

Paper Title: **The work of Sisyphus: squaring the circle of Roma recognition**
Introduction to the special issue

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The work of Sisyphus: squaring the circle of Roma recognition

Introduction to the special issue

In the eleventh book of *Odyssey*, Homer tells his reader of the punishment inflicted upon Sisyphus for deceitful behaviour during his lifetime to be carried out in the Underworld upon his death. In the story, Zeus condemns Sisyphus to roll a large boulder up a steep hill just to see it roll down again before reaching the top, consigning the hero of the story to an unending frustration of heavy, but ultimately futile, effort for eternity. Since antiquity, many authors have used the figure of an unfortunate King-turned-labourer as a metaphor for a never-ending search for the goal in life, an effort most prominently made by Albert Camus in *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (1942). In Camus' own interpretation, Sisyphus illustrates one man's futile search for an ultimate rationality in the world devoid of God's providence, concluding his short volume with a point that more often than not, people forget about the end result of their efforts as they are consumed by backbreaking struggle and everyday activity.

This collection of papers brings together the results of discussions between the contributors, with our joint concern over a series of never-ending and mostly frustrating debates between scholars of different disciplines about the potential for the recognition of Roma minorities in contemporary Europe. The original meeting of authors in this volume sought to identify ways in which debates on Roma inclusion have been taking place across social science scholarship along three conceptual axes: identity formation, social mobilisation and political representation. However, our original excitement about identifying, drawing upon and working with the problematique pertaining to Roma communities proved a challenging task and we kept coming back to the same fundamental questions about *recognition* (both politically and in terms of identifications): what do we mean when we (or others) use

the term 'Roma' or 'Gypsy'? Why do these terms and our research seem so inadequate in the face of the realities of diverse situations?

A considerable amount of ethnographic work and sociological analyses focused on Roma political participation and representation has already been carried out. However, much of this work still needs to fully engage with a reflection on what this research, as a whole, achieves and what it contributes towards. If we fail to understand the wider picture of what our collective research is trying to achieve, and if we do not engage with the questions about the power paradigms of recognition and representations, our task becomes as hard and as futile as that of Sisyphus.

There have been huge rifts between scholars in Romani studies who have argued over different approaches to 'Roma'. This has set a fragmented and at times confusing terrain for the younger generation of researchers that this volume represents. A classic divide is the debate about whether to see 'Roma' as one large group with specific linguistic and historical connections, or whether poverty or cultural differences makes the notion of 'a group' redundant. We take the stance that seeing diverse understandings of who Roma are as divisive hampers the advancement of scholarly recognition of Roma communities' interests. Yet the question, 'who Roma are' keeps coming back, leaving a need for some kind of definition. The danger is that we can end up generalising and losing sight of important ways to make a difference. This special issue faces the challenge of representation, bringing together contributors who focus on Roma recognition as a starting point for enhancing our understanding of the political and social avenue for inclusion, representation and mobilisation of marginalised communities. All the papers in this special issue seek to locate the issue of Roma recognition in a wider set of discussions, showing how the situation of Roma minorities is linked to wider debates on minority integration and mobilisation. Coming from various disciplinary backgrounds, our authors discuss a diversity of interests and experiences, drawing upon their own fieldwork, analyses of media and academic discourses and policy documents. The papers lay the groundwork for a more critical approach to researching the recognition and representation of Roma minorities in contemporary societies.

Whilst not all contributors would necessarily situate their work in Romani studies, this special issue targets readership from that arena, primarily calling for greater alertness to approaches, methods and debates taking place across social sciences about the limits of recognition of groups under study. At the same time – and this forms a fundamental purpose to this special issue – the aim is not to remain in Romani studies. Thanks to established networks, courses, symposiums and a variety of summer schools, Romani studies has developed from a segment of anthropological and ethnographic research into an issue that informs quality research from multi-disciplinary perspectives (Guy, 2001, Stewart and Rövid, 2010). However, Romani studies has still not managed to free itself from its so-called ‘splendid isolation’ from other academic areas (Willems, 1997: 305). Contributions in this special issue speak to debates in minority politics and identity studies, along with migration and race/ethnicity discourses. This indicates that the experiences of, and discourses surrounding, Roma minorities reflect the fundamental concerns of social science research about identity, ethnicity, cohesion and change.

The first two papers assess how the matter of Roma exclusion has been addressed at the European institutional level from the 1990s. Agarín gives a detailed context of European institutional pathways to facilitate Roma inclusion that has approached the issue as if Roma was a homogeneous cultural group, yet refrained from defining it as such. McGarry’s paper then outlines the problem of representing Roma both as a broad policy target as well as an avenue that would allow space for Romani interests in national and transnational political contexts. The next two papers explore these contentions empirically and assess how Roma negotiate the markers and limits of external discourses about Romani political or social mobilisation. Clough Marinaro and Daniele analyse political mobilisation and participation of migrant Roma groups in Rome, where issues of cultural belonging, conflict and difference abound. Roman then puts two communities face to face and observes their interactions on an issue-specific basis: ‘Finnish Roma’ meet immigrant ‘Romanian Gypsies’ in Helsinki, and in such interactions Roman does not find much evidence for ethnic solidarity. Given the much-politicised discourse on relations between Roma groups across Europe and

a prominent move towards 'transnationalism' among the Roma, this paper finds that it is actually the dichotomy of 'us'/'them' that largely reflects the political and socio-economic situations where Roma people meet.

The articles by Messing and Tremlett move to discuss the approaches to researching Roma populations. Messing looks at the challenges of creating a solid methodological framework for collecting data on Roma. All European and nation-level policies and funds rely on statistics about Roma, but as Messing details, there is still a perceptible lack of variables beyond very broad, glib, Roma/non-Roma categories. Tremlett then concludes the special issue by looking for a potential future direction for research on Roma, arguing that Romani studies scholars need to take on a more critical view of concepts such as diversity and ethnicity, suggesting that new discussions around 'super-diversity' can be a useful tool to make sense of people's increasingly diverse lives. Whilst all the papers explore the politics and power of recognition and subsequent representations, we do not claim to be free of essentialising framings. What these papers do achieve is not taking such framings for granted, and this is a major step forward for research on or with Roma minorities.

Beyond post-socialism: Policy paradigms in contemporary Europe

The key modern historical juncture that forms the backdrop to this special issue is the system change from 1989 in which former socialist states in Central and Eastern Europe moved into a new era of self-governance, precipitating new economic and social structures in what is termed a 'post-socialist' era. Understanding the legacy of and the pattern of transition from this historical juncture is recognised as the most defining shift in Europe since the end of World War II (Eyal et al., 1998, Kornai, 2008), particularly when it comes to the profound effects which the transition has had on European societies. The increasing convergence of political and economic conditions has facilitated greater exchange between societies previously separated from one another by the Iron Curtain. Inevitably, greater awareness of each other's politics, economies and cultures, along with exchange between academic and policy experts are all fundamentally transforming European societies. The growing mutual exposure of western and eastern European societies to practices and norms dominant

in respective social contexts makes deeper engagement with perspectives upon and answers to perennial issues of social exclusion, such as those experienced by Roma communities, a matter of paramount importance. The papers in our special issue engage in debates around these issues with a specific reference to issues of recognition.

In the late 1990s, Nancy Fraser described a constitutive feature of the post-socialist condition as a tension between the two paradigms of redistribution and recognition (Fraser, 1997: 97). The post-socialist era saw a shift away from political claims of redistributing wealth to an emphasis on the recognition of different groups and their value in society with resultant competing routes to addressing social injustice and inequality (Fraser, 1997: 2). The redistribution paradigm views the formation of groups occurring under the pressure of socio-economic inequality, and thus was conducive for group *cohesion*, whilst the recognition paradigm promoted group *differentiation* as a means of greater participation by activating identity politics. 'The two kinds of claims stand in tension with each other', Fraser points out, 'they can interfere with, or even work against, each other' (Fraser, 1997: 16).

The situation of the Roma communities across the post-socialist region is highly illustrative of this context. On the one hand, Roma communities face protracted structural inequalities including poverty and limited access to health and social services, education and employment. Such structural inequalities lend weight to the argument that Roma group identity is a result of a person's basic lack of economic resources; redistributive practices would be a more appropriate way of improving their conditions (Ladányi and Szelényi, 2006; Szalai, 2003). On the other hand, the prominence of racism and general lack of appreciation of the diversity of Roma groups, their histories and experiences, gives credence to the argument for identity politics that exalt Roma people and their cultures by adjudicating their communities under a broader notion of a 'nation without a territory' (Acton and Klímová, 2001: 216). Prominent Roma activists have pushed for the latter, recognition paradigm to gain stronger political representation, drawing attention to stigmatised group identity in order to forge solidarity among Roma communities. However, there is also a push

for redistribution: a joint venture by various international actors 'The Decade of Roma Inclusion' (2005–15) for example, pushes for socioeconomic-based policies. The paradigms that Fraser notes can thus be linked to debates over whether Roma minorities should be seen predominantly as a minority mired in poverty in need of redistributed wealth, or a stigmatized group that needs to be recognized and valued in order for greater stability and participation to be achieved.

Nevertheless, in practice the two paradigms do not necessarily take consistent opposing positions and are often intertwined (see Tremlett, 2009 and McGarry, 2012 for further discussion). Political instruments of addressing communities excluded and marginalised often combine practices of recognition for the purpose of ensuring access to, i.e. redistribution of, resources. The Council of Europe, for example, has upheld the rhetoric of 'recognition', while recommending policies that would target disadvantaged Roma minorities and facilitate their participation in social lives alongside the majority. Likewise, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1998) and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1998) are both cited as two of the most important and fundamental instruments for the protection of Roma rights (as noted in 'Protecting the rights of Roma' report, Council of Europe, 2011). These recognition approaches see supporting cultural efforts as a resource translatable into socioeconomic development, anti-discrimination and interaction with the majority society. However, such instruments often overemphasise particular cultural markers that, from the outset, exclude many individual Roma people and in some cases, results in substantiating discriminatory discourses (Tremlett, 2009).

As is often argued, the EU cannot be fully committed to the recognition of Roma without a firm understanding of how to tackle racism and discriminatory practices (McGarry, 2012). This is a crucial point for European institutions as two new initiatives are under way that are significant in their scope and outlook. First, a common 'EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies' has been launched, which aims to create a set of common policy aims and outcomes for all member-states to assess and address specific needs of Roma to participate in societal

processes alongside the majority populations (Crepaz, 2014). The Framework is placing the responsibility for Roma inclusion in the hands of member state governments, who have been hitherto unwilling or unable to address the socioeconomic and political disadvantage of Roma and thus seeks to re-establish joint responsibility of the EU and its member-states for their Roma citizens (Agarín, 2014). Second, the newly established 'European Academic Network on Romani Studies' has been jointly founded by the Council of Europe and the EU in a step that recognises the importance of research-led policymaking related to EU citizens who have been socially disadvantaged and politically neglected. We see these initiatives as opportunities to push for the need to reflect on the experiences of researchers in this field. This special issue highlights and investigates the methodological and theoretical caveats and challenges that are still to be addressed when tackling racism and discriminatory practices against Roma minorities.

Theory in Romani studies

The major challenge is that much research on Roma minorities is lacking in theoretical discussions. We recognised this in our symposium and raised it in a resulting working paper (Tremlett and McGarry, 2013). This special issue does not solve the theoretical challenges, nor stake a claim to one theoretical approach. We do not believe that there should be one theoretical approach but we do believe we should be engaging much more with theory, importing and interrogating concepts from diverse disciplines, and debating with other scholars working on similar strands of social, cultural or political research.

Broadly speaking, there are two theoretical discussions on minorities and ethnicities that are particularly important for current studies of Roma minorities. First, on the politics of recognition from the study of minorities and migration in sociology and political science, and second, on identifications and anti-essentialism from sociology and cultural studies. Political scientists such as Kovats, Van Baar and Vermeersch all investigate paradigms of power in the formation of recognition politics. The key question here relates to how groups should be recognised in public life (Young, 1990) and whether a group, by virtue of its perceived difference, should be accommodated

by institutional and legal provisions which, in turn, could reinforce their marginalization (van Baar, 2014). Thus, it is important to recognise the potent effect of policy discourses. In this special issue, the first two papers (by Agarín and McGarry) focus on the institutional processes of producing 'Roma' in policymaking contexts and the impact of these processes for inclusion efforts. Similarly, Messing's detailed critique of the ways in which information on Roma minorities is collected and used in policymaking shows how decisions made by researchers using survey methodologies profoundly affect the way Roma minorities are viewed by policymakers. All three papers follow the political science line that such discourses are important to investigate and critique as they can powerfully affect societal forces and lived realities (Vermeersch, 2012: 1198).

But of course we also need to know what happens 'on the ground'. It is sociologist Roger Brubaker who has been particularly influential in highlighting the importance of the empirical, particularly in the case of Roma minorities. His academic shift from large-scale comparisons to empirical work is detailed in the opening of *Ethnicity Without Groups* (2004). Quoting Eric Hobsbawm's famous dictum that nationhood and nationalism cannot be understood without also understanding the everyday experiences of ordinary people, he recognises the significance of investigating empirical settings in his own work:

Studying the everyday preoccupations of ordinary Clujeni – to which ethnicity is indeed largely irrelevant – helped make sense of certain puzzles: in particular the lack of popular mobilization in response to, and the considerable popular indifference in the face of, intense and intractable elite-level nationalist conflict. (Brubaker, 2004: 2)

In this special issue, the two papers from Roman, and then Clough and Daniele investigate the differences between public discourses of Roma ethnicity and local practices. The authors are sensitive to the power struggles and enactment of identity, what Brubaker calls the 'quasi-performative aspect to the way in which group-making entrepreneurs of all kinds – ethnic, racial, nationalist, class etc. – contribute to

creating what they're purporting to describe by naming "groups" (Brubaker, quoted in Sturm and Bauch, 2010: 190). Both papers show a great awareness of the excessive group-focus of wider politics, and detail how people negotiate (or find irrelevant) wider politics in their everyday lives. It is the last paper, by Tremlett, that brings in a more firmly stated theoretical stance. Drawing upon the 'new ethnicities' and 'anti-essentialist' perspectives begun by Stuart Hall in the 1990s, Tremlett considers recent work on Vertovec's coining of the term 'super-diversity' (2007) as a potential anti-essentialising direction for researchers of Roma minorities. Not staking it as a singular theoretical perspective, Tremlett puts forward a case for super-diversity as a useful baseline for developing theoretical discussions in Romani studies. Super-diversity, she argues, can be used as a tool to allow different academic disciplines to speak to each other. This sums up the overall direction of the special issue. Whilst this special issue does not claim to resolve theoretical dilemmas, the authors' joint commitment to critically assessing public discourses and investigating local practices is an important stepping-stone in the study of Roma minorities.

Purpose of special issue

The main purpose of this special issue is to analyse and debate the main contentions in approaches to Roma minorities, particularly around the tensions between the concept of the European drive for inclusion and empirical examples of Roma mobilisation. We emphasise the importance of interrogating conceptual issues around minority integration alongside empirical knowledge of how Roma identities become implicated in and through different modalities of mobilisation. The themed issue uses 'Roma' as an umbrella term that is widely used in European institutions but carries with it normative and symbolic value for mobilisation efforts. The challenges of using such a term to represent diverse individuals and groups are well recognised and form the basis of a critical dialogue that connects the papers in a timely and animated discussion.

If research on Roma exerts its energies on attempting to solve the recurring questions of status relating to the origins and determination of 'who is Roma' then we are

doomed to repeat the work of Sisyphus. These exertions are not entirely futile, as they have illuminated the practices, discourses and realities of certain Roma communities laying the bedrock of Romani studies today. At the same time, we need to sharpen our understanding of concepts such as 'ethnicity' and 'identity' and how they are related to Roma communities. Recently, researchers from other fields such as migration, gender and education have begun working on Roma themes, which has brought welcome insights, concepts and knowledge to the discipline. Additionally, interdisciplinary discussions and research projects, including this special issue, have the potential to invigorate our understanding of concepts that can apply to diverse Roma groups. The time is certainly right: Roma communities continue to experience acute marginalisation and persecution across Europe and the issue of Roma inclusion has never been so high up on the agenda for national and European policymakers.

It has become a customary practice when discussing Roma to point out their heterogeneity: Roma are not really a group at all! They are too diverse! 'Roma' becomes shorthand to describe groups and communities including Lovari, Manouche, Sinti, Travellers, Kaale, and Gitanos, amongst others. The acknowledgement of ethnic group diversity has created an interesting phenomenon in itself whereby a piece of research will recognise, usually in the first footnote, the importance of avoiding the essentialisation of Roma, highlighting their diverse cultural practices, geographic distribution and absence of a common religion or language. However, once this first footnote is inserted, the research will inevitably discuss Roma communities in essentialising terms usually encapsulated by the phrase 'the Roma' or 'the Gypsies'. Even if careful to use only specific group names such as Lovari or Manouche, researchers still do not sufficiently recognise the possibility that these groups can be inherently heterogeneous in themselves. Language practices, socioeconomic circumstances, local contexts and so on, can differ *within* as much as *across* groups. And academics are not the only culprits: international actors such as the EU and the CoE have grappled with this issue as well, and routinely acknowledge Roma heterogeneity in policy documents and discursive interventions whilst continually re-affirming the existence of 'the Roma'. We fall into this trap (not entirely avoided by this special issue) because we lack the language to capture the diversity of Roma

communities and discuss ethnicity and identity in ways that do justice to the realities of everyday life for Roma. The authors in this special issue hope that an interdisciplinary investigation of Roma recognition will offer useful insights for future research and ensure that we do not repeat the same endless task. The papers in this special issue look towards understanding both *local practices* of Roma people as well as the expectations produced by *public discourses*, the two aspects of recognition that are required to ensure our understandings of Roma inclusion is no longer a task comparable to that of Sisyphus.

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