

The Roma Spring: Knowledge Production and the Search for a New Humanity

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The academic world is one partly characterised by complexity, factionalism and fault lines. In the post-communist system one line of division that emerged was the ascendancy of western sociology and expertise in the east of Europe. In societies in transition many social scientists were cowed and tamed. According to Szalai an exception was Roma research where researchers chronicled human and minority rights violations and charted how the Roma were amongst the greatest losers of the new neoliberal order. As the Roma issue became a cause of growing concern for policy makers, sociologists increasingly enjoyed the elevated status of adviser.¹ A key question is whether academia ever actually had, or has retained, a sense of vibrancy and relevance to the Roma issue. Has advice given to policy makers been insightful? Has advice been heeded?

The dichotomy between East and West is elaborated on by Marushiakova and Popov who describe the Roma as an “imagined community” in part reflecting the tendency of some scholars to direct their investigations towards the ‘others’, namely those who are considered as exotic peoples. “Even though Gypsies are largely European peoples, the romantic image in the public consciousness enables them to fit into the paradigm of Anglo-Saxon anthropology, and this scientific tradition still maintains its dominance globally. Imposing this Anglo-Saxon approach on Gypsies in Eastern Europe is inextricably interwoven with the context of changes in this region over the past 20 years”.²

With the passage of time and the fusion of east and west in the new Europe the precise geographic demarcations may be less pronounced but the fault lines of ideology and standpoint remain. One of the central aspects of the papers in this section of the journal, dealing with knowledge production, is the dividing line that exists on the central question of relationships between researchers and communities and whether researchers are working ‘with’ or ‘on’ the researched. On this question the past two years have witnessed a series of sharp and at times fractious debates within Romani Studies centred on issues such as objectivity, the roles of insider and outsider and the relationship between research, activism and transformative change (radical societal change based on notions of social justice).

The intensity of the debate may in part be due to the fact that terms such as empowerment and partnership have become popular buzzwords. However, the gap between rhetoric and practice in policy formulation and knowledge production has been a central factor in stoking some of the conflicts which have emerged, with a number of critical researchers asserting that emancipatory concepts are being subverted and/or tokenised. It is argued by some disgruntled activists that little has changed - in their opinion the Roma are still being consigned to marginal roles in ‘imagining’ their communities. How might the situation of the Roma change if the voice of communities at the margins is heard and empowered through inclusive forms of knowledge production?

The intensity of debate about power relations may also be prompted by the fact that a new cadre of Roma activist-researchers are emerging, often schooled and trained as community organisers/activists in Roma civil society. Such contributions to knowledge production have been described as “NGO-science”, and it is claimed the primary qualification of the authors for research is their Roma origin.³ However, a growing number of these activist-researchers have proceeded to venture into the realm of academia by studying for or gaining PhDs and attaining positions at prestigious universities and/or winning research contracts. For many of these Roma activist-researchers the late Nicolae Gheorghe was a mentor and intellectual leader. Gheorghe’s disillusionment and frustration with the failure of power elites to engage adequately with Roma communities and his equal frustration with the hierarchicalism of civil society is evident in the work of some of the new cadre of Romani leaders. Whether these activist-researchers can

effectively carry the baton which Gheorghe passed to them remains to be seen, as a period of intense debate and contestation ensues.

This moment in time has been dubbed by some observers as the “Roma Spring”, a period of critical consciousness and a new militancy and assertiveness.⁴ Such a process of decolonialisation has already occurred amongst other systematically marginalised communities. Be it amongst the Aboriginal People of Australia or First Nations of Canada and the USA, movements for self-determination have been pivotal in creating a new generation of leadership, new outlooks and a sense of confidence and pride in identity. Yet this assertiveness has also been accompanied by disappointments and forms of subversion, with some of the new and emerging community thinkers being subsumed into the academic and wider establishment. Will these processes appear in the Roma Spring? Will the Roma Spring permeate to the grassroots through inclusive approaches to research which can scale and dismantle the perceived aloof ivory towers of the traditional academic establishment? Or are the defenders of the status quo, namely positivist academic critics, correct in their assessment that these activist-researchers have succumbed to a post-colonialist fad and have *been reading too much Foucault*, instead of undertaking so-called ‘objective’ scientific research.

Claims of expertise and objectivity, and a corresponding disparagement of getting too close to the researched, have been termed as scientism. Those imbued with scientism have adopted set limits as to how much the researched should be invited to comment on the interpretations of the researcher or to have the opportunity to participate in the resulting analysis and knowledge production. The argument is that such a line needs to be drawn as the researcher can be shackled and chained into a form of accountability where the researched can somehow have too great a say in interpretation and thus research can become partisan and invalid.⁵ Conversely, it has been argued that such scientism operates from assumptions based on unexamined biases of privilege.⁶ In addition, it is argued that science-based epistemologies are inherently anti-feminist. Indeed critics contend that such positivist thinking is deeply conservative, adopting quasi-scientific methods and conceptions of detachment, and that the pursuit of objective truth is delusional.⁷ What scientism labels as ‘the truth’ is highly contested and politicised. For power elites are able to permeate discourse, knowledge and ‘regimes of truth’. Hence, knowledge and discourse are given the status of truth by those in power, which includes those who portray themselves as the ‘all-knowing expert’.

On the other hand difference and contestation might be the furnace needed to produce new knowledge. Different approaches to research prompt new lines of inquiry, and test and temper hypotheses. It could be argued that Romani Studies by virtue of its interest in marginalised communities should reflect and embrace a diversity of opinions (working dissensus), and even structures and networks. Basically qualitative and quantitative approaches can learn from each other, as can scientism and participatory approaches. It may not be a matter of academic hierarchies but instead a case of looking to the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

These were some of the thoughts and questions which prompted the organisation of the seminar *Nothing about us without us?* The following papers, which were presented at that event, provide important insights into the topic of where Roma are located in contemporary power relations, including in the realm of knowledge production.

Mirga-Kruszelnicka in her paper entitled *Romani Studies and emerging Romani scholarship* provides an overview of current debates within Romani Studies, as for instance reflected in the development of the European Academic Network on Romani Studies (EANRS), an academic network funded by the European Union and the Council of Europe and centred on a mission statement which includes supporting efforts towards the social inclusion of Romani citizens in Europe, facilitating intercultural dialogue and raising the visibility of existing research outside the academic community in order to foster cooperation with policy makers and other

stakeholders. However, in its initial election of a Scientific Committee the EANRS failed to elect any members of the Roma community.

It should be noted that further controversy was aroused when the Scientific Committee issued a statement which was critical of a proposed European Roma Institute. Critics of the proposal stated that the initiative was a mere legacy project and whim of the billionaire George Soros and that recognised higher education institutions should be the locus of academic engagement with Roma culture on account of established processes and procedures which make it possible to produce knowledge that can inform policy and public attitudes in a reliable and transparent manner.⁸ Such notions within the academy sacralise the power and practices of academia, upon which its authority rests. This form of cultural reproduction leads to 'misrecognition', where power relations are perceived not for what they are objectively but instead in a form which depicts them as legitimate in the eyes of the beholder.⁹ Foucault argued that modern rationality and institutions of knowledge are sources of domination; in other words, every production of knowledge is serving power.¹⁰ Thus education, research and knowledge production on Roma has at the end a political purpose, and consequently power games are played out by some academics in the hope of accruing or maintaining prestige, research contracts and influence.

With reference to the imbalance in power relations in 'imagining' Roma communities and knowledge production Mirga-Kruszelnicka and indeed other contributors to this journal such as Violeta Vajda, feel that the imbalance can be addressed through participatory and collaborative forms of research which give communities voice. Feminist and critical researchers contend that research should be situated (standpoint theory) in the concerns of marginalised people, and this can best be achieved through egalitarian research practices like participatory action research.¹¹ Such an approach brings the researcher closer to a more valid and meaningful form of knowledge and it is argued this is more ethical for those being researched as forms of accountability are developed at all stages of the research including involvement in analysis and interpretation. Standpoint theory contends that scientism cannot detach itself from the class, culture and race of the researcher, though recognition of the impact of such attributes through reflexivity can minimise the influence of bias. Reflexivity leads to rejecting notions of the researcher being an impersonal machine and defies scientism/positivism by not sanitising the 'I' from the narrative.¹² Instead the researcher should acknowledge the impact of the different perspectives and life experiences they hold and determine how these have shaped their research by 'situating' the perspective of the researcher through reflexivity. In this process it is important to reflect on the variety of 'selves' or shades of identity the researcher brings into the research process.

The next two papers on knowledge production touch upon the practice of reflexivity, exploring issues such as critical whiteness and mixed heritage, gender and identity. Violeta Vajda in her contribution entitled *Towards 'critical whiteness' in Romani Studies* refers to the dominance of white researchers in the field of Romani Studies. Vajda outlines how in her view Romani emancipation will be impeded unless the concept of critical whiteness gains traction. It is argued that unless non-Romani people examine their own racialised identity and understanding of how stereotypes, othering and scapegoating are constructed, then significant progress will be impeded. Such a process involves examining the deeply held beliefs or even prejudices that non-Roma bring to practices or academic writing. In other words the non-Roma should question their own identities. The importance of such a venture is emphasised by Vajda who points out the dangers of a white identity increasingly being steered by the vagaries of the New Right and forms of nativism, which favour the rights of established inhabitants over migrants.

Vajda refers to *Bildung*, a certain maturity that allows one to question and remain open to new experiences, while at the same time grounding these in a thorough understanding of the past. Another important term for Vajda is *hermeneutic dialogue* which can be described as a state of mind, an openness and continuous questioning, a robust form of inter-cultural dialogue which prompts reflection, two-way change and reorientation. Yet we live in an increasingly intolerant

age, where hegemonic power seeks distractions and scapegoats for the perceived ills of society, which through a securitisation discourse often casts the Roma as a menace and threat to majoritarian society and values.¹³ Hence, the propensity for genuine dialogue and reflection is limited by forms of narrow monoculturalism and movement away from even liberal notions of multiculturalism. Challenges to the intolerance meted out towards outsider groups such as the Roma could do much to shatter this hegemony and bring about transformative change. However, to provide such an environment, forms of institutional change are warranted that can nurture deliberative forms of democracy which would encompass radical and more participatory forms of engagement. Critical researchers argue that inclusive approaches to research with the Roma have a part to play in this process.

References to forms of identity are evident in the paper by Ethel Brooks entitled *The Importance of Feminists and 'Halfies' in Romani Studies: New Epistemological Possibilities* which focuses discussion on people whose national or cultural identity is mixed and move between different worlds and cultural systems. For Brooks, Romani scholars who come from Romani backgrounds, families, and communities can also be considered as 'halfies,' moving between Romani and *gadje* worlds. The challenges for Romani scholars working within academia are compounded according to Brooks by the fact that Romani Studies is the inheritor and the legacy of the Gypsy Lore Society, as characterised by a hierarchical attitude to the researched and affiliation to established centres of power. Brooks calls for a commitment to reflexivity, a critique of our own positionality *vis-à-vis* the subject(s) of our research.

Marett Klahn in her contribution entitled *Knowing Differently: On Thinking and Doing 'Roma'* fuses discussion of identity with knowledge production. Klahn argues that discussions on knowledge production ought to take note of how the Roma are conceptualised as a static category, with their construction as 'the other' along racialised and essentialist lines. This process accentuates division and polarisation between the Roma and majoritarian society, divisions which Klahn argues are reflected in established knowledge on the Roma. Klahn presents the case study of the Dr Ámbédkar School in Hungary and how it creates a space where Roma pupils can express identity but do so in an environment which recognises Roma identity and which is shifting and fluid. Hence within the school identity is critically explored rather than presented as a rigid phenomenon preserved in aspic. The pupils are also able to access a curriculum which makes reference not just to the Roma but to other marginalised groups, and provides insights into emancipatory struggles and leadership with potential lessons for the Roma, thus fulfilling what Freire considered as the basic requirement of education, namely liberation as opposed to domestication.¹⁴ It may be the case that the Dr Ámbédkar School presents a model which other schools can emulate by creating open and critical learning environments for Roma and non-Roma pupils.

School can be considered a mirror and shaper of the society in which we live but in a mass media society the power for good and/or harm of the media cannot be ignored in terms of knowledge production. As evidenced by the tidal wave of derogative media reporting which has played a key role in demonising Roma communities through sensationalist reporting, the media has stirred within the public imagination 'moral panics' or public furores in which outsider groups are cast as folk devils in opposition to what are considered the values and ideals of majoritarian society. Thus the media acts as an enforcer in castigating those perceived as outsiders to bolster forms of hegemonic power and create borders and divisions between those who are deemed to conform and those who don't fit in or fall outside the boundary of those who can be accepted and included. Mária Bogdán in her contribution *Challenging Perspectives – The Role of Media Representation in Knowledge Production about Roma* explores these points and the concepts and meanings constructed through the media about Roma and the media's role of signifier, through their defining gaze. Conversely Bogdán argues that the media can be powerful agents helping to bring forth transformative change. Social media can be argued to have democratised knowledge

production and have been a central tool in the work of radical social movements, as evidenced by the Occupy Movement and the rise of left-wing populist movements like Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain and more recently in the UK with the Labour Party leadership victory by the radical socialist Jeremy Corbyn. In the Arab Spring and overthrow of dictatorships social media were a central engine in driving and mobilising revolution. The Romani Movement has witnessed an explosion of Roma orientated Facebook groups, networks and chatrooms providing platforms and tools for mobilisation for a new generation of Romani activists. A key question is whether through such spaces of agitation we will see the triumph of a Roma Spring.

Who and what are the regimes of oppression which need to be overthrown in the Roma Spring? As touched upon in the papers outlined above, transformative change warrants genuine and not illusory partnerships between policy makers, knowledge producers and the Roma. It also requires institutional and societal change and redistribution, as well as critical reflexivity on the part of majority society and amongst the Roma and the movements that seek to represent them, rooting out and dispelling exclusionary notions and practices and building on a worldview premised on cosmopolitanism, intersectionality and social justice.

In a speech to the *Nothing about us without us?* conference, the Roma activist and art curator Timea Junghaus felt the Roma intellectual and cultural movement had at times lost and wasted time and energy in seeking to identify the *a priori* essence of the Roma identity, only to come to the recognition – building on Black, African, Afro-European, and Jewish analogies - that the Roma diaspora is a process that involves practice and hard labour, which must be forged, constantly questioned and remade. As Junghaus noted ‘multiculturality’ might be an appropriate concept to describe the basic reality of Roma people.¹⁵ In other words Roma identity coincides with Stuart Hall’s understanding of cultural identity, which is a “matter of becoming”.¹⁶ In her speech Junghaus proceeded to surmise the answer as to how to imagine the Roma as situated in an outlook which envisions a world of rich and complex individuals with multiple and shifting identifications, and not one static identity. It is an identity concept which presumes respect for other cultures and a desire to learn and exchange in order to complete and build our identities. It is a constructive and transformative model - in theory, art, and life. It inspires us to see the potential reconciliation of interrelations between non-Roma subjectivity and ‘Gypsy’ reality. The speech included a clarion call mirroring the aim of this edition of the Roma Rights Journal for artists, theorists, activists and researchers and above all communities to look for and devise strategies to confront and de-link from the colonial matrix of power, and achieve decoloniality.¹⁷ As Junghaus notes, with reference to Mignolo, the Roma movement is in search of a “new humanity”,¹⁸ a search for social liberation from all power organised and based upon inequality, discrimination, exploitation, and domination.¹⁹

Endnotes:

1. Júlia Szalai, “Disquieted Relations: West Meeting East in Contemporary Sociological Research Intersections”, *East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 1 (2) (2015): 12-37.
2. Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, “Between Exoticization and Marginalization. Current Problems of Gypsy Studies”, *BEHEMOTH - A Journal on Civilisation*, Volume 4 Issue Number 1 (2011): 60.
3. *Ibid.*
4. An alternative term is ‘Roma Awakening’ see Thomas Acton, and Andrew Ryder, “From Clienthood to Critique - The role of Nicolae Gheorghe as Mediator and Catalyst in the Roma Awakening” in *Roma Rights* 1 (2015) *In Search of a Contemporary Roma Identity: In Memoriam - Nicolae Gheorghe*.
5. Zoltan Barany, *The East European Gypsies: Regime Change, Marginality, and Ethnopolitics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
6. Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 17-20.
7. Maria Mies, “Towards a Methodology for Feminist Research”, in *Theories of Women’s Studies*, ed. G. Bowles and R. D. Klein, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983).
8. See *Statement of the EANRS Scientific Committee on the Council of Europe’s proposal for a European Roma Institute*, 30 April 2014, available at: <http://romanistudies.eu/documents/reports-on-the-scientific-committee-meetings/>.
9. Loic Wacquant, “Bourdieu: A Case Study in Scientific Consecration”, *Sociology* 47(1) (1993): 15–29
10. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1983).
11. Patricia Maguire, *Doing Participatory Research: A Feminist Approach* (Amherst: The Center for International Education, University of Massachusetts, 1987).

12. Judith Okely and Helen Callaway, eds., *Anthropology and Autobiography* (London: Routledge 1992).
13. Huub van Baar, *The European Roma: Minority Representation, Memory and the Limits of Transnational Governmentality* (Amsterdam: PhD thesis University of Amsterdam, 2011).
14. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Press, 1990).
15. Nicolae Gheorghe, "The Social Construction of Roma Identity" in *Gypsy Politics and Traveller Identity*, ed. Thomas Acton (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1997), 153–171.
16. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Harlow, UK: Longman, 1994).
17. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011).
18. *Ibid.*, 52.
19. Anibal Quijano, *Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality*, *Cultural Studies*, (2007) 21 (2-3).