



Continuity or rupture? Roma/Gypsy communities in rural and urban environments under post-socialism

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The aim of the article is to contribute to existing research and debates on social change associated with the post-socialist transformation in Eastern and Central Europe. It does so by drawing attention to and examining the diversity of ways in which such change has been lived through and reflected upon by members of Roma (Gypsy) communities living in urban and rural environments. Drawing on ethnographic research amongst excluded and segregated Roma in the 'ghettos' of Czech cities and in rural 'Gypsy settlements' in the Slovak countryside, the author notes a striking difference between how members of these communities, belonging to the same extended families, lived through and reflect upon the post-socialist transformation. While the members of the Roma communities living in Czech cities perceive the post-socialist transformation as one of the most dramatic ruptures in their life trajectories, the rural Roma do not seem to have been affected as deeply and dramatically, and their life trajectories seem to be framed by different events than those directly associated with the market transition. The paper analyses and explains the social and historical conditions that (co)produce the sense of rupture or continuity in the life trajectories of members of Roma communities exposed to urban and rural environments.

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1. Introduction

Recent academic research and human rights monitors have repeatedly identified a significant decline in the socio-economic status of Eastern European Roma/Gypsies, marked by deepening poverty and increasing levels of residential segregation (e.g. Barany, 2002; Hirt and Jakoubek, 2006; Ladányi, 2001; Ladányi and Szelényi, 2006; Revenga et al., 2002; Ringold, 2000; Sirovátka, 2006a; Stewart, 2002; Vašečka et al., 2003).¹ Scholars of post-socialist transformation have shown that the more living conditions deteriorated in a society as a whole, the more they deteriorated for Roma communities in particular, who, out of all social categories, were the hardest hit by the market transition (Sirovátka,

2006b: p. 115). In other words, during the post-socialist transformation, Roma became a "symbol of poverty and [economic] backwardness" (Radičová and Vašečka, 2001: p. 179). For example, a 1997 household survey in Bulgaria revealed that over 84% of Roma households were living below the poverty line (Ringold, 2000: p. 1).² In response to existing data, "Roma issues" have become a focus for both international policy and action (Romadecade, 2009) and awareness-raising campaigns by the non-governmental human rights sector (Dženo, 2006; ERRC, 2010; FRA, 2009; Halász, 2007). This shift in the orientation of official policy, occurring in the context of a long history of exclusion and marginalisation, often directly facilitated by the state apparatus, can be viewed as a positive step towards greater justice in the system of relations between the state and its 'others'. However this leads existing academic and policy-oriented research on the marginality of Roma communities in East-Central Europe to represent the predicament of these communities in terms of a homogenous experience of decline in their social and economic standing.

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¹ The Roma, often referred to as "Gypsies" by the surrounding societies, are Europe's largest non-territorial ethnic minority. Kalibová (1993) estimated that there were about 8–15 million Roma living in the world in the 1990s, of which approximately 5–6 million were allegedly residing in Europe. Liégeois estimated the population of Roma/Gypsies in the Czech Republic at 200,000–250,000 and in Slovakia at 400,000–450,000 (Liégeois, 2007: p. 31).

² Based upon my own ethnographic data, I estimate the level of unemployment in poor segregated Roma communities in Slovakia and Czech Republic to be as high as 90% and in some places even 100%. Sirovátka (2006b: p. 115–116) gives a slightly lower estimate of Roma unemployment at about 80% (Sirovátka, 2006b: p. 116).

This article, which aims to complicate this kind of uniform vision by studying the diversity of experiences of Roma communities under post-socialism, is based on ethnographic research conducted with excluded Roma communities in both urban and rural environments in the former Czechoslovakia. The goal of the research was to understand and analyse how the post-socialist transformation altered the lives of members of local Roma communities after 1989. Over the course of my research I came to realize that members of Roma communities had much more variegated and diverse experiences than I had originally expected and more multi-faceted than existing research would suggest. As I explored the life trajectories of my informants in urban and rural environments, I realized that these trajectories (as well as my informants' reflections on the post-socialist transformation) differed in some quite significant ways even when these people belonged to the same extended families. Generally, members of socio-spatially excluded Roma communities living in "Gypsy settlements" in rural parts of Slovakia do not seem to have been affected as deeply, and do not seem to have experienced the dark sides of the post-socialist transformation as dramatically, as their urban counterparts.

Analyses of social and geographical phenomena can perhaps too easily fall into culturally pre-constructed "categories of seemingly distinctive opposition", such as the urban/rural dichotomy (Cloeke and Johnston, 2005: p. 5). By referring to urban and rural in this article, it is not my intention to contribute to reification of these already contested categories of vision and division (e.g. Halfacree, 2004; McLaughlin, 1986), but rather to underscore the diversity of living conditions (in terms of housing conditions, policy and political-economic contexts, etc.) to which particular Roma communities have been exposed and which may have shaped their life chances and trajectories in quite different ways. This is not to deny that categories like "rural" and "urban" are concepts embedded in particular socio-histories, but to highlight a different problem: by glossing over the difference between living conditions of different Roma communities, we run the risk of failing to adequately address their perhaps different problems and needs.³

The main objective of this article is to present and explain the substantial differences in how the post-socialist transformation has affected (and has been reflected upon by members of) Roma communities living in urban and rural environments. This is intended to add a new perspective to existing debates and to provide a better understanding of the diversity of processes and dynamics and the ways in which these were experienced during the post-socialist transformation. The article begins by introducing the research methods and settings. Thereafter, through a discussion of the ethnographic data, I seek to answer following research questions: (1) *Why do the excluded Roma in rural and urban environments have such different perceptions of the post-socialist transformation?* and, more specifically, (2) *How are these diverging perceptions and biographical accounts linked to their different social and economic environments?*

2. Research methods

This article rests on data gathered during ethnographic research on the circumstances and dynamics of social life under the conditions of social exclusion. Since 2002 I have been conducting

iterative ethnographic research (O'Reilly, 2005; Spradley, 1980) among Roma communities in rural Slovakia and in the cities of the Czech Republic. Generally, the goal of my research has been to explore the social logics of life under the conditions of socio-spatial exclusion, economic marginalisation, and symbolic disdain. I have been conducting ethnographic research in two Gypsy settlements in eastern Slovakia since 2002, and, since 2004 I have extended the research to include Roma social networks in Czech urban "ghettos".⁴

During my ethnographic research, consisting of systematic revisits over the course of a decade,⁵ I would usually spend several weeks in the settlements each year, in both summer and winter. During my visits, I usually used the method of direct (sometimes also participant) observation, and semi-structured and unstructured, mostly informal, interviews. By 2011 I had spent more than 80 days conducting ethnographic research with urban Roma communities in Czech cities (the municipalities of Kladno, Rotava, Brno and Pilsen). In addition, I spent over 80 days conducting ethnographic research in two Gypsy settlements in the Slovak countryside between 2002 and 2010. Between April 2011 and September 2011 I spent another 6 months conducting ethnographic and archival research on Gypsy settlements in the municipalities of Poprad and Levoča in eastern Slovakia. The main body of data for this article consists of ethnographic materials (field notes and observations), archival materials (produced by the state apparatuses in the last hundred years), and audio-visual materials (recent and historical photographs, recorded interviews with members of Roma communities, with the *gadje*⁶ villagers, as well as with representatives of local bureaucratic structures).

3. Research settings

One of the Gypsy settlements in which I conducted my fieldwork is situated in the Spiš region (germ. *Zips*) in eastern Slovakia, and is one of the most deprived and excluded settlements in Slovakia.⁷ It lies outside of the cadaster limits of the nearest village, which is used as an excuse for not investing any public resources to improve the living conditions of the settlement's inhabitants. The settlement is thus *infrastructurally excluded* (Ruzicka, 2011) from the world around it, with no access to forms of public infrastructure and resources otherwise generally available, such as paved roads, public transport, clean drinking water, and electricity. The inhabitants of the settlement have been exposed to multiple forms of exclusion for centuries. Excluded from the public sphere by having limited or no access to public institutions such as churches or a local pub, their children have had to attend racially segregated classes at local schools, etc. In order to watch television or listen to the radio, they have to run their appliances on car batteries, and they draw water for cooking and drinking from a nearby creek. Although all Gypsy settlements can be seen as more or less "excluded" from full participation in wider society and the economy, this particular settlement has been a rather extreme case of social, spatial and infrastructural exclusion.

⁴ On the rise of multi-sited ethnography see (Falzon, 2009).

⁵ For long-term research strategy based on focused "revisits", when the researcher returns to the site of her/his previous study, see (Burawoy, 2003).

⁶ The term *gadje* is a non-offensive term in Romanes (i.e. in the dialects spoken by some Roma/Gypsy groups in East-Central Europe) that refers to non-Roma people.

⁷ Although I conducted my fieldwork in two Gypsy settlements and briefly visited at least a dozen others, I have decided to limit the focus of this article to the particular settlement in which I gathered most of the data on "memories" of post-socialism.

³ See also Schwarcz (2012) and Kovacs (2012) in this volume, for a discussion of the ways in which localized constructions of Roma identity, as well as local state and community practices regarding welfare and social assistance can impact on the particular experiences and issues faced by Roma people.

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