THESES OF DISSERTATION
Mátyás Binder

ROMA ETHNIC MOBILIZATION IN EASTERN EUROPE

Doctoral School of History
Professor Mr. Gábor Erdődy, Head of Doctoral School of History

19th and 20th Century East European History Doctoral Programme
Professor Mr. Krausz Tamás, Head of the Doctoral Programme

Members of the Committee:

Dr. Palotás Emil DSc, professor emeritus

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Dr. Kovács Mónika PhD

Dr. Ladányi János DSc

Dr. Prónai Csaba PhD

Supervisor: Niederhauser Emil, academic

Dr. Krausz Tamás DSc

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My thesis investigates the appearance and the unfolding of Romani identity politics in the context of economic, social and political change in Eastern Europe. I try to approach the topic not from the problem of ethnicity or nation, but rather consider it as a social process with regional features in which the ethnic background in itself does not have sufficient explanatory force. The necessitated theoretical background is defined by the concepts of the constructivist approach of ethnicity/nationalism/nation (Gellner, Anderson, Barth, Brubaker); a historical approach that is comparative, critical and social-historical (Hobsbawm, Niederhauser, Szűcs, Wallerstein), as well as a set of notions (also) applicable to Roma from cultural anthropology and other social sciences.

Because the Roma communities form a non-territorial „folk,” I use the notion of ethnic mobilization (Olzak, Vermeersch) that has a wider perspective than of nationalism, which is connected closely to nation state, both in scientific and in public thinking. In my work, ethnic mobilization means the action of groups organized by certain ethnic features. The advantage of employing this notion is that we can classify such phenomena under this category, which are not based on nationalist (nation-building) principles, but apparently show ethnicity in conjunction with representative, interest protentional and cultural goals.

The thesis goes beyond the national and - in a narrow sense - the historical frames. The geographical limits are given by Eastern Europe as a historical notion and the temporal frames are specified by the investigated phenomenon, Roma ethnic mobilization (from the last third of the „long” 19th century to the end of the 20th century).

I.

The presentation of the conceptual frames is the aim of the first part. After a short terminological introduction I discuss the geographical and temporal limits of the thesis. In this frame I sketch the historian discourse that discusses the definition, interpretation, and relationship to the west of the East European region. (What do Central Europe, Eastern Europe and Central Eastern Europe mean?) I use the East Europe notion defined by Emil Niederhauser, and investigate the ethnic mobilization appearing in the „West Eastern” and „South Eastern” sub-region of the area, specifically Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia.

I examine the political „dimension” and the „needed” system of conditions following a classic periodization: the end of the „long” 19th century, the interwar period, state socialism, and regime change (democratic period).
The aim of my brief historical review of science is to justify the interdisciplinary nature of the work and to demonstrate the nature of the social scientific approach to dealing with Roma. After this I devote a larger space to investigate the notion of ethnicity/nationalism/nation because of the sensitivity of the topic, which is also politicized and obviously indefinable. I declare here that I agree with the modernist approaches according to which nationalism and nation are inherent parts of modernity, human constructions transformed to natural facts. In this part beside the „classic” nationalism researchers (Anderson, Gellner, Hobsbawm, Smith, Szűcs) I integrate cultural anthropologists’ and sociologists’ theories and analyses (Barth, Brubaker, Geertz, Eriksen, Löfgren, Sárkány, Csepeli); concerning East European nationalism Emil Niederhauser’s and Miroslav Hroch’s approaches are relevant to me. I present the point of view of the conditional system and approaches of ethnic mobilization based on the theoretical works of Suzan Olzak and Peter Vermeersch.

I also review the defining questions connected to Roma researches (the „Who is Roma?” debate) and the relevant social scientific notions and models (acculturation processes; questions of classification; peripatetic strategy; culture of poverty; underclass)

II.

In the second content unit I briefly review the main features of the Roma communities’ presence in East Europe from the 15th century to the end of the 19th century, up until the first public appearance of representations of ethnic consciousness. I try to illustrate what kind of acculturation processes formed the Roma communities before the appearance of the Roma „national idea” based on my research examining Hungarian historiography and the results of the recent English literature. In connection with this I examine the different form and space of Roma – non-Roma coexistence (wandering, village, town), the different economic strategies and the Roma politics of the particular states. As careful hypothesis, I state that the activities with are not connected to Romanies on the basis of stereotypes (e.g. agriculture) could have helped assimilation, and conversely, the urban spaces rather favoured lasting integration. In a distinct subsection, I discuss the appearance of the so called „Gypsy question” and the constraints concerning the changes of lifestyle and profession affecting the Roma communities in the second half of the 19th century.
III.

In the third chapter I deal with the developments of the „cultural phase“ (Niederhauser), based on the typology of East European nationalism. I present the main components of the Roma „national narrative,” placing them into the system of similar constructing processes. The three main elements of the imaginary Roma historical consciousness are: the „space” (original home and diaspora), the „characters of the nation” (wandering lifestyle, „traditional” gypsy crafts) and the „fate of the nation” (persecution, Roma Holocaust). The political and scientific (linguistic) attempts to standardize the Romani language follow the East European „recipe” of nationalization. Roma literature and art are important because of the ancestry of the authors, and because they represent the „everyday life of the Gypsies” and/or the canonical moments of the „national” history. The unprofessional tale collections and folklore researches supply ingredients for constructing myths of genesis, like in any other case of the East European nations. We can consider the self-given name of the community (Roma or Romani), the flag and the anthem as the most important Roma national symbols. Therewith a lot of different „symbols” (museum, journal, political association, voivode etc.) could function as a national instrument, irrespective of its original role.

IV.

In the 4th chapter I examine the different manifestations of ethnic mobilization in certain historical periods corresponding to the nature of the system of conditions and the regional differences. To investigate the system of conditions of Roma ethnic mobilization I developed the following system of view-points: (1) model given nationalism; (2) ethnic inequalities (socio-economical position); (3) embourgeoisement (urbanization, education-schooling, social mobility); (4) governmental „Gypsy politics” (the role of the political opportunity-structure); (5) „the image of Gypsies” (discourse analysis). In the first examined area (the end of the „long” 19th century), movements that can also be interpreted politically took place only twice (Romania, Bulgaria). The paternalistic attitude coupled with scientific interest had important role in cultural field (cf. Roma researcher triad in Hungary), and in turn, „Gypsy-policy” instructions of the becoming independent nation states in the political field. It has a rather symbolic significance, but it is important to note that the first Gypsy poetess and the first political activist in the modern sense emerged at that time.
There were marked differences during the interwar period concerning two sub regions („West Eastern” and „South Eastern”). While in Romania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia Roma ethnic mobilization was active, almost nothing happened in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland (except for the Polish „Gypsy kings”). The most active ethnic mobilization occurred obviously in regions densely populated by Roma and in the central towns of those areas (Sofia, Sliven; Bucharest; Craiova, Belgrade, Kosice). In addition, the identity of local Roma elites, the governmental Gypsy politics, the ethnicised „Gypsy image” and the earlier integration processes also could have had a role. In the South Eastern sub-region during the Ottoman Empire, the Roma communities had more rights and became better integrated into the local societies than in other regions of Europe. This can (also) be related to the fact that their emancipatory endeavour was similar to the earlier movements of peoples living in the Balkan.

The Roma were primarily interpreted as a disadvantaged social group during the state socialist systems (except for Yugoslavia). The Roma were affected adversely from the point of view of ethnic mobilization by the absence of minority institutions, organisations, the ban of journals and the lack of minority rights. A social economic integration realized to different extents emerged parallel to the assimilation aspirations of state socialism. As a result the objective life circumstances of the majority of Gypsies became significantly better. In turn, this process could indirectly help the unfolding of ethnic mobilization.

During state socialism the conditional system between the two wars was no longer determinate, but rather the state attitude toward the „Gypsy question” and toward the question of the national minorities in general was. Romania and Bulgaria, possessing significant „national” minorities and having enough Stalinist arrangements, eradicated the remains of the earlier Roma ethnic mobilization and over time left off the new initiatives. Czechoslovakia treated the Roma minority and the attempts of the non-Roma intellectuals’ solidarity with them in an authoritarian manner. More significant organizations could only function between 1968 and 1973. Poland resettled the small but mostly wandering Roma communities, but in the cultural field was rather permissive. However, in Hungary, during the so called „soft dictatorship” and in the „separate passenger” Yugoslavia, lively Roma ethnic mobilization activities took place.

A summary about the international Roma movement is also part of the chapter and after I review the effects of the regime change. I investigate the significantly boosting Roma ethnic mobilization through the drastic change of the system of conditions. The focus is on the interrelation of „triple transformation” (the simultaneous change of economy, the legitimizing
ideology and the political system); changes of Gypsy’s images and ethnic mobilization. The policy of ethnic recognition benefits ethnic mobilization but at the same time could also strengthen the harmful effects of certain “activities” of national state nationalism (scapegoating, ethnicisation of poverty, segregation).

V.

In the summary, I outline three possibilities of interpretation/approach. First I examine the Roma national identity-building through a cultural anthropological (or „inner”) view-point, based on the recent literature and a micro-research conducted by me. According to my careful theoretical conclusions, the collective ethnical and national identity of a given Roma community could be formed by the majority society, the inter-group relations inside the „Gypsy category” and the Roma national narrative. The ratio and the power of these identity-forming factors are situational.

After this I pose the hypothetical question (Gellner) of modern nationalism theories concerning Roma ethnic mobilization: was it a „logical or a sociological necessity”? In a world ruled by nation-states it seemed be logical for Roma leaders to establish an own national identity for improving the protection of interests and legal remedy. Studying the question through the acculturation processes and the systems of conditions, I state that Roma ethnic mobilization is a logical necessity, not a sociological one. This logical necessity is vitalized by the structures and pressures of „the age of nationalism.”

At the end I approach the question from the policy of recognition. I compared the Roma and the „non-dominant,” East European nations’ nationalism with the assistance of Miroslav Hroch’s tripartite typology. Following these, I came to the conclusion that Roma ethnic mobilization is a special variant of East European nationalism, which is non-territorial, its evolvement is mainly „logical”, and it did not achieve the „C” phase (mass movement).

However we can interpret the phenomenon through the view-point of different politics of identity and social movements. This approach indicates a problematic situation. Nancy Fraser argues that there is a contradictory relation between the aims fighting for cultural and political recognition and the aims for abolishing the economical disadvantages. In the first case, the group needs to emphasize their special features to become recognized. In the second case, the logic of the solution prescribes the liquidation the disadvantaged social group. The Roma communities of Eastern Europe both suffer from the lack of cultural recognition and
the system of socio-economical unfairness. This produces a „double and contradictory goal-system” for their ethnic mobilization.

In the viewpoint of modern identity politics, Roma ethnic mobilization is a very differenced and „elite-centered” social movement, with an ethnical and national legitimising ideology; it fights both for political and cultural recognition and for abolishing the economical disadvantages. The question is what results could be permitted by this „double and contradictory goal-system” and system of conditions dominated by the nation-states.

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