



Ethnicizing poverty through social security provision in rural Hungary

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A B S T R A C T

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Rural poverty has become an increasingly ethnicised category for the majority society in contemporary Hungary. The article aims to explore the process and practice of social exclusion and ethnicisation in relation to mutual effects of post-socialist welfare restructuring and changing discourse on poverty in the post-socialist rural reality. The empirical data were gathered during ethnographic fieldwork carried out in a village in 2009 and 2010. Employing a relational, processual concept of ethnicity, this paper focuses on the ways in which the Magyar majority applies the approach of 'groupism' to imagine and discuss Roma as an ethnically bounded, distinctive group with a considerable set of distinguishable ethnic traits and degree of homogeneity. To point out how the discursive context influences social care and in what way the local implementation of social provision is able to formulate this context the paper deconstructs the local notion of 'Roma ethnic group' along with understandings of deservingness and social entitlement. It goes on to show the dual role that local state actors play in this process. The article concludes that both ideologies and practices of social care legitimise the identification of Roma as an ethnic category negatively equating this group with notions of deservingness and thus institutionalising ethnicised poverty.

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1. Introduction

In the summer of 2009 after more than two years' absence, I returned to Sziroda² to carry out fieldwork. On the very first day I was astonished by how common discriminatory talk about Roma people (*cigányozás*) had become in everyday communication in the village. Regardless of which village residents I entered into communication with, the Roma issue was brought up very quickly and verbal violence was evident in their speech, even if my company was local officials. These discourses focused mainly on the blindness of state-provided social security provisions and the discrepancy between deservingness and eligibility—or, more precisely, local discourse stressed that until poor people comply with dominant ideas about deservingness, they should not be entitled to social provisions. Moreover, local argumentation claimed that the undeserving poor, whom they see mostly as Roma, abuse the social security system and the taxpayers, and as such, can be blamed as an ethnic group for their own poverty. The morally-

based differentiation of poor people along categories of so-called 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, and the stigmatization and punishment of the 'undeserving,' have a long history (Solomon, 1998; Katz, 1989; Vincent, 1993). Extending this approach to an ethnically defined group, the Roma are blamed not only for their poverty but also for their presumed misuse of social provision, and thus as not deserving social care. This implies that the working of social services may contribute to or even reinforce this dominant opinion, which leads to an ethnicization of poverty in post-socialist rural contexts.

Many studies have reflected upon the production of a 'new urban poor' as a consequence of neoliberal welfare restructuring embedded in the global system of post-industrial capitalism (see, for example, Ganz, 1993; Susser, 1996; Castel, 1998, 2005, 2008; Morgen and Maskovsky, 2003; Wacquant, 2004, 2008, 2009). This approach led to the formation of the concept of the punitive neoliberal state (Wacquant, 2001, 2009). Welfare-restructuring promotes privatization of services, emphasizes the ideology of personal responsibility and places employment as the central focus of policy. Thus, the new agenda replaced the right to welfare by the obligation of 'workfare' (Morgen and Maskovsky, 2003; Wacquant, 2004, 2008, 2009). One of the few conceptualisations of welfare-restructuring in anthropology places gender and race at the centre of analysis and sees welfare-restructuring as reinforcing racial and gender hierarchies by such reforms as welfare-to-work,

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² I have decided to change the name of the village and refer to all the research participants by their professional role or fictional name in order to protect their anonymity.

thereby also redefining the terms of citizenship and belonging (Morgen and Maskovsky, 2003: 320–323).

In the former Soviet Bloc, transition from 'existing socialism' to actually existing neoliberalism generally deepened social inequalities. Although sharp increases in income inequalities and poverty were common, sub-regional differences can be detected in the extent of poverty and income inequality. Various explanations have been offered for these differences, including the different paths to postcommunist capitalism, the different cultural heritage and the distinct ways of welfare restructuring since 1989 (Eyal et al., 1998, Sotiropoulos, 2003; Szelényi, 2003). Recently a growing number of studies draws attention to expanding rural poverty, marginality and exclusion as a significant phenomenon in the post-socialist region (Ladányi and Szelényi, 2004; Shubin, 2007; Virág, 2010; Kay, 2011; Thelen et al., 2011). Researchers have highlighted that the character of poverty in Eastern Europe has also become increasingly racialized and feminized, much as it has been in advanced societies (Emigh and Szelényi, 2001; Szelényi, 2001). However, until now less attention has been paid to the process and practice of social exclusion and ethnicisation³ in relation to mutual effects of post-socialist welfare restructuring and changing discourses on poverty.

This article aims to highlight the ways in which discourses about deservingness in contemporary Hungary are linked to everyday practices of social care at the local level and thereby enhance an ethnicisation of poverty. Local state actors play dual roles in this process. On the one hand their actions and approaches are influenced by local or wider discourses about poverty. On the other hand, they also contribute to the formulation of local public debates on deservingness and help make poverty an ethnic category by virtue of the ways in which they implement and evaluate social provision. The article begins by exploring scholarly debates on ethnicity and changing social protection, as well as shedding light on public discourses on poverty in post-socialist countries. I then go on to introduce the local setting in which empirical data was gathered. Thereafter, I present local discourses on Roma and deservingness and the practices that are both influenced by and at the same time reproduce these discourses. These factors are further elucidated through an examination of the local variant of the public employment program. Finally, and in more general terms, I discuss the lessons which can be derived about the mutual effects of discourses on deservingness and entitlement and the delivery of social services.

2. Theoretical background: ethnicity, welfare provision and the changing discourse on poverty in the post-socialist context

2.1. Roma as an ethnic category

In this article I apply a relational, processual concept of ethnicity for analysis in order to shed light on the process of making, creating, imagining and discussing the category of Roma people by the majority society through practices of everyday life and of social care. Brubaker (2004) draws attention to the fact that there is a tendency in social sciences to take groups for granted in the study of ethnicity and treat ethnic groups as substantial entities. He calls this approach 'groupism', a result of ethnopolitical practices that wish to see ethnic groups as discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogenous and externally bounded units (2004: 8).

Instead he argues that ethnicity may be seen as a relational, processual and dynamic category. Thus, if we think of ethnicity without groups and focus on how categorization creates 'groupism', we may better understand the dynamics of group-making as a social, cultural and political project (Brubaker, 2004). Meanwhile, individuals might or might not have or even represent either the individual or the collective (ethnic) identity. As several scholars have pointed out recognition is fundamentally related to self-identification and collective identification (Calhoun, 1994; Kovács, 2002, 2010; Szalai, 2009). Construction of an individual sense of self is achieved ideally by personal choices regarding who and what to associate with in different situations and contexts.

Nevertheless prevailing practices of discrimination and exclusion of those considered to be Roma in contemporary Hungary undermine the possibility of personal choices regarding group affiliation. As they do not necessarily identify themselves with a specific language, or culture the only ethnic trait or marker that is 'held' by almost all of Roma people is the discrimination of and prejudice against them (Messing, 2006; Durst, 2010; Szalai, 2010).⁴ Regardless of Roma's attempt to belong to the national community, the majority society can and does 'overwrite' Roma's personally chosen 'Hungarianess' and categorize them as members of 'the Roma' as an ethnic group on the basis of various attributes, considered to be ethnic markers (Kovács, 2002; Szalai, 2009).

2.2. Post-socialist welfare provision

While the Socialist regime restricted political and civil rights, at the same time it attempted to legitimate itself with an extension of social entitlements linked to inclusion into the labour market (Verdery, 1998; Sotiropoulos, 2003: 266–267). The relationship of paid work and access to social entitlements was much tighter than in the western European social welfare states, as many social services were only directly accessible through employers (Haney, 1996, 2002; Read and Thelen, 2007; Tomka, 2008). After the collapse of socialism in Central-East Europe, mixed social welfare systems came into being, which, to various degrees and in various manners, were accompanied in each state by restrictions in certain forms of provision as a social entitlement (Tomka, 2008: 85).

Read and Thelen argue that the model of state withdrawal in the post-socialist economic-social transformation may be too simplistic with respect to social care. First and foremost because the withdrawal of the state has often meant that the central state delegated the tasks of provision and care to the local level, while more or less retaining its regulative role in defining access to services (2007: 9). Overall, post-socialist welfare restructuring can be summarised as follows: levels of social security have fallen back, systems of provision have become unstable, and universal entitlements of individuals have been reduced. However, the neoliberal approach, in the case of social policy has come as a slow flow, a full neoliberal turn has not taken place in any of the states concerned (Tomka, 2008). At the same time several authors argue that in the framework of decentralisation, the tasks delegated to the local level disproportionately increase the role and responsibility of local actors and organisations engaged in social provision (Szalai, 2005; Durst, 2008; Rác, 2008; Virág, 2010; Thelen et al., 2011).

In general, less attention has been paid so far to two major questions: how does social assistance work at the local level in post-socialist countries? And, what sort of relationship exists between the daily practice of the system of social provision and

³ Even though much American and other literature use the term race and racialization, I adhere to the terms ethnicity and ethnicisation as better-established notions of the scientific discourses on Roma.

⁴ See also Ruzicka (2012) for a discussion of discrimination and exclusion experienced by Roma people in the former Czechoslovakia and the ways in which this spans and queries a division into 'socialist' and 'post-socialist' historical periods.

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