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The Making of Gypsy Diasporas[1]

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Abstract.
The article proposes to adopt the notion of diaspora as social practice for an analysis of Gypsy diasporas. It indicates the limits of the classical definition of diaspora, which is mainly based on the experience of the Jewish diaspora, and argues that the paradigm shift towards diaspora as social practice allows refocusing the debate on constitutive factors of diaspora making and on functions and main actors in developing a diasporic political discourse. The article outlines core elements of the Gypsy diaspora discourse and its main advocates. It offers thoughts on strengths and limits of this discourse and emphasises positive implications of the use of the diaspora concept for ongoing negotiations of Roma/Gypsy identity in the public sphere.

Keywords: diaspora, Gypsies, Roma, identity politics, Romani intelligentsia, minority policies in Europe

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Introduction

The estimated eight million Roma and Sinti living in Europe – located mostly in the Balkans and in central and Eastern Europe and commonly referred to as 'Gypsies'[2] – are a widely dispersed people. They do not constitute just 'one people', but a mosaic of groups scattered across the world. This great dispersion of Romani groups in conjunction with their deterritorialized way of living has led a number of scholars to identify Roma as diasporic groups. And yet, very few Roma have attempted to formulate their pan-Romani identity as diasporic.

One of the main reasons why diasporic narratives failed to gain wider acceptance among the Roma so far is that these narratives bear resemblance with attempts of authorities and policy-makers to mark Gypsies as 'different' and exclude them as undesired and undesirable 'foreigners' who in the distant past entered Europe from India. Such labelling is by no means a

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[2] Since there is no single term in the Romani language embracing all individuals of Romani or related ethnic affiliations, the article uses the terms *Rom*, *Roma* and *Sinti* as etnonyms and the terms *Gypsy* and *Gypsies* as 'umbrella terms', in full awareness that non-Gypsies often attach a derogatory connotation to the latter. The use of the expression 'Roma/Gypsies' is in keeping with the choices made by the interviewees: some of them defined themselves as Gypsies, while others preferred to be called Rom or Roma.

thing of the past and is not confined to official authorities: in 1995 for example neo-Nazis attacked a Roma settlement in the city of Oberwart in Austria and left there a sign saying "Gypsies go back to India" (when the Roma tried to remove the sign, a bomb went off killing four of them).

However, in recent years we have also witness the rise of autochthonous diasporic discourses, especially among Roma/Gypsy activists and intellectuals. In order to understand these recent diaspora discourses among the Roma the dominant interpretations of the diaspora paradigm and their applicability to the Romani case must be challenged. Essentialist understandings of Gypsy diasporic identity need to be reformulated as a result of social practices of diaspora making and as part of ongoing negotiations of Roma/Gypsy identities in the public sphere. These diasporic practices cannot be reduced to a mere reflection of non-Roma's minority discourses and policies. In fact, there is no overarching diasporic discourse among the Gypsy, but rather a plurality of narratives and (often contradictory) interpretations of Gypsy origins. These Gypsy diasporic discourses have the unquestionable merit of encouraging Roma to participate in policy-design and decision-making processes, especially in the context of an increasing Europeanisation and internationalisation of Roma issues. As social practices, diaspora discourses might even contribute to give hitherto 'invisible' and disenfranchised Romani groups a public voice.

The diaspora paradigm and the case of the Roma/Gypsies

The diaspora concept currently enjoys great popularity and has gradually established itself as a key term in both the humanities and the social sciences. Despite the proliferation of the use of the term 'diaspora' over the last twenty years (Brubaker 2005), a proliferation that is perceived by many as a problematic semantic drift from its original meaning that was confined to the Jewish case, scholars tend to agree on what should constitute the basic elements of a diaspora. This can be referred to as the 'classical' or 'analytical diaspora paradigm'.

According to the widely quoted definition proposed by William Safran, the key components of this classical diaspora paradigm are (Safran 1991: 83-4):

1) dispersal from a homeland;
2) collective memory of the homeland;
3) lack of integration in the host country;
4) a 'myth' of return and a persistent link with the homeland.

Robin Cohen (1996:515) supplemented this list of key diaspora features as follows:

1) dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions or expansion from a homeland in search of work/for trade/colonial ambitions;
2) a collective memory and an idealization of the homeland and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation;
3) the development of a return movement that gains collective approbation;
4) a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and the belief in a common fate;
5) a troubled relationship with host societies;
6) a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement;

7) the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism.

There are two fundamental tenets of the classical diaspora paradigm: an emphasis on the link between a group and a particular territory, a homeland, and a reliance on an essentialist identity paradigm of the nation-state. Even refined postmodern interpretations of diaspora, such as those proposed by Stuart Hall (1990), Paul Gilroy (1993), Avtar Brah (1996) and most notably by James Clifford (1994), do not avoid the risk to 'slide into primordiality' (Anthias 1998:568) in defining diaspora. They share a concept of diasporic identity based on the idea of roots and notions of ethnic and national belonging, thereby expressing a particular *Weltanschauung* and attitude towards space and territoriality typical of sedentary Western societies (Sibley 1982 and 1995; Okely 1983; McVeigh 1999; Levinson and Sparkes 2004) that regard nomadic and semi-nomadic minorities as a potential threat to the 'stable, culturally homogeneous, historically unchanging […] national territory' (Sibley 1995:108).

The problem of analytical interpretations of diaspora is that they are written from the perspective of sedentary societies and encounter difficulties in grasping the 'deterritorialised and spatially unbounded culture' (Okely 2003) of Roma/Gypsies who are 'at home' anywhere, in the sense that they share their home with the non-Gypsies, yet nowhere, since wherever they go they are constantly reminded of their difference and their inability to 'fit in' and to be identified with a well-defined national territory. Their situation is indeed similar to what Agamben describes as the condition of the refugee:

> […] the refugee represents a disquieting element in the order of the nation-state […] primarily because, by breaking the identity between the human and the citizen and that between nativity and nationality, it brings the originary fiction of sovereignty to crisis.
> […] the refugee, an apparent marginal figure, unhinges the old trinity of state-nation-territory… (Agamben 2000:20-21).

Precisely like the stateless refugee and the denizen, the Gypsy is a 'disquieting element' in the order of the nation-state in so far as s/he violates the basic principles of the nation-state and questions what is perceived as a mandatory link between *state-nation-territory*.

Diaspora theorists have nevertheless tried to categorise the Gypsy diaspora on the basis of the definitions outlined above. The Roma/Gypsies do indeed share some defining features of a paradigmatic diaspora. They are a widely dispersed and internally varied group (cf point 1 of Safran's definition), and their great dispersion is mirrored in the variety of terms and ethnonyms used by Romani groups in defining themselves. Depending on their geographical location, Gypsies call themselves *Roma* (*Rom* in the singular) in central, southern and eastern Europe, *Romanichals* (England, US, Australia and New Zealand), *Sinti* (Germany, Austria, central and northern Italy, southern France), *Kalé* in Spain, *Manuś* in France and so forth. As far as the Romani language is concerned, it has been estimated that since the arrival of the Roma in Europe, at least 80 variations and dialects of the Romani language have developed, and not all of them are mutually understandable (Bakker et al. 2000; Matras 2002). Furthermore, the Gypsy diaspora is characterized by a difficult relationship between 'Gypsy' communities and their

'host' countries (cf point 3 of Safran's definition). The Roma and Sinti constitute the largest ethnic minority in Europe and they are certainly the least represented and the least protected among the other European minorities. A recent report commissioned by the Directorate-General for Employment and Social Affairs of the EU revealed that the Roma in the European Union suffer severe discrimination and social exclusion in at least four key areas: education, employment, housing and healthcare (European Commission 2004). The report has also revealed widespread anti-Romani racism and recurrent human rights infringements, not to mention violations of civil and political rights against the Romani minority in Europe. As the report demonstrates, such violations not only occur in the new Central and Eastern EU member-states, but also in older EU member states. The situation of the Roma in Italy is particularly worrying. Italy is known in Europe as 'Campland', the country of 'camps for nomads' (*campi-nomadi*) which is where many Roma are forced to live, completely isolated from the rest of the population. This glaring lack of integration of the Roma within their countries of settlement is indeed another crucial element that they seem to share with other diasporic groups.

Despite these shared elements, however, diaspora scholars emphasise the fact that the Roma/Gypsies also lack some crucial diasporic features. This is particularly true for the feature that lies at the core of the classical notion of diaspora, a strong link with a homeland. Safran for example underlines that Roma/Gypsies have 'no precise notion of their place of origin, no clear geographical focus, and no history of national sovereignty' and that they are a 'truly homeless people' (Safran 1991:86-87). As Barany argues, the Roma/Gypsies 'are unique in their homelessness'; for them 'every country is a "foreign" country, a "country of residence"' (Barany 1998:143 quoting Liégeois 1994:225) and this is the main reason why their communities cannot be defined, strictly speaking, as a diaspora. The second crucial diasporic feature that is allegedly missing in the Gypsy case is a strong diasporic consciousness. As a result, the diaspora scholars claim, the Roma/Gypsies made no political effort to develop a unified diasporic political movement (Cohn 1993; Kovats 2003).

A further problematic aspect of the normative approach to diaspora is its failure to explain the recent rise of Gypsy diasporic practices and the tendency to ignore or minimise the efforts of a co-ordinated international movement, a Romani intelligentsia that has recently began to adopt the language of diaspora to give voice to their people's claims. As a matter of fact, despite their extreme geographical dispersion and their fragmentation, the Roma have been engaged for quite some time in diaspora politics and they have developed their own autonomous diaspora discourse. In order to investigate the main features of such discourse, I suggest moving away from the classical analytical diaspora model and embracing an interpretation of diaspora as 'category of practice' (Brubaker 2005). According to Brubaker, a diaspora does not represent a unified, bounded group connected with a specific homeland:

> we should think of diaspora not in substantialist terms as a bounded identity, but rather as *an idiom, a stance, a claim*. We should think of diaspora in the first instance as a *category of practice*, and only then ask whether, and how, it can fruitfully be used as a category of analysis. As a category of practice, 'diaspora' is used to make claims, to articulate projects, to formulate expectations, to mobilize energies, to appeal to loyalties. It is often a category with a strong normative change. It does not so much *describe* the world as seek to *remake* it (Brubaker 2005:12; emphasis mine).

In a similar vein Sökefeld, in the attempt to '[counter] essentialist concepts of diaspora that reify notions of belonging and the "roots" of migrants in places of origin' (2006:265), interprets diasporas as the outcome of specific processes and practices of identity building. He argues that 'sentiments of belonging, attachment to a home and ideas of a place of origin [i.e. the key diaspora features] do not constitute the "substance" from which diasporas – like other identity groups – are made', and he regards diasporas as 'discursive constructions of imagined [transnationally dispersed] communities' (Sökefeld 2006:267). Both Brubaker's and Sökefeld's definitions of diaspora underline the need to think of diaspora as 1) a dynamic process and 2) as a project, rather than a *fait accompli*. In addition, Brubaker notes that diaspora discourse is often the discourse of a minority:

> not all those who are claimed as members of putative diasporas themselves adopt a diasporic stance. Indeed, those who consistently adopt a diasporic stance […] are often only a small minority of the population (Brubaker 2005:12).

Brubaker's insight can be taken a step further. Diaspora should not be seen as a static notion, but as the result of dynamic process of continuous making and remaking of diaspora with no fixed membership. In the following, the case of the Gypsy diaspora will be used to describe how Roma/Gypsies engage in discursive and political *practices* of diaspora. Particular attention will be paid to their agents and the main social and cultural factors that constitute these practices.

A diaspora in the making: The rise of Gypsy diasporic practices

Before analysing the main feature of Gypsy diasporic practices, it is worth pointing out that for a long time only the non-Gypsies (*Gadźé*) have been interested in identifying the Gypsies' origins, and not the Gypsies themselves (Piasere 1989). Since the first appearance of Roma/Gypsies in Western Europe, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, there have been constant attempts by *Gadźé* scholars to trace back their original homeland. The very terms with which the Romani people were originally labelled testify the unrelenting search for the Gypsy origins. In particular the term 'Egyptians' (the origin of the English 'Gypsies', the Spanish 'Gitanos' and the French 'Gitanes') derives from the belief, dating back to the late Middle Ages, that they were pilgrims from the Orient – a belief that in all probability the Roma/Gypsies themselves helped to spread (Fraser 1992:62) among the *Gadźé*.[3] As will be seen, it is only during the eighteenth century, when linguists discovered the Sanskrit origin of *Romanes* (the Romani language) that Roma/Gypsies started to be widely associated with India.[4]

Whereas there is plenty of evidence of non-Gypsy discourses about the Gypsy diaspora, very little is known about the features of Roma's diasporic discourses. Roma diaspora politics remains largely overlooked by historians, politicians and policy makers. There is still a widespread tendency to consider the Roma as 'unable to organise themselves', and their attempt at turning their internal diversity into a unified, transnational political movement are regarded by many as simply pointless (Cohn 1993; Kovats 2003).

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[3] Other terms used to define the Roma/Gypsies include '*Zigari'*, *Cerretani*, '*Cingari'*, '*Bohemiens*'. The terms '*Zigeuner*', '*Tsiganes*', '*Cigány*', '*Zingari*' derive from 'Athinganoi', the name of an heretical sect that lived in Greece during the VIII century which literally means 'untouchable' (Liégeois 1994).

[4] The belief in the Indian origin of the Roma/Gypsies can be found already in early documents dating back to the late Middle Ages and in the Renaissance *canti carnascialeschi* from Tuscany, but it gained currency only at the end of the eighteen century.

In recent years, Romani activists have been able to lobby effectively both national governments and supranational bodies such as the UN and the European Union. As a result, more is known about their situation and the serious problems they face in their host countries. However, evidence of a diaspora discourse among Roma/Gypsies can be traced back at least to the beginning of the 20th century. Romani intellectuals and academics played a fundamental role in initiating and promoting diaspora discursive and political practices. This confirms Sheffer's assertion that intellectuals 'can be quite useful in fostering close contacts between diasporans and their homeland [..] and in the creation of incipient diasporas and in their transformation into established entities' (Sheffer 2003: 167).

Romani intellectuals have helped shape a common Romani diasporic identity in several ways. They have promoted the study of Romani culture, history and traditions and supported the diffusion of a common Romani language. The standardization of *Romanes* was achieved in 1990, when the World Romani Congress (WRC) adopted the standard Romani alphabet proposed by Marcel Courtiade. In the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages of 1992 *Romanes*, after already being recognized in several European countries, was granted the status of a non-territorial language (together with Yiddish). Intellectuals regard *Romanes* as 'the heart and soul' of the Romani people, as the factor that ultimately unifies all Romani groups by allowing them to communicate across national borders:

> It is our speech which is the greatest part of [Romani common heritage], and even among those populations whose Romani [Romanes] has been reduced to only a vocabulary, as in England or Spain or Scandinavia, it remains a powerful ingredient in Romani ethnic identity. (Hancock, Dowd and Djurić 1998:18)

The diffusion of Romanes has been encouraged through a number of written publications and journals, with both national and international circulation, aimed at overcoming linguistic and physical barriers and promoting a better knowledge of Romani history and culture. A more recent trend has been the launch of online news and journals in *Romanes* and the creation of an impressive number of Romani websites and chat groups, which 'have become one of the main mobilization tools for Romani activism' (Klímová-Alexander 2005a:8).

Romani intellectuals have also contributed to the idea of a diasporic Gypsy nation. One of the first intellectuals to introduce such a project was Ionel Rotaru, a Romanian-born writer (known in France as Vaida Voevod, the 'supreme chief' of the Romani people), who called it *Romanestan*.[5] He founded in 1959 a Romani group, the *Communauté Mondiale Gitane* ('World Gypsy Community'), which relied on 'a nucleus of followers among French Kalderash and Yugoslav Roma living in the *bidonvilles* of the capital' (Puxon 2001:95). Rotaru tried to finance his project with the help of German war crimes reparation, which, however, never materialized.

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[5] The notion of an Indian homeland dates back at least to the early twentieth century and was upheld not only by intellectuals but also by self-proclaimed representatives like the members of the Kwiek family – who were able to establish a Gypsy royal line in Poland in the late 1920s. Michal Kwiek II declared in 1934 that it was his intention to create a Roma state on the banks of the river Ganges, which he considered as the place of origin of the Roma. His successor, Mathias Kwiek renounced the title of king and declared himself "Leader of the Gypsy Nation". Another member of the Kwiek family, Janusz Kwiek, planned to create a Roma state in Abyssinia (Ficowski :165). Janusz Kwiek (crowned in 1937 as Janos I) advocated the representation of the Romani people in the League of Nations. After WWII. the members of the Kwiek family emigrated to France, carrying with them the project of an independent Gypsy state.

At one stage he demanded land near Lyons from the French government in order to establish Gypsy villages. In another initiative he pleaded with the UN to allocate territories in Somalia for the Gypsy state and he even issued his own passports for the future state (Hancock 2002:119-20). The idea of *Romanestan* was re-introduced in the 1970s by the activists who organized the first World Romani Congress, held in London in 1971, which was partially financed by the Indian government. The congress chose as its president Slobodan Berberski, a poet from former Yugoslavia. On that occasion some crucial symbols of *Romanestan* were introduced: a Romani flag[6] and anthem and the 8th of April (first day of the Congress) was proclaimed as the 'International Romani Day'. The Second Romani Congress – held in Geneva in 1978 and attended by more than one hundred delegates – saw the foundation of the International Romani Union (IRU), a non-profit, non-governmental organisation recognized by the UN. This organisation is not only concerned with political and minority rights issues, but promotes in particular research and study into Romani history, arts and language. In 1990 the writer Rajko Djurić was elected president of the IRU.[7] At the World Romani Congress held in Prague in 2000 Emil Ščuka (Czech Republic) was elected president. In 2004 the WRC took place in Lanciano (Italy), and on this occasion Stanisław Stankiewicz (Poland) became the new IRU leader. Stankiewicz was reconfirmed as the current IRU president at the last World Roma Congress held in Zagreb in October 2008.

Besides the IRU, another major actor in the international political arena is the Roma National Congress (RNC), an umbrella organisation including several Romani NGOs operating in Europe and beyond. Its main aim is to lobby European governments and institutions to devise effective policies not only for the improvement of Gypsies' living conditions, but also for the protection of their civil and human rights.[8]

The rise of Gypsy diasporic practices: constitutive factors

There are a number of factors contributing to the rise of Gypsy diaspora discursive and political practices. For analytical purposes, we can distinguish between 'external' conditions and 'internal' factors that led to an 'ethnic awakening' (Gheorghe and Mirga 1998:1) of the Romani community.

Major external conditions include:

- the political opportunities provided by European institutions such as the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Union (EU) (Vermeersch 2001), accompanied by 'recent attitudinal and practical changes toward diaspora politics' (Sheffer 2003:5) and the increasing concern in Europe for issues related to minority protection (see in particular the Copenhagen criteria introduced in 1993, which urged aspiring EU member-states to address Romani issues as a matter of priority);

[6] The Romani flag was first established in 1933, and consists of a blue stripe symbolising the sky, a green stripe representing the green earth and a wheel at the centre.

[7] Other leading Romani academics and intellectuals actively involved in Romani diaspora politics include Romani scholars Vania De Gila-Kochanowski and Šaip Jusuf, Ian Hancock, Professor of linguistics at the University of Texas at Austin, the Romanian sociologist Nicolae Gheorghe, currently head of the Contact Point for Roma and Sinti of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Romani scholar Andrzej Mirga, and the Italian Rom Santino Spinelli, musician and lecturer at the University of Trieste.

[8] For a full account of Romani international organisations see Barany 1998, 2002; Vermeersch 2003; Klímová-Alexander 2004, 2005a and 2005b.

- the establishment, particularly during the 1970s, of institutional links between Romani international organisations and India. The support of the Indian government has been crucial for the international recognition of Roma/Gypsies as an ethnic group with Indian origins;
- the establishment of an Indian paradigm of Gypsy origins, developed by non-Gypsy scholars, and the emergence of Romani philology, which created the basis for the development of a diaspora narrative by Gypsy activists;
- last but not least, the emergence and possibility of imitation of other diaspora experiences (especially the Jewish experience).

The above-mentioned circumstances are crucial in explaining the increasing involvement of Roma in diaspora politics. However, it would be simplistic to suggest that this involvement is exclusively a hetero-induced phenomenon. The rise of Gypsy diasporic practices cannot be adequately explained without taking into account their links with the social and cultural dynamics at work within Romani groups. Among the internal factors are the rise of transnational Romani organisations and their activities. During the last years these organisations have grown exponentially throughout Europe (Acton 1974; Hancock 1991; Liégeois 1994; Kawczynski 1997, Barany 1998, 2002; Kovats 2003, Vermeersch 2003; Piasere 2004, Klímová-Alexander 2004, 2005a, 2005b). The nature of these organisations is varied. According to Bársony and Daróczi (reported in Trehan 2001), Romani NGOs include 'local or national cultural organisations and clubs; civil rights organisations; political and human rights organisations; national umbrella organisations representing Romani political interests; 'showcase' Romani organisations (created and financed by the state); groups organised on the basis of kin links, representing various interests (including economic) and formations with religious orientations' (Trehan 2001:135).

International Romani organisations – especially the IRU – have strived to develop a diasporic consciousness among their people. In order to do so, they have focused on the revitalization of a common Romani history and the portrayal of the Roma as a unified people. In other words, they pursued the unification of the Roma, what Hancock has called *Jekhipè* (oneness) (Hancock 1987). In this regard the growing use of writing among the Roma (Djurić 1993; Piasere 1995; Toninato 1999, 2004) played a major role. As it has been pointed out, Romani writing, and Romani literature[9] in particular, is instrumental in strengthening the sense of a common identity among the Roma:

> Even though still confined to a handful of dialects, the publication of literary works in Romani and the propagation of the language in written form may be a first step towards its unification and may lead to a deeper self-awareness among this people in search of itself (Soravia 1984).

Moreover, the increasing use of Information Communications Technology and the internet among Roma (Clark 2006) help them establish transnational networks, to co-ordinate their political activities and to create a sort of diasporic community or, to use Fox's words, a virtual imagined community (Fox 2004).

[9] In this regard see for instance the collection *The Roads of the Roma*, published by the University of Hertfordshire Press, and the anthologies published in Italy by Romani author Santino Spinelli from 1994 to the present.

Narratives of Gypsy diaspora: a plurality of discourses

The Roma have lived for a long time as a dispersed minority dwelling at the margins of the dominant society. This marginality is two-faceted: it is on the one hand functional to their socio-economic system (Gmelch 1986, Piasere 1985), allowing the Roma to minimise the risks of cultural assimilation and to confirm their identity and their particular *Weltanschauung* (Williams 1982, 2002; Piasere 1985, 1994, 2004). This marginality leads to 'political invisibility' and exclusion from the public sphere. A main result of this exclusion has been for a long time the forgetting of the Romani Holocaust and the neglect of the Roma/Gypsies' fate at the Nuremberg trials (Kenrick and Puxon 1995). On the other hand, Roma's diasporic marginality is the result of active social exclusion on the part of the dominant group, and *demands* the political mobilization of Roma/Gypsies based on affirmative action and on what Charles Taylor calls 'the politics of recognition' (Taylor 1992; Honneth 1995; Fraser and Honneth 2003). In the last few decades, with the establishment of a transnational intelligentsia, an increasing number of Roma have tried to make their voice heard by lobbying international organisations and institutions. They perceive the formulation of a Romani identity in diasporic terms as crucial for their recognition as a distinct group. As Romani scholar and activist Ian Hancock explains, 'being identified with an actual homeland brings legitimacy and a measure of security' (Hancock 1997).

As already remarked, the most enthusiastic supporters of a global diasporic Roma community are the members of the International Romani Union. In 2000, during the Fifth Romani World Congress, the IRU called for the recognition of the Romani people as a transnational, non-territorial nation unified by a common Indian origin:

> We ask for being recognized as a Nation, for the sake of Roma and non-Roma individuals, who share the need to deal with [today's] new challenges. We, a Nation of which over half a million were exterminated in a forgotten Holocaust, a Nation of individuals too often discriminated, marginalized, victim of intolerance and persecution, we have a dream, and we are engaged in fulfilling it. We are a Nation, we share the same tradition, the same culture, the same origin, the same language: we are a Nation. We have never looked for creating a Roma State […] [10]

The term 'nation' in this context is very different from the classical paradigm of the nation-state (Gellner 1983; Smith 1987 and 1991), which stresses the link between the putative members of the nation and a historical territory. The expression 'Romani nation' as employed by the IRU cannot be identified with and does not encapsulate an aspiration to inhabit a territorial state; it rather indicates 'a politicized cultural group which seeks the preservation of the group within the existing interstate structure' (Feys 1997). IRU activists seek recognition of the Roma as a nation *without* territory (*Romanestan*). Given the transnational nature of Romani communities, the existence of the Romani nation is doomed to remain a symbolic claim. At the core of Romani activists' claims lies a demand for recognition and political representation, rather than a nationalist project.

As Clifford reminds us, nation and nation-state do not coincide (1994:309). This is particularly true in the case of the Roma/Gypsies, who define themselves as a transnational stateless diaspora with no territorial claims. In this respect, their approach is radically different from a traditional Zionist perspective. Most of the activists I interviewed oppose the creation

[10] IRU, 'Declaration of a Nation', Prague, 2000, quoted in Acton and Klímová 2001:216-7.

of a Romani state and are concerned about the negative consequences of eventually pursuing a Zionist goal. According to them, the lack of a territorial state does not prevent the Roma from acting as a community – albeit only at the level of an 'imagined community' – able to rise above its internal fragmentation. By placing the emphasis on common linguistic and cultural Indian factors shared by different groups, Roma diaspora activists aim at constructing themselves as a 'collective subject', making their voice heard within an international arena.

As has been remarked, one of the main features of diasporas is their ability to 'to envision utopian futures' (Werbner 2002:9). In other words, diasporas should not be interpreted as fixed entities, but as ongoing projects which largely depends on external political circumstances. This doubtlessly holds true also for Gypsy diasporic practices. Moreover, the advocates of a transnational, non-territorially-based Gypsy diasporic identity have to face fierce opposition and competing identity claims which are currently being raised among different Roma groups. Some Roma prefer to adopt a 'national minority approach' – as in the case of Roma activists in Central and Eastern Europe (Barany 1998, 2002; Vermeersch 2003; Kovats 2003), or a 'civil rights approach' – pursued by the Romani civil rights movement in Germany (Matras 1998). There are also activists who oppose the conceptualization of the Roma/Gypsies as a separate ethnic group and prefer to be regarded as a social group in order to avoid stigmatization. In these cases, the activists' claims tend to downplay the Indian features of Roma identity and remain firmly anchored to a nation-state frame.[11] In addition, there exists a number of versions of Gypsy origins which challenge the Indian paradigm, for example the belief in an Egyptian origin (Trubeta 2005).

> While early Romani populations on their arrival in Europe were able to say that they had come from India, that fact has become lost over time and is still generally unknown to the vast majority of Roma, many of whom have internalized instead the notion of an origin in Egypt (Hancock 1997:27).

To conclude, Gypsy diasporic practices are an internally diversified phenomenon. This is largely due to their nature as social practices, thereby intrinsically context-specific and subject to change. Furthermore, the plurality of voices within the Gypsy diaspora discourse reflects the great differentiation of Romani groups and their diverse situation in their host countries – what Gheorghe and Action have defined as the 'Gypsy archipelago' (2001:55).

Gypsy diasporic practices: limits and contradictions

Romani diaspora activists have to face a number of serious challenges. There are questions of representativity that have to be dealt with. Research on Gypsy groups in Europe (Williams 2002; Stewart 1997, 2000; Gay y Blasco 2001, 2002) confirms that the establishment of the Roma/Gypsies as a transnational diaspora remains mainly a concern of the non-Gypsies, whereas the majority of the Roma, unlike other more established diasporas, have 'rarely claim[ed] for themselves a land of origin, a history, or any kind of overarching political project to debate or share' (Gay y Blasco 2002:173). If we accept Pnina Werbner's statement that diasporas are 'con-

[11] A considerable number of Romani activists are sceptical that the Roma should be considered a unified transnational, non-territorial community and about the legal implications of this claim. In particular the members of the *Zentralrat* of German Sinti and Roma favour a 'national minority approach' because only a national minority status ensures the implementation of legally binding minority protection such as the 'European Charter for Minority Languages', the 'Framework Convention for National Minorities' and the other international conventions for national minorities of the UN, CSCE and European Union.

sensus-based wholes' (Werbner 2002:18), then we are bound to acknowledge that issues of legitimation and democratic participation are vital aspects of Gypsy diasporic practices and thus need to be addressed as a matter of priority by the burgeoning Romani transnational intelligentsia. Kovacs (2003:4) stated this point very clearly in relation to the activities of the IRU when he remarked that 'Roma nationalism is not a product of, but predates, the emergence of grassroots Roma politics'.

It has been noted (Barša 2000; Vermeersch 2001; Acton and Gheorghe 2001; Fosztó 2003) that Romani diaspora politics is bound to face a number of dangers and paradoxes. For example the debate of an Indian origin in discussions of the Roma/Gypsies' diaspora has been exploited by non-Gypsy right-wing extremists demanding their physical return to the homeland. At the start of the article I mentioned an emblematic case of racist attack against Roma/Gypsies that took place in Austria in February 1995, when a bomb had been concealed behind a placard enjoining 'Gypsies' to 'go back to India'. This is not an isolated case, as similar attacks have more recently been carried out elsewhere in Europe (Lacková 2000; Hancock 2002; Boscoboinik 2007).

Critics of Romani diaspora politics reiterates that Romani activists have to choose between 'nationalist segregation' or 'multicultural integration'. According to Sheffer 'Roma leaders must begin to decide about autonomy and corporatism versus full integration in their host countries (2003:140) or, to use Hirschman's terminology, they have to decide whether to opt for 'exit' or 'voice' (Hirschman 1970).

Finally, the growing diffusion of Gypsy diaspora discourses has also been criticized by some leading Romologists. Their main argument is that these discourses rely on notions that are limited to the academic domain and are not shared by other members of their communities. Paloma Gay y Blasco goes as far as arguing that Gypsy diasporic practices are completely incompatible with traditional models of Gypsyness. In embracing the diasporic paradigm, she maintains, Roma diaspora activists 'not only adopt the institutional supports for identity offered by the non-Gypsies', but 'they also rephrase the contents of that identity on the basis of non-Gypsy values and cultural models' (Gay y Blasco 2002:186).[12] The claims of Roma diaspora activists, Gay y Blasco argues, are irreconcilable with the features of Roma identity, since they are formulated in a language – that is, the language of human rights and minority rights – that 'draws heavily on dominant western models of ethnicity' (179). Gay y Blasco is right in emphasising that Gypsy diasporic practices have been largely influenced by dominant political discourses. Yet her critique seems to imply that there is just one diasporic model to which all Roma intellectuals and activists invariably refer: the 'classical' model of territorial, state-linked diasporas, usually associated with a specific ethno-national group. In fact, as the variety within Roma/Gypsies' practices of diaspora shows, the territorial model of identity is only one among the possible strategies available to the Roma for political action.
It would be misleading to depict Roma diaspora practices as purely derivative and incompatible with the features of Romani identity. Rather than being seen as the outcome of uncritical borrowing from the non-Roma, these practices should be seen as the result of a process of creative 'bric-

[12] Along the same lines, Kovats has defined the emergence of Roma nationalism as 'the politicisation of the Romantic racial myth of the 'Gypsy people'' (2003), a myth now discredited, but traditionally used by the non-Gypsies in order to marginalise and racially segregate Roma and Sinti.

olage' whereby non-Gypsy paradigms of identity are effectively re-used and invested with new meanings. The explicit reformulation of Romani identity as a transnational, non-territorially based identity represents one of the main outcomes of this process, giving rise to what Nicolae Gheorghe has named as "ethnogenesis" (Gheorghe 1997:158).

According to Gheorghe, the attempt to shape a diasporic Roma community in non-territorial terms is the key to finding positive alternatives to nationalist ideologies. This confirms Clifford's argument that peoples, in particular those who are constantly subject to prejudice and rejection, 'cannot be "cured" by merging into a new national community' but tend to identify with 'positive articulations of diaspora identity [which] reach outside the normative territory and temporality (myth/history) of the nation-state' (Clifford 1994:307).

Conclusions

The rise of Gypsy diasporic discourses represents a positive and timely development which coincides with an acknowledgement by European institutions that measures to tackle the problem of Roma exclusion in Europe are urgently needed. The treatment of Roma minorities is even regarded, to use the words of Vaclav Havel, as a 'litmus test' for European civil society. International and European-level initiatives such as the decade of Roma inclusion 2005–2015 – involving twelve countries with sizeable Romani minorities: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Spain – and the PHARE programme are expressions of this acknowledgement. However, a number of key issues affecting the Roma population in Europe remain to a large extent unresolved, in particular discrimination against Roma in the fields of employment, housing, health and in education (Committee of Experts on Roma and Travellers – MG-S-ROM 2000; van der Stoel 2000; European Commission 2004). In some EU Member States Romani groups are neither recognized as separate ethnic groups, nor granted equal access to political and civil rights. In countries such as Greece, Spain, Italy and Germany Roma and Sinti are forcibly evicted and resettled, and this exacerbates their marginalization and social exclusion. A recent World Bank report (Ringold et al. 2005) has highlighted the dramatic problem of Roma poverty, affecting especially– though by no means exclusively – Roma living in transition countries. Most crucially, the problem of anti-Gypsyism and Romaphobia is still entrenched within European society and may always resurface unexpectedly, as recent anti-Gypsy pogroms in Naples, Italy, demonstrate. All this testifies to the extraordinary complexity and the urgency of the so-called 'Roma issue'.

What appears increasingly clear in this context is that the successful implementation of policies aimed at Roma requires a closer involvement of Roma in the policy making process. The 2000 OSCE HCNM Report on the situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE area, for example, demands that Roma should be 'centrally involved in developing, implementing and evaluating policies and programmes' (OSCE/HCNM 2000:5-6). A transnational Romani intelligentsia has emerged which participates and represents Roma within European institutions. Their active involvement is widely regarded as a necessary prerequisite for the formulation of a coordinated European Roma policy that is able to address effectively the specific needs of an internally diverse Roma population, thereby complementing existing policies at the member state level.

Furthermore, Gypsy diasporic political mobilization fulfils a number of important functions *within* Romani society. For many centuries Romani identity has been hegemonized and 'colonized' by the non-Gypsies (Belton 2005), who have produced a range of misleading and ethnocentric stories and narratives of Gypsy identity. Even today the non-Gypsies retain to a large degree the power to name and represent the 'voiceless' Roma/Gypsies. However, the enduring anti-Gypsy stereotypes that often underlie non-Gypsy representations of Roma are increasingly challenged. Newly emerged diasporic discourses among Roma/Gypsies publicly reassert a positive version of their identity and their origins. This act of positive self-identification enables them to bridge the gap between their self-image and a stigmatized hetero-image.

It is my contention that the rise of Gypsy diasporic practices signifies a crucial attempt, on the part of the Roma/Gypsies, to create and negotiate their own narratives of identity to formulate their own ethnohistory and to establish themselves as writing subjects (Toninato 2006), and not just objects of representation.

Romani intellectuals have adopted the diasporic frame for purposes of identity-building. In reconstructing the history of the Gypsy diaspora, Romani intellectuals not only write about Romani history, but in a sense create it *ab initio*. They regard this act of re-writing as necessary in order to regain possession of an image monopolized and often distorted by the majority group. In their view, historical 're-construction' and 'deconstruction' of stereotypes are interrelated. Gypsy diaspora practices have provided the Roma/Gypsies with an important channel for political expression, allowing the emergence of the Roma as public political actors with their own agenda, while at the same time opening up new possibilities for collaboration between Gypsies and non-Gypsies.

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