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LECTIO PRÆCURSORIA

*They Look Me In The Eyes And I Smile And Then We Know:
The Interaction of Finnish Roma and
East European Roma in Finland*

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ABSTRACT

A lectio præcursoria is a short presentation read out loud by a doctoral candidate at the start of a public thesis examination in Finland. It introduces the key points or central argument of the thesis in a way that should make the ensuing discussion between the examinee and the examiner apprehensible to the audience, many of whom may be unfamiliar with the candidate's research or even anthropological research in general.

Dear Custos, my esteemed Opponent Professor Robbins, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On 20 September 2018, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland published an occupational barometer. This barometer indicated that the number of labour shortage professions in Finland has increased. Within two years, the number of professions suffering from labour shortages has increased from 15 to 48, out of 200 professions under investigation. The increase in the labour shortage in Finland has been associated with people from larger age groups, born during years with a high birth rate (over 100 000 / year) after the Second World War in the period 1945–1950 who have reached the retirement age, and the lower birth rate in subsequent decades. According to the report of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, from 2010 both long-term economic and labour

market forecasts suggest that problems with the availability of the work force will increase in future. With the aging of the population age structure, the availability of the work force is expected to rapidly decrease from the beginning of the 2010s. According to this estimation, in the area of social services and healthcare sector alone, there will be 180 000–1 220 000 positions open during the period 2005–2020, which amounts to approximately 20% of the entire labour market.

One way to solve this challenge has been sought in occupational migration. It has been estimated that in the future Finland will need long-term and short-term migrants. On 15 September 2018, the headlines of *Helsingin Sanomat*, Finland's and the Nordic countries' largest subscription newspaper, stated 'They come to Finland, get training for branches with labour deficiencies, get employed and stay – Is there a panacea in immigration and labour

shortages in South Ostrobothnia.’ Migration into Finland, however, is not seen only as a positive phenomenon in the public debate in the country, but the dangers of unsuccessfully managing it have also been the focus of public attention.

On 29 January 2018, the newspaper *New Finland (Uusi Suomi)* featured a blog post from the former head police officer Mikko Paatero on Swedish gang violence titled, ‘The internal security of Sweden is cracking’ [translation by the author]:

Recently, many alarming news items have been heard from Sweden and its internal security situation. The grenade attacks, the intensified operation of organised crime, the existence of parallel societies’ concerns. It is noted that there are a bit less than 1000 young men in Sweden who belong to criminal networks and are able to use a firearm. Although the figure is considered large, there is not much difference with the situation in Finland. In Sweden, the attacks and threats against the police have increased dramatically and being a police officer is no longer a popular job. In addition, trust in the police has deteriorated due to these issues, despite the fact that the number of police officers has been increased in recent years and is now undergoing a strong recruitment campaign with considerable additional funding from politicians. There are 15 such areas in Sweden where the police do not go for small issues at all and for bigger issues large numbers of police go in because there is open hostility towards the police. This development has not happened in Sweden suddenly, but over years. It started in the 1990s and as immigration has increased, it has been increasing all the time. In Sweden, there has clearly been no control over the huge immigration wave that has come. (Paatero 2018)

In contemporary Europe in general, migration is a highly controversial topic, one that is continuously present in daily headlines and intensively employed in the election campaigns of politicians. As the above examples clarify, in the case of Finland, migration is appreciated as a potential for strengthening the manpower of an aging society and enriching the cultural diversity of a smaller scale Nordic country. At the same time, migration is seen and experienced as a threat. The news of outbreaks of vandalism in areas with predominantly migrant populations in the neighbouring country of Sweden and the terrorist attack in Turku on 18 August 2017, during which two innocent women lost their lives when attacked by an asylum-seeking migrant and several people were seriously injured, can hardly leave anyone indifferent. Nevertheless, migration is a fact with which Europeans need to come to terms.

The PhD dissertation examined today investigated the attitudes and interaction of an established minority group in Finland, the Finnish Kale, with a part of the newcomer immigrant population, Eastern European Roma. In addition, this dissertation examined efforts on the behalf of some Finnish Kale to facilitate the integration of the latter into a new country. This research is based on participant observation in connection with 14 months of intensive fieldwork during 2014–2015, supported by the tacit knowledge gained through long-term friendships with representatives of Bulgarian and Finnish Roma as well as social work amongst Finnish Roma. Often during my fieldwork, I acted as an interpreter, facilitating interactions between representatives of different groups or helping newly arriving immigrants to deal with the necessary paperwork and when communicating with authorities. I am aware that this role put me in a specific power position relative to the participants of my research.

I ensured that all of the people involved were informed of my task as a researcher. That said, I saw my task as a researcher as a possibility to devote time and effort to supporting people, whom I cared for and some of whom I had known for a long time.

Migration and the encounters of people representing different communities call for a process of identification. The questions ‘who am I’ and ‘who is the other’, along with ‘what unites us and what separate us’, ‘can we cooperate and improve each other’s wellbeing’, or ‘what kinds of sacrifices does our cohabitation call for’ tacitly arise in people’s minds when being introduced to an unknown person or group of people. What external factors influence the emerging relationship are equally important. Yet, migration amongst Roma has its particularities. The migration of people belonging to a minority group which has suffered marginalisation for centuries throughout Europe differs from the case of people migrating for economic reasons or those fleeing from danger who had not faced marginalisation prior to their migration.

An important issue associated with migration is the humanitarian aid extended to refugees as a means of protecting basic human rights. During 2015 in connection with the crisis in Syria, more than 32000 people entered Finland and applied for refugee status. Those individuals were immediately granted shelter and food provisions for the period of investigating their refugee applications, some of which are still being processed almost four years later. At the same time, many Finnish Kale had a burning question in their mind: ‘Why is the government of our country generously spending money on tens of thousands of people coming from outside Europe, but will not provide any support to the 300–400 poor, homeless Eastern European Roma who entered Finland in the

previous few years after Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU in 2007?’ Were Eastern European Roma in Finland less important as human beings as they fled hunger and marginalisation in their home countries, not receiving any humanitarian support in Finland either?

There were clear political reasons and international agreements behind the decision of the Finnish state and municipalities back in 2015. Finland was committed to encouraging work-related migration. Permanent residents of Finland were entitled to social security, while other EU citizens could benefit from it only if they were residing in Finland for work as employees or as self-employed individuals. Since Bulgarian and Romanian Roma were citizens of EU countries and not residents, instead only temporary visitors (at least on paper) to Finland, they were supposed to obtain social support from their country of origin. From that point of view, Finland had practically no official obligations to them at the time. Nevertheless, for ordinary citizens the question remained, ‘Why are some people being taken care of and others left to potentially freeze to death in Nordic winter nights?’

The Finnish Kale not only asked questions, but some were ready for action providing the resources and possibilities they had to hand. Not many in terms of numbers, but strong in zeal and ready to sacrifice, the Finnish Kale had already been assisting their fellow Eastern European Roma for the last few years in their efforts to settle in Finland. Some provided accommodation to newcomers in their homes and helped them to learn Finnish, find employment, and subsequently a home of their own. ‘The guests’ in return tried to be helpful in handling household matters with small repairs, making food, taking care of children, and mending cars among other things. Some

Finnish Kale nongovernmental organisations also acted on behalf of Eastern European Roma on the societal, political, and religious levels. In short, it could be said that this desire amongst the Finnish Kale, to help and support essentially foreign people, individuals with whom they barely had any common language, but with whom through what appeared to me somewhat mysterious ways they felt connected, provided the inspiration for this research. Having said that, it is important to clarify that not all Finnish Kale were interested in establishing contact with Eastern European Roma in Finland. Many of the people with whom I met recognised Eastern European Roma as Roma, but felt that they were only very distantly related, and they thus had no intention of becoming acquainted with the newcomers.

My work focuses on the factors influencing the relationship between Finnish Roma and Eastern European Roma in Finland and the outcomes of those relationships. It aims at portraying and analysing the way Roma in Helsinki position themselves in the world in general and towards each other as representatives of different groups. In connection with that, the issue of ‘how we people in general position ourselves in the world’ also surfaced. As major factors shaping the prerequisites of the interaction between Finnish Roma and Eastern European Roma in Finland, I have identified a Roma identity, Pentecostalism, and Charismatic Christianity as well as nationality as most important.

Specifically, I investigated how ethnicity, religion, and nationality engage with each other in the interactions between different Roma groups in Helsinki. I described how people negotiate a balance between different identities in the continually ongoing process of identification that accompanies this balancing

act. In the case of most Finnish Kale and several Eastern European Roma, my understanding is that they saw their own Roma identity as an ethnic identity. This ethnic identity was defined by their shared origin in terms of the principle of descent from an assumed common ancestor as well as by the distinctive ‘Kale culture’ or Romani language and Roma traditions in the case of Eastern European Roma. However, the cultural commonality perceived by informants clearly relied more on the experience of a shared understanding than it did on any demonstrable similarity of the cultural traditions. I suggest that, in this case, ‘the discourse on ethnicity has escaped from the academy and into the field’, as argued by Banks (1996: 189). Given that ethnicity and ethnic identity are abstract concepts defined in academia, rather than ontological things existing in the world, it is possible to discuss how much social reality has influenced the creation of concepts and how much these concepts have in turn influenced social reality.

I am aware that in the social sciences the term identity has been utilised in ambiguous ways, carrying contradictory meanings or associated with reifying connotations. Identity has been specified as fluid, with multiple and constantly negotiated meanings, which may lead to an oxymoron with no real meaning. As stated by Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 3) in his essay ‘Beyond “Identity”’, the concept is troubled by the ‘overproduction and consequent devaluation of meaning’. Nevertheless, based on my own fieldwork experience, I argue that for most of the Roma with whom I worked, ethnic identity was a meaningful concept, and many Roma felt that it reflected their social reality and gave them the chance to define themselves as people or ‘ascribe themselves a name’, as argued by Foucault (2002 [1966]: 132). The use of the concept has

arguably also altered social reality at times, most obviously in terms of ethnic mobilisation.

In the process of identification, certain identities influence one another. For example, for some participants of this study, religious identity at times could completely override Roma identity. In these cases, people felt that they belonged first and foremost to the community of the 'children of God' or were 'Jesus's own', which most of the time was equated with being members of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. At the same time, the importance of a certain identity could vary situationally and require participants of the study to exercise their judgement and find suitable compromises. Such was the case when the Finnish Kale willingly interacted with Eastern European Roma during the evangelising meetings they organised for these Eastern Europeans, but would deliberately keep their distance during occasions intended mostly for Finnish Kale. In these cases, it appeared to me that their Kale identity, and the social obligations deriving from it, prevailed.

Often, the interplay between different social identities was crucial to the outcome of encounters between representatives of different Roma groups. Representatives of different Roma groups, who as part of their religious identity did not associate themselves with the Pentecostal or Charismatic movement, would recognise each other as Roma most of the time, but often avoid close contact. In contrast, most of the participants in my research who were members of the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches would gladly interact with each other. Some of the Pentecostal and Charismatic Kale would even make substantial sacrifices in order to support a needy Eastern European Roma person or family.

Differences in nationality appeared to be strongly emphasised in cases where people did

not subscribe to the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. The Finnish Kale often emphasised that they were exclusively Finnish Roma and many did not want to be associated in any way with these newcomer Eastern European Roma. Based on national belonging, Bulgarian and Romanian Roma divided resources and territory among themselves, both in terms of different areas of town, as well as inside the Day Centre they used most often.

Roma identity, Pentecostalism and Charismatic Christianity, and nationality can also be seen as three different albeit related social fields (or, perhaps better, subfields) as described by Bourdieu (1995: 66–68), in the sense that each of them has its own rules and demands. Regarding nationality, ethnicity, and religion as three different social subfields makes it possible to discuss how people live within these fields and how they sometimes follow the rules of one and at other times follow the rules of another. For example, the same Bulgarian and Romanian Roma might behave differently if they met in the setting of the Day Centre or at a Pentecostal gathering. People's identities are not necessarily affected by these social and strategic choices of how to live in different fields; yet, this approach allows us to focus on how people live and experience their lives without having to establish what this says about their identities. That could possibly be the subject of future research.

One of the main topics of this work is spirituality. Spirituality has been discussed in anthropology for the most part in connection with research on non-European communities and non-Christian religious groups. When doing research on Pentecostalism and Charismatic Christian communities, researchers have approached the subject primarily as a social and cultural issue. In contrast, this research

addresses the spiritual dimension of it as seen and experienced by participants of this research.

I now call upon you, Professor Robbins, as the opponent appointed, to present your critical comments on my dissertation.

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