



## Stereotypes and Folklorism

Michael Teichmann

The history of the Roma and Sinti is a history of suppression ranging from daily discrimination and racist persecution to systematic genocide. Ever since their arrival in Europe, the two groups have been labelled "dangerous strangers". They have been, and continue to be, accused of spying, witchcraft, pacts with the devil, as well as of rejecting work on a regular basis and stealing. They used to generally be known as "scary creatures".

The following example illustrates how much the collective consciousness is still influenced by religious and racist prejudices of this kind: in 1992, businessmen throughout the entire area of the northern German lowland plain placed brooms in front of their shops in order to keep away the "floods of gypsies from the east" which the popular press had predicted. For clarification, it may be noted that the so-called "gypsy-broom" can be traced back to medieval fear of devils and witches. The broom was believed to have a similarly deterring effect as the crucifix. In this respect, there are striking parallels with anti-Semitism: both Jews and Roma were blamed with the plague, the cholera and various rat plagues. The image of the "eternal Jew" moreover correlates with the idea of the "wandering gypsy". Both myths, whose power lives on even today, are based on the sense of an anti-Christian "original sin". The "eternal Jew Ashaver" was condemned to incessant wandering for having denied Jesus access to his home when the latter was in need of rest on his way to Golgotha. The Roma, who in reality did not appear in the Middle East before 1200, are said to have denied the Holy Family escaping from Egypt a place to sleep and were thus cursed with eternal wandering. In this context, another classic stereotype can be noted: since their arrival in Europe, it is especially those Roma and Sinti practicing nomadic lifestyles who have been accused of spying. They were blamed with having collaborated with the Turkish military and were held to be spies of the Vatican in Protestant England. During the time of National Socialism, they were considered accomplices of "Jewish Bolshevism", falling prey by the thousands to mass shootings by armed forces of the SS who, supported by task forces of the Wehrmacht, murdered behind the German front line. During the war in Kosovo, Albanians suspected Roma of collaborating with the Serbs. On the accusation of spying, they were driven out of the country or murdered. In Hungary, parental organizations recently protested against a schoolbook that still describes the Roma as criminals and spies.

The following example is a good illustration of the way in which prejudices and stereotypes come to exist: the legend of the "gypsy who steals children", among others, goes back to Maria Theresa's politics of forced assimilation, which ordered that Roma children were to be taken away from their parents and given over to the care of Christian foster parents. Those Roma families attempting to get their children back were consequently accused of "child theft".

In the 19th century, both a form of scientifically legitimated racism, which was to become the basis for later ethnocide, as well as a form of romanticism and folklorization grew in importance. Roma and Sinti were increasingly identified with a sense of unfulfilled longings and desires. Yet, the existing negative stereotypes were however not proven wrong, but merely re-interpreted in a positive way. In this way, the image of "the wandering gypsy" was eventually related to the idea of unlimited freedom. Through literature, music, dance, opera, and operetta, these gypsy images found their way into mass consciousness.

This construction of gypsy identity, simultaneously biologicistic and romantic, characterized both academic and socio-political debates on the topic of the Roma and Sinti in the 20th century. The biologicistic view worked with terms such as "blood" and "descent", categorising the Roma and Sinti



as an inferior group of people. Due to the scientific discrediting of the term "race" after 1945, "culture" became the new leitmotif in research. This, however, was a naturalised cultural term, which, characterised by the earlier mentioned idea of "gypsy romanticism", created a form of "culturalism" that defined the Roma and Sinti by their alleged "otherness", thus deeming cultural differences to be insurmountable.

Similarly, the postulate of racial purity is replaced by that of cultural purity. Up until the 1980's (and in some cases to this very day), a major part of ethnological research in German on Roma and Sinti after 1945 was carried out on the basis of this paradigm.

In this respect, it must be added that scientists such as Hermann Arnold and Martin Bloch, both of them central to German research about gypsies after 1945, still considered "race" the defining factor in social behaviour.

In this way, cultural peculiarities of supposedly all Roma groups, such as the concept of "impurity" or nomadism are excessively stressed, thus favouring processes of homogenisation and exoticism, which correspond less to social reality than to one's personal beliefs and expectations. Consequently, the reason for social inequality between the various majority populations and Roma and Sinti would not be found in the unequal access to resources, in poverty, joblessness and discrimination, but rather in their own "ethnic culture, which is not integrated into the European value system", as in the words of Reimer Gronemeyer. Following this line of argument, politics could no longer be held responsible of guaranteeing social standards for everyone, since the problems of the Roma and Sinti could be traced back to cultural issues. This strategy characterises the way the Roma are still being treated in many eastern European countries.

Such a static concept of culture that neglects continual change and leaves outside all kinds of sociological aspects, holds the permanent danger of folklorization, that is the reduction of culture to outer and simplistic patterns or aspects.

Artistic discussion on Roma and Sinti is characterised by such folkloristic attempts, especially those cultural areas of widespread public influence, such as film, television and photography, which offer very few examples of truly individual perspectives.



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