

# ON THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF “OTHERNESS”: IDENTIFYING “THE ROMA” IN POST-SOCIALIST COMMUNITIES

Gail KLIGMAN

Department of Sociology, UCLA, 264 Haines Hall, Los Angeles, CA. 90095;  
e-mail: gail.kligman@soc.ucla.edu

**Abstract.** Gypsies, or Roma, are simultaneously among history’s most romanticized and reviled of peoples. Stereotypically racialized and eroticized as “other” wherever they are located, prejudice and discrimination against Roma are currently heightened. This paper seeks to illustrate processes of identification by which Roma in post-socialist countries are classified as “other”, as “different”. Drawing on interview and observational data from the community studies of the project on “Poverty, Ethnicity, and Gender in Transitional Societies”, this paper explores various discursive ways in which Roma are stereotypically “othered” by non-Roma populations as well as ways in which Roma understand themselves in relation to these historically persistent if situationally variable representations of their putative “identities”. As is discussed, “Roma” as a category has been expanded in certain contexts to essentialize a purported relationship between “race” and poverty.

**Keywords:** ethnicity, poverty

“To our eyes this people seems to lead what is practically an animal existence... A race having neither any religion nor any law, any definite belief or any rule of conduct; holding together only by gross superstition, vague custom, constant misery and profound abasement; yet obstinately persisting, in spite of all degradations and deprivations, in keeping its tents and rags, its hunger and its liberty. It is a people which exercises on civilised nations a fascination as hard to describe as to destroy; passing, as it does, like some mysterious legacy, from age to age; and one which, though of ill-repute, appeals to our greatest poets by the energy and charm of its types.” Franz Liszt, *The Gipsy in Music* (1859)

“The Gypsies – who of us has not, at one time or other, paused to watch and wonder at these picturesque and mysterious wanderers – the most widely-diffused race, not excepting even the Jews, on the face of the earth?” (“The Roumany-Char or Gypsies” *The Illustrated London News* Sept. 20, 1856; a correspondent, p. 304)

Gypsies or Roma, as they are variously named, are simultaneously among history's most romanticized and reviled of peoples.<sup>1</sup> Stereotypically racialized and eroticized as "other" wherever they are located, Roma, whether male or female, young or old, are both seductive and feared. Although widely encountered across Europe, demographic evidence varies regarding their numbers. In general, it is believed that Roma are most concentrated in the countries of Eastern Europe. The largest population is found in Romania (estimates range between 800,000 and 2,500,000); the smallest in Poland (between 50,000 and 60,000)<sup>2</sup>. No matter where in Europe, prejudice against Roma is currently heightened and unrelenting. They are discriminated against in almost all domains of everyday life. Prejudice against Roma is customarily predicated on racialized, social-cultural "features" attributed to them by others and by which they are, tautologically, identified and essentialized. Roma are perceived to be darker skinned than the dominant national populations among whom they live; to many, they are Europe's "blacks".<sup>3</sup> Indeed, survey data indicates that skin color is the factor most often cited in all countries when non-Roma identify who is or is not Roma.<sup>4</sup> Skin color seemingly connotes genetically determined practices and ways of living that, in other contexts, are thought to be culturally or socially constructed, including "identity".<sup>5</sup> Roma are, "by nature", essentialized.

Among the "racially" dictated practices and characteristics customarily assigned by non-Roma to Roma are that they are "dirty", "uncivilized", "not to be trusted", "immoral", "thieves". They are poor and will always remain so because they do not engage in "honest work" for a living; they live off of others, whether through begging, theft, or social assistance. They dress differently and live unconventionally.

1 For a succinct discussion of the complexities of naming and the meanings of "Rom", "Gypsy", see, for example, footnote 1, Stewart, forthcoming. On discrimination against Roma as reviled peoples, see, for example, I. Zoon, *On the Margins: Roma and Public Services in Romania, Bulgaria, and Macedonia* (with a supplement on housing in the Czech Republic). NY: Open Society Institute report, 2001.

2 The estimates of Roma in Romania are, respectively, from Baranyi (2001) (see Table 5.1, p.160; his high estimate is 1,500,000) and Davidova (1995); the range for Poland is from Davidova (1995). Roma scholars and activists tend to provide higher Roma population estimates. On what such population estimates are based and what they represent are the subject of debate regarding classification systems and the social construction of Roma identity. See also footnote 7 below.

3 In 1990, a prominent Romanian Rom commented while in the US that it was the first time in his life that he felt anonymous, that no one paid any attention to his very being (personal communication). Roma in the US are not as (re) marked publicly as Roma in Europe.

Scholarly comparisons are often made between Afro-Americans and Roma, especially in terms of underclass features, cultures of poverty, racial regimes. See, for example, Ladányi (2001); Stewart (2000), forthcoming. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review the debates about Roma and the underclass.

Roma activists also invoke this comparison to underscore the structural and metaphorical dimensions of racism against Roma.

4 Szelényi, March 2001, draft paper. Language, way of life, and self-identification were other important factors cited in all countries. Surveys were conducted in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria and Russia. See also notes nine and ten below.

5 In a related although different treatment, Roberts (1997: 186) addressed the "genetic tie" in the lives of Afro-Americans; she underlined the relationship between the putative "inheritability of one's race" and one's consequent social status. The legal "one drop" rule applied to Afro-Americans does not pertain to ascribed Roma "identity". However, the symbolic "inheritability" of Roma racial characteristics does, as this project's interview data reveal.

In short, as the two quotes above illustrate, the Roma are a race born “other”, a different people.<sup>6</sup>

In keeping with the theoretical premises of the overall research project on “Poverty, Ethnicity and Gender in Eastern Europe during Market Transition” (see below), in this paper, how non-Roma discursively identify Roma as “other” and how Roma self-identify are viewed as the result of classificatory struggles (Emigh and Szelényi 2001). Typically, there tends to be a disjunction between the attributions of the former – non-Roma – and the self-perceptions of the latter – Roma, that hierarchically favors non-Roma. The “identities” ascribed to Roma are, in general, negatively marked stereotypes that are often internalized by Roma themselves. Yet, these “identities” may be and often are situationally variable. This paper seeks to illustrate processes of identification by which Roma are classified as “other”, “different”.<sup>7</sup> As shall be seen, “Roma” as a category has been expanded, in certain contexts, to essentialize a purported relationship between “race” and poverty.

This paper draws on interview material collected for the Community Studies of the comparative project mentioned above.<sup>8</sup> Various discursive ways in which Roma are stereotypically “othered” by non-Roma populations in post-socialist Central East Europe are examined, as are ways in which Roma understand themselves in relation to these historically persistent if situationally variable representations of their putative “identities”.<sup>9</sup> Attention is focused on Roma living in spatially or geographically segregated locales and non-Roma living in the same or nearby local communities. Most of those addressed in this paper live in rural villages or in sections, or ghettos, of villages or de-industrialized towns. In this respect, their everyday circumstances in the period of post-socialist transformation may vary significantly from Roma living in urban areas, whether in ghettos or in more integrated neighborhoods. These

6 Roma who are wealthy are presumed to have acquired their wealth through dishonest or illegal means, with the acceptable exception of urban or internationally recognized musicians. Just as “difference” is associated with the lifestyles of acutely poor Gypsies, so it is with the lifestyles of rich ones. For example, the latter allegedly wear flashy clothing that exhibits poor taste (regardless of the social construction of aesthetics); their houses are garish, etc. According to the stereotypes of others, Roma occupy either end of a social and economic class spectrum: very rich or very poor. There is no middle class, so to speak. The stereotypes of Roma, in large measure, mirror those of Afro-Americans and are generally racist. Media images reinforce and perpetuate these stereotypes of Roma in the public spheres of the region, particularly of their assumed engagement of criminal activity.

7 Brubaker and Cooper (2000) offer a thoughtful critique of the “social construction of identity” and the overburdened work that “identity” is meant to accomplish as “category of practice” and “category of analysis”. See also, for example, Calhoun (1994); Castells (1997). On the “social construction of Roma identity” or of Roma ethnicity, see, for example, Ladányi and Szelényi (2000); Ladányi (2001); Emigh, Fodor and Szelényi (2001).

8 This paper reports preliminarily on the interview data by Judit Durst (Hungary), Roman Dzambazovic (Slovakia), László Péter (Romania), Ilona Tomova (Bulgaria), and Gabriel Troc (Romania). Field research was carried out in 2000 as part of the community studies component of the project on Poverty, Ethnicity, and Gender in Eastern Europe during Market Transition (see Emigh and Szelényi 2001). It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the construction of Roma identity historically. Space does not permit adequate discussion of the relationship between the representations reported and everyday experience. Other articles in this issue address these concerns or examine everyday life more explicitly.

9 On situational ethnicity, see Okamura (1981).

locations – broadly categorized as urban and rural – offer different opportunities as well as consequent problems and concerns for their residents and inter-relationships.

To the extent that democratization and privatization have been institutionalized, who has been included in or excluded from the newly emerging post-socialist polities and economies has been of significant interest. An integral aspect of these profound transformations has been the retraction of previously guaranteed “social rights”. With the burgeoning of individual and human rights, “identities” are being refashioned and revalued, as are life’s possibilities. As prejudice and discrimination against Roma circulate openly in the public spheres of Central East Europe, race and poverty often constrain their options. Indeed, it may be argued that a feature of post-socialist transformation is the racialization of poverty. In consequence, for many in Central East Europe, poverty has a Roma face.<sup>10</sup>

### “OTHERING” “THE ROMA”

Who are “the Roma?” How do majority populations identify them? Although Roma, like all peoples, are heterogeneous, they are customarily cast as a homogeneous group, “the Roma”, “the Gypsies”.<sup>11</sup> For most non-Roma, Gypsies are collectively identifiable either by racial features, particularly skin color that seemingly reveals their origins, or by their stereotyped and stigmatized lifestyle practices. The following excerpts present varied yet standard, cross-cultural representations of “the Roma”, who they are thought to be, and how they are believed to live:

“They are all Gypsies even if they declared themselves Hungarian or Slovak. They are all Roma. Just look at them... They never worked because they are very lazy. If they need something, they steal it. This is typical Roma character.” (quoted from a retired Slovak woman)

“All these Gypsies are lazy. They hang out all day long in the village, in groups, not like normal people. They have a single aim: to make money for drinking. Instead of working, they beg from door to door...” (a 36-year-old woman, secretary at the town hall, Romania)

“When they came here they thought that the bathroom and the toilet were something else: a place for storage. I heard that the parquet floor was taken up and used as firewood. The whole place was destroyed. They live like Gypsies.” (a 48-year-old female school teacher, Balan, Romania)

<sup>10</sup> Racism against Roma is rampant across Europe, not only in Central East Europe. Whether Roma constitute a race and/ or an ethnic group is a topic of debate. For purposes of this paper, I refer to racialization, even though ethnicization also pertains. As in note three above, skin color is consistently significant with respect to identifying “Roma” and essentializing their identities. Such racialization allows for categorical slippage, as discussed below. Regarding post-socialist poverty, it is pertinent to note that some claim that women, like Roma, benefited from communist rule and were complicitous with it. Since 1989, women and Roma are among those filling the ranks of the poor, making the racialization and feminization of poverty foci of research. See, for example, Gal and Kligman (2000); Fodor (2001); Emigh, Fodor and Szelényi (2001).

<sup>11</sup> Homogenizing “the Roma” occurs in scholarly and activist work as well, frequently unintentionally. The experience of rural Roma is often implicitly ignored. It is unclear that the underclass debates adequately differentiate between urban and rural Roma.

"I know the place; it is full of Gypsies... It is an awful place. Why are you interested in those dirty Gypsies? They are all unemployed, good for nothing." (a Romanian woman, mid-thirties, a statistician, speaking about Temelia)

"You can easily figure out who are Roma only by looking at their skin. But you can't be sure about those people who live in the Nikola Kochev district or who have already left it – they are different, they resemble us more than Gypsies. They are all from good and decent workers' families, often educated and well qualified. They speak Bulgarian. For most of them, you will never think that they are Roma. There are many light-skinned Roma in Sliven because of the promiscuity of Roma women. Roma are often illiterate and without any qualification. Now with the rise of unemployment, most of them are out of work. You can see them at the garbage bins gathering waste paper, empty bottles, old clothes and even discarded food. They are not disciplined and they don't respect other people. If you come here when their social allowances are paid, you will not stay even 10 minutes. All of them push each other and shout. It is a mess. They never say 'Good morning' when entering your office; they interrupt you if you are speaking with someone else as if they are the only people in the world and the only ones in a hurry. And you always have the feeling that they are angry with you because they always shout at you." (a Bulgarian female social worker, mid-forties, employed at a Municipal Center for Social Services)

As these quotes illustrate, being identified as Roma results both from racial characteristics with which Roma are born, such as dark skin, or from social behaviors judged inappropriate by those identifying them as "other". Skin color is allegedly a sure sign of Gypsiness, a social skin that defines for others the person within. However, as a 34-year-old Roma woman pointed out, skin color is not as foolproof as non-Roma assert:

"I too am Roma, of course. All people know in the village that I am Roma. But I have a whiter color of skin than [her partner]. But if I go to the city and put on new clothes, nobody will tell you that I am Roma. On the other hand, J. is dark as coal. Everybody sees that he is Gypsy."

The arbitrariness of symbols notwithstanding, for non-Roma, the fates of those born "Rom" are sealed. According to a Slovak woman, "...if you were born as a Rom, you will die as a Rom too". A Hungarian woman concurred with that observation: "You must be born a peasant. And a Gypsy – you cannot change that ever." For these women, being Gypsy is tantamount to a genetic curse that is inescapable, no matter what the circumstances. Some Roma can "pass" or try to transform their "identity", but as the Hungarian woman continued: "It is silly to change your name. You stay the same. People know anyhow whence they have come." Or as another Hungarian put it: "The Gypsy, even if he lives in a castle, will always remain a Gypsy."<sup>12</sup>

12 Roberts' work is again instructive. In discussing the "genetics" of racial construction, she reviewed how race "came to define... second-class members of society" (1997: 187). The black genetic tie resulting from such a racial hierarchy was "not a valued promise for future generations, but an indelible mark that doomed a child to an inhumane future (ibid.: 188). See also note four above.

In an era when work opportunities and habits are being reformed, Roma have been publicly and collectively castigated as unwilling to engage in regular waged labor.<sup>13</sup> Instead, it is claimed that they either are lazy and unwilling to work, preferring to beg or depend on social benefits, or that they are thugs involved in “mafia” activities. Yet, during the socialist period, Roma regularly worked in state-run agriculture and industry, usually in un- or low-skilled, labor intensive jobs. After 1989, they were often the first to be laid off from their factory jobs; they have subsequently found it extremely difficult to find full-time employment. Unemployment among Roma has risen dramatically. Although older Roma may still be employed, younger Roma are at a distinct disadvantage: racism and overt discrimination, fueled by stereotypes about Roma, work against them on the labor market. A 26-year-old iron worker by training from the Nikola Kochev neighborhood of Sliven, Bulgaria, who has been unemployed since 1999 explained:<sup>14</sup>

“In the last few years they started to segregate people. There were about ten Gypsies in our shop in the machine-tool plant. We were the first to be dismissed when the cuts in the staff began. Now I hear that they started to dismiss Bulgarians too, but they began with us. There are no vacant jobs in town. We’re only offered work in public sanitation at a minimum salary. If one refuses such a job, his social aid is stopped. They don’t send Bulgarians to clean the streets. And there are no jobs in the private companies either.

I look more like a Bulgarian, so it’s easier for me to find a job, but when employers discover that I’m a Rom, I’m immediately dismissed. Our last hope is to steal firewood from the forest and sell it. We cut the firewood and carry it on our backs down the hill. And the forest guards shoot at us. But one can’t just sit and wait for [social] allowances when the family is hungry!”

Another unemployed young Rom adult in Romania made a similar comment:

“Well, everybody knows that we are Gypsies. And nobody wants to hire us. I am young. I want to work, but when an employer asks me where I am from, and I say that I am from Temelia [Romania], everything stops because everybody knows that Temelia is a Gypsy place.”

Before 1989, many of the Roma in Temelia worked at the petrol refinery in the town of Onesti. When its doors were shut, they, like almost everyone else, joined the ranks of the unemployed. A steady source of income had been terminated with alternative employment options or retraining not readily available, especially for Roma. Unemployment among them has risen dramatically.

13 The majority of Roma do not fit the stereotypical profiles of women with children hanging on their skirts, begging and harassing passersby, or of young children so doing. Interestingly, women and children are most generally associated with the invasion of non-Roma private space and property in urban areas. On stereotypical media representations, see, for example, Appendix B in Hancock 1987.

14 According to Tomova, of a sample of 570 Roma, those between the ages of 17 and 29 were most likely to be unemployed, with the rate skyrocketing to 80%. Roma between the ages of 40 and 49 were the best off, with 16% having permanent jobs; 12% in seasonal labor (Bulgaria: Survival strategies: Second economy; unpublished report, 2001).

Given such circumstances, secondary economic and black market activities are tempting. In a Bulgarian village, Topolchane, several young Roma men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two appeared to fit the image of local tough guys. When questioned about being unmarried at their ages, one of them responded realistically: "Even if I wanted a wife and family, I cannot support one. I can't get a job because I am a Gypsy." Whatever the image and the means by which these polite young Roma men stayed so fit looking, they were conscious of the fact that they had few, if any, "legitimate" opportunities in the world around them, regardless of their hopes and intentions.

Roma who had worked in agriculture before 1989 were especially hard hit by privatization and the redistribution of land. Having provided adequately and even well for their families during socialism, these Roma "peasants" found themselves jobless and landless and, again, with few options open to them. In another Bulgarian village, Gorno Alexandrovo, a father lamented that he had no idea how his children would continue schooling since he could no longer supply bus fare for them to get to the school in the nearby town of Sliven. A neighbor's son spoke proudly of all his father had done for them and wondered, in view of the intensified discrimination against Gypsies, how he himself could possibly do the same for his own children. He and his father were then unemployed. In the parched soil of the small plots around their well-kept and noticeably clean homes, these families attempted to grow vegetables and fruits for minimal subsistence needs, but the longer term prospects were hardly promising.<sup>15</sup> The everyday aspirations they articulated for themselves and their families were at stark odds with their possibilities, these latter harshly limited by discrimination against Roma as a collectivity. As a Romanian Rom peasant reflected on these radically changed circumstances: "Democracy has brought nothing to Roma." Those who were agricultural workers before 1989 lived like their peasant neighbors. Today, these formerly hard-working Roma, now landless and unemployed, are quickly slipping into dire poverty without evident alternatives. Despite these conditions beyond their control, non-Roma persist in blaming them for their deteriorated circumstances.

This is not to say that all Roma are currently seeking salaried work, but increasingly and regardless of pay levels, stable jobs are difficult for Roma to obtain. To reiterate, many of those who had previously labored in the socialist economy are sinking into poverty. For the poorest of Roma, poverty means virtual destitution. A Bulgarian social worker from Sliven described how many of the extremely poor get by; in so doing, she also wove a panoply of stereotypes about Roma into her account:

"Many Roma make their living at the rubbish dump in Sotirya; most of them are from the same village, but sometimes Roma from Topolchane or Sliven also go there. Others live on begging or stealing. Some of the Roma used to gather lime blossoms and herbs, but in the last few years they rooted out the herbs and cut off the branches of the lime trees, so

15 The houses of these "peasant Roma" were difficult to distinguish from those of non-Roma peasants, or poorer peasants, throughout the region. Many of the houses into which I entered were neat and clean and certainly unlike the stereotype of Gypsy houses as being "filthy", "filled with dirt and lice". See note 17 below also.

now these are not a reliable source of income anymore. Roma do not care about consequences: for example, they steal from the cherry orchards at night, cut off the branches and take them home to use as firewood. The next year there are no orchards and nowhere to steal from. There are about 5000 individuals of working age in Nadezhda district. No precise data about their real numbers exists. Even the census cannot provide this. Roma acted very strangely during the census. They asked government officials what it was all about, pretending to be insane and lying about the real number of their family members... I simply could not understand what they were hiding from. The unemployed Roma from Nadezhda district and the villages are our biggest problem. The majority of these people are neither educated or qualified [for jobs]. In 1997 we carried out a program for education and employment at the school in Nadezhda district. The participants passed the first degree of a literacy course. The results were poor. These people are not motivated to work. When they register at the employment offices, they do not expect to find a job. On the contrary, they know that we cannot provide them any, so they will keep receiving social assistance. Social assistance has contributed to their complete loss of interest in work.”

The director of the secondary school in Sotirya had a more sympathetic view of the plight of Roma in the context of increasing poverty and decreasing local sources of income. According to him, the difficulties Roma experience in keeping their families alive supercede other parental responsibilities and affect diverse aspects of raising their children:

“Many of our problems [Roma children not attending school] are due to the growing poverty of the population. The parents are either unemployed or migrant workers and in such cases, all their efforts are directed toward the immediate survival of the family instead of toward the education of their children, who are often left without any supervision. They travel everywhere. Some try to find seasonal jobs at the sea resorts, selling underwear, fruit and vegetables, and whatever one can think of; others work as musicians in bars. There are people who travel to Turkey where they buy cheap stuff that is later sold in different parts of the country. Some are hired as seasonal workers in Greece. No matter where they go, the problem is that they do not have time to take care of their children.”

As mentioned above, for those families who do not engage in seasonal or migratory labor, part-time or otherwise, social assistance is their main recourse for survival. Social assistance and Roma dependency on it figure large in non-Roma perceptions of Roma attitudes toward work and the larger society.<sup>16</sup> Non-Roma do not generally acknowledge structural discrimination and related factors such as

16 There is no need to rehearse the litany against “welfare queens” in the US. There too, poor women of color in particular are berated for living off of the state and others, for having too many children, for being bad mothers, etc.



prejudice that limit Roma "motivation". As the young men previously mentioned cogently remarked, no one wants to hire them because they are Roma (i.e., lazy, dark-skinned, unreliable, unmotivated, etc.). And Roma tends to translate into "the Roma", a collectivized category whose connotations are primarily negative. (In a related vein, Roma engage in negative collective stereotyping of non-Roma or "gadjo".) A vicious cycle perpetuates the attitudes of Roma and non-Roma alike. Recognizing that her children will not acquire jobs, a Bulgarian Rom mother living in the Nadezhda ghetto rationalized her children's lack of education: "They didn't want to study and we didn't make them. Even if they had studied, they wouldn't find a job."

Although prejudice against Roma is rampant, many non-Roma village dwellers throughout the region have personal relations with Roma and their families. These particular Roma fulfil various labor needs of the non-Roma. Not surprisingly (and as classically associated with racism), these Roma are considered to be "good" Gypsies, in a sense, the personal property (i.e. "my Gypsy") of non-Roma. Yet, when asked about Roma in general, regardless of how hard or reliably those employed by them work, they will disparage Roma as being lazy, dirty, uncivilized thieves and criminals.<sup>17</sup>

### ROMA SELF-UNDERSTANDINGS: BETWEEN "US" AND "THEM"

Roma may internalize many of the dominant culture's characterizations about "the Roma",<sup>18</sup> and invoke these either to demonstrate their similarity to non-Roma, to distinguish themselves from "gadje", or to distance themselves from other Roma with whom they are today nonetheless collectively associated by non-Roma (e.g. hard working vs. lazy; honest vs. thief; civilized vs. uncivilized). For example, in the Transylvanian community of Brazilia, itself part of a larger community in which the majority population is Hungarian, a 54-year-old Bakos Rom man differentiated between the Roma there known as Brazilians and themselves:

17 As Gabriel Troc found in his research in Romania, Roma often seek patron-client relations as a survival strategy (see unpublished report). To this end, they ask non-Roma to serve as godparents. This relationship provides Roma with a degree of symbolic respectability (recognized through the godparents' agreement to act in this role) and minimal material resources. Troc reminds us that those who claim that Roma are dirty forget that individual Roma often perform household chores for them, such as washing their clothes. Ironically, "traditional" Roma culture has strict body-related taboos. For example, clothes worn on the lower part of the body were not to be washed with those worn on the upper body. Practices associated with pollution were formalized.

An irate Bulgarian Roma woman living in the village of Sotirya expressed her rage at the representation of Roma as "dirty". How, she asked, can we be clean when there is no running water at all here where we live? She ranted that she wanted to send a sack full of lice to Parliament to let them see what it is like not to be able to bathe. Another woman complained that she often heard people calling them "dirty Gypsies" when walking down the street. She commented: "And I am sure we are not dirtier than they are." She added that this had not happened before 1989 – an "advantage" of living in an authoritarian state?

18 Mennell (1994:182) in discussing the internalization of what he calls "we-images" attributes this to disparate power between the "established" and "outsiders", the latter being unable to escape from their positions of exploitation and oppression. He further notes: "This process of stigmatization is a very common element in domination within such highly unequal power balances, and it is remarkable how across many varied cases the content of the stigmatization remains the same. The outsiders are always dirty, morally unreliable, and lazy, among other things."

“We are hard-workers, you know..., [during socialism] we had proper jobs... We have real houses, with TV, a fridge, what a house is supposed to have. We have all these because we worked hard in Ceausescu’s time...”

This Rom represented his group as hard-working and civilized, that is, like the non-Roma. During socialism, they had not only labored in “proper jobs” working in the collective farm, they had also constructed “proper” homes (complete with the accoutrements of modern life). Houses are material public markers that represent similarity and difference. “Decent”, “good” Roma live in “real” houses. As one Hungarian Rom, the child of a mixed marriage, indignantly retorted: ‘How could I be a Gypsy when we have such a big house?’ The typical image of Gypsy dwellings is of bare shacks in ill repair, filthy, and lacking any amenities, or of Gypsy caravans made up of horse-drawn covered wagons.<sup>19</sup>

Regarding the differences between Bakos and Brazilia Roma, a 58-year-old Brazilia Rom man virtually echoed the other’s statement:

“Those from Bakos moved there when their parents were in their prime... They got jobs at the CAP [the collective farm] and they built good houses. We, here, didn’t realize the importance at that time [of improving their houses]. It didn’t occur to us... we didn’t even make the foundation for a house [note that the Brazilians are “traditionally” brickmakers.]... The Bakos Roma escaped this mess because they lived with the Hungarians.”

According to this man, some Roma have bettered themselves as a result of living in close proximity to non-Roma, in this case, mostly Hungarians. Yet, he reproduced the same civilized/uncivilized distinction when speaking about the group of Roma living in Boghis, a nearby community where Roma traditionally worked as rag dealers. From his point of view, the Boghis Roma are allegedly involved in questionable business activities; unlike the Brazilians, the Boghis do not dress “like normal people”. While the Brazilians are certainly poor, they consider themselves nonetheless to be civilized. At the same time, the Boghis Roma regard the Brazilians with contempt. They do not view them as “real Roma”. In this instance, “civilization” undermines “authenticity”.

In another Romanian community, Temelia, similar distinctions are at work:

“Temelia has always been a Gypsy village... We are not troublemakers like the Kalderash; we care about our community because all we have is the fact that we are together. We don’t own land and we are poor; we have always been poor Gypsies, slaves...”(a 68-year-old man, retired)<sup>20</sup>

Another man, 36, who was at the time (summer 2000) an unemployed electrician as well as Roma leader, commented:

<sup>19</sup> Even though Roma may live in “big houses”, non-Roma consistently note that these houses are ostentatious, in “Gypsy-style”. Moreover, Roma do not live in them as “normal” people do. Instead, they live only in one or two rooms of a multi-leveled dwelling with the other rooms being “for show”, or they are said to still live in their courtyards with the entire house “for show”.

<sup>20</sup> On Roma slavery in Romania, see Achim (1998 chapters II, III); Hancock (1987).

"We are also Gypsies, but we are different from those Gypsies who live in Gura Vairi [Kalderash]. They are a different tribe, and they are not from here. We were slaves, and we lived here since our ancestors were liberated in the middle of the last century [on Roma slavery, see Hancock 1987]. After the liberation they had no place else to go so they founded a settlement here. The Kalderash Gypsies came here after World War II. We don't wear those traditional clothes.<sup>21</sup> We and our ancestors were farmers and have never dressed like them. Also, our language is a little bit different. We are poor and don't have any land. We in Temelia are a tight community. We must be, we are Gypsies after all."

Or, as a 34-year-old unemployed Slovak Rom woman said:

"If someone is born Roma, it is a very hard life. Last time I was in a shop in the city, the salesperson watched to make certain that I didn't steal anything. But I am not as they are ( the 'bad' Roma who steal, etc)."

For Roma, the identity ascribed to them may be a source of pride or of embodied prejudice.<sup>22</sup> Some, like the Boghis Rom above, are proud of being Roma just as they are conscious of their poverty and some of the structural reasons for it:

"...It is hard nowadays to be Gypsy in Romania, but we don't try to hide our identity. We are Gypsies, we worked as slaves for boyar's, and after, as landless peasants for Romanians. And we are also poor." (a 72-year-old man, former agricultural day laborer from Temelia)

Another person from Temelia, a 24-year-old man who has never been formally employed, stated outright:

"Everybody [in Temelia] is Gypsy, or almost everybody. Over there are some Romanians. Whatever, I am not ashamed because of it."

Others claim themselves to be like the majority population around them (see above); still others are ashamed of, afraid of, or angry about being perceived as Roma. A 58-year-old textile worker from the Nikola Kochev district of Sliven, Bulgaria, remarked:

"If we live in Bulgaria, we are all Bulgarians. We are born here; we have no other Fatherland. In the event of a war we shall go and defend our country like all other soldiers, never mind the skin color. We speak only Bulgarian at home. Our children don't know the Gypsy language. They live among other Bulgarians; their children study in Bulgarian

21 The Kalderash women wear "traditional" clothing (that which is at least romanticized as such, apparently even by other Roma): brightly-colored floral-patterned fabric that is made into shirts with billowing sleeves, layered skirts, headscarves; necklaces of coins and shells; bangles on their wrists, etc. The Kalderash are semi-transhumant, meaning they spend approximately half of the year travelling around Romania. Elsewhere in Romania, settled Roma also make a distinction between themselves and those who pass through, making trouble for the local Roma. At such times, non-Roma neighbors seem to forget that "their" Roma are not interlopers. It is an example of "situated identity".

22 The politicization of Roma rights and cultural identity emerged into national and international public spheres upon the collapse of communist regimes. It is beyond the scope of this article to review this development.

schools. We all are working, only my wife is without work, because they shut down the canteen. My wife is quite white and the children are white, too, so nobody calls them Gypsies. And during socialism no one made this distinction between people. Now they call Gypsies all who live in the neighborhood, and all who have darker skin.”

This man’s comments signal other factors, such as skin color, language, and work, that are situationally and arbitrarily used to identify Gypsies. Moreover, he echoed a commonly held perception that, in general, the Roma have not benefited from democracy and the collapse of communism. To the contrary, many have been its victims. “Democracy has turned everything upside down. For Gypsies, it is worse than ever”, said the Bakos Rom quoted above.

Or, as an unemployed Slovak Rom woman pointed out:

“... You are Roma? You can die! Nobody cares about us. What will become of us? The mayor got money to help us but we didn’t receive anything. Officially, in the village, there is now only one Rom. The others did not declare their ethnicity... Who would like being a Rom?”

In her research in the Sliven area of Bulgaria, Ilona Tomova similarly found a shift in Roma self-identification. Although non-Roma identified all of those interviewed by Tomova and her team as Roma, only 71 percent of those interviewed identified themselves as Roma. 7 percent declared they were Bulgarians; 5 percent, Turks; 17 percent refused to identify themselves in ethnic terms. The researchers also found that men and the elderly were more likely to identify themselves as non-Roma (35% of men as opposed to 26% of women; 37% of elderly; see Tomova, unpublished manuscript). Increasing social, political and economic isolation combined with public discrimination have contributed to changes in Roma self-identification.<sup>23</sup>

To be sure, many Roma resent the negative representations about themselves and their culture. As an unemployed 42-year-old Slovak male retorted:

“The peasants certainly told you that Roma are such and such. It is not true! We are Roma and what of it! It is not important if you are Roma or not, if you are a good person. Right?...”

Or as a middle-aged Rom housewife observed, resigned to the realities of daily life:

“My husband is Romanian. I am Gypsy. The children are mixed – half Romanian, half Gypsy –, and this should not be an issue. But you know how people are. I grew up here, among Romanians. It is hard for you when your skin is a little bit darker. Not too much, but enough to be different. This is it.”

A Hungarian Transylvanian Rom woman in her twenties expressed a related sentiment about being Roma: “You know, [in the eyes of others] a Gypsy is always a Gypsy. However well dressed or well educated the Gypsy, there will always be a difference.”

23 Whether prejudice against Roma is greater in the post-socialist era is impossible to assess. However, differing from the socialist period, prejudice is now openly expressed and acted upon in the public sphere. Regarding Roma self-identification, it is unclear how Roma self-identify among themselves. Roma are claimed to have different naming systems, for example, depending on with whom they are interacting. This lends weight to viewing “identity” as situationally contextualized.

Not surprisingly, non-Roma who are today identified as Roma express their own resentment at this notable change in local social perceptions and relations that are manifest in their being reclassified as Gypsies. As a 28-year-old unemployed man clarified:

"We are Hungarians [in Slovakia]. Everyone in the village talks about us as if we are Roma. But my father was a peasant from the village... We are not Gypsy but Hungarian. We don't live as they [Gypsies from village] do. You know."

In addition to underscoring his Hungarian family heritage, he further dissociated himself from the Gypsies by referring to what were meant to be implicitly understood, negative assumptions about how Gypsies live (i.e., "You know").

The local transformation of attributing "Gypsy identity" to those who claim not to have been so identified before the collapse of communism seems to be largely the consequence of two interrelated factors: worsening poverty levels and geographical segregation. For example, Bulgaria's Nadezhda ghetto in the Sliven district is populated by some twelve thousand Roma. This ghetto is particularly striking because it is fully enclosed by a cement wall.<sup>24</sup> It can only be entered by car through one entrance road, or from an underground tunnel exiting the local train station. Those living in this ghetto are spatially stratified by class, occupational, and putative ethnic differences: one area is occupied by Turks who are better off and who exploit the poverty of the largest segment of the ghetto; another, by Roma musicians who are on occasion able to earn some money through their music; and the rest are Roma who live in abject poverty.<sup>25</sup> The Turks, who are assumed to be Turkish Roma by everyone but themselves, often disclaim Roma roots. To illustrate, one 41-year-old man discussed his family's situation: Although he had been officially unemployed for seven years, he runs a small neighborhood business selling meat, sausages, and fish at a street stall in the ghetto. Two of his three children are married; the youngest son is in the Bulgarian army. All of his children graduated from the local "Roma" elementary school. He himself had gone to the same school when he was a boy, but then it was "the Turkish school" and classes were conducted in Turkish. He claimed:

"We are Turks. We are not Gypsies. They call us 'Gypsies' because we live here, but we were the first who started to live here and the Gypsies came after. The musicians, the Naked, the Bebrovski and Gradeshki are Gypsies, but they are living in the next side of the neighbourhood. How could they say we are Gypsies when we only speak Turkish at home. Anyway, look how we live and how they live. We all have good houses, we work hard, and we do not drink alcohol as they do. We don't quarrel

24 This walled ghetto was created during the communist period. It has not attracted the public outcry by human rights' and Roma activists that accompanied a Czech locale's post-socialist attempts to shut out their Roma neighbors. See, for example, "Two Czech Cities to Wall Off Their 'Problematic' Gypsies", *International Herald Tribune*, May 25, 1998.

25 The poorest Roma are often hired for extremely low wages, for example, to steal fruit that Turkish Roma will then sell at higher cost. If the Rom being paid to steal is caught, s/he and not the person for whom this activity is done pays the price, often with a jail sentence. Project researchers heard similar stories of intra-Roma exploitation elsewhere.

like they do, especially when it is a family argument; we fight at home, not in the street.<sup>26</sup>

Now, with ‘democracy’ the others call us ‘Gypsies’ more often, especially if your skin is darker or if they realize that we live in the Ghetto. Previously, during socialism, they accepted us as Turks and nobody insulted us with the name ‘Gypsies’. We had a lot of friends who were Bulgarians then and we were in good relations with everyone.”

Again, familiar stereotypes about Gypsies are invoked: they do not work hard, do not live in proper houses, they drink and fight. The darker skin of Turkish Bulgarians and/or Turkish Roma seemingly betrays them from the standpoint of a broader, and prejudiced, Bulgarian public.

The elasticity of collective categorizations is evident in the following resentful remark by a 41-year-old housewife living in Balan, Romania:

“The Texans [those living in a particular section of Balan]? Well I am angry because of them. I am a local settler for a long time. This is my place of birth; my parents used to live here. Because of that kind of people, we as a whole are blamed. But we are different... I don’t like them. They are and were always different from the rest of us, decent people. First, they don’t belong here. They are uprooted, Moldavians, but part of them for sure are Gypsies. They live like Gypsies. I have to admit they are poor, but we all are poor here. At least we try to do something; we are not sending our child to beg for a piece of bread every morning, and we are working hard for a living. We are working; they are doing almost nothing. They don’t like to work, [they’re] dirty folks.”

However, there are others who perceive clearly the structural basis of their putative, shared “Roma” identities as well as the generalized racialization of poverty that has accompanied post-socialist change:

“Yes, I know that we are called Gypsies. And what of it? Some of us are Gypsies, some are Romanians and the others are Hungarians. But we are all alike. We are so poor that we can barely survive. You know, I don’t care what I am called. When you are hungry as I am, you are not interested in anything else than to find something to eat for your children and, if possible, for yourself. To live somehow. If you are poor as we are, in the eyes of others, you are a Gypsy.” (a 42-year-old male, former unskilled worker today unemployed)

This man understands all too well the politics of difference that not only stigmatizes poverty, but racializes or ethnicizes it as well. Reproducing a historically “traditional” view of the poor, post-socialist poverty is seen as the fault of individuals, not of structural changes that have altered the meaning and politics of poverty and of need. As has already been noted, skin color has increasingly become the casing

<sup>26</sup> He noted that most of the women speak Turkish and are not conversant in Bulgarian. Men learned Bulgarian in the army and spoke it at work also. As to drinking, Muslims and/ or certain Protestant groups do not drink alcohol.

around a set of negative traits that are visibly embodied by Roma and that are associated with poverty and the poor. Yet as has also been noted, skin color is not fully determinate of being identified as Roma. Categories of classification such as "Roma" are not fixed or immutable; they may be expanded or contracted to include or exclude. Hence, many of today's poverty stricken have been metaphorically "Roma-fied", regardless of how they self-identify.

In this respect, poverty has been racialized in "metaphorically" inclusive (i.e. "like a Gypsy") and physically exclusive (i.e. skin color) ways. (Recall that the feminization of poverty during this period of radical change is also of concern.) Nonetheless, those poor that self-identify as Roma tend to have a much more difficult time getting by these days than most others. The following lengthier quotes from the villages and Roma ghetto around Sliven better illustrate the challenges of daily life for Roma who find themselves unemployed, with large(er) families, often hungry and living in squalor. First, a 34-year-old married woman with four children, living in Sotirya, related:

"My husband and I worked in the village cooperative. When it was closed – in 1992 – things got bad. There's no work for us here. In the summer my husband, my son and I go to the villages around Yambol to plant and gather onions, garlic, and pickling onions. We get 6 leva per day (3\$) each. My daughter remains here to mind the house. I always try to save the money the three of us earn to buy some flour, rice, beans or lentils. When I manage to gather some 10 kg of foodstuffs, my son or my husband brings it home for the winter. I try to spend less than 8 leva a day for the three of us. And the money just goes – for food, alcohol and cigarettes. If my husband finds the money he gets drunk and spends everything. Everything I manage to save in the summer goes for food so that we can survive in the winter. Even if he finds some job here, my husband spends everything on drink. I try to take him out of the village to gather hips, lime blossoms, herbs or firewood so that I can take the money when we sell them. He gets very bad when he's drunk....

In the winter we go to the rubbish dump to gather tin caps, bottles, anything that can be sold. But there are so many of us, some 100 people every day, and all garbage bins are already rummaged by paupers from Sliven. How much do you think we get? One or two leva for bread.

We don't buy any clothes. When we work for Bulgarians, they sometimes pay us with old clothes, or we find some clothes in the garbage. Sometimes the kids receive second-hand clothes at school, too. During socialism all students who lived in the boarding school received new clothes every year but now they are happy if they get some second hand things..."

A 51-year-old Rom, also from Sotirya, who had married at age 12 and has 15 children and 7 grandchildren, had worked as a shepherd for the collective farm; however, he has been unemployed for the last ten years. His summary of their recent lives echoed the accounts of others:

"If it was not for the rubbish dump, we would have died. We collect jar caps, paper, bottles and then sell them [usually to two Roma families in the village who resell the scrap to different plants for recycling]. In the

summer we gather lime blossom and hips. We even search for food at the rubbish dump like pigs. There is one Bulgarian with 200 pigs; we gather waste food together with them. The social worker doesn't care about us. We haven't seen her since the spring. They haven't paid children's allowances since then. We get aid for heating: they gave us 15 (\$7.5) leva three times and 25 leva (\$12.50) once. Our kids never eat milk and meat. We are happy when we are able to buy some flour or to receive it from our neighbors; my wife then makes bread and gruel for us. I owe 260 leva to the storekeeper for bread. The Bulgarians give us tomatoes, peppers [when they can], but they're poor too. We take clothes from the rubbish dump, wash them and then wear them. Sometimes the Bulgarians give us worn clothes too. In the winter we steal fire-wood from the forest and the foresters chase and beat us."

In the Nadezhda ghetto, a 23-year-old mother of eight living children who married at age 13, and who currently inhabits a 1.5 meter high, roofless shack with no door or windows and only one bed, noted:

"There's no work. We get monthly aid and child allowances. The three older kids collect bread from the garbage bins and we sell it to the musicians to feed their pigs. We also take our clothes from the garbage. Sometimes the kids gather discarded bottles and paper. Social aid always comes late. We wait for months to get our money, but if we are late by one day to register, they stop the aid for half a year. They always quarrel with us when we go to get aid. They call policemen to beat us. They hit our legs because we didn't keep our place in line!"<sup>27</sup>

Another woman living in Nadezhda, a 28-year-old mother of four, acerbically remarked:

I have never worked; I rely on the child allowances. There is no job for us here... And my husband and his brother are in prison, for theft. It is only the Gypsies who go to jail because the laws are made to protect the biggest thieves and jail people who are just trying to survive... Look at the politicians; they are all criminals, but there is no court for them. The policemen are nasty and often beat us, but some of them still understand and behave humanly. If they have to arrest everyone who steals, all the men from our street would be in prison, truth be told. But they know that if they arrest everyone, the women and children would die, so they leave at least one man to support the family. We are all hungry and when the children are crying, you just have to find them something to eat. This is just because there are no jobs."<sup>28</sup>

27 As in non-Roma accounts of how Roma act when they come to get their social benefits (rudely, noisily, violently), Roma present mirror images of how non-Roma treat them (rudely, noisily, violently). Except in the cases of personal relations, Roma/non-Roma perceptions of each other are virtually black and white, with little room for tolerance in between.

28 In another village, there were police who were said to have acted similarly, sparing a man to support the family. One policeman allegedly turned a blind eye to a Rom's production of bootleg plum brandy, with the proviso that he receives his share of bottles.



For the poorest of the poor Roma, everyday life is hard and harsh. Coping with the effects of post-socialist change is compounded by the racial and cultural assumptions reviewed throughout these pages. Those who live in spatially segregated areas, whether in urban ghettos or rural villages, find themselves increasingly isolated – socially, economically, politically, spatially – from “mainstream” society. Many of those interviewed poignantly recounted their attempts simply to survive in the face of increasing racism and discrimination. Most do not view themselves as they are portrayed. To the extent that they recognize themselves in these stereotypes of stark “otherness”, they understand themselves to be victims of misunderstanding, intolerance, and prejudice. They acknowledge that there are Roma who fit the negative stereotypes, but as is the case with such collective representations, they hardly constitute a majority. As opportunities to acquire basic needs such as food, shelter, education, healthcare, and work further decline, many Roma sink deeper and deeper into extreme poverty. Whether or not they form an underclass or an undercaste in the making may be an academic issue,<sup>29</sup> but however identified or labeled, ongoing and increasing discrimination against and exclusion of a majority of Roma in all countries of Europe, at the very least, belies the lofty ideals of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”. At the most, the deteriorating conditions of many of their lives suggest a volatile transnational crisis in the making, the discourses of democracy notwithstanding.

## REFERENCES

- Achim, V. (1998): *Tigani in istoria romaniei*. Bucuresti: Editura enciclopedica.
- Baranyi, Z. (2001): *The East European Gypsies: Regime Change, Marginality, and Ethnopolitics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brubaker, R. and Cooper, F. (2000): Beyond identity. *Theory and Society*, 29: 1–47.
- Calhoun, C. (1994): Social theory and the politics of identity. In C. Calhoun (ed.): *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 9–37.
- Castells, M. (1997): *The Power of Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Davidova, E. (1995): *Romanu drom – Cesty romu: 1945–1990*. Olmouc: Univerzita Palackeho Olomouci.
- Emigh, R., and Szelényi, I., eds. (2001): *Poverty, Ethnicity and Gender in Eastern Europe during Market Transition*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Emigh, R., Fodor, É. and Szelényi, I. (2001): The racialization and feminization of poverty? In Emigh, R., and Szelényi, I. (eds.): *Poverty, Ethnicity and Gender in Eastern Europe during Market Transition*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1–32.
- Fodor, É. (2001): The Feminization of poverty in six East European societies. *Szociológiai Szemle*, forthcoming.
- Hancock, I (1987): *The Pariah Syndrome: An Account of Gypsy Slavery and Persecution*. Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishers.

<sup>29</sup> On this debate, see, for example, Ladányi and Szelényi (2000), Stewart (2000; forthcoming).

- Ladányi, J. (2001): The Hungarian neo-liberal state, ethnic classification, and the creation of the Roma underclass, In Emigh, R., and Szelényi, I. (eds.): *Poverty, Ethnicity and Gender in Eastern Europe during Market Transition*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 67–82.
- Ladányi, J. and Szelényi, I. (2000): Ki a cigány? In Horváth, A., Landau, E. and Szalai, J. (eds.): *Cigánynak születni (Born A Gypsy)*. Budapest: Új Mandátum Könyvkiadó, 179–191.
- Mennell, Stephen (1994): The formation of we-images: A process theory. In C. Calhoun (ed.): *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 175–197.
- Okamura, J. (1981): Situational ethnicity. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 4 (4): 452–465.
- Roberts, D. (1997): The genetic tie. In Delgado, R. and Stefancic, J. (eds.): *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 186–189.
- Stewart, M. (2000): Spectres of the underclass. In Szelényi, I. and Emigh, R. (eds.): *Poverty, Ethnicity, and Gender in Eastern Europe during Market Transition*. Greenwood Press.
- Stewart, M. (forthcoming): Roma, deprivation and the underclass. In. Hann, C. (ed.): *Postsocialism: Ideas, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*. London: Routledge.