hidden behind a role. Thus, in this moment upon which the survival of the group depends, since it ensures subsistence, ethnicity passes completely unperceived. We could say, then, that in the domain of economic activities, invisibility is the modality of integration of the Kalderash Rom of the Paris suburb..." (1982:324). And not just economic activities.

Because they are invisible, the Kalderash do not try to expel from the Paris region other Rom who come there providing a competitive offer of services to the Gadže. How can they claim to reserve the exclusive right of Rom presence when, strictly speaking there is no Rom presence, Williams asks ironically.

Of course, you may think, this practice of passing is so much easier in the multi-cultural metropolises of western Europe than in the relatively mono-

cultural cities where most Rom live today in eastern Europe. But some evidence points against that. Szelényi and Ladányi's (2006) demonstration that the degree to which external agents disagree over the attribution of ethnicity from country to country in eastern Europe merely provides robust statistical support to a mass of ethnographic evidence suggesting the same thing. Kaminski's account of Slovak Roma invisibility in the 1960s (1982) or Cătălina Tesăr's description of Cortorari Roma dressing up as poor Italians when they go to beg in the cities dotted along the Po river speak to identical strategies (2015). So does Judit Durst's ongoing work on the Hungarian Roma in northern England who today pass as Hungarians among the unsuspecting British Pakistani employers and landlords (*personal communication*).

Invisibility is just one of the strategies that ground the process of differentiation and affirmation for traditional Romani communities. What we have learnt from the mass of ethnographic research in the past thirty years is that the Rom have been extraordinarily inventive in finding idioms of cultural differentiation, devising registers of value in which to put themselves at a distance from the majority world around them. Rom have largely rejected the homogenizing implication of the external world's definition of *Cigány* as type of human – there are multiple ways of being Rom even if – in classificatory terms at least – there are not of multiple ways of being *Cigány* or Gypsy: which is always to be the subject of a series of absences or failings.

In some *Vlach* Romani speaking settings the idiom of social value is built up around idioms of 'brotherhood and luck', in other (*Manouche* and *Sinti* worlds) around Romani silence and respect for the dead and overcoming the

challenges this poses to daily life; elsewhere, the construction of moral, gendered behaviour of a performatively constructed male and female Gitano and Gitana marks out the Spanish communities and yet elsewhere, in Finland among the Kaale, in California or in Poland notions of the pure Romani body provide the grounds for establishing an image of a profound gap between the Rom and the non-Gypsy world. It is for this reason, that in a collection of Patrick Williams' and my essays we used the inelegant construction 'Some Gypsies in Europe' [*Des Tsiganes en Europe*] (Stewart and Williams 2011) for our title -- to avoid the implication that any one collection of texts will give the reader an overview, a generalizable model of how 'The Gypsies in Europe' live [*Les Tsiganes en Europe*] (see also Piasere 2011).

In each case that I have cited the Roma have found a solution to the challenge of preserving cultural continuity in a situation of immersion in *and* dispersal among a more powerful majority world and have done so by constructing a conception of social value that places that 'value' beyond the reach of dominant society. This remains a remarkable achievement of these populations. It has protected Romani speaking communities and their culturally confident descendants from the depredations brought to them by generations of the civilising process.

This leaves an enduring puzzle. Against the ethnographic evidence of robust, culturally confident and, in some senses, autonomous communities of Rom there persists, in activist circles, an alternative vision and a consequent political agenda which seeks to foster a process of ethnogenesis and cultural

homogenization among 'the Roma' without reference to, or in denial of the widely documented varieties of traditional Romani lifeworlds.

The activist perspective

Some of the questions posed by our more political and mobilized colleagues as to the robustness of Romani affirmation are not only empirically poorly grounded but also potentially damaging. When Ian Hancock, in his wise and thoughtful contribution to the 2010 Khamoro festival, worries about Rom not knowing who they are, we get an inkling of the issue here.

This is Hancock: "I made the point in a recently published essay that it is the vagueness regarding Romani identity that has allowed it to be so casually manipulated by outsiders, If we knew who we were, and had more status allowing us to be heard, we would have a say in how we are portrayed. If a journalist wants to say we originated in Egypt, as one recently did, who are we to say she was wrong, and what would we say to correct her, and where would that protest even be heard or acknowledged?"

.... Without education, we cannot be articulate; we lack a loud enough voice. We complain, but are not heard." (2010:18).

One can feel and understand the agony of feeling that your folk, your kind, are traduced and there is nothing to be done about it. The desire to 'set the record straight' against the force of prejudice is admirable. Nonetheless, the 'we' in this passage is problematic. Who is this 'we' that Ian Hancock invokes? Do

the Kalderash Rom of Paris not know who they are? Or the Mašaro Rom of the town where I worked? Or the Gábor Rom of Transylvania or the Cortorari Rom of the Sibiu area? Do the Gitanos of southern Madrid, who threw Gay y Blasco's friend Agata out of their community for breaking the Gitano law, not know who they are (Blasco 2011)? For the Romani intellectual – with weak links to such communities – the issue of the status of the Rom in the outside world is of course burning. As Hancock says, he lives "like an increasing number of Romani people, with a foot in two worlds, and I can identify a number of these issues from both perspectives" (2010:16). But do the Cortorari Rom of Medias in Romania care how they are portrayed by the gadže? Maybe they have other solutions to the challenges of living in a multicultural universe?

What I am suggesting is that the discourse of many of the activists and NGOs in this field tends to take over the homogenizing baggage of the category 'Cigány/Gypsy' while verbally replacing it with a positively marked term, Roma. The underlying conceptual move of replacing 'Cigány' by 'Roma' is not, however, sufficiently critiqued. By importing the conceptual baggage of the 'Gypsy' category, 'Roma' in the new discourse stands for a series of problems (lack of housing, education, employment, health), just as 'Cigány' did for the Communists. 'Roma' live in a disaster zone as it were and so, as a result the discourse that emerges out of the activist-mobilising tradition produces historical accounts organised around a series of cataclysmic persecutions.⁹

The opening paragraphs of a paper in Signs by the self-declared Romni, Ethel Brooks, illustrates this well. Brooks presents Romani history in Europe

lurching from one persecution to another – a people ‘subject to enslavement, forced displacement and exile, violence, and death’ (2012:3).¹⁰ In fact, as historians like Henriette Asseo (1994), Lech Mróz (2015) and Ulrich Opfermann (2007) have shown, Romani speaking communities were deeply integrated into and accepted as part of early modern European life in many parts of the continent – and were in many respects probably more accepted than their Jewish counterparts.

In the same ilk, Brooks argues that *if* Roma have in some places and times been successful – she talks in this case of artistic practice - it is only to then be subject to “an appropriation that mixes fantasies about and hatred of our actual existence” (2012:3). In this passage, the author is very understandably raging against an interlocutor who (outrageously) told her she could not be both a feminist and a Romni, since to be a Romni was to be part of a patriarchal social order. Obviously, she was entirely within her rights to throw the debilitating belittlement back, but in the manner of so doing Brooks imposes a simplistic and monolithic victimhood on the real lives and history of the Roma in Europe.

The decision to place a trans-historical oppression at the core of an analysis of Romani lives leads to the notion that Roma have always suffered *racial* exclusion. ‘Racial persecution’ provides an analytic category here that purportedly transcends particular social regimes and grounds an enduring anti-Gypsyism. But the persuasive power of this move derives more from a metaphorical transfer of the unbearable history of race in the United States than from the realities of European early modern society.

Activist and Research agendas – an incompatible mix?

There is a further consequence of defining the Roma as ultimate victims of European modernity. It leads on to the debatable notion that scholarship in this field should not be like research on say the civil administration in different Arab countries, or the emotional life of bankers (Tuckett 2011). If it is to be validated, it needs to be committed. In this vein, several contributors to the issue of Roma Rights that I have referred to question whether scholars in this field work 'for', 'with' or 'on' Roma (e.g. Bogdán et al. 2015). The implication that those who work 'for' or 'with' (i.e. in some form of collaborative action research) are morally superior to those who work 'on'. I am very happy to say that I work – as an anthropologist – 'on' Roma related topics. I am happy to say that the core contribution of academic research is not necessarily 'helping people'. It is about breaking free from preconceptions, as far as is possible, in order to find out stuff – to work out how things work. Of course, afterwards, those who want to devise policies to help people are able to use our 'stuff' to make better policies than those devised with a total lack of knowledge of who the beneficiaries are, how they live and what they live for are most welcome to do so. And if they claim to be working 'with' or 'for' the target group, good luck to them.

Leaving further discussion of this politically slanted research agenda aside, I would like to question whether the explicit distinction upon which it stands, between outsider and insider, is really so clear and unambiguous as it needs

to be for the 'on', 'with' and 'for' distinction to hold up? Are those who bring over a North American model of racial politics and the 'critical race theory' that goes with it and then impose it on the very different history of Romania or Hungary or Czech Republic just working 'for' the Roma? Are they not actually also working 'on' the Roma whose history they present in such a way that, though they may have little practical connection with 'communities' on the ground, they can then speak 'for' them?

This issue of Roma Rights that I have cited sailed out under an ensign that is gaining followers in this field and that provides the title for this paper: Nothing about us, without us. As I indicated earlier, after fifty years of 'progressive' policies that were based on the opposite idea it is very understandable that some people of Romani descent adopt this rhetorical riposte to exclusion. The origin of the slogan is – once again – North American, arising in communities of the disabled who demanded their own involvement in medical policies that affected them (Stone 1997). And, as far as public policy is concerned, surely, they are right. What kind of democratic process does not consult and engage those for whom it is initiated?

Should the same considerations apply to academic research? I want now to consider what is at stake in claims that there should be no research about any particular group without the participation and maybe even authorisation of that group (or, more likely, its representatives self-appointed or elected). This is, of course, not at all a question exclusive to Romani Studies. In recent years, there have been lively, and pained, debates over whether non-Jews can teach or lead Jewish Study programs (an area with the converse tendency to the

Roma field since non-Jews are on the ascendancy there, whereas Romani scholars are rising in our field). The same debates occur over whether persons of 'white' skin colour can teach on African-American courses, whether men can teach feminist studies and so on.

On its own merits the issue might rightly be thought of as too trivial to merit serious attention. The stance is easy to mock. It would be hard to find those supporting a slogan 'nothing about bankers without bankers' – and this holds even though it would be hard today to think of a more vilified group of the employed. The real issue is to ask, once again: who is this 'us'? Are the Roma a truly well-defined group in which some are on the inside and others without. Is it really so easy to determine unambiguously the standing of a person as 'authentically within' or 'colonisingly without'. Let us imagine the situation of an Argentinian professor who has, let us say, published respected work on child abuse in the Catholic Church, but who on rediscovering their Romani ancestry now claims to speak in general terms for Romanian Roma. Would this person be better qualified to speak about these Roma than a Romanian non-Gypsy researcher who had lived for two years in a Romani speaking community and speaks Romani?

Perhaps the slogan is really about something else: the experience of academic hierarchy and a quite understandable fear of exclusion. Talented young Romani scholars like Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka or Angéla Kóczé find that they arrive in a field that appears already pre-defined and because this is a field that touches on their own personal experience, that impinges directly on their own lives, the challenge of becoming master of your field – a

challenge that all scholars face – is not only seemingly overwhelming and in the distant future as publication and promotion allow you to work ‘up’ the academic hierarchy but also appears (once again) to deny you the right to define yourself. You were denied the right to define yourself as a child in the street, at school in class, at University as a student and now, once again, you are being told who you are: one of those whom Stewart or Havas or Kaminski ‘described so well.’ These situations and their resulting sensations are perhaps intensified because the prestige research in Romani Studies has been linguistic (on Romani speaking communities) or ethnographic which is also mostly carried out in more traditional communities. And if you are a ‘halfie’ scholar, or live as Ian Hancock said with a foot in two worlds, or come, like my student Livia Jároka, from what we might call a community of Roma that are ‘in between’ or even ‘assimilated’, then the question of ‘belonging’ and of ‘authority to speak’ *can* seem problematic (Jároka 2012).

The issues in play here are both very real and truly complex. Managing them requires allocating time, space and resources, and I can see now that I for one should have paid more attention to them in, for instance, the CEU Summer Schools. I should have been peculiarly aware of the challenges since I teach this kind of stuff. The course I teach each year as part of Nationalism Studies at CEU begins by examining a series of studies by ethnographers who have fallen foul of the local authorities in the field sites where they worked, with the latter trying to assert control over the discourse about their own communities that the anthropologist will eventually produce. The ethnographers I teach about had in fact all been declared *persona non-grata* –

by external political (and nationalistic) authorities –because their work inconveniently refused to recycle as authorised truth a local nationalist version of history. Because they were ethnographers of nationalism – Michael Woost in Sri Lanka (1990), Allan Hanson for the Maori in New Zealand (1989), Anastasia Karakasidou in Greece (2009), Paloma Gay y Blasco among Gitanos in Madrid (2011) – they had all run into what is perhaps an unavoidable conflict. Anthropologists share with national activists a number of key intellectual moves and statuses: they are interested in the ‘authentic’ voice of ‘the people’; they tend to seek this in more isolated or more conservative sections of the population; they seek to systematise the knowledge and understanding of such people into an account of ‘their culture’ and in so doing they emerge as people who represent these people to the world outside (Linnekin 1991). Ethnographer and national activist both claim an ambiguous insider status – the anthropologist through fieldwork and the activist through ethnic identification; but, in reality, both – and this is perhaps more infuriating to the politically active ‘locals’ – are commonly outsiders – in the latter case teachers from the city; NGO activists; foreign supporters who have ‘gone native’ (Herzfeld 1986).

Consequently, I wonder: Is it inevitable that anthropologist and nationalist activist will squabble? Does it have to be so? Would it be possible to recognise that diverse research agendas today are not so much competitive but complementary?

Academic knowledge

Such a reconciliation can only happen if we can agree what knowledge is and what the conditions are in which it is produced. Resorting to postcolonialism and its one surviving offspring, intersectionality, is unlikely to take us far, for in their relentless focus upon identity and who gets to define identities both these post-Marxian movements posit that who you are – from where you speak – matters as much or more than what you say. They also implicitly claim that who you are changes the criteria by which you establish evidence based claims: Who you are guarantees what you say.

In this respect Intersectional Studies reinstates, strangely for it lays claim to the mantle of liberation-theory, the old conservative, relativistic defence of local truths that rationalist scholars have fought tooth and nail for three hundred years. It endorses a right to speak because of who you are without reference to quality of argumentation. It may allow some to recover confidence in themselves and claim a place for marginalised points of view but at the risk of fostering a fruitless competition over the right to speak – and, if the American experience holds elsewhere, a subsequent campus disease of agonistically competitive displays of victimhood and grievance.

The more positive point I think is this: while the focus on ‘oppression’ and cataclysm is wholly inappropriate when applied to the more conservative or traditional Romani communities (authoritative figures in which regularly denounce the activist purveyors of intersectionality as thieves of public money and charlatan pretenders), for those Romani communities who are, in popular

parlance, 'in between' – like the Hungarian speaking Gypsies in Hungary, the descendants of the former musicians, or the Băiesi and *Tsigani romanizati* in Romania - a concern with racism and its legacies – both socio structural and cognitive may well lead to new insight. But such insight can only come from research- going out and finding stuff out that we did not know.

Many of the scholars I am challenging here come themselves from the semi-assimilated milieu that Ian Hancock so poignantly evoked with a foot in two camps. Moreover, they have suffered from a double discrimination – rejected as sell-outs, 'not real Rom' by traditional communities and even more thoroughly rejected by white society as 'not real whites'.

Here there is a huge, a challenging and a potentially enormously rich field of research across the whole of the European continent. And were scholars associated with the 'critical' turn to write about the experience of such people there could be none better qualified. But it will not be possible to work out from first principles or theory – however 'critical' it is – how real people are negotiating the historical challenges that arise from having given up their own social organisation, their language and to some extent the institutions of an autonomous cultural production and then finding that the majority society did not really want to let them in anyway. In other words, the techniques of anthropology, which have shown so much promise in relation to more conservative Romani communities are going to be needed just the same to work in these 'semi-assimilated' settlements and ghettos.

So far, the only really significant work in this field has come from within traditional academy. Cecilia Kovai, a young Hungarian ethnographer, carried out field research in a north Hungarian village of semi-assimilated 'Hungarian Gypsies' (2015). Contrary to the implications of writers like myself, who took over 'Rom' hostility to the '*Romungre*', Kovai shows how *Magyar Cigány* are not just impoverished rural proletarians. They have made as distinctive a *Lebenswelt* from the materials that history has given them as any of the more famed traditional Romani communities.

This research could be replicated across Europe with, I suspect, very different results in Poland, in Germany, in the UK or in Spain. If there is no such empirical research Critical Romani Studies risks simply reinstating the old communist concerns with housing, education, health and employment though combined with a postmodernist focus on the shaping of identity by the experience of oppression, which while understandably urgent for some are certainly not representative for all Rom everywhere, as the ethnography cited in this paper shows. In this sense intersectionality is a tragic cul-de-sac. If we step outside its framework of one-sided descriptions of historical persecution and lamentations over white hegemony, there are really important phenomena that would demand attention across the social sciences. As Hancock said, the Roma currently and are and are not one people (2010 22-23). Across Europe and beyond there are unprecedented and highly specific processes of nation-making ongoing, and enquiry into such, into Romani nationalism let us say, poses fascinating topics for intellectual enquiry. Framing productive questions about these processes will demand a spirit of intellectual detachment that is

the opposite of the revindicating stance that has emerged so far from the 'Critical Romani' approach.

Conclusion

While there is enormous potential for young Romani scholars to enter the academy and make contributions to academic knowledge, we should not be too romantic about the potential of the activist contribution. Even if activist and scholar can collaborate in research, the opposition between us will never entirely disappear probably because we are dealing with different paradigms.

Take my own discipline. Anthropology is an academic discipline with a core research agenda – understanding the nature and causes of human social and cultural diversity - that has precious little to do *inherently* with the multidisciplinary research field that some call Roma or Romani Studies, whatever the conjunctural coincidence of interests I outlined above for post-communist eastern Europe. Romani Studies, like other regional studies, has as part of its agenda the task of (critically) promoting the visibility, the attractiveness, the global value of the brand – here Roma, but the same applies to Jewishness or Europeanness. And this has nothing much to do with Anthropology.

There is also a broader point here about the relationship between research and social engagement and for this I reach back to the Polish founder of modern Anthropology and the commentary on his diary by the great American

anthropologist, Clifford Geertz. Geertz's commentary starts from the publication, in 1967, of a 'Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term' (the title is that of the posthumous editors) that Malinowski had kept during part of his Trobriand fieldwork (Geertz 1967). To grasp the story, you have to know that Malinowski's descriptions of Trobriand everyday life, of social organisation, kinship and political structure are still almost unrivalled in the field. The two volumes of *Coral Gardens and their Magic* represent the culmination of his endeavour. Now, until the publication of this diary it was assumed that his genius for observation and recording was a product of a deep and profound empathy with what he called 'the native point of view.'

Too often, today, we adopt a sentimental view of rapport between researcher and researched in which anthropologist and informant are folded into a single moral, emotional, and intellectual universe. Malinowski did more than many later ethnographers to 'grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life' to realize *his* vision of *his* world, but he did not do so by becoming one with his subjects. His diaries stand as testimony to the pointlessness of merging researcher and researched.

And the same holds for academics who write about Romani issues as part of their disciplinary engagements. It is not by 'becoming one with' nor indeed by being one of the informants that we arrive at new knowledge. 'On', 'with' or 'for', it makes no darned difference to the production of knowledge in the academic sense. In the pages of the issue of Roma Rights I have discussed most of the authors complain about the supposedly terrible legacy of 'Gypsylorism' but, with the notable exception of Marett Katalin Klahn's paper

on 'Knowing Differently: On Thinking and Doing 'Roma'' (2015), none actually provide any empirical evidence to demonstrate the hope that the hailed dawn of a new 'post-colonial' research practice is going to teach us anything that the tradition of ethnographic research has not.

To return to a point I've made earlier: all the social sciences, and anthropology is no exception in this, rest upon what me might call a deeply bi-polar personality. On the one hand, we are – or we should be - committed to the standards of refutation of all the systematising disciplines of the university environment, the demand that what counts as evidence in the assessment of the claims of theory should not be defined solely by the theoretical paradigm it comes from. Theories must not validate themselves by determining what evidence counts and what does not (as intersectionality and all other forms of Marxism do by declaring that the experience of those who have shed the scales of oppression from their eyes see the world as it truly is). We strive to produce accounts that are rigorous, the validity of which can be assessed by others whose world view differs from our own. In assessing the credibility of a case being made we are not interested in the identity of the researcher (ascribed or self-proclaimed). What some call "scientism and objectivity" are not a means by which "Roma have been de facto excluded from knowledge production" but the very foundation of any universal reason and the research agenda of any university worthy of the name. Indeed, there is a kind of inverted racism in the claim that it is only by removing scientism and objectivity that the Roma can flourish in the academy.

Yet, on the other hand, we are invariably driven to work in this field by a sense of social commitment, by a desire to contribute to fundamental debates about the nature of our societies, by a calling to shape the ways our fellow citizens look at and think about the world that we share. We use our research performatively and not just descriptively. We are, all of us, all the readers of this journal, politically and socially committed. The disagreements social scientists and those who work in the humanities have are in part political and bring with them all the passionate divisiveness of that conflictual mode of human action.

This fact makes the other scientific and objectivist side of our personalities all the more important. There is really no hope for us in Europe if we revert to the old ways of the Soviet occupied bloc in the 1950s and take the view that the criterium of validation, the authority to speak, is a matter of social position – be it class, racial or gender. In the 1950s it was class and the children of the bourgeoisie and the politically incorrect intelligentsia were, for example, excluded from higher education. Today race and gender replace class. But the result can be no better.

Precisely because our disagreements matter for how we conduct ourselves in the public sphere, for the policies we support or advocate, for the political and social programs we promote or oppose – it is essential that we remember we are also heirs to that scientific tradition that lies in our time, as across the past few centuries, at the heart of the great transformation that has entirely reshaped the nature of human existence and that still offers the only hope of resolving both the grand challenges humanity faces today and the smaller

ones 'ethnic groups' and nations confront within increasingly dysfunctional national and regional political systems. The Cartesian and empiricist legacies of the Enlightenment still offer the only hope of illumination in these dark times. And it is the unique role of universities to provide a space where these conflicting ideas about the nature and goals of research can be vigorously but rigorously debated. For this to continue, we all need to understand and respect the production of *academic* knowledge.

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¹ For the program and abstracts see: <http://bit.ly/2finalprogram> . Speeches are available on You Tube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3R8h1n94RJw>. I was inspired in writing this by the memory of my friend, my teacher and my collaborator Katalin Kovalcsik, the woman who found me my field site, who more or less alone in Hungary at the time understood what I would do, whose brilliance and whose insight informed my work as long as she lived and whose passion for this field continues to fill me with the sense of engagement that I trust my readers can feel in the text I offer here. I would also like to thank two reviewers for Romani Studies and Ana Chiritoiu for critical suggestions on the final outline of the text.

² Alongside the Nationalism Studies offering, over the same period, and along with many of the editorial panel of this journal, the author ran a summer school at CEU, with CEU and EU financial support that has helped establish the international field of Romani Studies – so well represented in the articles of this journal over the past ten years.

³ This was not, of course, for lack of effort: the school was oriented towards ethnographic and qualitative research and it may be that the few young Roma who were eligible wished to work in different fields of the academy. The Summer School director was actively involved in the foundation and management of the Roma Access Program at CEU so there was no lack of potential link up.

⁴ It was Csaba Prónai who first recognised this with the launch of a series of translations of key texts in Romani Studies (2000).

⁵ Livia Jároka, who completed a PhD at UCL was a potential exception but she moved rapidly into full-time political activism as a Member of the European Parliament.

⁶ The situation was made all the worse by the de facto repression of local research on Roma by the Communist regimes. The few heroic individuals who battled to maintain positions within the academy were systematically marginalised and undermined by their own institutions. There was no question of any of them having doctoral students and their publications were printed in offset booklets only available if you knew the authors or a member of their institution.

⁷ Népművelési Intézet háziyomdában készült *Dokumentumok a 'Magyarországi Cigányok Kulturális Szövetsége 1957-1961' életéből* (Documents from the Hungarian Gypsy Cultural Association, 1957-1961, Internal publication of the Institute of Popular Education. In files of author).

⁸ Guy describes a similar situation for Czechoslovakia where, after the formation of Czech and Slovak Gypsy Associations during 1968, their room for manoeuvre was gradually restricted until they were disbanded in 1973, much to the dismay of the Gypsy activists who had led them, formerly with the Party's approval (Guy 1975).

⁹ Part of the issue here is the imposition of a model of the possessive individual of the modern nation state onto communities that organise their cultural compromises around different principles. When Ian Hancock writes of lack of Romani memory he plugs straight into the folk idioms of the modern nation state: “Because our history was lost to us many years ago and we thus cannot provide it, the non-Romani world has not shirked in creating various identities for us. I don’t believe that we can make history unless we know our history; Alain Besançon has said that —a man without memory is of absolute plasticity. He is recreated at all moments. He cannot look behind himself, nor can he feel continuity with himself, nor can he preserve his own identity. As long as the storybook Gypsy influences the journalist’s and the novelist’s portrayal of us, as long as the instant experts in the media feel confident that what they write will go unchallenged, as long as their imagination has free rein, we will continue to be —recreated at all moments, as Besançon says, never in control of our own identity” (2010:18).

Memories in Besançon’s model are possessions to be assembled in a box through which we can leaf in the order we choose. Our ownership of the box means that we are authorised to sort it as we wish: and this is proof that we are owners and masters of ourselves. As Richard Handler beautifully pointed out, with respect of the Quebecois separatist movement, this is the core of the nationalist cultural message (1988). But all the ethnographic evidence shows that most of the Romani communities that are fiercely conservative- ‘traditional’ if you will – sustain their distinctiveness with little no sense of historical tradition at all.

¹⁰The claims culminate in the entirely inaccurate claim that the Nazi genocide of the Roma ended, “with three-quarters of the Romani population murdered” (2012:3). Two-thirds of the nine million Jews in Europe died (6 out of 9.5 million) but best estimates of Romani deaths range between 125,000 and 250,000. Even the political-compromise figure of 500,000 adopted on the Berlin memorial reaches nowhere near 75% of Europe’s pre-war Romani population.