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Gypsy reactive culture*

Abstract: *Beginning with an overview of the “basic” knowledge on Gypsies, the article develops further around different aspects of the issue of the “Roma culture”. The aim of the text is to clarify how a peculiar social and historical situation of this minority group has determined a specific form of its culture. Finally, the article puts into light the difficulties for the modernization of this group that are caused by the specific reactive form of its cultural traits.*

The subject of this paper is a minority ethnic group and its culture, a group which is in many respects perceived as being different from other minorities of Romania and of Europe. Namely, I will address the issue of the Gypsies, or the Roma, as they want to be called today. “Roma” is in fact the endo-name for various groups that were previously known as “Gypsy”, as well as the political correct term today. It is a term that was proposed in order to take place of different names considered to have pejorative meanings, like *țigani* in Romanian, *cigány* in Hungarian, *Zigeuner* in German and so on.

I chose the subject of the *Roma culture* because I think it could explain or at least clarify some of the important issues of today’s situation of the Roma in Eastern Europe (and not only). But more than that, I think that the subject could raise at least some concern about the future place of this minority in the future Europe of 27 countries, as we Romanians, together with the Bulgarians, hopes to be very soon.

Let see, for the beginning, to whom one is referring to when speaks about the Gypsy. When speaking about the Gypsy we are referring mainly to a European ethnic group. We are finding Gypsy all over Europe and in a smaller proportion in United States and Middle East as well.

An important issue to be mentioned from the start is that they were historically considered as being in different ways as inferior to the rest of the population, as being at the bottom of society, a kind of lower European caste. This has to do with the fact that many of them (but not all, I have to underline) used to be nomadic and semi-nomadic groups. Consequently, they were perceived, for a long time, by the mainstream sedentary population as being somehow “alien”. This perception was aggrandized by their specific economic activities and by the fact of being much poorer than other groups.

In Europe they are concentrated mainly in the Balkan and Central European countries. The largest groups live in Romania. Why Romania? - one might ask. There is a clear reason for this, and not one to make Romanians to be proud of. In Romania, more precisely in the old provinces of Moldavia and Walachia, the Gypsies were slaves for at least 400 years. (I will come back further on to this topic.)

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As could be remarked, I spoke about “an ethnic group”. However, the situation is much more complicated. And this because the so-called “ethnic group” is highly fragmented in various ways: in respect with their native languages (there are 47 known dialects in Europe), in respect with their history, with their habits, generally speaking with their “culture”.

While coming to their numbers the situation is even more complicated. The numbers had varied over time, depending on various assimilation politics that the nation states imposed against the Gypsies, as well as on these states’ ethnic politics. The numbers are all the time strongly divided between a low figure, provided by the state’s censuses, and the high figures, estimated by the Gypsy elite and different experts. To give just two examples: in Romania the last census counts 530 thousands, while the experts are figuring between 1.5 millions and 3 millions. In Hungary the low are 600 thousands while the high numbers are one million. The global estimations in 2002 are between 6.4 millions and 11.2 millions¹. The dynamics of the population growth is also hard to clarify. And this for the reason that the censuses made during communist times are particularly unreliable, because the gypsies were generally seen not as an ethnic group, but as a special group within the group of the poor (more precisely as “the poorest of the poor”²). So the numbers during the time of state socialism can be deduced only from the rubric of those who speak a *Romani* dialect. However, many of the Gypsies, or those considered to be Gypsy by the specialists and Gypsy elites, were not speaking gypsy language (or, for different reasons, were not recognizing this in the front of the authorities).

The question of the ethnicity of this group was intimately related with the search for its origin. That is why, in order to clarify the question of the “gypsy culture” I have to refer myself briefly to this subject.

The first place of their origin was considered to be Egypt, mainly because of the fact that when they arrived in Western Europe (at the end of 14th century in Germany) they present themselves using this appellative, “the Egyptians”. It was a certain reason for this: Egypt was considered in the European imagination of the time to be the place of the ancient mysteries, of magic and exoticism and the Gypsy groups were performing different kind of entertainment activities connected with spelling the future, with witchcraft, with making tricks and magic and so on.

The second place of origin, which is considered by many to be the real origin, was India, more precisely the North Western part of the Indian subcontinent. Beginning with the 18th century, when Heinrich Grellman, a scholar from Tübingen, has advanced the theory, numberless efforts were made to trace different routes of the travel of the Gypsies, through centuries, from India to the Balkans. The linguistic argument played in this theory, and is still playing, a decisive role. This argument is based on the fact that some Romani dialects contain words that are very similar to a vulgar form of the old Sanskrit, namely a language that was spoken in the beginning of the first millennium in Northern India: *prakrit* language. While created by the non-Gypsy, this theory was largely embraced by the Gypsy elites themselves. And this from the very beginning when, in the 19th century, George Borrow, a gypsy scholar, has set the bases for the most

¹ For a detailed presentation of the figures by countries see Zoltan Barany, *The East European Gypsies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 160

² Cf. Michael Stewart, *The Time of the Gypsies*, Westview Press, London, 1997, p. 6

influential gypsy organization: Gypsy Lore Society, which was created in London in 1880. However, in respect with the language analyses, as is well-known, a lot of European languages have also Indian origins, so this method of proving the origin is not so convincing. Instead, we should see here the need of a population that was historically stigmatized to define itself in connection with an old and much praised civilization, fact that would give it a certain historical dignity.

A third hypothesis concerning the Gypsy origin is lesser impressive, and it was best formulated by a British scholar, Judith Oakely, in the '80s. She had remarked that the emergence of the Gypsy groups in Europe is contemporary with the disintegration of the feudal order. This is the moment when an important number of people – that remained without a master and had no property – started to move inside Europe looking for work. Of course, this is the well-known process of the formation of the proletariat. What is important for us here is the formation of a sub-class, namely what the Marxist were calling the lumpen-proletariat – those who possess nothing and have no peculiar skills – a sub-class that was condemned to extreme poverty. From these people – the argument of Oakely goes – some had found an economic niche to be exploited. But this niche (of the sort of different entertaining activities or petty metal work) required a specific group identity. In this context, some groups of people chosen to present themselves as ethnic groups (as we are calling it today) or as descendant, kin-related groups. So the “gypsiness”, according to Oakely, might be an entirely invented ethnicity, produced in specific historical circumstances and having peculiar economic reasons.³

What we have to mention now is that all these theories on origin remain simple hypothesis. What we know for sure is that some of the ancestors of the present Gypsies came from Asia. We know they were present in the Byzantine Empire in the 11th century and we know that they spread throughout Europe beginning with the end of the 14th century. In almost all the Romany dialects there are Greek and Turkish words. A third massive language influence is from Romanian language. The reason for this is, as I already mention earlier, the long history of their enslavement in the Romanian provinces.

I will focus further a little bit on this subject, because it explains some important facts. First of all I should say that in Moldavia and Walachia the only category of people who used to be slaves were the Gypsies. Actually the word for slave (*rob*) was for long time synonym with the word “*țigani*”. As elsewhere, it was a slavery that functioned in a legal form based on the assumption of the natural inferiority of an ethnic/race group.

I have to say now that Romanian historiography was not much concerned with this subject, so there are very few researches in this respect. We don't know many things about the origin of this institution. The historians generally presumed that the Gypsies were the slaves of a warrior group – the Tartars – who often invaded the Romanian provinces during Middle Age. The story goes that when the Tartars lost a battle their slaves, namely the Gypsies, remained under the same status, slaves of the local princes. However, there are no kind of historical proofs for the allegedly “gypsiness” of the Tartars' slaves. Instead the historical sources clearly speak about the fact that when a Romanian prince won a battle outside the border of the kingdom he brought with him large number of slaves. However, because in Moldavia and Walachia the only people

³ Cf. Judith Oakely, *The Traveller-Gypsies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, p. 13-15

who could be enslaved were the Gypsies, it is very likely that many foreign groups (Bulgarians, Turks and so on) had fallen in this category.

During history the economies of these provinces tended to rely more and more on slave labor. Therefore, the need for the Gypsies also increased. So we probably have here an interesting process of “Gypsy” formation as a result of a peculiar social structure of the proto-Romanian society. The fact of using the Gypsies in all the fields of economic activities is proven by the development of various form of owning the Gypsies. There were Gypsies that belonged to the prince (*țigani domnești*), there were boyars’ Gypsies and monasteries’ Gypsies. Some of them were settled (*țigani vătrasi*), other were nomads, paying taxes to their owner. The economic activities performed by them were numberless: from agriculture works to domestic works. Their group classification names speak also about their occupation: gold seekers, woodworkers, bear trainers, vessel makers, musicians, metalworkers, brick makers and so on. The slave system allowed their owner to sell them, to exchange them, to donate them, to divide the families, with the only restriction of not killing them, “without a very good reason”. They did not have the right of mingled with the majority population, and the separation was very harsh. For instance, a non-Gypsy who wanted to marry a Gypsy would automatically become a slave.

Beside their use value, they had also a symbolic value: very often a prince was expressing his benevolence towards a boyar by donating him large group of Gypsies. In the same fashion he was expressing his gratitude to divinity: by donating large groups of Gypsies to the monasteries.

The slavery was abolished very late, only in the second half of the 19th century.

Now let see what this slavery system explains. It explains, of course, the big number of Gypsies within the Romanian territories. It explains also the variety of the groups that are found here and also the fact that many groups speak no kind of Romany dialect (the *Rudari*, the *Boyasi*). This was a huge puzzlement for all the attempts of classifying the Gypsies within the paradigm of Indian origin. It also explained the widespread of the Romanian-originated Gypsies presented now all over the world (they migrated *en masse* out of Romania after the abolition of slavery, phenomenon that is known as the great Kalderash migration). And of course, it explains the persistent representation in the mentality of the majority population of the Gypsy as the lowest strata of society.

After presenting this “basics” on Gypsies, we move now to the main issue of this article: the Roma culture.

To understand the Gypsy culture, and the way in which we could speak of “a culture”, we have to remind the great variety of the groups that are falling under the name of “Gypsy”. Being so largely spread and being subjects to diverse influences of their life-context, their pattern of behavior and their customs are also very diverse. However, different groups have at least in common a long history of poverty, exclusion and social marginalization, facts that determine, in my opinion, what I would call the *reactive feature* of their culture.

In discussing Gypsy culture we also have to bear in mind the fact that – being an oral culture – the inner representation of its traits came very late. However, the external representations, be that scientific or popular, were abundant. But all of these

representations could be comprised in two overall perspectives. The first could be generally described as the romantic image of the “free Gypsy” – a people who lived close to the nature, being not subject to the predicament of civilization. There is the image of the wild Gypsy man who does not obey to the rules and the image of the beautiful and mysterious Gypsy women who has the gift of guessing the future, of spelling and of seduction. The other image is the image of the Gypsy as deviant or as delinquent, as a thief, a trouble maker, to wild to be civilized. These two images are often mixed together in the same text, narrative or even politics toward Gypsy population. The most famous (and should say, the most unfortunate) of this mixed representation was that of Dr. Robert Ritter, the Nazi director in the Ministry of Health of the Third Reich, who had the task of classifying the Gypsy. The two main perspectives received, under his classification, a racial bias. So he claimed that the “true” Gypsy were the Sinti nomads, who are wandering within Germany playing music (a true “Arian” gift, as they said; the Indian origin thesis is also present here), while all the other are racially “impure” Gypsies, considered together with all the physically and mentally disabled and who have to be sterilized. His views had directly influenced Himmler and his decisions concerning the Gypsies. The strange consequences of this view was that the nomadic Sinti were left to travel free in Germany until 1942, while Gypsies from the settled groups (including Gypsy soldiers, who were withdrawn from the front line) were imprisoned in concentration camps⁴.

Let’s go now to a third perspective, which was just recently developed within the field of anthropology. From an anthropological point of view - and I would mind here the name of an English researcher, who used to work with the Vlax Roma from Hungary, Michael Stewart – we should see the gypsy culture as a culture of resistance, a culture who has no central core (a book or a set of norms shared by all the groups), a culture whose elements should be seen as forms of reaction of the majority’s way of life⁵.

More precisely, because the Gypsies were subjects to a long history of marginalization, they developed behaviors and customs opposed to the mainstream, cultural forms that have a double function. First: to impose clear borders of the ethnic group against the majority population and second: to make possible an inner cultural space with specific values that makes the world of the Gypsy and their life-styles to be perceived as being better or more desirable than the world of the *Gadjo* (non-Gypsy). In short, *to produce a system of values that praised the marginal life as the real life*.

I have spoke until now somehow abstract about the Gypsy culture. Let see at this point some peculiar cultural traits that are specific to the traditional groups of Gypsies (more precisely, specific to some groups belonging to the Vlax-Roma and Nordic metagroups).

1. First and foremost we have to underlay the strong gender gap inside the groups. The gender gap is manifested in different ways: in the strong code of dressing, following the gender line, in the strong subordination of women to man in decision making, in the institution of the brotherhood of man (with less concern for the age differences), as opposed to the fragmented world of women. On the

⁴ Cf. Michael Burleigh; Wolfgang Wippermann, *The Racial State: Germany, 1933-1945*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 113-135

⁵ Cf. Michel Stewart, *op. cit.*, p. 13

- street in Romania you may still observe this gender gap in the form of the man, or group of men, going ahead, while women are following them at some steps behind, carrying the luggage and the small children.
2. The gender gap structures some other patterns of behavior and rules. I would mention here the pollution taboos, known as the *mahrimos* or *mahripe*. While those taboos are referring to both women and men, women are much more often the subjects of these rituals of cleanness and uncleanness and more often considered to be a source of pollution⁶. In respect with washing clothes, for examples, men clothes are never washed together with women clothes. The most polluted part of the human body is considered to be the lower part of the women body. This is the reason why this part should be strongly covered, women dressing code imposing them to wrap up with many skirt, one over the other. From the same reason – the downside of the body being considered polluted – they are not wash their body in one and the same water. In this respect, making a bath (a tube-bath) is considered to be totally inappropriate. Of course, from this point of view the majority population is considered to be dirty. (We can see here how the reactivity works. In general Gypsies are considered to be dirty by the majority population, and they now it. At their turn, and according to Gypsy norm, the majority are considered dirty.)
 3. Another element of the Roma culture is the enlargement of the ethnic category to the reign of animals. A much praised animal is the horse. Or, the horses could be “Gypsy horse” or “*Gadjo* horses” (foreign horses). A Gypsy horse, which is seldom sold, could be one that is borne by a “Gypsy mare”, or - if coming from the outside world - it could become a Gypsy horse by breeding, more precisely, by being breed in its first months of life inside the household, or even inside the house, together with the children.
 4. In what concerns the property: this is sacred inside the community and every crime is punished by an internal court or tribunal (called *Kris* to the Kalderash). Stealing from the *Gadjo*, on the other side, is not considered a crime. On the contrary, it is an action that is often praised. Generally speaking, to cheat, to steal, to beg outside the community is considered legitimate. The rule of making business with someone outside the community involves the compulsion not only for making the best deal, but to get something more than that, - to sell something, for example, with a much higher price than it worth. We may be tempted to consider this as a form of the most benign capitalist rule of trade. However, in Gypsy trade the symbolic dimension of trade is very important. Is important to cheat the *Gadjo* in order to prove that he is naïf, that he can not manage as the Gypsies do – generally speaking that the gypsy life is better than the non-gypsies’.
 5. Also specific to the Gypsy culture is a certain understanding of what is considered to be the real Gypsy work, what they call *romani butji*, which means precisely Roma trade or Roma craft. Irrespective to the actual content of trade or craft, *romani butji* suppose the following features: to act economically as a group (sometime as family), to be self employed and to move from place to place in order to meet the *Gadje* request. In addition I would add (fact that is not

⁶ Cf. Lev Tcherenkov; Stéphane Laederich, *The Roma*, Schwabe Verlag Basel, 2004, Vol. 1. pp. 556-557

considered by the internal definition of the Gypsy work) a good knowledge of what it is needed on the market, or otherwise put, of the products that are scarce.

Let see now some of the consequences of this culture (only sketched here) for the modernization of the Roma groups. But we cannot understand this issue without taking into account the results of the socialist politics concerning Roma in Eastern Europe and its consequences for today.

If we look at the present figures we find that more than 80% of the Roma are living below the poverty line, and around 60% are living in extreme poverty, situation that is largely caused by the structural unemployment. During socialism almost all the Roma were forced to enter in the formal economy, in a way or another, so that many of them, after two generation, were integrated, while some of them were assimilated in the mainstream culture. However, against its Marxist-Leninist ideology, the real existing socialism has failed in its efforts to make a homogenous and egalitarian society. As is well known, the old hierarchies were replaced with new ones, in which Gypsies remained at its bottom. Even if they have a better situation than today, the Gypsies remained, during socialism, in the lowest positions, having the worst jobs in factories and agriculture, the overall remaining unskilled workers. Consequently, the long history of Gypsies marginalization had continued during socialism, and the public perception of the Gypsy as inferior has not changed essentially in these Eastern European societies.

It's no wonder than, that after the collapse of communism the Roma were the first who lost their job and their social aids and the first who went out from what has remained from the socialist safety net.

Now, in respect with the Roma culture, as I sketch it, an interesting situation has been created (interesting, of course, only as a sociological phenomena, otherwise being a very sad reality). What it is all about? In the new so-called capitalist environment of the postsocialism the Gypsies who managed and even succeeded during transition were precisely those who preserved at least some of the traits of the culture of resistance, as I called it. More precisely, the success stories are of those who could act economically as a group and who exploited the new trade opportunities in an environment with many lacks of formal regulation.

In Transylvania, for examples, some of the traditional gypsies travel in the countryside and buy cattle from the peasants, reselling them afterwards on the best regional market. They took advantage of the immobility of the peasants (who, if want to sell a cattle are going to the closest market). In the same time they resell (or exchange for other local products) to the peasants all kind of goods that are not provided by the formal trade system.

So, what we have now in Romania, and I suspect in other Eastern ex-communist countries as well, is a large group of half-assimilated Roma which is living in extreme poverty and a small group – of mainly traditional factions – which is rich and get even richer day after day.

But what we have to underlay here is the fact that both of these groups are marginal groups and are similarly perceived by the majority population, fact that is maintaining a strong ethnic border between the different ethnic groups that are living in these countries, from one side, and the Gypsies, from the other side.

I would close my article with an hypothesis that I think has great chances to be proved as true (at least for the rural Roma): it seems that the more integrated a group of Roma was during socialism, the greater are the chances to be poor today, and the less assimilated a group remained, the greater are the chances to manage during transition or even to enrich in these times⁷.

So, in respect with the desire for modernization and integration of the Gypsies in the contemporary society the issue of their culture is raising a big puzzlement. Defining themselves as an ethnic group, the Roma groups need to express this definition through their peculiar culture. But many of the forms of this culture are built, as we have seen, in sharp opposition with the mainstream values and lifestyles. Consequently, a successful integration clearly requires them to abandon some of their cultural forms – at least those that are the most “reactive”. Is this possible – we have to ask ourselves – without losing that difference that allowed them to be seen not only as the “poorest of the poor”? But, finally, is it feasible, from their point of view? And this last question is for the Roma not an abstract one, but a matter of life and death as a group. Because the Roma groups have a past recent history (during socialism and transition) that clearly shows them the fact that whenever the social condition became instable the only groups who succeed are those who maintained the reactive cultural form.

This puzzlement requires today, with the emergency imposed to Romania by the EU integration process, a quick solution, both from the part of the Roma elite and from the part of the majority’s decision makers.

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⁷ I have formulated this hypothesis as a result of a community research in Transylvania (see Gabriel Troc, *A State of Despair: Roma (Gypsy) Population during Transition. Transylvanian Case Studies*, in *Studia Europaea*, XLVII, 1-2, 2002, pp. 49-89)