

# CULTURAL AND POLITICAL CONSTRUCTION OF ROMANI ETHNIC DIFFERENCES IN ROMOLOGICAL DISCOURSE ON ROMA IN SLOVENIA

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*"[Gypsy ethnography] is wrapped in an embrace of 'Gypsyology,' which has presented and still partly presents itself – not so much as a cluster of interdisciplinary studies than a gypsy lumber room"*<sup>1</sup> (Piasere 1994: 21).

In the late 1990s, anthropologists discussed the concepts of culture, power, and place in the context of critical anthropology (Gupta, Ferguson 1997). The concept of culture, as rooted and territorialized, was subject to critical consideration several times, and the criticism of "naturalized" connections of people to places was raised again. Whereas anthropologists underlined the importance of re-thinking the concept of identity as fluid and related to space and place, Slovenian Romology rooted Romani people to demarcated territories.

Although it is generally claimed that Slovenian Romology is a "science on Roma" (Tancer 1994), I believe that Piasere's citation would serve as a better starting point for an anthropological debate on Slovenian Romological professional knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Elle prit place au sein d'une "tsiganologie" qui se présentait, et se présente encore en partie, non pas tant comme un ensemble d'études interdisciplinaires que comme un "fourre-tout" tsigane."

<sup>2</sup> The analysis of Romology in this text observes Slovenian Romology through concepts taken from the anthropological field of ethnicity and

Viewed as a "fourre-tout tsigane," Slovenian Romology is more interrelated with archaic traditional Gypsyology and its scientific racism than with contemporary theorizations in social anthropology, Romani Studies, or anthropology of Gypsies, and studies on ethnicity and nationalism. One of these pernicious effects of Romology is the construction of difference between autochthonous and non-autochthonous groups of Romani people, which is analytically described in this paper as a case of a territorialization of Romani people and culture. In what follows, I explore the process

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nationalism, or rather, the formalist model of ethnicity proposed by Eriksen (1993) and Šumi (2000) on the one hand, and Romani Studies (Acton 1974, 1989, 1997a, 1997b, 1998, Hancock 1979, 1987, 1997a, 1997b, 1999, Acton and Mundy 1997) on the other. The anthropological fieldwork and more recent theories deriving from the social anthropology of Gypsies, as it is represented in contemporary anthropological writings from the 1970s and 1980s onwards, make up the framework for a critical reading of Slovenian Romology (Gay y Blasco, 1999, Lemon 2000, Mirga 1987, 1992, Okely 1983, 1994a, 1994b, 1997, 1999, Piasere 1985, 1986, 1989, 1994, Stewart 1997a, 1997b, 1999, Silverman 1988, Sutherland 1975 [1986], Van de Port 1998, Williams 1984, 1989). Aside a simple verification of ideological statements about the grandeur of Slovenian Romology, one of my central interests in my doctoral dissertation was also the reproduction and transmission of Romological knowledge.

of the construction of cultural and political difference between Romani people within the framework of critical anthropology (Gupta, Ferguson 1997). The crux of this article lies in the ways in which Romological discourse shapes the territoriality into a form of cultural difference, which was in turn used as a political criteria for differentiation of Romani communities. Although the extreme importance and quality of Slovenian Romological production has often been accentuated (cf. Tancer, 1994: 28, 30), I point out the pernicious consequences of this distinction for Romani communities.

Slovenian Romology was first defined by Mladen Tancer. Following his statements, the very foundations of Slovenian Romology rest on the research project *Isolates of Gypsies and Calvinists in Prekmurje* (1962), when several researchers conducted a eugenically-inspired study on the Romani population: the anthropological type or 'ethnic types' of the Romani population were constructed by anthropologists (Pogačnik 1962, 1967), as well as ethnologists (Štrukelj 1964); genealogies were collected, and endogamy was more presupposed than it had been thoroughly studied and described by genealogists (Dolinar–Osole 1962); the samples of blood types were analyzed (Hočevár 1962); an anthropo-medical research on the transmission of pathological genes was carried out (Avčin 1962a, 1962b), and finally, ethnological as well as sociological studies on the Gypsy population were also conducted (Štrukelj 1964; Šiftar 1962). However, a general methodological slip was made then and has been perpetuated since: on the basis of their own pseudo-scientifically defined and constructed criteria, the researchers took it upon themselves to decide who was a Gypsy or Rom – or in more accurate terms: their decisions were made on the basis of the racial archetype of Roma.

After the independence of Slovenia in 1991, the study of "isolates" is still considered as both fundamental and contemporary in the field of Romology, since it has never been critically examined despite the fact that during the 1990s Slovenian Romology underwent a

period of considerable revitalization, mainly within the Institute for Ethnic Studies (hereafter IES). However, the social construction of the racial type defining 'true Gypsies' was not discussed by Romologists. Quite on the contrary: the racial image of Roma has remained practically intact until the present day. As Tancer puts it: "Roma are determined by distinctive anthropological characteristics, such as: darker tan, dark and naturally curled hair, dark eyes and smaller stature" (Tancer 1994: 96). Therefore, archaic and archetypal Romological repertoire is perpetuated and the discourse of Slovenian Romology is inevitably veering to racism and the discrimination of Roma. Zadavec describes his racial images of Roma in his book *(Medical culture of Roma in Prekmurje 1989)*, where he claims: "It is exactly this positive genetic basis, passed on from one generation to the next, that has enabled Roma to preserve themselves as an autochthonous ethnic group!" (Zadavec 1989: 88). Furthermore, Slovenian Roma are also claimed to be unique mostly because of their language and their own specific ethnic culture.

Autochthonism<sup>3</sup> –is it a concept belonging to the tradition of the "Slovenian national

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<sup>3</sup> Encyclopaedic and lexicographical sources usually offer two definitions of this term: firstly, it means indigenous settlers, original inhabitants, or native settlers; "indigenous, native, originating from the place where they live", and secondly, the term may also relate to animals and plants. Autochthonous in this respect may mean indigenous, original, and the botanical meaning would also be "wild, spontaneously grown, autochthon, being there from the earliest times" (Dolinar, Knop 1998; cf. Javornik 1997-1998, Verbinc 1994). Furthermore, the dictionary of the Slovenian language offers some additional exhaustive definitions, such as: "originating from the place where they live; native". I believe that the illustrations proposed for the use of the defined terms express xenophobic fear of foreigners: "autochthons gave way to immigrants"; additionally, the use of the term is illustrated with explanatory terms, such as "native", "original", further explaining phrases as "autochthonous inhabitants, autochthonous nations and also

question” and ethnic studies or is it a “practical criterion withstanding the vital test”?

The professional knowledge of the IES, designated as the “Slovenian national question,” has traditionally followed the nationalistic interests of the state. As a professional field, ethnic minorities have been a traditional topic within the “Slovenian national question.” They are interpreted as “consolidated, historical, autochthonous or, not to say, primordial” (Šumi 2000: 118). After 1990 conceptualizations have frequently implied notions of minorities, such as autochthonous, “natural,” “essential” entities. Apart from the Italian and Hungarian minorities, which have traditionally remained close to the Italian and Hungarian borders, and the Slovenian minority, which has remained “cut off” from the Slovenian national body due to the newly established state borders after 1991, the so called “new minorities,” such as “the Slovenian minority in the ex-Yugoslav territories” or “the immigrants from the former Yugoslav republics,” are also the subject of this professional field. The “reinvented German minority” and “ethnic community of Roma”

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autochthonous plants and trees (SSKJ 2000). The etymological authority is rarely quoted. The Slovenian Etymological Dictionary states that the term is of foreign origin and has been adopted from the German *autochton* or Greek *autokhthonos*. *Autokhthonos* means “native”, “indigenous”. Only in few sources is the origin of the term clearly stated. The Slovenian Etymological Dictionary only reveals that the term is of foreign origin, deriving from the German *autochton*, which, in turn derives from the Greek *autokhthonos*, meaning “native”, “indigenous” (Snoj 1997: 20). More particular explanations of “autochthonous” are given in older encyclopaedias of lexicographic institution: “autochthonous” or “autochthonism” derives from Greek and means “to spring up from the soil”. The connection to the soil is therefore particularly emphasized. Furthermore, the mythical notion of the term is also explained: some ancient cultures are said to have believed that they had sprung out to life from the soil.

are the topics of ethnic studies as well (Šumi 2000: 117-134).

Roma became the subject of research at the IES when a group of researchers from the institute devised the minority legislation regulating their status. Moreover, the newly accepted categorization of Roma as an “ethnic community” formed a new segment of the Institute’s research program. However, given the traditional reciprocity of minority policies and the Institute’s scientific research program, this fact was not surprising (Šumi 2000). In the revitalized professional knowledge on Roma, the definition of this “ethnic community,” equating the concepts of race, language, as well as culture<sup>4</sup> was constructed as follows:

[...] it is necessary to keep in mind that they [Romani people] are also determined by ethnic, racial, linguistic and cultural characteristics that at the same time bear their impact on the relations among various Romani

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<sup>4</sup> Barth (1969:13) expressed the generalization of traditional classification of people in human species in the equation of “race = language = culture.” Siân Jones (1997) explains, “that the conflation of culture and language with the notions of biological race in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the combined product of a number of substantially different theoretical approaches: (1) the linguistic notion of race, which was central to the “ethnological” and comparative philological traditions; (2) the racial determinism of the physical “anthropological” tradition which assumed a direct, fixed correlation between physical form and structure, and mental and cultural capabilities; 3) the widespread adoption of the Lamarkian proposal that acquired cultural characteristics could become inherited, which served to reinforce a vague correlation of race with national, cultural and linguistic groups; 4) the Social Darwinist conception of a parallel relationship between cultural and physical evolution. Although all these theoretical approaches did contribute to dissolution of the boundaries between physical and cultural diversity in the classification of peoples, it is evident that the relationship between race, language, and culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century thought was far from “straightforward” (Jones 1944:43-44).

groups, as well as the level of their respective integrations into wider society. (Klopčič, Novak-Lukanovič 1991:12)

The concept of autochthonism has not been defined as an analytical term by the IES researchers. It is understood “from the native point of view,” since the term is represented as a “natural,” “empirical,” if not even “objective” reality, or – to put it more accurately – “the fact withstanding the vital test.” Consequently, the distinction between the concepts *autochthonous* (originating from the place where they live) and *allochthonous* (originating from some other place (Jesih 2001: 35) is generally not perceived as problematic among the IES researchers. Some of the researchers see difficulties in establishing criteria, such as three generation criteria:

As a scientist I find such criteria somewhat contentious, since they are simply not feasible. If we only take, for instance, the situation in Europe: here we already have a third post-war generation of immigrants from Africa and Asia, and these people are still perceived as complete foreigners. Thus, it may be concluded (considering the three-generation criterion, observation by AJS) that this kind of autochthonism does not withstand the vital test in practice. (interview with Jernej Zupančič, IES, Ljubljana, 6 February 2002)

### **The initiation of the terms “autochthonous” and “non-autochthonous” in the Slovenian Romological discourse**

It seems that these terms have their history in Romological discourses. A considerable turn in the Romological discourse that could be noticed during the late 1980s, as well as during the period following the constitution of the new, independent Slovenian national state in 1991 was brought about by the demarcation of boundaries between different groups of Roma living in Slovenia. The delimitation of autochthonous and non-autochthonous Roma was defined by the minority “protective”

legislation and regulations or administrative provisions. This distinction was uncritically accepted even by Romologists who had not been directly involved in the drafting of the minority legislation, as if the delimitation of different groups was a naturalized fact. The Romani activists also accepted the proposed distinction although they had most probably been driven by a different motivation.

The allegedly up-to-date Slovenian Romology tradition thus restricted the research activities almost exclusively to the groups of Roma that were perceived as “native” and as such also denoted as “traditionally” present in specific territories. The latter have been constructed as regions permanently colonized by the Romani population (cf. Tancer 1994, Štrukelj 1980, 1996, 1999). This territorialization of Romani people was based on the studies from 1960s onward (Štrukelj, 1964, 1980, Šiftar 1962, 1970), in which Romani settlements were elaborately listed and described.

However, before 1980, the explicit distinction between “our Roma” and “foreigners” was made and “foreign” Roma as well as Roma who had been labelled “nomads” were subject to discriminative criminalization:

The efforts that are being made by the Lendava police are often wasted to drive the immigrant Roma back to their “home municipality” of Čakovec [i.e. town in Croatia]. Those immigrating to the towns of Dolga vas and Črenšovci have no permanent residence and often stir up fights and similar disturbances. In the Murska Sobota municipality, however, these unwanted guests are usually ‘forced into exile’ by other Roma. On the other hand, there are also Roma that are permanently non-resident or camp in some of the ‘settlements’ within the Novo mesto and other Dolenjska municipalities. (Šiftar 1978: 427)

Also initiated was the territorial differentiation: “We have to differentiate among three territories [i.e. Gorenjska, Dolenjska, and Prekmurje] inhabited by natives, and immigrants that have been settling them during the last two decades”

(Šiftar 1988:329). At that stage, groups had not been denoted as “autochthonous” yet, but three main groups of Roma living on three different territories had been constructed and the term was used for “autochthonous, original in Romani medicine” (Šiftar 1989: 10). At the same time, poor knowledge of “groups of new-coming immigrants” in urban centers, such as Ljubljana and Maribor, was expressed: “There is not much data available on them and sometimes it is indeed hard to establish (since we have no knowledge either of their language or dialects) whether they are Roma, Albanians, or Turks” (Šiftar 1988: 331).

The “Romani ethnic community” became closely connected with two larger regions “inhabited by native Roma: /which are/ the Prekmurje and Dolenjska regions” (Šiftar 1994: 9). Consequently, Roma have become inseparably linked with these “autochthonous” regions (Šiftar 1994: 11), while in other, non-specific, generally urban regions, they are characterized as “Romani immigrants” (Šiftar 1994: 11; cf. Štrukelj 1991, 1999; Tancer 1994).

Before 1989, neither legal nor political differentiation between the autochthonous and non-autochthonous Roma was observable in the Romological discourse, nor was the differentiation in the legal categorization expressed. What did take place was the criminalization of Roma immigrants from Croatia in the border areas of Prekmurje (while the remaining Romani immigrants to Maribor and Ljubljana were mentioned only in passing), their culture, however, was not a subject of in-depth Romological studies.

From 1991 on, however, a frequent use of expressions, such as “autochthonous minorities” and “immigrants” has become the main characteristic of the Romological discourse. Roma did not obtain special collective rights pertaining to minorities or specific groups. This turn occurred after the legal categorization had been imported into the discourse by a group of researchers at the IES. Since then, they have been trying, together with the government representatives and Slovenian Romologists, to define Roma

as an “autochthonous ethnic community” (Klopčič, Novak-Lukanovič 1991: 7, Jesih et al 1994: 14, Klopčič, Polzer 1999) rather than a “national community.”

When the distinction between “native” and “foreign” or autochthonous and non-autochthonous Roma became relevant in the politico-juridical discourse, some Romologists generally recognized and started reconfirming the feelings of hatred between the two groups. “Especially problematic is the strong (and at times even hateful) sense of alienation among the autochthonous and immigrant Roma” (Šiftar 1994:11).

The Romological discourse has constructed the difference in the level of integration:

It is evident, although more on the basis of a general evaluation than scientifically argued findings, that the autochthonous Roma have been more successful in settling housing and urban issues than educational ones (relating to both higher and permanent education). (Šiftar 1994:11)

First, Romologists have not declared themselves as explicitly supporting or objecting to the minority legislation, although Šiftar wondered whether special rights should also be granted to “foreign” Roma (cf. Šiftar 1994: 14). Later Mitja Žagar (1998) added to the discussion by stating that it was only the autochthonous Roma who were entitled to the Romani protective legislation or, more accurately, special cultural policies:

When dealing with the issue of Roma and Romani culture, we also have to consider the fact that the Roma who have been ‘colonizing’ the territories in the vicinity of several cities (which lie, as a rule, outside the traditional colonizing zones of the autochthonous Roma) and have for the most part arrived from various regions of the former Yugoslav federation, cannot be considered as autochthonous in Slovenia according to the established criteria. With respect to their status they have to be, quite on the contrary,

regarded as one of the two (sub)categories of (im)migrants... (Žagar 1998: 173-174)

Moreover, a socio-political construction of the difference between the groups of Roma, introduced by the minority legislation, is widely accepted also by other Romologists. When I conducted personal conversations with one of them, Štrukelj often confessed that “our [Slovenian, non-immigrant] Roma require special treatment and the priority status when it comes to granting programs for granting aid to Romani communities” (Aug 8, 1999).

### **The ethnography of discourse on autochthonism among Romani activists**

Since 1991, some voices of Romani activists have made themselves heard in the field. At the first conference on Roma in Slovenia, some Romani activists thus expressed their points of view. They made a considerable contribution to the political and legal recognition of Roma as a national community, finally providing them with collective and not only individual rights. Rajko Šajnovič, a Romani activist and poet from Novo mesto, proposed his vision of the minority legislation in the name of “Slovenian Roma” (Šajnovič 1991:131). However, Vlado Rozman, a Rom from Pušča, was more poignant in his rhetoric, directly opposing to the legislation that defined them as “ethnic groups” (Rozman 1991:135): “no one but the Roma (ourselves) ... has the right to make decisions in solving the issue of our civil rights.” In his opinion, only the status of a national minority could be acceptable:

Since Slovenia is a state in which we have been living for thousands of years, we can only be treated as equal citizens or be, at the very least, recognized as a national minority, as is the case with the Italians and Hungarians living here. In my opinion, this is already our inalienable right since our children have been attending Slovenian schools, and speaking the Slovenian language beside their mother tongue, while we

have been working in Slovenian institutions and companies, and have been living for the benefit of the Slovenian society, and the Slovenian existence and time. (Rozman 1991: 135)

In the early 1990's, they did not express the distinction between the political categories; they were, in fact, agitating for an option of obtaining the status of a minority group and they did not stress the cultural or territorial differences among them. Later, during the 1990's, it seemed that only one Romologist accepted a similar viewpoint – her text espouses the idea of a “European Romani nation,” while the denotation of the Roma as “Indian nomads” is also no less frequent (Štrukelj 1999, Štrukelj, Winkler 1996). However, no analysis that would examine the political consequences of the protective policies for different groups of Roma has been offered thus far.

Only one representative of the Romani voices outspokenly expressed the consequences of the discriminative legislation and outlined the difficulties that Roma are confronted with:

There are two kinds of Roma in Slovenia: some of us are autochthones and others are immigrants who have lived here for more than 30 years, therefore we can be considered autochthones as well ... And I have to say that the majority of us Romani immigrants come from Kosovo. I had many discussions with the Ministry [of the Interior], I was present at almost every meeting – some of them came to Slovenia leaving their houses behind, and are now left with absolutely nothing, because they cannot obtain the citizenship. ... There is this case – we often talk about our Roma; the immigrants do not have the status of equal citizens. Therefore our Romani immigrants cannot lead a normal life; firstly, we are not treated as equal citizens. (statement given at a press conference Ljubljana, April 2000)

Jožek Horvat Muc, a Romani leader of the Association of Roma in Slovenia, used the denomination “Slovenian Roma” or “Roma living in Slovenia,” which seems to affirm the denomination of autochthonous, typical of Slovenian Romology: “The majority of Roma living in the Prekmurje and Dolenjska regions, as well as Sinti in the Gorenjska region are autochthonous” (Horvat 1999: 21). It generally seems that Horvat has accepted the Romological representation of Slovenian Roma as tied to a particular region. However, Horvat, who is also a cultural worker from Murska Sobota, cooperates with the Romologist Pavla Štrukelj in organizing Romani summer camps. Nevertheless, he has recently distanced himself from the above mentioned distinction: the inclusion or exclusion of the distinction between autochthonous and immigrants in his discourse depends on the context. The ways in which this process of construction of the difference manifests itself among Romani people is one of the future tasks in studies of Romani culture and identity.

### Conclusions

The above-presented ethnography reveals several problems of Romology. Among them I would like to stress three possible interpretations:

1. Scientific or professional racism is obviously present in the discourse on Roma. It uses terms such as race, culture, and ethnicity as naturalized, rooted within territory, and biologically determined, facts. Consequently, the notion of ethnicity as a process of social or cultural construction of differentiation between specific groups is not accepted, and ethnicity as a dynamic phenomenon in the political context remains ignored (cf. Jenkins 1997, Eriksen 1993).
2. There are different levels of exclusion of Roma and evidence of a patronizing discourse on “Slovenian” Roma by Romologists and Slovenian minority policies. Romologists have always automatically denoted Roma as “Indian

nomads” (Štrukelj). On the one hand, Roma have been sedentary – and some of them nomadic – in Slovenia for centuries. At the same time, they have also been highly mobile in their pursuit of “economic and social niches in which to make a living and maintain their way of life” (Stewart 1997: 83, Okely 1983). The orientalizing of Roma as “Indians” or “Asians” has thus always excluded them as “foreigners” and the representation of Roma as a nomadic people could also serve as a political tool of exclusion.

3. One of the possible interpretations of the Romological discourse lies in writings that discuss concepts, such as nomadology (Deleuze, Guattari 1980), anti-nomadism or sedentarism (McVeigh 1997: 7-25; Shuinéar 1997: 26-53), sedentarist metaphysics (Malkki 1999), or in a “nearly mystical assimilation of territory, language and people” (Stewart 1997: 83). Liisa Malkki wrote that the metaphorical concept of having roots involves intimate linkages between people and their place of living (Malkki 1997: 53). “Sedentarist metaphysics” is one of the characteristics of Slovenian Romology which expresses the “naturalized identity between people and place” (Malkki 1997). Roma are naturally attached to their mythical “original homeland,” India, while similarly, “native,” “autochthonous” Roma are described as “confined” to specific regions on the Slovenian national territory, e.g. to the Prekmurje, Dolenjska, or Gorenjska regions. At the same time, some groups of Roma who do not live there are depicted as “foreigners.” Sedentarism is also present in the discourse of Romani activists maintaining the dialogue with the Slovenian national discourse, even though they have chosen it on behalf of every Roma living in Slovenia.

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