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Paper Summary

Is There a 'Waiting Room of History' in Europe?
The West, Eastern Europe and the Anthropology of Roma

The main characteristic feature of most gipsy communities is the lack of several important things, like adequate wages and income, proper homes, appropriate clothing and meals, healthy drinking-water, education and the ability to complete with non-gipsy people.

- Introduction,
Photographs of Hungary Gypsies from 20th Century History,
Hungarian Ethnographic Museum, 1993

This paper is an investigation of the ambivalences and tensions that exist within Europe between the West, the East, and the Other therein. Rooted in postcolonial theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to 'provincialize Europe,' the paper's primary concern is to explore how notions and values about 'the West' and 'Europe' are mobilized within academic work on Roma in East-Central Europe. This task is approached through an engagement with ethnographic and historical representations of Hungarian Roma in anthropological scholarship. In doing so, I aim at illustrating the ways in which the anthropology of Roma constructs what Chakrabarty calls a 'waiting room of history' in which Romani identity becomes juxtaposed against a modern 'West' and thus comes to represent notions of lack, incompleteness, and the denial of political modernity and Europeanness.

Importantly, the anthropology of Roma is located within a region itself wrought with the complexities, ambivalences, and tensions between 'Western' Europe and 'Eastern' Europe: as scholars of East-Central Europe emphasize (Wolff 1994, Todorova 1997, Cervinkova 2012,

Bakic-Hayden 1995, Beasley-Murray 2007), postsocialism and the inferiorizing positionality of East-Central Europe within the wider European project has necessitated a probing of the meanings of ‘the West’ and ‘Europe’ for the region as a whole. My analysis of the anthropology of Roma therefore interrogates the positionality of ‘Eastern’ Europe in relation to ‘Western’ Europe, considering the implications of the region’s “demi-Orientalization” (Wolff 1994: 7) as the “semideveloped, semicolonial, semicivilized, semioriental” space of Europe (Todorova 1997: 16). The question becomes one of how representations of Roma operate to mark East-Central Europe as simultaneously superior and inferior against the West, within the overlapping arenas of postcolonialism and postsocialism, and *vis-a-vis* the axis between ‘West’ and ‘East’ Europe. How are Roma shaping and being shaped by a region that compensates for its own sense of inferiority, in which “violently distancing themselves from Gypsies is an effort by ‘true’ East Europeans to deny their own impurity” (Imre 2005: 86)?

My analysis consists of two parts. Firstly, I provide a theoretical examination that places Chakrabarty’s framework of ‘provincializing Europe’ in conversation with postcolonial theories regarding Roma and East-Central Europe. I explore the ways in which Romani history is depicted in terms of lack, incompleteness, and inadequacy, in comparison to a figurative ‘West’ and how, consequently, the Roma of anthropological representations become confined to linger in an idyllic past separate and untouched by Western political modernity. Chakrabarty’s poetic image of the ‘waiting room of history’ is instructive in understanding the implications of a version of history that centers on ‘the West’ as the yardstick for political modernity. As he explains, this eurocentric historical discourse

consigned Indians, Africans, and other “rude” nations to an imaginary waiting room of history. In doing so, it converted history itself into a version of this waiting room. We were all headed for the same destination... but some people were to arrive earlier than others. That was what historicist consciousness was: a recommendation to the colonized to wait (Chakrabarty 2007: 8).

‘Provincializing Europe’ then becomes a task of articulating the tensions, omissions, and ambivalences within these projects of Western modernity and European historicity. Drawing from scholars probing the relevance of postcolonialism for the study of Romani histories and representations (Junghaus and Picker 2014, Ashton-Smith 2010, Trehan and Kóczé 2009, Imre

2005), my paper suggests that Roma in East-Central Europe are read through a gradation of ‘waiting rooms of history’ in which they must contend with the power relations of being caught between both East-Central and Western Europe. In bringing Chakrabarty’s analysis to bare on the contradictions of East-Central Europe, I attempt to make sense of Romani histories in relation to a ‘West’ that is separate from them and to which aspirations for modernity in the region are perpetually cocked. The analysis thus attempts, as Chakrabarty suggests, “to write into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and ironies that attend it” (Chakrabarty 2007: 42).

Second, I consider these theoretical insights with specific examples from ethnographic, historical and anthropological representations of Hungarian Roma. In analyzing photographic and written texts of Hungarian Roma within the scholarship of anthropology, I pose a set of questions inspired by the project ‘provincializing Europe:’ Do these representations evince the omnipresence of the ‘West’ and the ambivalence of East-Central Europe? Is it possible to locate the Roma as a figure of lack within them? How is Romani history implicitly measured against a particular notion of political modernity rooted in the ‘West’? In following these lines of inquiry, two themes become discernible: firstly, a preoccupation with the origins of Roma, which exempts them from modern European narratives of belonging, relegating them to a position far outside the ‘West’; and, secondly, a social anthropological classification system that juxtaposes Western and Eastern trajectories of development, thus placing Roma by definition in the waiting room of history.

I conclude by interrogating the potential pitfalls and risks in ‘provincializing Europe’ in a region where ‘Western’ liberalism is a relatively tenuous concept. What does ‘provincializing Europe’ signify for Romani histories in a setting where appeals to the ideals of ‘the West’ offer one of few footholds on which the ongoing struggles for Romani rights are fought? The symbolic power of ‘Europe’ to advocate for the rights of Romani people in a postsocialist landscape marked by increased bouts of undemocratic and far-right movement is an especially stark example of Chakrabarty’s observation that European thought “has historically provided a strong foundation on which to erect - both in Europe and outside - critiques of socially unjust practices (Chakrabarty 2007: 4). ‘Provincializing Europe’ must then be a project that can bare the weight

of the double significance of 'the West' that is both disparaging and liberating for a postsocialist East-Central European country such as Hungary and the Roma who live in it.

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