

Cultural rights and Roma migration through Europe

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Introduction

This chapter deals with the mobilization struggling for cultural rights of the Roma population in Europe. Whereas most of this people is totally sedentary in the various countries where they live, some of them have migrated from eastern to western Europe during the last two decades, following a migration initiated by the middle class in order to resist to economic depreciation in the former communist countries (Morokvasic 1999). By doing so, they raised a transnational “Roma issue” as a main political subject in western countries. After having presented this situation with more details, the point of this chapter will be to analyse how the Roma movement has emerged and been recognized over the last decades, in order to reply to structural discriminations and endemic poverty. We’ll observe how a few leaders managed to construct a trans-european Roma nation, despite the lack of previous common feelings of belonging from ordinary people. The chapter points the adequacy between leaders’ activity and the option of a pro-active political multiculturalism defended by international organizations (Council of Europe, EU). As A.Wimmer (Wimmer 2013) pointed out in other circumstances, the context offered the possibility to give space for a –nearly- new ethnic group, supported by an identity that has been shaped during the last fifty years. That is the process we analyse here. In conclusion, we underline the main objectives of such a movement and its links with the struggle for empowerment in a neo-liberal context.

1. Roma migration in Western Europe, a new issue

Before entering the main subject, it is necessary to clarify our focus group, as the “Roma” is a quite obscure population, confronted to many stereotyped representations by the main population. The people called Roma presents itself as an ethno-cultural group spread all over Europe, divided in many sub-groups in the various countries of the continent. The names given to these people are numerous: Tzigani in eastern Europe, Gypsies in Spain, Manouches in France, Yenische in Germany, Travellers in the UK and so on. The cultural substrata of these groups, their way of life, their kind of housing are of various types, but in the common imaginary, they are thought off as being nomads, poor and living in the margin of the European societies, in their specific cultural pattern. Whereas, as the anthropologist H.Asséo wrote, the idea of belonging to a common nation is quite recent and, even now, not broadly shared by ordinary people (Asséo 2007). Throughout the continent, their main common point is to be stigmatized and often discriminated, maintained apart, obviously or incidentally, from the main society (Stewart 2013). If existent in every European society for centuries, their presence has become a political issue in western Europe during the last fifteen years (Nacu 2011; Canut and Hobé 2011; Legros and Rossetto 2013; Sigona and Trehan 2009; Vincze 2013).

Indeed, the construction of the European Union has been accompanied by an opportunity for mobility between the member states, giving rise to unprecedented population flows. Since 1995, the member countries

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of the so-called Schengen area¹, which covers more or less the territory of the EU, have built an area of free circulation.

All sorts of migrations have followed, including pendular movements from eastern to western Europe for economic reasons (temporary work, subcontracting, trade, etc.). In this new migratory configuration, as usual, it is first and foremost the populations most heavily armed with social and economic capitals who migrated first. It is then mainly the middle class, suffering from the economic transition, who migrate towards the West (Potot 2007; Diminescu 2003; Okolski 2001; Potot 2008; Morokvasic, Erel, and Shinozaki 2003; Petric and Gossiaux 2009). Later, while migration was greatly facilitated and no longer an adventure, more impoverished groups also began to take advantage of the wealth differential internal to the European Union.

Thus, so-called Roma populations, which are numerous in Eastern Europe, have joined Western countries. In their countries of origin, such as Slovakia, Bulgaria, Former Yugoslavia and Romania, these groups are often socially and economically disqualified and disregarded (Vincze 2013; Reyniers 1995; Powell and Lever 2015). They have also been the main victims of the economic crisis following the collapse of the communist bloc (Wolfensohn and Soros 2003; Ladányi and Szelényi 2002). In such a context, migration towards France, Germany, Italy or other places appears as an option for better hopes. Even without qualification or social capital, they guess they will be able to make the most of richer societies. As an informant told me “In France, even the rubbish are more valuable than in Romania”.

Arriving in Western Europe, these migrants are double marginalized, as being economic migrants first and, secondly, as being from the stigmatized Roma ethnic group. Most of them live there in slums or squats and have great difficulty in getting out of a survival economy based on begging and the recovery of used objects. Thus, the arrival of these migrants focused the attention of the media and politicians on the Roma group.

By doing so, they join together Roma from the East, who are foreign economic migrants, and Roma from Western countries, who are natives of these states and most of the time much better well off. Thus, the arrival of eastern Roma tended to stigmatize all Roma, raising up during the last decade an ancestral latent racism (Csanády and Briard 2014).

The presence of these people begging in public spaces, which offers a high visibility to the very great poverty in Europe, has become a political issue: the Roma population is seen as the cause of a social disorder. Politicians often denounce the supposed unwillingness of these people and point out their own responsibility regarding the racism they endure. Roma are not considered just as poor, they are regarded as an ethnic group whose culture prevent them from being integrated in the main societies. Its living conditions in Western Europe are accorded not to difficulties of social and economic integration but to their cultural characteristics. Thus, this population, which hardly operates as a group at the level where people interact, is correlated to various social issues: the one of racism, the one of economic migration and the one of poverty and inequality throughout Europe.

In such a context, more and more Roma organizations emerged during the last decade. As a result, advocacy of this population by civil society (NGOs) claims less access to universal rights, as is generally the case with regard to the defense of migrants (right to education, health, housing), but requests cultural rights that are specific to this population. Through the ethno-cultural path, their aim is to struggle discriminations and poverty bared by Roma. These NGOs appear in the media when Roma shantytowns are eradicated or when politicians discriminate or pronounce racist speeches against Roma. But if Roma groups are so diverse, where do these organizations come from? How do they agree on a common narrative regarding Roma's origin and culture? How do they gain acknowledgment at a European level? It is these questions we intend to consider now.

2. The Roma movement, a co-construction

If visible for the general public only since a decade, the Roma movement, gets its roots in an unrelenting mobiliza-

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/schengen_en

tion which has been lasting more than fifty years. In a sense, the “Roma nation” was built as a unified people in the twentieth century, just as the majority of European nations did in the 18th and 19th centuries (Thiesse 2001). It began slightly before World War II, but the transnational Roma movement really took shape during the second half of the twentieth century.

However, this mobilization would have had not effect if it had not been supported by main European institutions. Since the WWII, traumatized by the Jewish genocide, the European Union and the European Council have actively supported a multiculturalist approach, defending a conception of a society made of a multiplicity of minorities. This rhetoric prevents a vision in terms of class struggle and wealth inequalities, and valorise a society in which each minority, being ethnic, gendered or else, should have access to cultural rights. These latter appear as a solution to struggle discriminations which are seen as the main cause of inequities.

Regarding Roma, this orientation supported the emergence of a transnational movement in a kind of virtuous circle: the attention of European institutions (European Union and Council of Europe) to minorities gave weight and meaning to Roma representations, which tended to increase the visibility and give shape to that specific ethnic group. The Roma nation was constructed from a perspective of Affirmative action, starting from the asset that Roma were discriminated and suffered from ill-treatment throughout Europe. The Roma movement, led by a few educated leaders from western countries, become engaged in a political struggle to defend a dominated population and regain a denied dignity. Thus, a Roma political elite intended to get the attention of a European political elite. Meanwhile, it responded to an expectation from European institutions that had been sensitive to the Roma cause since the genocide (Samudaripen in romani) but had no direct contact with these people on the ground. As a matter of fact, Roma were quite diverse, spread all over the continent and had hardly any political leaders in the countries where they lived. In such a context, it was difficult to invite them to the table of negotiations. In this sense, the Roma movement responded

to a political need of the international organizations. It allowed to create community leaders who, on the one hand, could represent an unstructured ethnic group and who, on the other hand, could express expectations of individuals for whom social difficulties were identified. Therefore, from the 1950's, the Roma movement will work hand in hand with European institutions, in particular with the Council of Europe, which, although discrete on the national political scenes, is a strong ideological incubator in Europe. This process gave a political reality to the Roma ethnic category and intended –although with low success until now- to support a collective consciousness between the diverse groups concerned.

3. Historical process

Lets consider now, how this mobilization occurred during the second half of the twentieth century. In 1959, a Romanian Tzigan from Paris, Ionel Rotaru, founded the Gypsy World Community and became its official representative. If he is concerned with obtaining the support of a few Gypsy personalities, his action has an outward-looking political aim: he claims better treatment for Gypsies among French deputies; Calls on the German government to pay war damages for Gypsies victims of the genocide; He writes to the United Nations with the aim of obtaining a territory for Gypsies, etc. This association had little success and was dissolved in 1965 but it launched the initiative. In 1967, a few leaders of this NGO, gathered with others around the Yugoslav Vanko Rouda, established, the Tzigan International Committee. The organization publishes a monthly publication, The Gypsy World Voice, which aims to federate and structure the Gypsy world by highlighting the homogeneity of the difficulties encountered throughout Europe.

On the institutional side, in 1969, the European Council adopts the first “Recommendation on the situation of Gypsies and other nomads”. At the same time, and during the following decades, the issue of nomadism will be deeply worked by the Roma movement to become constitutive of the Gypsy identity.

In 1971, the International Romani Union (IRU), appears as the successor of the Tzigan International Committee, and is formed by leaders of many European

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countries, in order to represent politically “all the Roma of the world”². It held the first World Roma Congress in London which is nowadays regarded as the advent of the national Roma movement (Asséo 2005). Until today, the International Romani Union is the main Roma organization whose activities extend across Europe; it says it has the voice of about 12 million Roma and Sinté living in Europe. This organization has greatly contributed to formalizing knowledge about Roma population. It has worked at defining the socio-cultural content of the Roma ethnic group. I set up a common name for the various groups in 1971: “In the spirit of the now universal practice, the 1st International Congress of the Roma has claimed the legitimate right of this people to be recognized under its real name” Rrom “(roma) to designate it”³.

The name being not enough to make the Roma people, the congress also adopts a flag and a patriotic hymn written for the occasion. The founding myths of the nation are defined at this first congress: language, origin and persecution will play this role.

Ten years later, in 1981, as if it replied to the claims of this congress, the European Council adopts a resolution (125) stipulating “The Roma” (so-called) are recognized as one of the European ethnic minorities. They are thus part of the defense of minorities and cultural diversity in Europe”⁴.

A real work is then undertaken around the Roma culture by its leaders in the following period. They set an official origin to the group. From the study of the languages of certain groups, a historical account was reconstituted. Among Roma identified as such, many do not speak any other language than the one of the country in which they live, but some have recourse to unwritten languages that have common elements among themselves. Linguists, thus, postulate the existence of an original Gypsy language which has been reconstructed from 1971 until

it is established in 1990 through a grammar in 21 points with a specific alphabet (Volle 2007).

Beside, in 1994, the Council of Europe adopts the Charter of Regional Languages and a resolution on the protection of minorities in Europe. So, the Romani language itself becomes a cultural object to be defended. Also in 1994, European Council, denouncing discriminations and stereotypes against Roma, votes a specific program for Roma and Travelers, which urges European countries to treat these populations with particular attention. Further, in 1997, the European Union makes the condition of the Roma one of the criteria for new EU membership from eastern Europe. The Roma issue, previously perceived as a problem of the countries of Eastern Europe, is becoming an issue shared by all EU members, due to possible migration towards the West.

The Roma movement keep gaining power and in the year 2000, Emil Scuka, President of the IRU, gives a speech on the existence of a Roma nation without territory but with Indian origins. By a language genealogy, he postulates a pure biological lineage since the departure of northern India around the 10th century. This theory replaced any other depreciative alternatives regarding the origin of the Roma.

This narrative gives nowadays their legitimacy to the many Roma organizations: the existence of a common nation is not questioned anymore and is backed on a specific language, a unified history, a flag and a national hymn. Even though at the level where the real people interact, observing the everyday ethnicity (Brubaker et al. 2006), the Roma identity is hardly acknowledged—people mostly speak of their group as Tzigan or Manouches and so on-, for international institutions, the Roma exist as an ethnic minority and constitute a target for public policies.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, the ambitions of such a mobilization was –and still is- to fight against economic scarcity of the vast majority of the people designated as Roma. In this sense, despite appearances, the Roma movement is not folklorist: As shown by N.Fraser, the struggle for recognition is above all a requirement of redistribution (Fraser 2003). The neo-liberal politics being more obli-

² See <http://www.iru2020.com/>, consulted in july 2017.

³ Site of the NGO *La voix des Roms* <http://Roms.blogspot.fr/>, consulté le 14/7/2015

⁴ <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/X2H-Xref-ViewHTML.asp?FileID=6762&lang=fr>

ging with minorities claims than with class struggle, ethnicity has become a weapon for improving the condition of marginalized people. In the case studied, as it has been for some Indigenous in Latin America (Jackson and Warren 2005), the acknowledgement of the Roma nation is a prerequisite for acting on processes of social relegation and becoming a public policies' focus group. In this sense, cultural rights should not be considered as a simple matter of intellectual comfort but as an inseparable part of the human rights.

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