
SECTION III: ETHNIC MINORITIES

"TALKING NICELY": THE BIO-POLITICS OF SOCIAL WORK IN THE OSTRAVA ROMA COMMUNITY

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Late last year, the newly formed Roma Parliament (*Parlament Romů*) sent a delegation to meet with Czech President Klaus. The Czech president's subsequent pledge to address Roma concerns would seem like good news for a community in which unemployment sometimes tops 80 percent, money-lending is rife, and the majority of children have been educated in substandard 'special schools' designed for the mentally disabled. A year previously, Klaus had gained a modicum of Western notoriety for dismissing the suggestion that Roma faced discrimination in the Czech Republic on the BBC World program *HardTalk*, announcing that it was "such nonsense and stupidity that I won't even react to it" (Klaus 2003).¹ But Klaus's newfound willingness to react to the issues often grouped under the heading of the 'Roma Question' was not received warmly in all quarters. The meeting instead set off a tiff between the President's office and Jan Jařab, the Government's out-going Human Rights Commissioner, who complained in the newspaper *Lidové noviny* that the Parliament, as a non-profit organization representing a spectrum of local non-profits, was misrepresenting itself as a 'political subject' (*politický subjekt*), and expressed his wonderment that the president would meet with an organization that was not even registered with the Ministry of the Interior (Vokatý 2004).

The leaders of the Parliament have a standing quarrel with Jařab, who is white and whom they hold does not share their "unmediated"

access to the Roma community (Ščuka and Jano 2004). Jařab's reaction to the meeting also reflected behind-the-scenes political wrangling, for his Government office oversees the Office of Roma Community Affairs for the Czech Government that serves as the secretariat for the Advisory Board for Roma Community Affairs (*Rada vlády pro záležitosti romské komunity*). The Parliament was making a claim to that advisory role on the basis of what the head of Office of the President called its "authentic view" (*autentický pohled*) on Roma issues (Vokatý 2004), jeopardizing the host of social programs run out of Jařab's office. Thus the Roma Parliament launched itself headlong into the core of one of the debates that currently animates the post-socialist liberal landscape in the Czech Republic: Who is to be taken as a representative of the Roma community in what is known as the 'majority society'?

This article is a brief reflection on how this question has become salient, and the multiple practical effects of the answers to it. Though the fieldwork (conducted in 2004) on which this piece is based focused on Holocaust reparations,² I found that the tangled

¹ Though Klaus made his remarks in English, I am translating here from the Czech-language transcript provided by the President's office, in which he is quoted as saying, "To je takový nesmysl a hloupost, že na to ani nebudu reagovat" (Klaus 2003).

² In my research on Holocaust reparations and the relevance of contemporary notions of race to their Nürnberg-era predecessors that surface in those reparations, I spent half a year in the field with Roma social workers as they assisted elderly clients in claiming reparations from the Czech state. I was constantly struck by how entangled the Roma Question was with the subject of my research: that the Roma should make claims was deemed ludicrous by white acquaintances, because "they already take welfare;" failed claims, in turn, were chalked up by their non-recipients to Czech racism. It was even harder to ignore the arm's-length fascination that educated Czechs have with Roma. Many Czechs immediately assumed that, because I am an anthropologist, I worked on Roma, who seem to offer themselves up as the proper subjects of the

contemporary nexus of race, culture, and politics that constitute the Roma Question surfaced unbidden in my research with a pervasiveness that made it hard to ignore. Roma today are the focus of intense sociological interest: they are the subject of innumerable publications ranging from academic and policy-oriented surveys and reports on the challenges Roma present for cultural diversity to social-scientific tracts on their putative racial, and thus intellectual, inferiority. Across this spectrum, there exists a preoccupation with Roma cultural uniqueness, with what makes them not fit into Czech society, and what should be done to redress their exteriority. These meditations address schooling, housing, criminality, hygiene, and poverty – the laundry list of concerns that have reformulated themselves after the end of state socialism. They are made all the more crucial by the post-89 pogrom-like violence that to this day is practiced by white Czechs against their black ‘fellow citizens’ (*spoluobčane*),³ a reminder that in the Czech context the dark side of cultural difference is racial violence. In their centrality to all these social issues, Roma constitute an “imaginative surface” (Hartman 1997:7) onto which Czech society projects the anxieties and antinomies that adhere to the post-Communist reintroduction of a liberal state form. At stake, thus, in almost every public discussion of Roma is not only its presumed subject but also the very form of the post-socialist polity on whose margins Roma hover. Taking as the basis of my analysis Michel Foucault’s notion of bio-power, which practices itself on the level of population by optimizing the life of that population, I seek to explore how the dense discourse about Roma participates in rendering Czech society into a

population in which ‘Roma’ becomes a special category of intervention. In order to take stock of the production of knowledge about ‘Roma culture’ and how it circulates in political domains, we must resituate the question about the possibility of an “authentic view” into Roma cultural uniqueness into the frame of the bio-politics that generates it.

Bio-power and governmentality

Many recent observers of the post-socialist condition frame their analyses in the vein of governmentality, examining the introduction of the liberal form of government (in the Czech case, its re-introduction) in the context of new forms of knowledge that have begun to circulate in Eastern Europe and the technologies of intervention those forms of knowledge underpin (June this issue, Chivens 2004, Dunn 2004). It is fruitful because governmentality is wider than the practices of the government, encompassing not only “governmental apparatuses” but also the complex of knowledge that weaves through many domains (*les savoirs*) (Foucault 1990). Governmentality and bio-power are contiguous forms, each reliant on a population in which to intervene. For the case at hand, though, I find Foucault’s later musings on bio-power more useful, for he posits the problem anew, expanding it into the realm of racism (Foucault 1997b:227, see also Agamben 1999:82-86).

By racism, Foucault does not mean, as he says, an “ideological operation by which states, or a class, would try to divert toward a mythic adversary the hostilities that would be directed toward themselves,” but rather the ominous inverse of the optimization of life (1997b:230). This addition to the notion of governmentality is crucial, for Roma seem to provide a particular challenge to liberal governance; their difference is not easily subsumed into the population that government takes as its end. What distinguishes this racism in the framework of bio-power is the danger it poses to the state’s own, proper, citizens (*propres citoyens*), in effect to the constituents of the bio-political population (227). While the jacquerie violence against

anthropological gaze in the Czech Republic. Even though I work equally in communities of Jews and former political prisoners, I am still introduced by Czechs as “an anthropologist who works on Roma.”

³ The term ‘fellow citizen’ can be used, for example, by an elected official to address all of his constituents. It is also used, however, to refer to the not-quite-Czech populations of the Czech Republic: Jews, Germans, and, the largest of the three today, Roma.

Roma usually associated with skinheads in the Czech Republic is one aspect of this,⁴ the recent instance in which three off-duty police officers burst into a Roma household and attacked its members while shouting racist slurs is equally illustrative (Truhlička 2003).

As the animating force of bio-power, racism introduces the grounds for dividing the population into those who will live and those who may not. While Foucault grapples with these issues in relationship to Nazism, he does not limit his analysis to this extreme case. "I don't only mean direct murder," he says, "but also all that could be indirect murder: the act of exposing to death, of multiplying for certain the risk of death, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, casting out, etc." (1997b:228-229). In this sense, we do not have to return to the period when Roma were rounded up into the concentration camps of the Czechoslovak Second Republic to imagine the impact bio-power has in the here and now. Thus here I consider first an example of the spectrum of knowledge that exemplifies how the parameters of Roma political subjectivity are constructed in the discursive frame of 'culture.' The reach of this knowledge, which has very clear roots in Normalization-era Czechoslovakia, today finds itself stretched between a production of multiculturalism that valorizes Roma identity⁵ to a more troubling middle ground of social assimilation and on to racist rants with eugenic overtones. I then turn to the case of social workers who are hired by the Government to function within the space of those parameters in order to promote Roma social integration. In examining a combination of knowing and the practices it

makes possible, I hope to make an initial contribution to understanding the persistent racialization of Roma, and to challenges the mechanisms of bio-power pose to liberal governmentality.

Integration and the culture of the minority

The programs that Jařab was trying to protect center around the social integration of Roma and are typified by his office's Roma Field Social Worker program (*terenní sociální pracovník*, henceforth TSP).⁶ The TSP program, through which I conducted fieldwork in 2004, hires (predominantly Roma) Roma social workers whom it trains to assist members of the Roma community in their interactions with official administrative structures, such as the local town hall or the welfare bureau.⁷ Many older Roma cannot read and write in the Czech language, so social workers work as their scribes. In my fieldwork, I often witnessed social workers sitting patiently in living rooms, pens poised, while elderly clients dredged their memories for the exact dates they spent in hiding from the Nazis in order to fill in the myriad forms required to claim Holocaust reparations from the Czech state.

The communicative gap between Roma and the majority resonates on many levels, and renders Roma into a seemingly silent population. No one is required to identify themselves as Roma on the Czech census (or as anything else for that matter), and few Roma announce themselves as such on census forms. There are, as a result, no reliable statistics on how many Roma live in the Czech Republic. One of the consequent problems the TSP program faces is the uncertainty over who actually is Roma. In Ostrava, a city of about 300,000, there are by most conservative estimates 10,000 Roma; by

⁴ Stories of skinhead attacks on Roma feature in the Czech press with saddening regularity. One of my informants related to me that for a period, local Roma in his city formed armed defense gangs in the mid-1990s; another told me that her all-Roma suburb had its own Roma police force formed in response to the skinhead threat.

⁵ The most obvious example of this is the annual European Union-funded Khamoro festival, which celebrates Roma music and traditional crafts. See <http://www.khamoro.cz>.

⁶ For a detailed view of the Government's approach, see its Roma Integration Plan (*Koncepce romské integrace*) at <http://wtd.vlada.cz/scripts/detail.php?=-6206>. Though Field Social Worker is the official title of the position, they are often referred to as Roma social workers.

⁷ Of my social worker informants, only one was non-Roma, though she was married to a Rom.

liberal estimates there are up to four times that number. According to the last census, however, there are exactly 691 Roma inhabitants of Ostrava (Poláčková 2004:2). These sorts of discrepancies make it difficult for the Government's Office of Roma Community Affairs to justify the social programs it funds and oversees. After all, if there are only 691 Roma in Ostrava, why does the city need fourteen social workers just for them?

On the other side of the relative muteness of Roma in relation to governmental forms of data collection is the appearance of excessive impropriety when Roma do enter into the political provinces of the state. Thus, for example, the arrival of the Roma Parliament onto the scene was accompanied by intimations of the taint of corruption, as if their crossing of the borders of culture and race locates Roma improperly outside of their natural economies of exchange. The vice-president of the Parliament, Petr Jano, one newspaper suggested, was corrupt, having been 'judged (*souzený*) for extortion,' though they refrained from noting that the case was ongoing and that Jano has not actually been convicted (Vokatý 2004).⁸ Another newspaper ran an article devoted solely to the issue of the alleged illegal conduct of the Parliament's leaders (Blažková and Grohová 2004).⁹

⁸ The term *souzený*, unlike the related, and straightforward, term *odsouzený* (convicted), is deliberately ambiguous. I thank Petr Kadlec for the linguistic clarification of Czech legalese.

⁹ By the same token, my Roma informants told me that the leaders of Parliament were *degeši* (see note 15), and then expanded this pronouncement to include all Roma politicians, and then in turn, all politicians. By noting this focus on the alleged criminality of the Parliament's leaders, I do not mean to say that they are necessarily innocent, but rather that a larger discourse about Roma criminality impels the particular form of these representations as corrupt. Unlike the discourse about 'Czech' corruption, which has been marked by struggles to criminalize practices such as 'tunneling' a firm's financial worth and is perceived as arising from and embedded in bureaucratic structures and the state's participation in the post-socialist privatization process (Altschuler 2001, June this issue), the perception of Roma corruption rests on the widespread assumption

Subsumed in all the hullabaloo about whether the Roma Parliament was the proper representative of Czech Roma was their proposal to address the fact that Roma do not seem to register in any other mode but that of social pathology. One of the main planks of the Parliament's proposal identifies the most urgent task of their social workers to be a census of the Roma population (Vokatý 2004).¹⁰ Since Roma obviously have not revealed their identity to white census-takers, the Parliament argued that their (presumably Roma) social workers would be better placed to figure out who is who. They argued, in essence, that their "unmediated" access to Roma allows them to constitute the proper Roma political subject, identified and self-identifying, and massify these subjects into a political constituency.

The Roma Parliament and the Czech Government are not the only ones preoccupied by the question of the proper Roma subject, nor is the census the only form of knowledge deployed to delineate this subject's parameters. The particular form of inaccessibility that Roma appear to take – silent in such official registers as the census, yet legendarily responsible for street crime – has called forth a scientific-academic industry devoted to the reformulation of the non-Roma public perception of Roma.

On one end of the spectrum there are characters such as Petr Bakalář, who though roundly denounced as a racist also managed to top the best-seller list for months in 2003 with his study of the relationship between race and intelligence (Bakalář 2003, see also Bakalář 2004). In his social-Darwinist study of the

that Roma are the personification of criminality in the Czech Republic. Altschuler quotes a letter to a Czech newspaper as saying, "A normal Prager is someone who has [never] tunneled anything" (129). By way of contrast, consider the casual remark one stranger made to me at a tram stop when the ticket machine was not working: "It must be because Gypsies have been stealing from it."

¹⁰ For an overview of the history of the representation of Roma in the census, a long-standing issue in the Czech Republic and its predecessor state, Czechoslovakia, see Sokolová (2002:23-24) and Kára (1977).

supposed evolutionary effects of harsh environmental conditions on certain racial groups, he argues that the history of Roma has made them genetically weaker than whites, accounting for their "higher fertility ... lower parental investment [in children] ... lower life expectancy" and the like (2003:90). The social deviance of Roma, evident in their low scores on intelligence tests, he concludes, arises from their racial(ized) heritage. Occupying the other end of the spectrum, academics such as the linguist Milena Hübschmannová cast Roma difference in a positive light, arguing that the perception of their social deviance is rather a failure of majority society to understand Roma culture. For Roma scholars in this vein, Roma culture must be taken on equal terms with Czech: its difference should be celebrated instead of denigrated, and Roma claims to national status on the basis of this difference should be recognized.

In the most recent salvo in this set of debates, Marek Jakoubek, an anthropologist from Západočeská univerzita in Plzeň, proposes that both these approaches are wrong-headed. Roma, he holds, are neither a racial type nor a nation whose emancipation has been long denied by the dominant political structures surrounding it. Instead, Roma culture must be situated, through anthropological analysis, in the segregated Roma settlements (*osady*) of Slovakia where it is practiced in its most complete form. Much of his analysis functions as the basis for his reflections on the fraught status of the individual political Rom that so troubles Jařab and Jano. In an argument demonstrative of the way in which the cultural and the political present themselves as inextricable, yet endlessly self-segregating, Jakoubek reaches the conclusion that the organization of Roma culture forecloses the very possibility of Roma political representation (2003:157-157).

Though Jakoubek calls his contribution to Roma studies a 'heretical essay' that deconstructs the term 'Roma,' his analysis of what make Roma 'traditional' shares the same basis as most standard Czech ethnographic scholarship as well as the pseudo-scientific

writings exemplified by Bakalář, both of which rest on the premise that Roma are descended from 'Indians.'¹¹ In Jakoubek's reading, Roma settlements in Slovakia (where he conducted his fieldwork¹²) are relics of 'traditional society,' kinship-dependent and internally riven by concerns over ritual pollution and purity.¹³ Roma social structure, and the Romany preoccupation widely noted by ethnographers throughout Europe and in the United States (Silverman 1988) with the pure (*žužo*) and the polluted (*degešis*), is understood by Jakoubek as a preservation of a South Asian caste system, replicated over and over in self-contained Roma nodes inside the diverse European state forms of the twentieth century.¹⁴

¹¹ Roma are thought to have migrated to Europe starting around the 9th century, and by the Middle Ages are recorded as widely dispersed around the continent (Silverman 1995). I place the term 'Indian' in quotes because at the time the groups that were to become European Roma began their journeys, India was not a unified country. Linguistic analysis traces Roma origins to contemporary Rajasthan, which at the time of their initial dispersal, was the province of the Rajput dynasty (Columbia Encyclopedia 2001-04).

¹² Jakoubek conducted his fieldwork while working as the research coordinator for the Slovak NGO Nadacia InfoRoma's "Monitoring of the situation of Roma settlements" project (*Monitoring situace romských osad*). One of the main goals of the project, which was supported by the Slovak government, is to offer advice to the Government on its integration policies. See <http://www.inforoma.sk/vyskum.htm>. Though the settlements in Slovakia are rural enclaves disturbingly reminiscent of Third World poverty, Jakoubek generalizes his arguments to Czech Roma, a largely urban population whose migratory patterns over the past fifty years have on Czech soil fundamentally rearranged the original relations of these village's kith and kin.

¹³ I thank Petr Skalník for bringing the debate surrounding Jakoubek's book in *Lidové noviny* to my attention. See Barša (2004), Holomek (2004), Budil (2004) and Krčík (2004).

¹⁴ In my fieldwork, I found many Roma for whom this argument was persuasive. Usually, though, explanations offered in these terms were marked by hesitation as the person searched for the right academic term. One informant, expounding on the meaning of the word *degeš* (which is used to mean anything from 'ritually impure' to 'complete asshole'), said, "Well, you see, it's like in the, the, uhhh... castes in umm, you know... India."

Hübschmannová, one of the main proponents of the Indian origins theory, is also one of Jakoubek's main antagonists. She reads caste as a 5,000-year proto-Indian and Indian development that has produced the array of 'anthropological' and 'ethnocultural' groups present today on the subcontinent (1999:119). In her trips to India and around Eastern Europe she has amassed a veritable archive of ethnographic data detailing the persuasive similarities between contemporary Indians and Roma. Regarding food consumption, for example, she remarks that "it is almost unbelievable to what level of detail [the] custom [of not consuming certain types of meat] has been conserved (*udržoval*) among many Roma until very recently, if not today" (121). These sorts of observations are generalized in the academic discourse on Roma, which describe Roma social organization in terms of caste, a phenomenon Jakoubek asserts, is "universal in India" (2004:95, Cf. Quigley 1998).

Though Hübschmannová views the Indian origins of Roma as the basis for their political emancipation,¹⁵ Jakoubek eschews such politics as untenable in light of the nature of Roma communities as "relics" of traditional society. He describes the settlements as "*unique islands of traditional society* which have survived ... until today and at the same time are the last *enclaves of a people without history* in Europe" (2004:291, emphases original). To buttress these claims, Jakoubek relies on Louis Dumont's analysis of caste (Dumont 1970). Dumont's study details a system given over to concerns about ritual purity and hierarchy, manifested in caste and *jajmani*. *Jajmani* is described by Jakoubek as an economic system of reciprocity in which functions that in "modern, civil society" would be understood as economic are instead founded on (as Jakoubek quotes Dumont) "the implicit relationship to the whole, whose

character is religious" (2004:95-96).¹⁶ For Hinduism, which Roma in East-Central Europe do not practice, Jakoubek substitutes the preservation of "quasi-religious" ritual purity (96).

Conspicuously missing from analyses that rely on Dumont's understanding of the caste system is the widespread critique of his ahistorical analysis. Nicholas Dirks, for example, notes that caste in India was fundamentally reconfigured during the British colonial administration of South Asia.¹⁷ He argues that analyses of the present functioning of caste systems in India must account for the utility of the notion of caste to the British colonial project, and the way it underpinned and allowed forms of knowledge about natives that were inextricable from the political and economic projects the colonists were pursuing (Dirks 1993, 2001). Dirks's critique is, in the mode of deconstruction, an excavation of what the discourse of culture effaces. He argues that Dumont, by separating the internal workings of caste from the domain of the political, relegates its practitioners to a position outside of the realm of power and thus reinscribes the effects of colonialism. Jakoubek's deconstruction of the term 'Roma', however, does the opposite by positing Roma as a people without history whose stubborn adherence to their 'non-modern' social organization precludes the very possibility of their entrance into the contemporary Czech polity.

The historian Věra Sokolová sums it up nicely in her excellent study of the use of the notion of culture as a discursive strategy deployed by the state during Communism in order to marginalize Roma as 'socially deviant.' "The politics of Romani studies," she writes, "despite its best intentions of trying to champion Romani emancipation in a variety

¹⁵ Hübschmannová is noted for her political advocacy on behalf of Roma, and particularly her opposition to the repressive Communist-era attempts to integrate a population deemed by the regime to be 'socially deviant' (Sokolová 2002:227-228).

¹⁶ Here I am quoting Dumont in translation from Jakoubek's Czech text.

¹⁷ It follows that South Asian caste in its present form(s) on any continent cannot be read backwards as the preservation of a cultural form from pre-colonial India, much less to a medieval period when India as such did not exist.

of different ways, has also produced a set of knowledge claims that have tended to affirm, rather than reject, the politics of difference in the host society" (2002:43).¹⁸ Sokolová argues that the turn in Roma scholarship in the 1970s to the issue of origins opened up a space in which older notions of Roma social pathology could circulate with a new impunity (40). For example, Bakalář, who argues that the "quality" of the "negroid" race's *genofond* (in contradistinction to that of the "europoid race") has been environmentally and evolutionarily disadvantaged (*nezvýhodněný*), is faced with the issue that in his terms, Roma as Indians are 'europoid.' He resolves the dilemma by asserting that their 'negroid' characteristics are accounted for because they were, in India, Untouchables, responsible for sweeping away garbage (2003:90). His is a neat inversion of Hübschmannová's analytical frame, which attributes the mounds of garbage often resident in Roma settlements to Roma's originary high-caste status; contact with such filth would be, for them, impossible (Fonseca 1996:103). Thus analyses such as Jakoubek's, far from heretical, are part and parcel of this larger epistemic apparatus that has long constituted Roma as simultaneously culturally unique and socially marginalized.

The inscription of Roma to the margins has, in recent years, a complex history. Sokolová traces its lineage through the Communist era from its Stalinist beginnings as a disciplinary civilizing project manifest in the anti-nomadism laws of the period (2002:118) to its bio-political face ascendant in the sterilization legislation of the 1970s. This second period of Communist assimilationist interventions was brought to bear primarily on Roma women, who were the implicit targets of the 1972 Sterilization Decree (307). The Czechoslovak regime was, at the time, strongly pronatalist, a

policy that would seem to be undercut by the practice of sterilizing women that became prevalent then. At the same time it offered Czechoslovak newlyweds special loans for the first year of their child's life, the state was also paying Roma women to undergo sterilization (262).

Recasting this question in the frame of bio-power offers us some insight into this problematic. Along with the scholarly turn towards the question of Roma origins, the 1970s saw an intensification of the biological study of Roma. Sokolová chronicles the production of knowledge about Roma features such as skull size, skin color, and hormonal levels, which were perceived the basis of the presumed early onset of puberty in Roma children (229-234). The pronatalist preoccupations of this period with, as Foucault terms it, "making live" (*faire vivre*), is characteristic of bio-power (1997b:219). At the same time, he argues, bio-power establishes a second plane of intervention around the individual who "falls outside" of these processes (217). In this sense, bio-power folds in the disciplinary modes of power Foucault analyzed (1995) before he recrafted his analyses to the level of comprehending the state's relationship to notions of population. And in the 1970s, Roma women and their potential progeny became the target of its practice. As Sokolová points out, the Roma Question post-1989 has deep roots in recent history. Long before Czechoslovakia (and Eastern Europe more generally) garnered international attention for the 'resurgence' of racism against Roma, the stage was set. It should not surprise us, then that of the group of women who have recently filed a complaint with the Czech government for their involuntary sterilization in state-run hospitals in the post-socialist period, the overwhelming majority are Roma (Kovalík 2004:4).

The hand-wringing over the resurfacing of Communist-era policies that has accompanied this revelation is somewhat deceptive, though, for the post-socialist practice of sterilization takes a rather liberal form. Whereas Roma women recall being paid to undergo sterilization during Communism, they now

¹⁸ See Sokolová (2002:314-319) for an insightful discussion of the relationship between these prejudices and the violence that has regularly claimed Czech Roma lives since 1989. Silverman reports that, according to a poll in 1989, one-third of (presumably non-Roma) Hungarians would like to see Roma forcibly 'repatriated' to India (1995:43).

recount being thrust a welter of papers to sign as they were being wheeled into the delivery room, only to discover later that one of them authorized their sterilization.¹⁹ In his defense, a gynecologist in Ostrava accused of the practice remarked, "Look, if a woman signs something, then perhaps she understands it (*tak tomu asi rozumí*). And I don't believe that a woman is so altered by giving birth that she doesn't know what she is signing" (Kovalík 2004:4). Sterilization today, that is to say, inhabits a landscape of contract and individual responsibility.

To understand the lay of this land, and indeed for any analytically productive ethnography of Roma (and of Czechs), I suggest turning the anthropological gaze to the people who, instead of recognizing their Roma-ness (*romství*) as a barrier to societal participation, use it as the basis of their engagement. In my experience, the people who were most aware of bio-power's uses and abuses were the Roma social workers whose daily work it is to reconfigure the social terrain of bio-politics.

The practice of social work

Social work is a practice inseparable from bio-politics. It concentrates its efforts on the margins of society, among the poor, the delinquent, the unemployed, the ill. In the Czech context, all these categories are grouped under the term '*sociálně slabé*,' the socially weak.²⁰ It is also a term increasingly coterminous with Roma.²¹ Roma social

workers in Ostrava spend much of their time seeking out these socially weak, walking house to house in ghettos, helping clients fill in forms, or accompanying them to official offices. Much of their work, and the training that leads up to it, focuses on acting as a communicative medium between (Roma) clients and (non-Roma) bureaucrats. The brochure on cultural difference published by the Ostrava Roma Advisor's office illustrates the problem communication poses between these two groups, noting that volume is used by Roma to mark the level of their "involvement" in a given situation. Czechs are exhorted to keep this difference in mind: "What non-Romanies should be aware of is: if a Romany shouts, he does not shout at us, he only tries to show his involvement in the problem. Let him shout and wait!" (Poláčková 2004: 3).²²

Letting someone shout and wait, though, is not common practice among Czech bureaucrats (*úředníci*). To remedy this, Roma social workers spend much of their time leading their clients through bureaucratic provinces. They usually pick up their clients at home, and on the way to government offices (denoted in Czech by the hard-to-translate word *úřad*),²³ social workers often offer a primer on bureaucratic interaction, instructing their client not to yell, not to get confrontational, to speak softly, to be polite to the bureaucrat. Once in the office, the situation triangulates: the social worker often speaks to the bureaucrat on behalf of the client, and the bureaucrat responds to the social worker, who in turn repeats all the bureaucrat's questions to the client, who responds to the social workers and then has her response again repeated to the bureaucrat. I often marveled that, as a foreigner, I seemed

¹⁹ One woman recounts, for example, that she had been given a series of injections during a difficult delivery, and was led to believe she was signing papers authorizing a C-section (Kovalík 2004:4).

²⁰ Recently, several government ministries have put forth new terms to replace 'socially weak'; thus the Ministry of Education, for example, commonly uses 'socioculturally disadvantaged' (*sociokulturně znevýhodňující*). The social workers with whom I worked, however, used only 'socially weak' to describe their client base.

²¹ When I asked Lýdia Poláčková, the Ostrava Roma Advisor, why there was no Vietnamese Advisor to assist the burgeoning population of Vietnamese immigrants navigate the labyrinth Czech public administration, she replied (after she stopped laughing), "But they're not socially weak!"

²² Perhaps not surprisingly, the brochure locates the onus of 'difference' on Roma, noting of non-Roma only that in situations of extreme duress that they "maintain an ice-cold facial expression and they are close to a heart attack." (Poláčková 2004:3).

²³ There is no one adequate English translation of the Czech word '*úřad*,' which can refer to the welfare office, the town hall, the regional council (*krajský úřad*), and beyond.

to understand the bureaucrat and the client better than they seem to understand each other, even though they both spoke Czech.

Almost all of my informants use the metaphor of a bridge to describe the fundamentals of what they do. In a more candid moment, one social worker, Katka,²⁴ put it to me thusly: "You see, I have to both be a normal Gypsy, and at the same time talk nicely." Though it might not seem to be a classic hallmark of professionalization, talking nicely is one of the fundamental skills of the Roma social worker. At the same time, the flip side of this equation, 'being' Roma, is something immanent and hard to define as a job skill. In Katka's formulation, her profession is both exegesis and a hermeneutics of culture, a constant mediation of her unmediated access to Roma culture.

Laura Epstein's suggestive analysis of the American profession of social work is instructive for this case. She holds that social work must be understood in Foucauldian terms as a human science "constituted by [its] technologies of intervention: by observation, measurement, assessment, and administration" (1999: 14). In the American setting, she argues, the professionalization of social work, and thus its technologies of intervention, was heavily influenced the arrival of Freudian psychoanalytic theory on the American scene in the 1920s and '30s (see also Lubove 1965:107). This accounts for the contemporary American configuration of the profession, which is composed of social workers and psychotherapists. The psychotherapeutic aspect of social work, Epstein holds, dovetails with the American liberal discourse on personal responsibility. She writes:

Social work broadly disseminates the ideology of individualism in ways that make it appear believable. The thrust of social work's development of various types of psychotherapy has been to enshrine the values and

properties of individualism, disseminating it through a multitude of individual contacts with all citizens, with the millions in all economic classes who experience problems in living, and especially in populations that are impoverished and discriminated against. (1999:10)

One of Epstein's goals is to uncover the way in which the feminized profession of social work sought to elevate its status through recourse to a social-scientific discourse that neutralized the gender of its practitioners and allowed them to interact with professions such as medicine and psychology from which they had been largely shut out on the basis of their sex.

Though similar in the way its social workers address individual citizens, the TSP program does not spring from the same psychological well as American social work. Roma social workers are not, as is common of social workers in the United States today, endowed with Masters' degrees and training in psychological clinical practice. It is interesting to note, however, that the gendered component of American social work bears a certain resemblance to the fact that the Roma TSP program specifically seeks to professionalize its cadres based on their status as Roma. In this sense, though, being Roma functions more as an inverse of being female: instead of necessitating a neutralizing discourse from without to efface their status, being Roma is itself the very technology that legitimates the role of the Roma social worker.

In this capacity, Roma social workers find their Roma-ness has become one of the "technologies of intervention" Epstein cites. During the time I conducted my fieldwork, I attended several social worker staff meetings at the Roma Advisor's office that were visited by Czech social scientists. They came in order to solicit the help of the social workers whom they felt had the "unmediated access" the Roma Parliament claims it has to other Roma, a sort of *savoir-faire* about how to approach their fellow Roma that would allow them to

²⁴ The use of first names only indicates the use of pseudonyms.

better administer surveys of the Roma population. Although the social workers duly took their forms and agreed on the number of clients they would survey, once the visitors left the room, they immediately derided the validity of the data the researchers hoped to collect. Regarding a survey of money lending in the Roma community, one social worker declared, "I would never talk to white people about that!"

I often observed this uneasiness about the constant crossing of Roma/Czech boundaries that Roma social workers are hired to perform. When I mentioned to Lenka and Marek, two Roma social workers, the Roma Parliament's proposal to conduct a census to identify all the Roma in the Czech Republic, they immediately perceived its bio-political potentiality. It was deemed a racist endeavor, a dividing of the social body not in keeping with their mission as agents of the state. Lenka then recounted her experience with census-takers in the 2001 census. When he came to her door, her census-taker questioned her about her nationality, to which she replied that she was Czech. "Are you sure?" he said, to which she responded, "Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?" And then, in a moment characteristic of Roma interaction with things official and administrative,²⁵ she took the form and, without the census-taker's knowledge, filled herself in as Roma. It was a double triumph of sorts: requiring an agent of the state to recognize her as equally Czech combined with a moment of private resistance never to be recorded by its object.

Marek's response was staked on his inability to translate the necessity of a census across the communicative divide. "How should I explain to them that we need a list of Roma

for official purposes?" said Marek, "They would never understand. I couldn't explain it to them." Both reactions illuminate the issues at stake in turning Roma into government social workers in their own communities. The technologies of bio-power, with its concurrent investment in the population and the relentless production of those who stand outside it, repeatedly reveal their racializing character to those who are asked to act *as* those technologies. The constant necessity of speaking across the bio-political divide, the difficulty of using the presumed separateness of being Roma to bring fellow Roma into a relation with the state, refracts the construction of Roma difference in the very attempts to overcome it.

This difficulty, I contend, has less to do with some immanent feature in Roma culture presumed by commentators such as Jakoubek that disallows its members from operating outside the communal confines of kinship, purity, and caste than it does with the straitened sphere of Roma political interaction. It is the public circulation of constructs of Roma culture reliant on the academic exegesis of the origins of Roma difference that in fact narrows the political sphere, producing boundaries that can only be traversed by embodying that difference. The Roma Parliament would make its fellow citizens into political subjects by bringing them into the polity *en masse*; the social workers bring them is one by one. But they both operate along a frontier that marks the emergence of a new, liberal, modality of power, one shadowed by the specter of race. And until social work is deployed to address not only the Roma Question, but also the Czech Question that the former always erases, Roma will inhabit a landscape fraught by the perpetual racializing of the boundaries of the Czech polity.

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²⁵ An example of the practice of evading the grasp of the state, noted in various Roma communities, is the dual naming system in which people have one name recorded on documentation such as birth certificates and used generally for official interaction and a second name used by family and friends. Silverman remarks on the utility of this arrangement, noting that if a truant officer shows up looking for a John Miller, the six children who answer to the name are sure to confound his regulatory authority (1988:7).

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