THE ROMANI PEOPLE:
THE FORGOTTEN COMMUNITY OF PLURALISM

Very preliminary draft.

Étienne Schmitt
PhD. Candidate, Université du Québec à Montréal
schmitt.etienne@uqam.ca

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The Romani people is probably one of the most discriminated population of the world.
No need to visit the Hungarian countryside – where this minority lives in anachronistic conditions without drinking water and a public sewage system, suffering of economic and social discriminations – for observe a comprehensive situation. Indeed, Roma are also victims of structural discriminations in western democracies. The political hostility about Roma camps is a shame, but this is the tip of the iceberg. Since 2012, the Canadian government denies the refugee status to individuals who come from a so-called “safe countries”, even for a population victim of racism. With unofficial – but attested – racial profiling for people come from Hungary, this measure targets mainly Roma (Keung,
2015). In 2014, the French government did 14,000 expulsions of Roma (ERRC, 2015) and despite the protests of human rights NGOs and European institutions, the French government continues with this unlawful policy that violates international treaties like the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of European Union*. These examples – and I have not mentioned yet destruction of goods, hate crimes, sexual assaults, and other anti-Romani persecutions like contemporary pogroms\(^1\) – should convince pluralistic patterns who aspire to solve cultural diversity issues to consider relevant the “Romani question”.

Despite the obvious facts, the literature about pluralism is silent. Sure enough, some authors mention this issue but they relegate it into territory problematics, *i.e.* the cleavages national/transnational or sedentary/nomadic. In the end, Roma are a forgotten community of pluralism.

A simple analysis demonstrates that Romani conception of political community mismatches with liberal version of pluralism, and explains the reason why Roma are simply ignored by state-centred political modernity. However, pluralism is not synonym of liberalism. John Gray indicates that the so-called “liberal values” of toleration and recognition which pluralism is rooted exist in many different illiberal regimes (2001: 109) like Ottoman Empire or Soviet Union. This confusion derives to the pluralism’s progressive appropriation by liberalism. The first step has been the pluralism of values of Isaiah Berlin who postulated that pluralism is based on a negative freedom that allows the plurality of doctrines (2002: 216). In a second step, John Rawls endorsed that pluralism is “a permanent feature of public culture of modern democracies” (1993: 251), but democracies picturing in a liberal way with a sovereign people, a state, a territory.

Although critical of John Rawls, William Galston considered that liberalism is the only

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\(^1\)Many contributions develop anti-Romani feelings and persecution of Roma, see Brearley (2001).
philosophy that authorizes pluralism because it sets on a diversity principle (2004). Reproducing this philosophical inherency, contemporary pluralistic patterns share the same correlation. If alternative conceptions question liberalism, in the meantime Roma have disappeared of their concerns.

My contribution aims to demonstrate that an interactional pluralism is a necessity to perceive the Romani issues and to integrate Roma. Indeed, liberal pluralism has a misconception of the Romani people, and consequently reproduces the structural discrimination. Without necessarily arguing of an ethnocentrism of a western literature – which is extraordinarily receptive for indigenous claims –, the analysis underlines that liberal pluralism conceives only cultural or national accommodations Roma’s claims.

1. The misconception of pluralism about Roma

As Aspasia Theodosiou summarizes (2011), the multiculturalist discourse qualifies Roma for one and only subject: the settlement debate. Several pluralistic patterns repeat exactly the same mistake, deaf to political protests and other claims from a discriminated population. This omission is the result of the dominant political ideology of pluralism: liberalism. If contemporary liberalism is paradoxically welcoming with any kind of diversity, it is less friendly with cultures that question its institutional framework. No physical violence is necessary, symbolical marginalization is enough.
a) Romani people as a subcategory

Each typology is a scheme, a kind of generalization regarding the social reality, but this can be useful in order to perceive a process where contingencies complicating the basic observation.

However, categorizing is not reifying. Reification is defined like an extreme objectification of the common representations. According Alex Honneth, a “reification can be understood neither as an epistemic category mistake nor as a transgression against moral principles” (2008: 52). When individuals use it, this is "a kind of mental habit or habitually ossified perspective, which when taken up by human subjects causes them to lose their ability for empathetic engagement in other persons and occurrences" (Ibid: 53). In other words, it corresponds to a social pathology which subtracts relations, practices and cognitions. In fact, every group tend to reify themselves when their members carry strong representations and they mobilize those in political sphere (Brubaker, 2003: 554). When reification comes from another entity, it is no more a simple tension between such interpretations of group, but a dominant point of view of others on others. By academics, reification is likely a reduction of group’s members to the group without integrate their own representations and the structural social tensions. And sometimes – or more often in the Roma’s case –, groups have not even a category.

Will Kymlicka – probably the most famous academic in North America on multinational issues – suggests that Roma are an “other types of ethno-cultural groups which do not fit into the category of national minorities or immigrants” (2001: 32). This assertion is true in most of cases, but deeply wrong in several contexts. In United States or in Canada, Roma are immigrants. In Hungary, Slovakia or United Kingdom, they are
recognized like an official minority, sometimes with a national, ethnic, or cultural status. The integration policies vary extremely. Nonetheless, Kymlicka not perceives a multiplicity of situations. By simplification, he classifies Roma into a catchall subcategory.

An objection of my critique towards Kymlicka can be the normativity of his approach. Kymlicka admits that his pattern is not comprehensive, but he argues in the same time that the “intermediate cases” do not invalidate the general demonstration. I refute this argument by two points. Firstly, normativity does not justify stereotypes. This rhetorical question: “And what about the Roma (gypsies), whose homeland is everywhere, and nowhere?” (Ibid: 56), reproduces a strong reification of Roma on the only basis of their supposed nomadic habits. After five centuries in Spain and a 90% sedentary population, Kale (or Spanish Roma) do not represent their homeland in a different country than Spain (Marzo and Turell, 2007: 215-234). They are not an exception, local Roma populations in Britain, in France, or in Italy have the same representations. In Transylvania, Gaboria Roma consider themselves as an indigenous people (Olivera, 2012). Secondly, the overlapping situations – with a local Romani populations, immigrant one, sedentary, semi-nomadic or nomadic – require analyse every kind of diversity because Romani communities have not the same structuration and the same demands. This is the reason why ideal-types have never prohibiting complexity.

b) A non-jealous minority status

The Hungarian context is the only case where the Roma have a strong level of autonomy, with an official recognition, guaranteed rights, self-government, and allocated
resources. If the situation seems optimal according Kymlicka’s recommendations concerning national minorities' rights, a detailed observation demonstrates the opposite.

Despite this generous law for minorities in Hungary, the expansionist nationalism of Fidesz – the conservative party of the current Prime Minister Victor Orbán – and the success of Jobbik – the far-right party that got nearly 20% in last 2014 general elections – do not encourage them to claim rights. According to official census (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2012), only 555,507 individuals – including 308,957 Roma – assume to belong in one of the thirteen recognized national minorities. These numbers are totally distorted, because 1,455,883 people refused to identify themselves within a group. Also, the number of Romani people is smaller than reality. The Council of Europe (2010) evaluates that they are around 700,000 people, or 7% of the whole Hungarian population. The fact to refuse to be identified as Romani tends to prove the perplexity of this people about the political Hungarian guarantees, also tensions inside Romani political community that a constitutional minority status crystallizes.

Indeed, the Fundamental Law of Hungary seems very careful with minorities. The 29th article of the Constitution clearly stipulates:

(1) Nationalities living in Hungary shall be constituent parts of the State. Every Hungarian citizen belonging to a nationality shall have the right to freely express and preserve his or her identity. Nationalities living in Hungary shall have the right to use their mother tongue, to use names in their own languages individually and collectively, to nurture their own cultures, and to receive education in their mother tongues.
(2) Nationalities living in Hungary shall have the right to establish their self-government at both local and national level. (2013)
Therefore, Robert Koulish concludes his empirical article by some words that explain pretty well the dilemma of being Roma in Hungary, even though they have a self-government:

For assimilated Roma, the choice is between a higher standard of living and internalising oppression. For self-identified Roma, the choice is between a set of symbolic institutions-minority rights-and outright exclusion. Clearly these choices have no real alternatives. (2005: 323-324)

In others words, Roma have the choice between assimilation or exclusion, between second class citizenship or marginalized self-institutions. Indeed, the Romani national self-government is severely limited without legal competences, without a genuine representation of Roma actors into Hungarian political sphere (Kende, 2000: 195-197). It institutionalizes otherness rather than give a real political autonomy. Then, it politicizes clan differences and rivalries. The members of the self-government are belonging to a same group. The contrast between the minority government and the other community actors entails a progressive fragmentation of an already divided minority (Kovats 2000:259).

With an optimistic point of view, Hungary tries solving this issue with a minority status that organizes Roma. Of course, this is a beginning: the socialization of Romani elites to Hungarian power spheres achieves its normalization stage, and the Roma's confident to Hungary state is increasing from census to census. These data prove that integration works. Nonetheless, this optimistic point of view forgets something. Minority status allows Hungary to mobilize pluralism as a directory against its neighbors whom hosting Hungarian-speaking minorities. Roma are only an adjustment variable for an irredentist Hungarian government, destined to prevail itself in Europe as a defender of
minorities and justified its cultural borders during conflicts with Romania, Slovakia or Ukraine (Capelle-Pogacean, 2002).

This example demonstrates that a minority status corresponds sometimes to a forced integration, strengthening antagonisms between – in this example – the Hungarian state, the Roma representatives that contribute in the main political sphere and the Roma’s notion of polity.

2. To a interactional pluralism

Into his analysis on the probability of a future multination in Eastern and Central Europe, Stéphane Pierré-Caps qualifies the Romani people of “transnational minority” (1995: 26-28). Better than Kymlicka’s catchall subcategory because it integrates a different conception of territory rather than it emphasises on an exception of a general cultural issue, the transnational category is conceived yet on the territory stake. According Jean-Pierre Liégeois:

The Romani populations form a mosaic of small diversified groups in the world. It follows two essential considerations. Firstly, a mosaic constitutes a whole which each pieces are linked to the others. […] The Romani populations can be observed like an organized whole, if the structure in their case is not rigid but changing. […] Secondly, each piece extracted of the whole has its own features that make it to appear different from all pieces of the mosaic […]. Therefore, it is the conception that a description on the organization of the whole does not reflect the each pieces’ property. (1983: 57-58)

In other words, transnational category can be useful to solve the issue on overall level, but it is still inaccurate for communities’ accommodations. An interactional pluralism
requires to be comprehensive, adding other variables than territory such as structurations and claims of the political community.

\[ \textit{a) The Romani political community explained} \]

The gap between the Romani conception of political community and liberal state explains the difficulty for multiculturalism to understand this population. The Roma's self-representations of community are formed on a “segmented social universe” (Liégeois, 1983: 64-85) where individuals are more or less interrelated by a kinship, a subgroup's belonging and/or a national feeling. By example, the “kumpanja” is a temporary camp in a located area, where families or clans gather on a social and political model determined by them. This social structure is ruled by the same principle of autonomy than a liberal democracy, but in a different way: no right can be granted or exercised by somebody, by something, as representatives or a sovereign people.

In parallel with these unofficial structures, Romani organizations participate to the political sphere in a national, transnational or international level. Romani political parties have elected members in parliament and local governments, and the political mobilization increases. Also, “some aspects of the electoral campaigns of Romani parties have been fairly similar to those of mainstream parties” (Barany, 2001: 6). Therefore, a participation to politics is not an assimilation by politics, as Jean-Pierre Liégeois wrote:

\[ \text{These presidents, secretaries, leaders have a difficult role to play: too innovator for Gypsies, not enough for an environment who understand them badly, and not always with the agreement of their counterparts from other organizations. (2009: 97)} \]
The Romani socialization happening, but tensions have still remained within groups in a dialectic between cultural identity and politicized identity. In fact, Romani people have a certain suspicion towards their representative in Eastern and Central Europe. They often prefer voting for a communist party or for another majority party. As Zoltan Barany notices: “though other large ethnic minorities like Hungarians in Slovakia or Albanians in Macedonia tend to vote along ethnic lines, Gypsies often do not because they have little confidence in their own” (2001: 8). The Romani nationalism propagated by political elites in Hungary and Romania have failed to restore this confidence:

No clear understanding of the Roma nation is communicated to the Romani masses. Instead, Romani political parties conflate a common ethnicity with upgrading their social status, presuming that this will garner sufficient support. (McGarry, 2009: 119-120)

With this lack of confidence in mainstream politics and their own representatives, the gap between the Romani perception of political community and liberal state can be filled?

Normatively, the Pierré-Caps’ concept of self-federalism – influenced by the “personal principle” of austromarxism where geographically divided peoples gather upon their national belonging – promotes political diversity in a bigger picture. It might be a solution after some enlightenments, whose another option to categorize Roma rather than a transnational category. On transnational issue, Aidan McGarry has probably right when he questions “the elaboration of Roma as a nation without a territory” (Ibid: 119) by Romani elites in Hungary and Romania, reproducing some western stereotypes about the gypsy caravan traveler. Any kind of collective entity should not be imposed. Before called the Romani people “nation” or “transnational community”, an interactional pluralism supposes that each political group disclose its claims.
b) Roma’s claims

James Tully introduces each disclosure such as a struggle for recognition combined to some mutual acknowledgments. The issue is no more a recognition struggle for Roma. Since the first World Romani Congress in 1971, demands have been expressed, and – if not every claims were solved – gradually states and international organization give them recognition as a singular people and guarantee in some contexts their cultural rights. Tully agrees that the major issue is not claiming the group cultural recognition, but its freedom against the domination of the majority (1999: 14-15). According Tully, the disclosure is an intersubjective, dialogical, agonic and perpetual movement that should have some institutions, especially a constitution where the right of self-determination could be negotiated (Ibid: 24).

In the Romani example, this proposition is still abstract, even naive: structural discrimination and violence against Roma persist. In Hungary and Romania, McGarry notices that:

constructions of Roma nationalism in the national political context are not tied explicitly to cultural interests. It is worth noting that according minority protection in the form of cultural autonomy or state resources for mother tongue instruction is economically parsimonious for states when compared to redressing embedded structural issues such as socio-economic marginalization and the lack of a political voice, that is, the interests of many Roma. This is not to say that cultural interests are irrelevant because Roma enjoy a rich cultural heritage rather the main interests of Roma tend to be more pressing such as access to socio-economic provisions (health, housing, employment, and education) as well as cross cutting interests which reinforce marginalization such as poverty and discrimination. (2009 : 110)
On the African-American issue, Nancy Frazer demonstrates that recognition and redistribution are consistent of a same social justice’s need (2003: 9).

In fact, European policies are covering socio-economic needs, cultural recognition, and fighting against racism and xenophobia. Near to the end of the European 2020 Strategy, the achievements are mitigated. Among the recommendations made by the European Commission, it formulates what I think is the core issue:

To create national platforms for Roma or transform existing coordination structures to encourage mutual learning at local level and achieve wider participation of all stakeholders and Roma communities in the implementation and monitoring. (2015: 17)

The European and national strategies have forgot the local claims, despite the Romani conception of political community centred on several families.

Conclusion

An interactionist pluralism should be a transversal solution that overlaps the different pieces of Romani mosaic, and their different claims. By example, during the fifth Romani World Congress in 2003, representatives have expressed a demand of recognition as a non-state nation. If the self-determination right in Tully’s perception sounds utopian within a context of persecution where everything is a power relationships issue, I am agreed with Morag Goodwin when she conceives self-determination as right of participation, not necessarily a state-based right (2004). The Romani nation could be manage his cultural issues as well to participate as a sovereign entity to determine related subjects as European programs and/or national policies concerning educational access.
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The transnational and national basis decoupled with autonomous local public cooperatives loaded to redistribute funds and to come up needs will allow reduce the lack of confidence towards elite, and perhaps collusion among them.

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