

Roma people and their road to cultural identity.

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Abstract: The paper “Roma people and their road to cultural identity” aims to present how the cultural identity of the Roma people has evolved through time and how it managed to preserve itself through history. Furthermore, it is important to see how the cultural identity of the Roma people is a key component in forming any kind of public policies and also in better understanding the differences between different groups.

Keywords: *cultural identity, roma people, cultural values, historical content*

1. Introduction

The identity of the Roma people is a complicated concept to fully define. Cultural, social and historical content is found in it, and the task of the researcher is to define how these elements are connected to each other at a given time and in a certain group, and how the hierarchy of elements appears and changes over time.

We can see that in literature, when it comes to defining the identity (or identities of the Roma – because the plural form seems to be more appropriate here) we can distinguish two main approaches: the essentialism of the traditional approach and the relationism of the so-called constructivist perspective. In the first approach, Roma identity is perceived as a reproduction of a cultural essence or substance: the idiom of 'being Roma' which is a transposition of the fundamental values of Roma culture into the behaviour of Roma individuals and into the life of a group. Culture here is an independent variable: to explain social life we have to refer to the culture that offers certain patterns that are activated in particular situations.

2. The different approaches on the Roma people’s cultural identity

In this approach, characterizing ethnography and traditional history, the Roma were considered an ethnic group with a stable, strong and practically unchanged identity. Such an identity can be understood as a synthesis of a common origin and cultural immunity. Thus, a Roma was someone whose ancestors came from India and arrived in Southern Europe in the fourteenth century and who was born a Roma – that is, someone was of Roma ethnicity.

In a cultural sense, a Roma was a person who spoke the Romani language and whose daily life was marked by the concept of a world divided into "pure" and "impure" spheres, who expressed solidarity with other Roma who showed respect for the hierarchy within the group, who accepted the obligations arising from the structure of the Roma community, and someone who, through nomadism or the adoption of specific forms of professional activity, he tried to lead to a normal life to minimize the extensive control of the non-Roma environment. This set of values makes up a special code of behaviour, with an associated way of seeing the world that together constitutes the essence of being a Roma, the "true Belonging" defined by some Roma groups such as romanipen, romipen, romanija, ciganija, etc. [1]

The second approach to Roma identity can be defined as a relational one. From this point of view, the set of cultural values (Romanipen) is treated as the historical result of concrete relations between Roma and the non-Roma environment, between certain Groups of Roma and between different categories of people in the context of these groups. It is precisely these relationships, within this point of view, that define the Roma identity and its many variations. In other words, in order to understand who the Roma are, it is necessary, above all, to return to the fundamental opposition between the Roma world and the world of non-Roma. It is precisely the impact of the non-Roma world, rather than any "natural difference", "ethnicity" or distinct cultural values, that, in the opinion of some researchers, played a crucial role in the construction of the Roma as a separate group.

This approach is based on the idea of Fredrik Barth[2] who argues that it is not cultural substitution that determines the identity of a group, but the social boundaries that shape the cultural content they contain. The identity of the Roma is therefore perceived here as a maintenance of the social border that protects the Roma "the social space composed according to their own ethics of kinship[3]". In this approach, culture is dependent: we can explain it as a result of the processes in which the Roma strengthen their relations with the environment.

Thus, the "Roma identity" is a whole complex consisting of a vision of the world based on cultural values, the image of one's own social space and the borders that separate it from others, as well as the way of perceiving one's own history. In other words, competing approaches to Roma identification constitute a fluid configuration of cultural social and intellectual values and conceptions in a state of constant transformation.

Max Weber gives a definition of ethnic groups as being + "those human groups that maintain a belief in a common descendant due to physical, customary or both similarities, ultimately because of the collective memory of colonization or migration[4]. From this definition we can delineate three important aspects: 1) the fact that the common lineage forming ethnic solidarity is based on a presumption or a real faith; 2) belief in a common descendant is more important than common lineage, and 3) that there is a basis that ranges from physical similarities to common history or cultural practices.

Over time, the belief in a common history and a common descendant turned into a culture shared by these members. Cornell & Hartmann gives a definition of this: "an ethnic group has become a group of people who are distinguished by common culture, typically including language, religion or other patterns of behaviour or belief[5].

Another important definition, one that marked the situation of the Roma in Eastern and Central Europe in a significant way, is offered by Joseph Stalin: "A nation is a stable community of people, historically constituted, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological characteristics manifested in a common culture of its own" [6]. Due to this definition, the Roma were not considered to be a national minority during the communist period because they did not meet one or more criteria.

3. Influences on the construction of cultural identity

Antony Smith tries to combine the Weberian approach to ethnicity with the cultural sphere. It defines an ethnic group as "a type of cultural group, one that emphasizes the role of the myths of lineage and historical memory, and which is recognized by one or more cultural differences such as religion, customs, language or institutions"[7].

Thus, the concept of identity is presented by Brubkaer as one that generates confusion and ambiguity when used as an analytical term. The author proposes the subsumption of the concept of identity to pairs of terms that cover the various meanings of the term: self-understanding and social localization as terms that consider subjectivity and the disposition to act, categorization and identification as a procedural term and similarities, grouping and connectivity. Similarities relate to shared attributes, connectivity to relationships that connects people and grouping refers to the feeling of belonging to a distinct, delimited and cohesive group. [8]

The construction of ethnicity is primarily about the situations in which people self-identify, the way they perceive others, their daily experiences, the way they manage the problems they encounter and the ethnic or other terms used to describe the causality of problems.

Going further and addressing the types of identity construction, Castells [9] offers a definition of this and states that in the contemporary context there are three main types of identity construction that are based on their origin: resistance identity, project identity and legitimation identity.

Also, another perspective of approaching the Roma identity is through the prism of the approach to the issue regarding the sub-groups and gentiles, some sociologists pointing to the existence of 40 sub-groups or gentiles. Burtea shows the limits of this approach due to the fact that in the contemporary era "the traditional nation no longer seems to constitute a very vivid fact of conscience for a large part of the Roma population"[10]. There are even certain people who declare themselves to be Roma, but without having specific physical characteristics.

Stephane Laederich and Lev Tcherenkov concept the identity of the Roma as a primordial, immutable given, based on laws, traditions and customs that they systematically analyze. The authors classify certain groups as Roma fiid and treat the issue in a unitary way what they call to be Roma. [11]

Vermeersch⁵⁰, in an attempt to analyse how Roma are defined, divides the discourse on how Roma are defined in academia into three categories: (1) a historical diaspora with historical roots in northern India; (2) a group or race in which the members are related; and (3) a group with a culture and still of its own life, nomadism, common cultural practices and a conception of the world inspired by Romanipen[12].

An objective definition of Roma and their identity is tried by Szelenyi and Ladanyi, which shows that in research and censuses, the number of Roma depends on who identifies the subjects. They analyse three types of potential classifications of Roma: the classification made by experts who come into contact with Roma, the classification made by interviewers in scientific or commercial research, and the self-identification of subjects, showing that all three classifications are "real"[13].

History is a defining element when we talk about Roma identity. Thus, the shared memoirs on elements or events of the past, such as the Holocaust and the deportation to Transnistria, deeply marked not only the Roma who participated directly in these facts, but also the subsequent generations. Thus, the collective mentality of the Roma was one that changed in order to protect themselves. Proof of this is still the fear of some Roma people to self-destruct during the censuses for fear of being sent to sea by "paper boat"[14]. Another negative factor derived from this nefarious history is unfortunately also preserved among the majority, especially those with extremist discourse, who appeal to the period during Antonescu's time as a good way to deal with the Roma population.

Some may think that it is easy to identify someone who is Roma by breed traits, for example: Roma have darker skin. But not all Roma correspond to this taxonomy and, on the other hand, Sicilians or Turks are not Roma. Obviously, they have a common language, which would make this comparison perceptible, despite the fact that there are a lot of people who claim to be Roma, but who do not speak Roma, the Roma language is nothing more than a huge collection of dialects that would make it almost impossible to understand between, a Turkish Rum and a Spanish Roma.

Also, cultural identity characteristics - from religion, clothing or music belong to a similar trend towards an extreme variety (from traditional Balkan Roma music to Spanish flamenco, for example), to which we must also add the majority ethnic group's preconceptions about them. The message of such a fragmentary community can be neither coherent nor unintelligible for the institutions of the majority state.

Another important factor in defining Roma identity is the fact that the Roma population has not gone through a process of cultural unification and identity reconstruction, as europeans have done, therefore lacking a specific identity capable of manifesting itself politically, as in the case of other European minorities.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, the Roma identity can be viewed from multiple perspectives, each offering a certain explanation of how both Roma and non-Roma people have built the image of the Roma cultural identity. In principle, the Roma identity is a construct formed predominantly (at least at first) by non-Roma. This construction was carried out through certain centres of power, from social institutions in particular and those of the state, to academic writings and behaviours towards Roma in everyday life.

Of course, the promotion of stereotypes and sayings with a negative character towards the Roma had a huge impact on the contemporary collective mentality and thus promoted false things about the Roma identity. The most eloquent and representative example of this is the use of the term gypsy by the majority person, a term that assigns many negative connotations to the person in question.

Thus, the Roma identity is a hybrid model. It is made up of the gypsy identity, built by the non-Roma, along with the identity formed by the Roma activists, along with certain specific elements such as language, religion, nation, etc. It is also formed and built in relation to other groups, being a reference to others and what others say about you. The Roma are the subjects of external categorizations that have greatly affected their understanding and perception of their own identity. Another important factor is also the way in which the Roma identity is communicated in the public space, which is separated into two categories - the academic environment that has a constructivist perspective on the identity of the Roma and the primordialist vision that is found in the media, but also in the public opinion, which transforms certain limited thoughts and knowledge into truths generally valid for the entire ethnic group.

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