

Gernot Haupt

Discrimination of Roma People

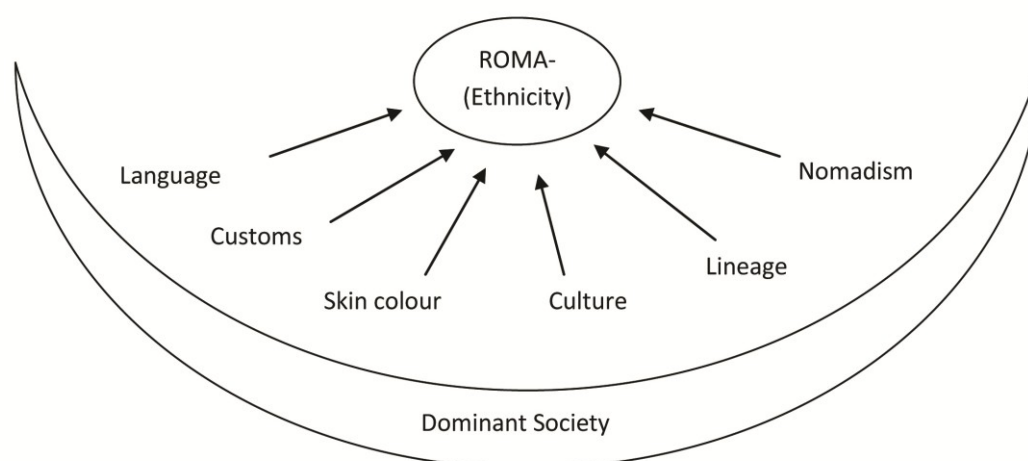
**Reflection Group on Roma People
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Dear participants!

My name is Gernot Haupt, I am from Austria. Some words about my person and my work first: Studies: Catholic Theology, Intercultural Educational Science, Political Science. Work: Roma-Solidarity-Project in Romania since the early 1990s.

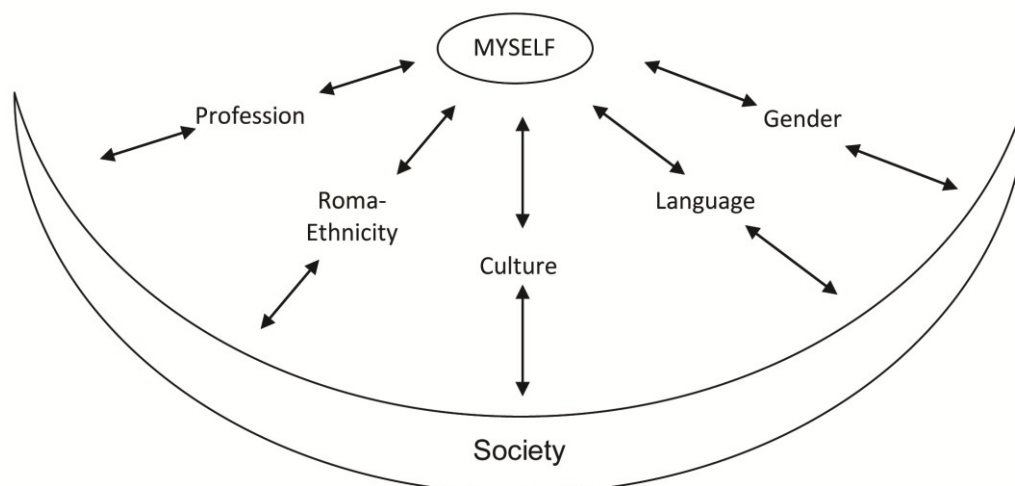
Let's start – because this is a crucial point in my opinion – let's start with the question of identity: Who are the Roma? There have been many attempts to register and to classify the Roma population by differences in their language, by their different professions, their religion, their family or even worse their tribal kinship, as it has been done by the Nazi-Regime and Robert Ritter with his genealogies.



Sophisticated methods of identification have been developed to be able to count the Roma. The purpose to have accurate numbers is honourable, the more they count the more politicians can be forced to face and to solve their problems. But numbers never are just innocent: The same numbers can be used by other politicians to give rise to anti-Roma sentiments by fomenting the fear of mass-migration, as it is done throughout Europe by extreme right-wing populists. And this struggle to count the Roma takes for granted that ethnic identity is like a stamp you have to bear and that you can only admit or deny your ethnic belonging.

As far as I am concerned I would be very cautious with such monolithic conceptions of identity. Following the symbolic interactionism established by George Herbert MEAD, Erving GOFFMAN, Lothar KRAPPMANN and others,

I would suggest understanding identity not only as inherited feature but as result of social interaction. For me, ethnicity is only one facet of my identity,



I for example am father of 4 children, I am teacher, I am a man, I am a piano-player etc. None of these facets of my identity is of great importance for this lecture.

Our identity is multiple, hybrid, and ethnicity is not always the prevalent item of my self-conception. I would even find it rather dangerous for the Roma civil rights movement to enforce a “re-ethnification”. We have seen very bad results in the Balkan wars, where ethnicity became more important than decades of neighbourhood and friendship.

If we want to understand the Roma identity, we have to look at the attitude of the majority of the population towards the Roma. I suggest to do this along the theory of functional systems within the society. The analysis of inclusion or exclusion of Roma in the different social systems such as money, education, law, health and so on provides the possibility of a better understanding of the very complex situation of different Roma communities in different regions of the world. This conception enables us to see and understand interdependencies between different social systems and – even more – to give a theoretical background for the social work to improve the inclusion into specific social systems, because general attempts at integrating Roma or global campaigns against discrimination have failed to be successful up to now, as you know. Between the two extremes of total exclusion on the one hand and perfect inclusion on the other I found out that four major items are characteristic for the situation of Roma all over Europe and – what is even more astonishing – all over the times:

1. Extermination:

The term “extermination” means the physical annihilation, the killing. Since their arrival in Europe the Roma have always been targets of lethal violence, reaching from being outlawed by the imperial diet of Freiburg 1408, over the genocide during World War II up to the pogroms in Romania after the fall of Communism or the political killings in Hungary in the last years. The impact that collective remembrance of historical extermination has on the consciousness and behaviour of the second and third generation of victims is not at all analysed scientifically in the Roma case as it is done successfully with Jewish victims. The traumatic experiences have serious repercussions up to the present. The fear of registration, of being object of research and persecution marks the contact with Gadje. The implications of the deportation of 25.000 Romanian Roma to Transnistria under the regime of General Antonescu on the social and mental situation of the Roma in our village is unclear. During one of my visits in Romania I spoke to an old Rom whose uncle was a victim of the Stalinist deportation of the alleged “rich bourgeois” to the plains of Baragan in the 1950s, where he died. The family was deprived of their landed property and struggles in vain for a restitution of these expropriated possessions. These wounds will not heal and social peace will not come as long as justice is brought to the relatives and descendants. Because – on the side of the perpetrators – missing admission of guilt leads to a prolongation of violent, racist and discriminating attitude and inhibits a new start of the relationship on the basis of human rights and human dignity. In my opinion the importance of the experiences of extermination cannot be overestimated in all scientific and social work with Roma. One duty of the dominant societies is to ask for forgiveness for these crimes and to enforce the efforts for a dignified commemoration of the Roma-victims.

2. Expulsion:

If the majority could not kill them to solve the so-called “Gypsy-problem” and to get rid of them, local authorities pushed them beyond over the borderlines of the village, of the district, of the state. Refused entry admissions or withdrawals of permits of residence have frequently been used throughout the centuries, deportations of asylum-seekers from Germany and Austria to the Kosovo or from France to Romania are the actual prove of this method of exclusion. Last week in Carinthia the politicians just re-invented expulsion as political instrument by claiming a ban on a handful of Roma-beggars coming from a

small town in Slovakia called Hostiče, where they live in pure misery. I think, everyone in this room can ad some more examples for expulsion.

3. Repression

The human spirit is so creative to find new kinds and methods of repression that it is quite impossible to present all of them here. This chapter is the most voluminous part of my book. It documents antigypsism and exclusion in the social systems of labour, housing, education, health, language and culture, politics and public opinion. I will explain this point with an example: Not always have Roma been excluded from the labour-market. Some of them were reputable blacksmiths while others were enslaved almost at the same time. Being rather well integrated into the communist farming-cooperatives in the post-communist Romania of today unskilled day-labourers in my village are exploited with a salary of 2 Lei per hour, that is less than1 Euro and equivalent to 1 litre milk. This is why I suggest to look closely to the circumstances of exclusion and inclusion to find out possibilities of re-inclusion, which could lead to my fourth point:

4. Full Citizenship

Citizenship does not mean assimilation, which I would consider to be a method of repression. Citizenship means full participation and inclusion into the functional systems. But this is very complicated: Let me give you an example: When we started our project in the mid-90s, we thought: Education is the most important factor to promote integration. So we thought to start a school for the Roma-children. Then we talked a lot with the Roma there. They told us, that the children would not have any chance to go to school, because they didn't exist officially, they had no papers, no birth certificate, no resident's registration, no marriage certificate. We understood that first of all inclusion into the political system was necessary to get the possibility to be included into the education system. So we gave up the idea for a school-project and engaged two social workers, one Rom and one Gadje, and they helped the Roma to get their papers, to receive social security, family allowance, to be included in the basic social benefits. Today almost all of them have regulated their papers, our village is that one with the highest rate of Roma on social security in the whole district, and that's a problem for the mayor's reputation and budget and so she has agreed to a number of measures in favour of the Roma, who are now voters in her village. She supports now a day-care centre for 30 Roma-pupils, which runs the 3rd year,

where the children get a warm meal and support in doing their homework to keep them in school for more years than today.

This example makes it clear, why I focus on social work as central point for the integration of Roma into society.

Roma have been objects of different sciences: Educational Science focuses on schools and education and ignores the simple fact that the children don't have a table at home to do the homework, that they don't have shoes or that they are hungry. Medicine focuses on tuberculosis and starts a vaccination campaign that is inefficient because it ignores the historical experiences of forced sterilization, which causes the resistance of Roma-women towards medical treatment or it ignores the poor housing conditions that are not solved. Campaigns for contraception by the way are more often motivated by antigypsism that fears the "horrible fertility" of the Roma and not by an interest in the Roma themselves.

This is how many of the great projects funded by the governments or the European Union and created by scientific experts function AND fail. Each of the scientific disciplines focuses at the Roma as objects under their specific narrow point of view. In contrast to this procedure I plead for a social work science that gathers and processes the findings of the different special sciences and recombines them from the point of view of the Roma themselves. Let me give you an example: Unemployment of a young Rom in my village may be the result of a lack of birth certificate (legal/administrative cause), may be the result of a lack of motivation to go to school (psychological cause), because he has to sit in a segregated class (result of antigypsism in public opinion), which leads to discrimination in the community (political reasons). Or unemployment can simply be the result of a lack of workplaces after the privatisation of the collective farm cooperatives (economic reasons). And in each case the interdependence of these different causes may be different. Social work is a transdisciplinary science and can put these results of particular sciences together from the point of view of those concerned. Social work can involve the Roma into the process of inclusion on individual and local level and should empower the Roma to find or to claim their chance for integration,

Let me say some words to the role that plays religion in the question of inclusion of Roma into the European societies.

What is the specific task of religion in the purpose of including Roma more and more into different functional systems? As you see, this question focuses only on the social function of religion, on its visible effects for the social systems, not on the kernel of religion itself, not on the personal believing in God. So the initial question of my investigation was: Is there a visible religious life in “my” Roma-community? Is there a formal or informal binding to the structures of one of the great churches in the village that means the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church? Are there new religious groups as the Neo-Protestant Pentecostal Movements that found ethnical pure religious communities in my village? And the second question was: How do the churches react on Roma? Are there pastoral guidelines for Roma from the established Christian churches?

I will sum up the most important findings of the research in some sentences:

1. There is a vivid religious life in the Roma communities. Two thirds of the interviewed Roma pray, some of them several times a day, half of them have religious symbols as crosses or icons at home.

2. The connection to the churches in the centre of the village and to its representatives, the priests, is rather loose.

One third of the interviewed Roma is Roman Catholic, two thirds are Romanian Orthodox. Only two persons go to church on Sunday, only some attend the service on the high days and holidays like Easter and Christmas. Very few are in contact with the priests, the Orthodox one passes by once a year to bless the huts, the Catholic one only comes when he is called which almost never is the case. The feeling of adherence to a special Christian denomination is rather weak. During an interview an 18 year old girl had to ask her mother if she were Catholic or Protestant. Finally she decided to be Orthodox, because at Easter she attends the service in the big cathedral near the town hall that’s the Orthodox Church.

3. The Antigypsism of the dominant society is reproduced in the big Christian churches. A high representative of the diocese uses spontaneously the term “the blacks” when he speaks about Roma, knowing that this word is very pejorative in Romania. And so on, I could add a lot of other proofs of his

antigypsistic attitudes. The same at local level: Concerning the question, “How many of the Roma in the village are Roman Catholic?” the priest of the parish tells me: “Few, very few, from time to time someone comes and tells me that he is Catholic, but this is seldom, very seldom” although at least one third of the Roma-Population is Catholic. And he admits openly: “I don’t have regular or direct contact to the Gypsies.” And if there is a contact with Roma, it is a bad experience for him that he ascribes to their racial nature: One Rom left his work unfinished, so he “showed his real face”.

4. For Roma adherence to a special religious denomination is a trial to overcome the almost total exclusion at least in one functional social system of the dominant society.

Coming back to the uncertain membership to a certain Christian denomination mentioned just above it is very interesting that there are many families, where the children are baptized in different religious denominations. The parents are Catholic, two of the children are Catholic, two are Orthodox. The number of Orthodox Roma is increasing, although many of the old Roma of the village are Catholic, because the majority of the Romanian population is now Orthodox, due to the mass-exodus of the former mighty Catholic Swabians. For Roma-parents it is a chance to tie themselves to the social network of the majority to a certain degree when they baptize their children in the Orthodox Church and when they get a godfather from the now dominant Romanian Orthodox society. This thesis might explain the widespread phenomenon, expressed even among Roma-Specialists in a reproachful tune that Roma wouldn’t have a proper religion but only take over the religion of the surrounding society.

On the local and regional level – as I could proof in this study – the clerical Antigypsism reproduces the overall antigypsistic exclusion of the dominant society. But what about the official pontifical documents, the pastoral guidelines of the Roman Catholic Church?

I will demonstrate this fundamental attitude analyzing the first official statement concerning Roma. It is the famous speech of Pope Paul VI to the Roma in Pomezia near Rome in 1964. There is one sentence that is quoted in every document since: “You are not at the margins of the church, you are – in a certain sense – in the centre, you are at the heart of the church.” But let us read the unquoted sentences too to understand the context: “Best greetings to you, eternal pilgrims, to you, voluntary fugitives, to you, who are always on the run... Best

greetings to you, who have chosen your little tribe, your caravan as your separated and secret world, to you, who look at the world with distrust and are looked at with distrust from all, to you who wanted to be foreigners everywhere and forever... “ If you can't believe it, I can give you the original text in Italian.

The starting point of all theological reflection is nomadism, voluntary nomadism. It is only consequent that almost all biblical references focus on pilgrims: Abraham, who leaves his homeland and becomes the ancestor of the people of God, Moses and the flight from Egypt, Jesus, who has no place to lay down his head etc. Being on the way to the holy land is demonstrated as the ideal Christian existence, the supposed nomadic lifestyle becomes a role-model for all Christians, seeking their salvation settled not here on earth but in paradise. The Roma, exiled from one county to another, outlawed, deported, should be glad to be nearer to God than the saturated settled Christians. This is almost cynical and the result of a wrong sociological analysis: not nomadism is the crucial point, but Antigypsism and exclusion, as I explained above.

So I would suggest another biblical foundation of pastoral care: the healing of the leper. Leprosy, illness in general at that time was much more than a medical diagnosis. It was the description of a social phenomenon. Being different was equivalent to being excluded, ostracized, expelled to the outskirts of the village and society. Religion as shown in this biblical story is a way to overcome the segregation. That is why I am very sceptical about the new Roma-Pentecostal movements, which try to establish ethnical pure religious communities. I doubt that re-ethnicizing is a good development for the Roma-movement. In my opinion healing the leper is a symbol for getting in touch with the untouchables, including the excluded, overcoming the Antigypsism to found a new solidarity on the basis of equal rights as human beings, so that the Roma can proudly say one day: I am from that country, I have this profession, I have that number of children AND I am a Roma.