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ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP?
THE POSSIBILITIES FOR A ROMANI GRASSROOTS REDEFINITION

In a book published in 1999 and revised in 2004, political scientist Daniel Barbu made an insightful observation about the carrying out of politics in the post-1989 Romania and which unfortunately continues to be true: the lack of a *common and equitable societal project* and of the *societal politics* through which such a project to be reached, all of these dubbed as "the absent republic". By drawing a qualitative difference between the demos as a people and the demos as a society, Barbu stated: "The central problem of the transition would be then the following: who are the Romanians and how do they grant each other ethical-political recognition? Are Romanians just a people? Or do they somehow make up a society? Do they compose a political community made up of citizens (*politeia*, *res publica*)? Or do they only represent the generic denomination of the inhabitants of the Romanian state?" (Barbu, 2004: 10, emphasis in the original)

It is my contention that the Romani politics of identity in post-1989 Romania – the focus of my larger research project – cannot be analyzed separately from the processes and transformations that took place in the Romanian society. And therefore the inability of Romanians to direct politics towards the shaping of a common societal project, as Barbu contended, was one of the several factors discussed in this paper, which determined the Roma activists to take up human rights approaches, victimization and ultimately projectification paths, rather than develop a republican-citizenship understanding of Roma in society.

The affirmation of Romani ethnic identity in different European countries has been broadly explained from several mutually accommodating perspectives: in terms of pressure and incentives coming from international institutions (Vermeersch); as failure or at best limited success on the part

of Roma elites in creating responsible citizens or as failed nationalism (Barany, Kapralski, Klímová, Vermeersch); by the most skeptical realists, as successful maneuvers by governments bartering subsidies and positions for votes (Oprescu, Pavel and Huiu); or as an almost natural development from the formation of ever extending networks of reciprocal support among the Roma (Matras). No matter which of these aspects is emphasized most, every time a restrictive normative model of politics is being imposed over practice which is thus doomed to never live up to the expectations of the master narrative.

My paper challenges these narratives by first questioning their implicit assumption of a given and recognizable Gypsiness. If to the anthropologist interested in the workings of ethnicity as an organizing principle in post-communist Eastern and Central Europe, "the Roma issue" emerges today as one of the most evident and somewhat trendy subjects, it has not always and everywhere been the same throughout Europe though. While ethnic belonging seems to be one of the most "natural" grounds for political mobilization today, I would like to argue that "making politics out of Gypsiness" should be regarded, at least in the Romanian case, as disconcerting and original as, say, "making politics out of retroviruses", as Bruno Latour dubs the unconventional AIDS activism. Second, my analysis diverts from the mainstream understanding of politics as mainly elections, participation in governing, or social movements. My heuristic approach consists in the investigation of aspects of the Romani politics by looking at the nexus of knowledge production, governance and participation. I contend that in order to understand the working of the political in everyday life we need to look at the imbrications of several processes: how institutions set the tracks or possibilities of people's participation, forge subjects and contribute to the waving of the social fabric; the way people participate in the world, how they try to negotiate and assert their own terms of participation, or how they advance claims on the polis on the account of fulfilling the required criteria of inclusion etc.; what epistemologies are used and produced in these processes; and how affects are mobilized and nurtured.

My research comes in the emerging tradition which questions the ubiquity and persistence of ethnic or national identity (Hall, Handler, Brubaker and Cooper), deconstructs group and individual realism (Brubaker, Somers) and warns against methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller). In particular, my research shares affinities with the recent project of Engin F. Isin and his collaborators on *Acts of*

Citizenship. Criticizing the sociological approach which views "shared values and cultural identity as the basis of the societal fabric", Isin replaces the production and maintenance of order and discipline as object of sociological investigation with the rupture and the breaking of the order, not the subjects, but the act itself, or rather the assemblage surrounding the act. "Acts of citizenship" are then according to Isin "those acts that transform forms (orientations, strategies, technologies) and modes (citizens, strangers, outsiders, aliens) of being political by bringing into being new actors as activist citizens (claimants of rights and responsibilities) through creating new sites and new scales of struggle" (Isin: 39).

I open the paper with the case study of a host of Roma NGOs associated in a network. The members of the Working Group (WG) entrusted with the elaboration of the vision and strategy of their network reached a conundrum which they had a great difficulty explaining. They phrased it in citizenship terms: how comes that although they have full legal membership in their countries, still they felt they did not enjoy all the social, economic and political rights entailed in this status. Throughout the several meetings in which I took part, and in which they tried to uncover what went wrong in the process, active citizenship (in fact a mixture of urban and social citizenship) emerged as the ordering principle of the political vision that they were trying to elaborate. So I will first reveal the process by which the members of the Roma grassroots network developed simultaneously both an understanding of themselves as "activist citizens" (Isin: 39) and a political vision for the Roma communities with which they worked. Then, in the second part of the paper, I will elaborate on two of the factors which have played a major role for the last twenty years in preventing Roma to frame their politics in terms of citizenship: the hegemony of nationalism in shaping both politics and society, and the looming specters of the troubled relationship of Roma with the workings of communism.

In media res: knowledge-making in a Roma social movement

In December 2006 I was invited by a network of Roma grassroots organizations from several European countries (hereafter referred to as the Network) to participate in the meetings of a quite exclusive Working Group which had the task to develop the vision and the mission of the Network. More technically put, the Working Group was set up in order

to elaborate the third chapter of the Network's Strategy. The first chapter, about the organization as a network – purpose and principles –, and the second one, about lobbying for the Network at European level, were almost ready.

The grassroots organizations came from Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, Macedonia and the Netherlands, and all of them in their turn supported numerous other organizations in their countries. That is, except for the Dutch organization which had directly helped the 'network members' get started in the first place. As a matter of fact, the Dutch were starting to recognize that they were reaching a turning point in their existence, the approaching moment when they would have to let the Roma organizations "take ownership", and, at the same time, the high time to redefine their own mission and fate. By encouraging the organizations they had been working with to form a network and manage it as their own game, the Dutch thought they would rule themselves out, as the time to let go had arrived. With the introspective process of self-definition they initiated through the Working Group though, they also eventually came to a new understanding of themselves as a *de facto* equal partner of the Roma organizations. They most certainly had lived for a long time with the tension of being in the giver's position while simultaneously trying to overcome the colonialism inherent in this.

One of the early defined rules of the game was the clarification of the roles we were supposed to play: facilitators, participants and ghost-writer. They were messed up almost as soon as they were agreed upon. The brainstorm engulfed everybody almost immediately, and everybody would take turns every now and then to draw attention to our jumping ahead or getting carried away, or just to trace back the concatenation of arguments in the heated discussion in order to figure how we got where we were and what exactly we were trying to say.

I was to be *the Ghostwriter* of this Working Group on Empowerment & Mobilization. I was supposed to put to use my alleged academic writing and research skills to help clarify fuzzy concepts and bring to light the taken-for-granted knowledge which was embedded in my colleagues' practice. How the very idea of the need for a ghost-writer in the WG developed is pretty opaque to me. To my extreme relief it was made very clear from the very beginning that I was not to play the expert's role. As an aside, actually nobody was 'the' expert in the group, and this produced an exhilarating democracy-in-practice effect, a procedure probably worth assuming more consciously and programmatically for the dynamic of

the group. Rather than a ghost, I was a Devil's disciple, a person with some academic writing skills who could ask for clarifications whenever concepts looked fuzzy or who could ask questions in order to help reveal the knowledge embedded in my colleagues' practice and which was already accepted as commonsensical. My secondary mission was that of a scholar-chronicler: "If the Network wants to be visible," I was told, "it should be on researchers' agenda as well, it should be written about."

The Dutch – as a matter of fact a Dutch lady and a Romanian Rom – were in theory the facilitators, while they were very much aware that their involvement beyond objective bystanders in a process they themselves had nurtured and bred:

> *I will try to clarify our roles. Our first role is to facilitate the discussion. Well, sometimes we … So we try to limit ourselves to this role by asking questions and by trying to keep the discussion to the topics which are on the table … ye, based on the program … to categorize it, to systematize it. […] But at the same time we know ourselves [in the sense that we have worked together for a long time], we are into the discussions, but we … we try to limit ourselves. Yes, this also because we're too much involved, to step out.*

While everybody else was urged to feel free to express whatever crossed their minds about what they did as organizations, no matter how hectic, the facilitators would have to capture everything and render order into chaos: "So maybe you can start to describe what you already do … And just feel free, you don't have to be very organized, so just let the flow of what you already do … we will try to catch it [on flipchart]" One of the facilitators would always re-phrase and synthesize what was being discussed and record it on the flipchart. Most of what was trusted to the paper was immediately translated for everybody, checked for any distortions made sure it captured the meaning properly. I would say that if the facilitators had any obvious 'interst' at all, that was to channel the discussions towards more explicit political claims. For example, listing what activists did was not enough; they had to also justify the relevance of what they did in terms of justice, and most importantly unearth the seeds for mobilization they might be already planting by coincidence: "Why we're doing this? That's the question. And one way to answer this is that we give the Roma the possibility to stand up. That's a start, but there are

other things." The facilitator had his own agenda here: to dig out some belligerent ethos.

Unfortunately I was not there when the decision was taken on how to best go about drafting the Strategy. Still I would venture guess that the people who gradually got involved in this Working Group formed a faction within the Network, and their relationship to *knowledge* is key to their becoming a splinter group.[1] They were the ones who pushed knowledge as a basis for political action. First they managed to confront the position of the Romanian organization which would rather solve matters less fussy and more professionally by having an expert write down the Strategy in no time. Then, in order to develop an action plan about how the organizations could act together "in the framework of the Network", the Working Group members decided to start by defining the common ground, that is, describe and analyze what was that they did. The result expected at this stage was a "body of knowledge", politically charged from the very first question that elicited it: "… we promote an alternative, we think we are different than the mainstream Roma organizations and we should more clearly describe why we're different and what's that makes us different, because it helps us to counterbalance this European focus." It was this particular knowledge, and not financial resources, connections to powerful people, institutional opportunities, or the force of numbers, that, they believed, set them apart from the other players in the field, or anyway should be used to differentiate them from the rest. In this concatenation of arguments, the next logical step they envisioned was the development of a grassroots Romani movement based on this alternative they enacted: "And then we should also describe better this Roma movement, this grassroots movement. Yes, so what kind of position we have in the [bigger Roma] movement."

The European level was an ever present, yet ambiguous term of reference from the very beginning. It was something that lied over there, ahead or above, at a precipice distance from the grassroots, a "gap to be bridged" by the lobbyist whom they employed in order to represent them in relation to EU institutions and international organizations. But at the same time, European was what other "mainstream Roma organizations" did, "a European focus to be counterbalanced" by the Network "alternative". Against the stream and removed from the sites of power – this is in a nutshell how the Working Group members would describe their activity. While the Network grew out of the experience exchanges between the organizations, the setting up of the lobbyist position put pressure for

further development of a common unified political vision of the member organizations. This inverted chronology was revealed by the Dutch facilitator in the introduction she made to the raison d'être of the Working Group: "a third chapter should balance the lobby […] and […] bridge the gap between European focus and the focus of the Network members to work on community level and regional level." While in most of the official accounts of the beginnings of the Network, we are presented with a 'natural development', the participants acknowledged that with the hiring of the lobbyist they also had to provide a unitary version of what it was that the Network members were doing and how this represented an alternative to a hegemonic approach to Roma throughout Europe. Although there was some hesitation about the actual success of such an enterprise as bringing a grassroots alternative into European institutions – "So actually this is a very difficult step to make. Yes, because it's … I don't think we'll succeed to bridge it … actually" –, the participants were not deterred from their belief in at least producing such a political vision.

Although only twice present in person at the eight meetings of the Working Group in the two years of its activity, the lobbyist, a Romanian Rom, was a vivid presence in the discussions. He was always evoked with admiration for his diplomatic abilities, expertise and easygoing manner of approaching and interacting with important people. But at the same time, Working Group members were experiencing an acute feeling that they were not succeeding to get their ideas through to their own lobbyist before reaching the agendas of European decision makers. The lobbyist was a person with a strong mind of his own who needed an institutional setting like the Network within which to carry out his own ideas. In the case of the Network, he was the charismatic person who branded the institution with his own figure. This is why his way of acting brought about some not entirely verbalized tension. The expectation was that he would use his expertise to mould ideas-in-practice from partner organizations into a policy-intelligible language. Yet he had his own agenda, and to many people ignorant of the members organizations, the Network *was* in fact the lobbyist and nothing more.

Not part of the dynamic of the Group, the lobbyist missed out several essential developments among its members which he completely failed to acknowledge. First, his idea of getting Roma involved was about working with strong characters with a mind of their own, expected to perform, identify concerns and come up with technical solutions. He was completely insensitive to the reflexive process of introspecting the social

production of Roma with which the Working Group members had actually forged their brotherhood ties. By silencing this cognitive and affective reflexivity he downplayed the conditions for the emergence of the organic intellectuals the participants valued so much. He reduced the grassroots activist to a provider of concrete material like examples of good practices to the expert. He imagined another structure, part of the Network, but not grassroots, that was meant to produce knowledge, while the grassroots were seen as the "experimental garden" which would implements and test policies developed by the policy centre. With the "garden" denomination, the grassroots were saved the role of the laboratory: grassroots would not do analysis or thinking but they would apply and draft reports of case studies to be used for public exemplification, denying thus precisely the conditions for the development of organic intellectuals. The lobbyist's stress on expertise originating elsewhere than in the organizations' practice led to the sparkling of mistrust among the Working Group members who feared they were being used just for show, to supply the 'crowds' or 'communities' needed to give representative legitimacy to one person.

I think the lobbyist failed to see the political awareness the Working Group members developed, and how reflecting on their own practice changed them into something they could not quite know how to name, but which they liked, and seemed hold enough perspective and importance to make them dream of their own Platform of knowledge:

This is where we see that we can contribute, this is where we see our comfort zone, in the knowledge platform. Because when we implement we get very tired during the implementation, we work very hard for the implementation, but we need something that we can rely on that will take the things on a step forward. […] But not as the next step in the sense of having a program, but as the next step in terms of producing knowledge. This I like very much! Because this means that you will be on the local level … but not on the local level to count how many bricks were in the community centre or how many people are coming to the meeting, but you will really focus on the process, the process you were involved in for so many years. But really try to identify the best way of mobilization, the best way of empowerment, the best way of connection with other people, with the scientists and so on. It helps you to think what are the ways that you should design your projects, your proposals, what kind of allies you should find in your country. And besides it puts in a very good position as expert organization. Because, let's be honest, so far we have been seen as doers in the countries: doing things, and taking examples. Ok. It's very good what is happening with the income generating activities and

the women centres in Bulgaria. Wow! Very good example! Let's present it in the Network meeting! That was all! There were some discussions about them in the meeting but not real thinking from the people. This is something with which we can really make a change in the things we want to do. That's why we are inspired, that's why we are committed to this. So you don't see it as a daily work, you see it as … how should I explain?! (Albanian activist).

The lobbyist was also blind to the qualitative difference the "ownership of processes and society" the members of the Working Group were advancing and the OSCE type of "Roma having ownership of the policies focusing on them" He ignored that the latter implied a selection process, by which only certain Roma, not all of them, would occupy key positions in governmental structures and that they may be in no way distinct from their fellow Romanians, Bulgarians, etc. The fact that they are Roma does not rule out opportunism when there is rumor of resources, whereas in the process some Roma are empowered while others are silenced, especially the ones who fear getting trapped in grey relations verging corruption, or getting to be blamed by other Roma. Such an 'involving Roma policy' would remain in the same logic of 'your own people', defined in ethnic terms, not as belonging to the same polis. Not to mention that once they talk about identifying social, economic or security problems in/with Roma communities, finding and directing resources, implementing projects and expecting things to change, it's largely irrelevant if Roma are or not involved in the process, they would only become experts and accomplices in the same master narrative.

Contrary to this rampant culture of expertise, the members of the Working Group represent organizations which over the years were involved in processes of community development. In practice they struggled to invest in human capacities and social structures with the aim of initiating a painfully long process that would make Roma act like "de facto, not only de jure, citizens". They did not develop this 'vision' of intervention from EU policies or political science books. From the very beginning they were *in media res*, in the middle of the things, which means that they had to face and deal with 'implementations' of EU and national programs for Roma on the ground. This is how they gradually came to an understanding of what they stood for and what their mission was, but also of what EU policies meant in practice. For example, they think that the current framing of Roma as a European concern merely

strengthens the popular perception of Roma as problems and dependent receivers of social policies. Following the goals of the European Lisbon strategy important sums of money are being directed towards solving the unemployment, housing, health or education problems of Roma. Apart from the current construction of Roma as a social problem, the Working Group also criticizes the kind of citizens EU tries to produce through its brand of "active citizenship". The members heavily debated how in the name of political engagement, Roma activists throughout Central and Eastern Europe concentrated their energy towards occupying positions at state level either through elections or by pressing governments to create offices or adviser positions for Roma.[2] The limited concessions states made for Roma such as representatives in parliaments and some 'lonely riders' in local administrative structures are usually associated with the myth of a functioning democracy in order to put forward the false message to the majority that Roma have been granted all the civil liberties and that their current requests ultimately represent threats to the other citizens.

The idea was to design an alternative to what they perceive the current Roma movement. They attempted to articulate a social and political vision, based not so much on documents of international institutions, but rather on empirical observation and on the distance they take from their own practice, their 'way of doing things. 'Active citizenship' emerged as the ordering principle of their political vision for Roma. Experienced initially as a sudden epiphany by all the members of the group, the realization put them into even greater difficulty: how comes that although they have full legal membership in their countries, still they felt they did not enjoy all the social, economic and political rights entailed in this status. How to explain the disjuncture between their legal status as citizens and the wanting practice of citizenship?

The WG heuristic is, pretentious as it may sound, a genealogical one, which connects the reflexive process of 'un-doing themselves' to the larger structures and mechanisms of inequality in society. They pondered over the processes of subjectivation, they retraced them from personal experiences and revealed power relations at work. It is not a theoretically assumed stance, it has to be dug out from the myriad of ambiguities, inconsistencies, and in the end it hardly comes out from the message put together 'for the outside'. They used case studies like the ones about Mothers' Centers I will talk about later on not as examples of good practice, or of Roma participation but as insights into the processes of becoming aware of everyday politics. That does not mean they downplay the importance of

other factors, but they also try to recover a silenced one. Obviously agree with the common narratives about Roma being the ones who lost most in turning from communist economy to capitalism, and about the structural factors that led to their exclusion and poverty. And, at the same time, none of them denies the importance and urgency of the current projects for improving the quality of life in Roma quarters, supported through European structural funds, like access roads, electricity, running water, sewage, and schools. But they think there is more to activist stance than quantifying improvements, just as there is more to citizenship than the narrow EU approach which defines it in terms of paying taxes, participation in the labor market, and voting in elections.

One of the earliest manifestations of "citizenship" in the Working Group's vacillations was the wish for the dream-work. The brainstorm had started with the participants trying to contain in a nutshell what their activities stood for. The transitive-verb sentences with Roma as direct object of their actions: "we activate people" or "I see our role first as an organization that supports the Roma to do things by themselves" caused some early uneasiness to the anthropologist schooled in the 'Foucault tradition'. It looked like the classical subject-object relation motivated by the wish to change or improve other people by acting upon them in order to persuade them to act by themselves. My hasty scientific diagnosis was to be immediately clouded by Neda's add-on. With a deep sigh and a short puzzled silence, Neda thought she had to take us back one step in order to put the social 'activation' enginery into some perspective. She began in Bulgarian: "I see our role first as an organization that supports the Roma to do things by themselves. … It happens in a different way. The question is somehow … we have kind of long term vision for the Roma." She switched to English as if wanting to get more quickly and persuasively to the audience: "We do this because we have this long term vision about Roma. But the Roma don't understand this. The Roma … accept our help … I don't know, to … to solve some problems, everyday problems. They don't understand, still they don't understand our long term vision."

My first wish had been Neda and Krasimir to have talked about a common effort of figuring out together with their partner organizations what that remote dream might be. It then turned out that their approach was not as clearly proselytizing as it sounded: persuade people to share a vision and find ways to act accordingly. They had actually started from the premise that everybody had some dreams about a better world and their place in it, and all they had to do was to explore those 'visions'. Yet

they were to become disillusioned with the mundane answers they got, and frustrated that they would have to convince people that that there was something else worth struggling for except a brand new car or a, be it second-hand, Mercedes, to show off with, or a fairy-tale wedding that would make them the talk and envy of the entire community. So there they found themselves back not even to square one, but before it:

> Neda (in Bulgarian): *At the moment we are trying to find Roma that are attempting to look in the future. There are very few. Most of the people deal with their daily problems. What I noticed precisely is that I just try to tell them, dream, dream on. (Lili switches to English) The Roma don't have dreams, they have very simple dreams.*

Despite their sometimes misleading choice of words, Neda's and her colleagues' almost obsessive return to the overriding idea of a "long term vision or dream for Roma" was less about the content of one particular 'dream' or its temporal dimension. Actually quite a lot was being expected from the "5 people, not more" Neda wished to find in each community her team approached. First they would have to be willing to think in the long-run, and be crazy enough to commit themselves to a long-term process for the realization of that remote 'dream'. Second, the 'dream' to which they would pledge allegiance had to be society-related:

> Neda (in English)*: And a dream that does not connect just to their everyday life, to their families, just families, but to their position in the society. This is our dream. It is not very complicated, but …*
> Luisa (consenting)*: ye, ye … to enlarge the dream beyond family.*
> Kasimir (in Bulgarian): *At the same time we face the fact that it is difficult for us to find people that think further. It is very difficult to find people who think in long term. It is very difficult to come out of the framework of their everyday dreams. This is why we look for these 5 people or even one person in the communities [we work with] or in any community, to have a dream.*

The 'dream' had a certain degree of generality and would have to work like a double-head arrow: on the one hand it had to be a vision of a better life that was related also to living together in society, and on the other hand, a vision that could connect one's aspirations to this larger society, that would allow Roma to recognize themselves as part of society, and make them "claim ownership" to this common life.

Away from academia or any powerful centre of knowledge the Working Group produced insights that challenge all matured discourses about Roma so far. Very few activists, if any, challenge the current construction of Roma as a social problem and dare ask European Union what kind of citizens it tries to produce through its brand of "active citizenship" dogma. And even fewer frame the 'issue' as Roma having to succeed to be in practice what they are legally entitled to, that is, equal partners in dialogue for a re-envisioning of their societies.

The knowledge produced through the Working Group is not representative in the conventional sense of summing up all practices and experiences of the partner organizations. The heuristic process itself did not consist of a very close systematic analysis of every instance of organizational practice. It rather took a spiral shape that started with some intuitive selection of concepts perceived as relevant, followed by the effort to define their content by invoking examples deemed significant and trying to make sense of them and rework their essential elements into 'theory'. Moreover, the bearing of the knowledge mobilized in order to make concepts like *stigmatization*, *diversification* or *empowerment* meaningful for the organizations' political purposes does not necessarily lie with the fact that it is grounded in local, specific situations – although, admittedly, some would deem it legitimate precisely because the speakers have worked directly with 'natives' in local communities and thus have the authority to give voice to the concerns of the powerless. The representativeness of this body of knowledge is to be weighed against a different set of criteria. Here is an example from the first meeting of the Working Group, a discussion which was repeatedly taken over during the next get-togethers.

Trying to explain his opinion about how stigma works, the Romanian Rom imagined three mirror images, one of which belonged to the Roma who so strongly internalize this collective blame that they themselves start to believe in it and accuse the other fellow Roma of all traditionally sanctioned evils. At this moment Neda precipitated towards the drawing and with her index finger tapping loudly on the flipchart she confessed in an emotional outburst: "It is me! Actually it is me! Really!" The process by which this *embodied knowledge* was finally turned into a representation or explanation of Roma's positions in society, took many turns for two more days, and was marked by even more emotional flare-ups. It was finally condensed in an account in which no primacy was given to discrimination, social issues, access to resources or any other types of

doctrinaire discourses. Why do Roma of all ethnic groups face such huge social problems? Because they carry this stigma with them, they either accept it as a normal yardstick of their lack of value or hide from it by denying their ethnic identity. While for the outsiders the account has an explanatory value, for the Roma who shared their experiences in the meetings it represented the process by which they worked out their consciousness of their being in the world.

Afterwards, the concern became how to replicate such moments of realization in other contexts and with other people.

> Neda: *For me 'development' is a way to support the happening of small changes in the community which will be accepted naturally by the community. This is how is happening with the kindergarten in Senovo for example. The people actually were not aware that they made change but they are happy because someone paid a lot of attention to their children. Before that there wasn't any attention to them.*
> Andrey (challenging the actual occurring of 'development' as defined by Neda): *They just accept the results of that change.*

What Neda actually says here is that 'there is no recipe, no training, about how to get political awareness started.' And without this important ingredient anything else is foreign imposition. Such a project like the kindergarten is comfortable for the activists too because they don't have to expose their intentions. But at the same time they fail to reach their objective, to incite some wish for change.

About a year later Neda decided to carry out some research among several mothers' centers they helped create in several Roma communities in Bulgaria and then she extended the research to their colleagues in Albania. Heart-broken about what she found in Bulgaria and absolutely excited about the developments in Albania, Neda could not figure out eventually what had triggered the political awareness in latter case and how such a process could have been replicate in the former case. In Bulgaria, Neda realized, the women they worked with, had internalized their subordinated position in society to the extent of not acknowledging at anymore and happily contributing its perpetuation.

The happening that raised Neda's question marks about what they were really achieving with the mothers' centers took place during one of her visits. The women had not succeeded to obtain a place from the local council for their activities but that had not discouraged them. One

of them made available her garage and there the women could meet together with their children whom they helped with their homework. As it a mainly 'Bulgarian street', the neighbors had started to become anxious about what looked like a meeting place for gypsies. To ease their mind and comply to the Bulgarians' expectations, the Roma women had mobilized their kids to clean the street and thus appease a bit Bulgarians' concern and resistance to the use of a private house on 'their street' for Roma community-related activities. When Neda visited the Center, some of the old Bulgarian women noticed the commotion and came to see who was the important person visiting the gypsies. They talked very highly about the Roma women and their efforts of educating their kids. After the Bulgarians left, the Roma were so excited about the praise they had received that their immediate reaction was a promise to themselves to go do the cleaning for the Bulgarians. Neda was mortified: she was witnessing the reiteration of the subordinated position of the Roma who willfully participated in it by strengthening the expectation Bulgarians had of Roma: to be the ones who take care of the dirt: "Actually the Bulgarian woman gave a good evaluation of the Roma women's work and they were so impressed that they reacted in the way they were used to, that is, to go and serve her, to clean her house. And of course she accepted." (Neda angrily)

Once started, Neda could hardly be stopped: she had a long list of how these women acted from a subordinated position all over again. Neda asked them if they had presented their work with the kids from mahala not only to the people from their neighbourhood, but to the school teachers as well, if they had contacted them in order to keep up to date about their kids' progress in school. The Roma women's reaction was that they felt in no position to approach a school teacher and anticipated their rejection: "But who are we to talk to the teachers? They will say, here is this gypsy woman again coming to bother us." Another example of the same type of behaviour was the meeting with the mayor of the village when they tried to negotiate for a building for the Centre. In the beginning the mayor refused to talk to a bunch of Roma women who were not even organized in a formal NGO. When the women were helped to get organized in an NGO they still were not aware that the new structure was a powerful resource and that being organized in this way they became actors with legitimacy Once again they doubted they stood for something or somebody to be listened to and taken seriously by teachers or local authorities: "Who are we for the others to listen to us?" Neda saw the problem with the fact that women did act, but that happened only inside the community, not

outside as well: "It's high time now that they start acting in the bigger society as well." Assessing the social texture of the mothers' centre Neda concluded: "There isn't anybody with high capacity among these women, unfortunately, they are very ordinary women from the mahala. But they are very dedicated, they really want to do something. They really wanted to make their voice heard, but they didn't know how. " But at the same time she could not help notice that there something that went much deeper than mere technicalities: the Roma women "seemed to derive their power from the graciousness of the Bulgarians, they seemed to derive their fulfilment from the fact that the Bulgarians accept them".

Coming back to Barbu's observation with which I opened this paper, the imbrications and mutual strengthening of Roma's internalized subaltern positions and Bulgarians' expectation that they act accordingly, has ultimately to do with the criteria on which the members of a people "grant each other ethical-political recognition" and only when these grounds for recognition are settled, can Romani grassroots carry out their ethnopolitics in societal terms. In the next section I will narrow the discussion to Romania in order to show some of the facets of the hindrances of such a common societal project.

Putting the case study into perspective

Romani ethnopolitics has been decisively influenced by two factors: a hegemonic narrative of national identity which left no place for a civic conception of nationalism, and a popular moral distinction between Roma and non-Roma with strong political consequences inasmuch as it constructs Roma as undeserving citizens. This moral unworthiness is qualitatively different than the one of another minority in Romania, the Hungarians, whose position can be said to be effected out of the working of the nationalizing state. Actually Romanians and Hungarians speak the same type of nationalism to each other. While Romani nationalism has been a political desideratum for many of the Romanian Romani elites and not only after the fall of communism, I treated it as only one of the several contending discourses about Roma and I am interested in revealing the factors which determine Roma elites to choose this path over any other. At the same time, it is not a negligible fact that the narrative of nationalism has been employed not only at the level of popular perception, but in academic writings as well, as a framework of analysis and eventually

of assessment of Romani political mobilization. As a result, authors like Zoltan Barany talk about the failure of elites to design appealing symbols, to mobilize history in order to determine individuals to identify themselves in a vertical relationship with an encompassing totality, the nation, to which they are expected to relate through a common myth of origin, and thus overcome internal factions and clan allegiances.

The leading role that Hungarians have played in the struggle for minority rights in Romania has set some strong limits on the social imagination of Roma elites. The competing nationalisms of Romanians and Hungarians have foreclosed the effectual advancement of the interests of the Roma community. Not endowed with a national narrative that would fit the pedigree of the other two main contenders, the Roma have always been presented as short of the main modern characteristic, a national identity forged in the immemorial depths of history and connected to a national territory.

In order to define the demos in whose name Roma elites were asking to be recognized as an ethnic minority, Roma seemed to have no choice but to meet this compelling narrative of nationalism. In 1990 it was the Rom sociologist and activist Nicolae Gheorghe who first brought the idea of a *current Romani ethnogenesis* to the wider public in Romania. It represented in fact the proposal for a civic form of nationalism which was doomed to fall on deaf ears, given the ethnic nationalism which was hegemonic in the Romanian public space at the time. "So far," Gheorghe contended in an article published in *Social Research* in 1991, "the large and diverse communities of Romanies, scattered all over Eastern Europe, *are experiencing a process of ethnogenesis: they are moving from the situation of despised marginal communities and persons, as tsigani, to the situation of an acknowledged ethnic minority, as Romanies.* This status involves a relation of equality, of partnership with other ethnic communities, in a political context evolving (or supposed to evolve) toward democracy, pluralism, and tolerance for cultural diversity." (Emphasis added)

The idea of *Romani ethnogenesis* was presented to the Romanian press during a roundtable discussion caused by the publication of the results of a study carried out by the Bucharest-based Institute for the Study of Life Quality regarding the social situation of Roma in Romania.[3] The newspapers which reported the event offered no clarification whatsoever as to what the sociologist meant by the concept, but swiftly treated the idea with contempt, self-sufficiency and malice: "the Roma claim to be

a minority who hasn't been born yet!" Due to the ambiguous wording, it was not clear from the articles whether the Roma were openly denied the status of a national minority or whether the journalists only scorned the idea of a people being formed under their own eyes at the dusk of the 20th century as a droll sociological concoction. Either way, the effect was the same: the de-legitimation of Romani political mobilization through the imposition of a nationalist interpretative frame. To conceive that a people is shaping a collective expression nowadays seemed just beyond logic to the Romanian journalists well entrenched in the nationalist mythology of the Romanian people born out of the merging together of Dacians and Romans two thousand years ago in the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic space.

For Gheorghe though, it was obvious that in order to compete for resources "Romanies are confronting the need to identify themselves in collective terms, to crystallize and to 'spell out' their ethnic identity *in relation to current sensibilities* and symbols at the national and transnational levels" (emphasis added). In these circumstances, "the process of building Roma ethnicity is structured mainly as a political process. … In such a context, Roma identity signals a political rather than a folkloric-cultural identity. Culture moves to politics. … The field of ethnicity is in a clearer way the field of ethnopolitics." In trying to impose this philosophy to the emerging Roma nationalism, Gheorghe was I think an emancipatory visionary but unfortunately completely obscure to most of his political fellows. 'Cultural manifestations' were not the empowering force the newly emerging unified voice of the Roma minority needed. It was not through songs, and dance, and festivals that Roma could achieve an ethnic consciousness, but through the realization that in spite all differences, they were all caught in a similar struggle against marginality: "Ethnic communities take shape as response to stimuli which induce a process of ethnogenesis." He was already talking social movement, societal structural transformation rather than policy achievements.

By holding these ideas Gheorghe was on the very same wavelength with a small group of Romanian intellectuals who talked about joining Europe as a political and societal program expressed in terms of the return to Europe or neo-'48ism (*neopaşoptism*). The most prominent of them were Adrian Marino, Stelian Tănase and Gabriel Andreescu. It was an effort to retrieve from history elements of symbolism and political culture like a conception of political citizenship based on equality before law, and civil rights and liberties, in which the new project could be rooted. While the political principles and values of the 1848 revolution re-entered

the political debates after the 1989 revolution in relation to the emerging discourse of Europeanization as a social and political alternative for post-communist Romania, several Roma elites also endowed the '48 moment with symbolic power by referring to one of its most important outcomes – the emancipation of gypsies from enslavement. In what follows I would like to shortly refer at how the dis-enslavement was recuperated as one of the defining moments of the Roma history.

The evidence I am bringing here come from a roundtable discussion held in 2006, as a celebration of the 150 years that had passed from the Declaration about the emancipation of the Roma slaves.[4] The meeting, which took place almost 15 years after Gheorghe wrote what might be called a manifesto for a Roma movement, brought together different generation Roma activists, some of whom had already changed sides, that is, they were now employed in governmental structures. The ones who really set the terms of the debate were Gheorghe's generation activist, Vasile Ionescu, and the Romanian reputed historian Viorel Achim, the author of the only book about the history of Roma in Romania.

I am not going into the details of the debates about the origins and nature of gypsy slavery in the Romanian principalities. As a matter of fact, they were quickly dismissed during the discussion with a short remark by the Romanian historian who warned that Roma were not the only segment of the population that was enslaved, that sometimes their living conditions were not so bad and that the phenomenon was not that widespread as the claim goes today. There are several interesting points that came out of the debate.

First, none of the discussants or presenters described the liberation of the Roma from slavery as intrinsic part of a crucial moment for the development of the Romanian modern state. An integrated presentation could have led the discussion towards asking what an inclusive citizenship could actually mean and where, along the process, the promise to its values had been broken. It was only in the slightly disconcerted concluding remarks that Ionescu reflected on the nature of citizenship Roma might want to aspire to. But his thoughts died out as if spoken to himself as they had no reverberation in the audience:

The question is, if we Roma want to exist, whether we should follow the idea of minority rights and then we should negotiate our citizenship. No matter what we may dream at, the fact remains that Romanians have first rank citizenship … I mean, if we try to nuance things a bit … that is, they

are what is called state creators, and only after that come the Hungarians, the Germans and the others. That is, right now, Roma still don't have a well defined identity on whose terms to negotiate its position.

Needless say that, following the pattern set by the use of holocaust in writing Roma history, most of the Roma present agreed on a self-victimizing interpretation and complaint about the lack of an assumed guilt on the side of Romanians: "It is obvious I think", the same Vasile Ionescu added, "that the current disastrous situation that Roma face today, racism and anti-Gypsyism, have their roots exactly in this lack of an inner shiver on the part of the Romanian people towards their own history, towards the way they betrayed their brothers, be they Jews, be they especially Roma." Yet he left unexplored precisely the nature of the brotherhood between Romanians, Roma and Jews.

Met with the historian's skepticism about a direct causal relationship between slavery and the current marginalization of Roma, the activists had hardly any choice but to frame the slavery episode in terms of active memory of hardships and dishonor. Structural factors and social relationships of production left aside, slavery was still essential for the history of Roma, the Roma activist Delia Grigore argued, as a vivid memory of lived humiliation:

I don't think we can talk about a lack of consequences of Roma slavery in the present when it is very possible that our grandparents who still live today may have had parents or grandparents who were slaves. We are talking 150 years from the emancipation, two generations. So it is very close to us and the consequences are very important from a collective mentality point of view; if not from a socio-economic point of view, at least from the perspective of self-stigmatization and being stigmatized by the others. I also don't think we can talk about soft slavery as long as people were weighed, sold by the kilo in market places to the amazement of the foreign travelers who could read such notes in local newspapers like: I sell fit for breeding gypsy young woman. So we will not have rest in our undertaking for the revealing of history of Roma, slavery included until we set a governmental commission for the study of slavery just as there was one for the study of the holocaust. We will also demand an institute for the study of slavery just as there was one for the study of the holocaust. And we will demand a monument in the honor of the Roma slaves just like the one commemorating the holocaust.

The most perplexing position though, which curiously met no opposition, was expressed by the Romanian historian. With a firm stance against the mobilization of the dis-enslavement episode in the construction of the Roma identity, Achim openly expressed what I think is the most widespread and commonly embraced opinion among Romanians, that is, that the liberation of Roma was yet another of the numerous occasions in which Roma have been given a hand but proved morally and civically unworthy of this help:

> *Since 1840-1850s there have been several moments in the social history of Romanians when Roma, who were already citizens, have been given a certain chance. The dis-enslavement is certainly one of them. The same, during the 20th century, a process of social modernization took place and communism, well, we cannot say that assured everybody with an equal social status, but it did try to produce a certain social equalization and in part it succeeded. So there have been at least two moments in the history of Romania when there were provided the conditions that could lead to the modernization of this population. And every time, a small part of the Roma population did respond to these incentives. What we are discussing here, the problems with slavery and the ones during communism, we are actually referring to that Roma population which did not respond to these … and what happened in Romania is valid for other countries as well.*

The series the Romanian historian referred to is usually supplemented nowadays by other examples like the National Strategy of the Romanian Government for the Improvement of the Situation of Roma or the Decade for Roma Inclusion. History repeats itself in the sense that the processes that led to rendering this population futile or burdensome are not explained. The social production of marginality is not investigated. Instead of investigating the juncture between local social relations, actions of the state, the domination of capital, even today sociologists who write reports on Roma inclusion refer to whether Roma have identity and property papers or not, if they are tax payers, and if they are active on the labor market. The burden or the responsibility for the never changing marginality is placed on Roma themselves who are pictured as a population who is repeatedly given chances to integrate or include themselves in society and although some of them benefit from these opportunities the majority of them prefer to lead a parasite life.

Roma are thus condemned to the status of morally undeserving citizens of Romania who cannot afford the luxury of historical amnesia in the

production of a national history. No matter what, they will be constantly reminded that they have always been given and never raised to the height of the expectations.

Conclusions

I have chosen this research scenario because it helps us put into perspective the partial view of Romani activists and get more of a bird's eye view of their practice without falling into the common trap of finding blame with them, that is, finding them short of democratic practice (Rostaş), incapable of inspiring nationalist feelings among 'their own' (Barany, Kapralski), or, in a more Foucaultian take, further contributing to the subjectivation of Roma themselves (van Baar). It would have been a history of skidding and failure, while I was looking for a Hacking-inspired sociology of knowledge – "understand how we think and why we seem obliged to think in certain ways" – combined with an extended case study method (Burawoy).

This case study shows how and why the political claims born out of Roma's everyday participation in society fail to make it into the mainstream politics arenas, whereas claims derived from more abstract regimes of justification take the foreground in the ever multiplying sites of claiming justice for Roma. Much of the research addressing the relationship between local practice and such international organizations like the EU (or the World Bank, for that matter) looks at the multiplication of sites and actors who engage with these policies in a myriad of possible manners: endorse or use them selectively; schematize and caricaturize them by reducing them to mere jargon displayed to attract resources; know them only from hearsay or even critically resist them. Instead of using such a vertical, top-down approach which investigates how key concepts from EU policies are used in practice and how they impact on real people's lives, I use a more processual and genealogical approach.

NOTES

[1] That not all members of the Network were interested in the process set in motion by the Working Group is also evident from the almost null turnover of members from other organizations at the seven meetings of the Working Group despite being invited to participate.

[2] This is also the preferred domain of analysis by political scientists when it comes to ethnopolitics in Europe and to the Roma movement in particular. They usually analyze these attempts in the framework of political opportunity structure approach (POS).

[3] The study was published as a book, Zamfir, E., and Zamfir, C., Eds, *Ţiganii între ignorare şi îngrijorare* [*Gypsies between ignorance and concern*], Alternative, Bucureşti, 1993.

[4] I have the recordings of the meeting courtesy of my colleague Petre Matei.

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