

Surveillance and Segregation: The Case of the Roma

Defining Roma

Boundaries: Real and Imagined

Surveillance and Marginalization

Emerging Nationalisms and Activisms

Panelists:

Ethel Brooks (Associate Professor, Women's and Gender Studies/ Sociology)

Krista Hegburg (Visiting Instructor, Anthropology)

Eniko Magyari-Vincze (Global Scholar, Institute for Research on Women)

Alina Vamanu (PhD student, Political Science)



Ethel Brooks



Krista Hegburg

In response to the current crisis faced by Roma people in Europe, the Center for Race and Ethnicity organized a panel of Rutgers faculty and graduate students to discuss how the Roma have come to occupy the ultimate designation of the "other" in a trans-national context.

Recent spates of violence directed specifically at Roma populations in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Italy and Spain illustrate the dire consequences of discrimination and segregation and the importance of having a critical and timely dialogue about this situation. How are we to understand these recent events? As connected to a history of exclusion and on a continuum with the Holocaust and ethnicity and race in the European past? Or as a distinctive new phase reflecting the politics of ethnicity and race in the new European Union?

Exploring issues of nationalism, identification, and liberalism in a post-Holocaust, post-communist context, scholars from Sociology, Women's and Gender Studies, Political Science, Anthropology, and the Institute for Research on Women participated in what we hope will be an on-going discussion about the role that issues of race and ethnicity play internationally, especially in this time of global economic and political instability. Panelists contextualized the racial scapegoating, discrimination and segregation suffered by the Roma in this current conjuncture by placing it within a long history of violence directed at this diverse group of people. As they pointed out, the case of the Roma offers rich—and disturbing—comparative insight, a case study, "straight out of Habermas 101," in the production of "scandalous ethnicity."

DEFINING ROMA

Posing a question early on that underscored the problems with defining identity through notions of ethnicity, Ethel Brooks (Women's and Gender Studies) asked "how can we recognize Romani?" Brooks, who is Romani herself, described an encounter with a Romani woman in Portugal that alerted her to the notion of "recognition through misrecognitions." Though the women eventually recognized each other as Roma, this process was greatly complicated by class position and accompanying judgments about outward appearance. Brooks' talk addressed the politics of recognition in many historical contexts including during the Holocaust "when Roma people were forced to wear capital Rs on their clothing to identify them as genetically unworthy." An estimated half a million Roma

were put to death in Nazi death camps. It has been a challenge for scholars to recognize and unpack these shared histories of oppression and genocide.

Continuing on this theme of recognition, Brooks also took us to the contemporary context of the United States where racial categorization functions as a means of formal and legal recognition, so that some Roma are petitioning to be included in the categorization of "Asian-American" in order to claim the status of a formally recognized minority. Officially there is no existing category for Roma besides the general category of the Other. Brooks's talk foregrounded the importance of language and naming in identity formation—aspects that are clearly elucidated through the case of the Roma.

Complementing Brooks's discussion of the politics of

Roma, often referred to as gypsies, make up the largest ethnic minority in the European Union with an estimated population of ten million. A largely trans-national population, the Roma constitute an incredibly diverse group believed to have ancient roots in India; many speak dialects of a common Romani language, while others have adopted the language of the nation in which they live. Yet, the group has long been marginalized as an "Other" in the European context—identified ethnically rather than as citizens of nations.

With the end of the Cold War, Roma populations within a number of European countries have been increasingly targeted as interlopers by right-wing extremist groups. The past few months in particular have seen a surge in powerful demonstrations by extremist paramilitary groups in Roma-inhabited areas within Eastern and Southern Europe, with houses firebombed and children and adults shot to death. During these times of global economic and political crisis, anti-Roma sentiment is being fueled by stereotypes of Roma people as criminal, unproductive parasites on civilized society.

recognition, Eniko Magyari-Vincze (Global Scholar, Institute for Research on Women, Babes-Bolyai University, Romania) reflected on the problems with claiming an identity by posing this provocative question: "How do you claim that you are a people? A flag, a hymn, a nation?" Magyari-Vincze called attention to the problematic "toolkit of culture" that is deployed when groups are discriminated against and again in turn when segregated groups claim a marginalized identity for themselves.

BOUNDARIES: REAL AND IMAGINED

Majority groups in Europe tend to disassociate themselves from the Roma (a branch of the Romani people who have historically lived in Eastern and Central Europe, and a term that has increasingly been used to refer to the Romani as a whole), creating binaries of nationals-outsiders, good and bad citizens, victims and aggressors. Sharing her dissertation research on the consequences of Romanian migration to Western Europe in the post-Cold War era, Alina Vamanu (Political Science), pointed out growing insecurity among Romanians about the possible confusion of Roma and Romanians within Western European countries to which the Roma have been migrating. Vamanu suggested that Romanians have been responding to the perceived threat to their identity by constructing rigid concepts of ethnic Romanianness and Gypsiness. Such constructions, however, merely invert and obfuscate the power relations between the majority and the minority. The Roma have always been disadvantaged by the Romanian majority; however, public discourse typically portrays the Roma as an aggressive, criminal ethnic

group and suggests that they are victimizing the "honest," "hard-working," and "respectable" Romanian folk. Vamanu's talk highlighted how the fear of blurry boundaries between the majority and minority groups leads to greater ossification of ethnic constructions and categories.

Discussing the Czech case, Krista Hegburg (Anthropology) talked about the spectacle of the "typical" Romani family in the Czech media, where images of Roma being evicted from housing, or having excessive number of children, or having children that are raised by welfare services have contributed to increasing ghettoization of the community. These images in turn function as tools in schooling Czechs on how to be liberal citizens. Roma serve as powerful counter-examples in the construction of notions of Czech citizenship. As in the Romanian case, we see how images of Roma are being used to make rigid and more exclusive national and ethnic identities.

Reinforcing Vamanu's and Hegburg's analysis, Enikő Magyari-Vincze pointed to the social function performed by the Roma in the material and symbolic process of national identity formation, for the Roma play the role of the Other that is excluded from the national body. In turn, however, Roma have also constructed their identities as oppositional and complementary to the ethnic majority. In other words, this social positioning has become part of both national and Roma identity, and results in a mutual lack of trust on both sides.

SURVEILLANCE AND MARGINALIZATION

Panelists recounted numerous recent episodes that have been reported

through the media worldwide and that speak to the different kinds of violence directed against Roma in recent years. Some of this violence occurs in the form of increased surveillance of Roma peoples in nations like Italy and Spain. Alina Vamanu talked about attempts in Italy to automatically fingerprint people who are suspected to be Roma. Such actions by the Italian government have only opened the Roma to greater backlash and discrimination from the Italian population. Vamanu referred to these processes as contributing to the "production of scandalous ethnicity." Romanians migrate to Western European host societies such as Italy and Spain, are portrayed in negative terms in

these host societies, and then strive to discursively dissociate themselves from the Roma, in an attempt to create an image of "worthy Romanianness" in their own eyes, as well as in the eyes of the local populations. Roma play the role of "other" -- like the role played by Jews in the past.

Ethel Brooks pointed to a recent headline that highlighted the human cost of this discrimination and production of "scandalous ethnicity." The bodies of two Romani girls who had been begging were found on a beach in Naples; images showed visitors to the beach continuing to picnic as the bodies lay close by. Brooks's story raised questions as to what Romani laboring bodies are worth.

Consequences of the marginalization and ghettoization of



Image from a May 28, 2008 Newsweek story, "Italy's Unwanted," by Barbie Nadeau. Caption beneath photo reads: "Under Siege: A Roma woman inside the grounds of a camp near Rome." Photo: Tiziana Fabi / AFP-Getty Image



This image of a march in Budapest by the Hungarian Guard, a nationalist paramilitary organization closely associated with the country's far-right Jobbik party, appears in an Economist article, "Hungary's Opposition: A Nasty Party," June 18, 2009. The article comments: "Jobbik denies anti-Roma racism; it says it is just against gypsy criminals. But the badges, black trousers and heavy boots of its uniformed wing, the Magyar Garda (Hungarian Guard), which marches in formation against Roma wrongdoers, evoke unhappy memories of Hungary's past."

Roma include an increasing fear of Roma, who are associated with crime in countries like Italy and Spain. They are also often blamed for self-segregation. As Ethel Brooks pointed out, the blame of self-segregation travels discursively and trans-nationally and may in fact contribute to keeping the Roma always on the outside.

EMERGING NATIONALISMS AND ACTIVISMS

Accompanying the increasing violence directed at the Roma, there have also been attempts by European governments to present racism as a national embarrassment. Racism impinges on national identity formation, especially when it results in international reporting on incidents of marginalization and discrimination against Roma. Eniko Magyari-Vincze pointed out that before EU accession, countries were evaluated on how well they solved the Roma problem, and Eastern European countries were often blamed for being relatively “backward” in *not* being able to solve it. After the accession of a unified EU and the slow disappearance of the formerly communist Eastern Europe as a convenient zone of blame and shame, there have been attempts to frame Roma-related issues as issues of “ethnic minorities” rather than of racism. Despite this change of vocabulary, however, nation states continue to be the political entities within which solutions to issues of “racism” or of “ethnicity” are expected to find solution. But with the rise of neoliberalism, nations have been putting forward solutions to problems of race and ethnicity in terms of personal responsibility. As Magyari Vincze pointed out, European nations have been emphasizing the idea of

“dignity”—which is conceived of in social, cultural, economic terms, and as something we should all take responsibility for feeling.

But simultaneous with this new nationalist discourse, there have also been new attempts by Roma peoples to mobilize and politically organize. Roma community and civil rights activists gathered nationwide to protest the recent spate of violence against their communities in the Czech Republic and to demand that government authorities actively work to combat extremism and racism directed at Roma. Organizations such as the European Roma Rights Center, The Roma Civil Rights Foundation in Hungary and The Human Rights Project in Bulgaria are working to improve conditions for Roma people throughout Europe and provide them with some representation on the political stage. These organizations are cataloging attacks against Roma individuals and communities and subsequent inaction by local authorities through appeals to the European Union and the European Court of Human Rights. For these organizations, the threat of sanctions from the European Union for nations who refuse to offer concrete protections for Roma minorities is the most viable means of exerting pressure on authorities who may otherwise ignore or perpetuate persecution of Roma living within their borders. In the discussion of the Roma “problem,” the solutions proposed range from ensuring specific political representation and rights for Roma within various European nations to establishing an autonomous Roma state. As Krista Hegburg reminded us,

however, the quest for recognition on behalf of people who are largely poor and have no political clout is fraught with danger.

Please note:

The CRE welcomes faculty to submit ideas for future programming on issues of or relating to race and ethnicity; you may contact us at raceethnicity@sas.rutgers.edu.



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