

Struggles for viability and new forms of categorisation and racialisation. Czech and Slovak Roma in Great Britain

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Introduction

When Czech Republic and Slovakia accessed European Union in 2004, many Roma/Gypsies moved to Britain alongside other recent East European migrants. In many respects, they adopted similar strategies in search of work in the UK. Their migration was informed by a growing unemployment, poverty, forms of anti-Gypsyism and insecurity characterising the last two decades in the Central Eastern Europe (CEE).

Migration has crystallised as one of the most desired avenues for socio-economic betterment and for existential strivings for more viable lives. Most of the Roma experienced their movement to Britain as a way of escaping the oppressive and racialised categorisations of 'being Gypsy' in CEE. In Britain, Roma migrants identified as Czechs or Slovaks vis-à-vis the institutions and surrounding populations and were frequently labelled as 'East Europeans.' And yet, within a few years, in many British localities these new migrants became to be classified as 'different' and their Roma or Gypsy difference was foregrounded (e.g. demonstrated in the growing moral paranoia, scaremongering and fear of 'Gypsy invasion' spreading in British media and politics in 2013-14).

The project investigates under which specific spatio-temporal configurations, power relations and conditions do category of 'Roma' and 'Gypsy' crystallise as the most salient mode of categorisation in their destinations? To what extent, if so, are these categorisations racialised? How do these forms of racialisation relate to, and intertwine with, the ongoing racial formations developing in the British and Slovak contexts, as well as at the pan-European level?



'Sheffield square' in one of the Slovak villages with many transnational Roma migrants (Photo by J. Grill)

Aims

This project explores the recent forms of Roma migration from the perspectives of those who are defined as EU citizens but also simultaneously produced as internal outsiders to Europe. It examines the social and cultural dynamics of Roma transnational migration and forms of racialisation they experience. At the same time, it explores migrants' own ways of categorising other Roma and non-Roma groups they encounter on their migratory pathways.



Most Roma migrate to diverse multi-ethnic neighbourhoods (Photo by J. Grill)

I explore how Slovak Roma migrants, moving from a society where race and skin colour are firmly cemented as a central category of social understanding, negotiate their identities in their migratory destinations in Great Britain where their mode of existence is not circumscribed by this specific Slovak formation of racialised Gypsiness, and its interlocking with the ascribed and recognised measures of 'darkness'.

Migrating racialisation

This project develops the concept of 'migrating racialisation' in order to empirically trace how historically developed forms of racialisation in Slovakia & Czech Republic) migrate across Europe through the movement of Roma and non-Roma migrants from Eastern Europe, as well as through particular forms of knowledge circulating within newly emerging transnational fields constituted not only by Roma migrants themselves but also by various institutions for 'managing', 'helping' or 'researching' 'the Roma'. This management is situated within

'biopolitics of Otherness' (Fassin 2005) governing the lives of migrants, in this case the 'ungovernable' Roma, and simultaneously oscillating between acts of compassion, sympathy and policies of ordering and control.

'Migrating racialisation' allows us to analyse how the recent forms of racialisation simultaneously draw on heterogenous histories and nation-state formations, structural conditions and sedimented bodily dispositions, which are re-adjusted to new social conditions, discourses and emerging forms of knowledge produced about Roma migrants over the last decade. My research show that Roma are not only racialised but also how they actively respond, as well as engage in the racialization of other Roma and non-Roma groups.

Methodologically, this project draws on the following qualitative methods: (1) participant observation alongside the Roma migrants (combined with interviews and informal focus groups); (2) informal interviews with state, community & social workers, NGOs and other institutional actors who interact with the Roma migrants; (3) analysis of media coverage, tabloid journalism and state documents concerning migration policies.



Roma migrants appeared on front pages of tabloid media during 2013-2014 (Photo - Daily Star)

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