The New Political Discourse of Roma Activism:
The International Romani Movement and the Language of National Self-Determination

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Language and discourse are basic tools in political mobilization, interaction, negotiation, and legitimization. This article discusses discourse as a form of social action in the processes of the politicization of Romani ethnogenesis and the construction of Romani nationhood. The main research questions focus on the political language that the International Romani Movement (IRM) has been seeking to forge (mainly in the last two decades), the alternative frames it can provide, and its unifying potential, serving as the basis for collective national identity. This new political discourse is viewed as performing several functions: creating a sense of homogeneity, devising strategies for interaction and self-reflexivity, providing collective coping mechanisms against internal divisions or external threats, and aiming at positive representation through normative transformation. Answers are sought to questions regarding how old and new values, meanings, and traditions should be embodied in the language of Romani ethnonationalism, or when dealing with taboo and sensitive issues. A multiperspectival framework has been applied to analyse interviews, field data, and selected texts from Roma policy documents, media publications, and public speeches. Conclusions have been drawn regarding the choice of power relations Roma resolve to engage in and the contextual factors for achieving legitimacy.

Keywords: The International Romani Movement (IRM), language, political discourse, ethnonationalism, politicization of ethnogenesis.

Introduction

Current preoccupation with ethnic identity is to a great extent due to its potential to mobilize pre-existing cultural markers in new social contexts for gaining a better and more respectable position in society (Glazer and Moynihan 18). In this sense, ethnic groups have frequently been perceived as social groups pursuing emancipatory goals within societies marked by discrimination and inequality.

The collapse of the Communist Bloc became a turning point for the ethnopolitical mobilization of one of Europe's largest and most discriminated ethnic minorities – that of the Roma. Like other ethnic groups, they have discovered the power of ethnonationalism in an attempt to unite some twelve million people, dispersed around the continent, under the umbrella term "Roma," in a pan-European nation. The vision of the Romani nation presents a challenging post-national perspective, contrary to traditional forms of nationalism, imagined as cosmopolitan, non-territorial, and transnational. Recent developments

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in Romani nation-building can be viewed as the process of instrumental application of political tools for organizing cultural and ethnic differences in particular ways, mainly through language and discourse, for the purpose of rehabilitating a stigmatized pariah identity, building a more respectable image, and achieving better social standing and access to certain material and symbolic resources. Following Nancy Fraser's famous distinction (1998), this concerns both processes aiming to improve ethnic *recognition* and the *redistribution* of public goods. Therefore, the so-called *politicization of the Romani ethnogenesis* is understood as the process, in which "a social group, previously occupying a despised and inferior position, [is] moving from this position to some kind of respectability with a sort of equality with other social groups in the hierarchy of social stratification on the basis of a revised perception of their identity" (Gheorghe 158).[1] Manuel Castells (8) calls such an identity *project identity*, referring to social actors, who mobilize available cultural resources in the process of building a new identity to redefine their social position and transform the existing social structure.

The aim of this article is to analyse the discursive strategies applied in the process of politicization of Romani ethnogenesis, the construction and re-signification of identity in terms of positive valorization of a previously stigmatized ethnic image, and the emergence of novel values and meanings as a result of this new subject position. The utopian vision of the Romani nation, as a system of cultural signification, will be traced in narrative forms by studying the construction of the national narrative and of alternative identity discourses among the Romanies on three different levels: the subnational, the national, and supranational in interaction with other constitutive social actors within different temporal contexts.

The main research questions are the following: 1) what is the new political language that the International Romani Movement (IRM)[2] has been seeking to forge in the attempt to create a new *project identity* and non-territorial Romani nationhood? 2) How is collective identity being constructed through language and discourse? 3) What is the role of language and discourse in political mobilization, interaction, negotiation, and legitimization of social positions?

The article applies a multiperspectival research framework (Jorgensen and Phillips), combining theories of ethnicity and nationalism within the tradition of social constructionism with the sociology of language, poststructuralism, and postcolonial theories to study political discourse[3] and discursive practices. The analysis proceeds vertically on the three levels, as well as diachronically, comparing earlier developments in the Roma movement to more recent ones. It starts with the identification of particular nodal points[4] in existing discourses (for instance, Roma identity, the Roma nation), and traces the way in which such master signifiers have been defined across other discourses (i.e. examining floating signifiers in alternative ways), trying to gradually map the structuring of discourse within Roma ethnonationalism (Jorgensen and Phillips 30). Collected research materials for a period of almost two decades involve field notes, interviews, political speeches at Roma-related events, as well as media coverage.

1. Social Constructionism, Ethnic Identity, Language, and Discourse

1.1. Social Constructionism

Social constructionism, adopted as an analytical perspective, can be viewed as an umbrella term organizing a number of theories about culture and society (Jorgensen and Phillips 4), including theories

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[1] Nicolae Gheorghe (1946–2013) was one of the leading figures in the Romani movement and one of its most prolific ideologues, an inspiration for new generations of Roma activists.

[2] The structure of the Romani movement can be presented in a collage form (Mirga and Gheorghe 34), functioning both horizontally and vertically (Klimova 150), consisting of the international Romani organizations (e.g. IRU, ERRC, etc.), the local/ national parties and associations and the individual Romani and Roma-supporting activists, involving formal and non-formal groupings (Vermeersch 9). However, we cannot speak of a truly functioning global transnational social movement yet, which will presuppose a shared belief in Romani identity, common political goals and coordinated action at all levels up to the global (Klimova 150).

[3] Discourse will be understood for the purpose of this work as the temporary fixation of meaning around certain nodal points (Laclau and Mouffe 112–113), as it is always contingent, opening the way for new possibilities for struggle (Jorgensen and Phillips 24).

[4] Signs with a privileged status, defining other signs.

of ethnic identity, language, and discourse, which accept that the social world can only be described and investigated by using a system of representation. Its roots may be found in Kant's philosophy, while in sociology it was established by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), who described how social reality and different phenomena are constructed, institutionalized, and transformed into tradition. Although a product of human subjectivity, social reality may acquire "objective" appearance through language (Scott 110) and the way we conceptualize it defines our actions – the actual social consequence of constructed knowledge (Jorgensen and Phillips 5). Therefore, we can say that discourse, as a form of social action, plays a significant part in producing the social world.

Constructionist traditions, nonetheless, differ internally in their ontological and epistemological premises. *Strict constructionism* establishes a clear distinction between an objective reality and the socially constructed meaning of it (Pascale, *Cartographies* 51). For *radical social constructionism,* however, there is no objectively existing social world outside meaning-making and the subject is accepted entirely as a discursive category (Pascale, *Cartographies* 51). *Social or contextual constructionists*, on the other hand, are preoccupied with the collective process of meaning-making, shaped by social processes in particular local contexts (Pascale, *Cartographies* 51). Social categories, such as gender, race, social class, or ethnicity, can be further viewed as social representations of real social entities (*weak constructionism),* or as mere social constructs (*strong constructionism*) (Pascale, *Cartographies* 53).

1.2. Conceptualizing Ethnic Identity

Two basic theoretical models explain identity formation: an essentialist (primordial) and a non-essentialist (social constructionist). Culture, for the primordialists, is considered an essential given and ethnic identities are seen as consisting of some shared cultural traits – "primordial attachments," based on kinship, locality, language, religion and culture (Jenkins 45), viewed as natural, stable and immutable (Hutchinson and Smith 83). The non-essentialist paradigm, on the other hand, denies the possibility of the existence of separate distinct and stable identities. Within this framework, identities are perceived as multiple, relational, processual, and dynamic (Grossberg 89).

The Norwegian anthropologist Frederik Barth developed an interactionist and circumstantialist model of ethnic identity formation. He studied ethnicity as the "social organization of cultural difference" through interaction, so that the boundaries came to define the groups rather than the enclosed "cultural stuff" in them (Barth 15). In his view, ethnic groups are produced simultaneously by double processes of self-ascription, as well as by ascription on the part of external others (Vermeulen and Govers 1). In Barth's understanding, a person is capable of changing their ethnic identifications in accordance with particular circumstances and in pursuit of political goals or self-interest.

Different constructionist perspectives theorize ethnic group mobilization. Firstly, a *realist perspective* that accounts for the existence of certain objective interests in identity construction (Comaroff 165). Glazer and Moynihan represent the *instrumentalist* approach to ethnicity within this tradition, which treats, religion, language, and cultural differences as more "effective foci" for political mobilization than class and nation (18). Therefore, ethnic movements may become "pressure groups with a noble face" (Glazer and Moynihan 18), mobilizing certain cultural and ethnic diacritics in order to gain advantage in the struggle for recognition and material redistribution. The realist and instrumentalist perspectives, however, are found deficient in their explanation of cultural factors and symbolic resources.

Cultural constructionism (Comaroff 165) complements identity theory by accounting for the role of shared symbols and signifying practices in ethnic mobilization, as well as for that of emotions, linking "an interest with an affective tie" (Bell 169). Ethnicity is treated as a "strategic site" and a "choice," preferred by disadvantaged groups aiming to upgrade their status and gain certain privileges (Bell 169). This explains the upsurge of ethnonationalism as

> a cultural gain in that it allows individuals whose identities have been submerged, or whose status has been denigrated, to assert a sense of pride in what they regard as their own. …. [T]o claim a set of rights and privileges, which the existing power structures have denied them. (Bell 174)

Political constructionism (Comaroff 165) or *elite competition* theory developed by Paul Brass (1991) (Pieterse 367), on the other hand, dwells on the importance of elites in utilizing particular resources, such as different values and ideas in ideological forms. Elites select from the available cultural forms, values and practices of the group, which become for them political resources, in the competition for political gains and economic advantage (Pieterse 367). One or several of the selected cultural markers come to serve as symbols of the ethnic community, aiming to create internal cohesion and specific group distinctiveness (Pieterse 370–1). The very process of politicization of the ethnic community, that of ethnonationalism, may lead to the establishing of a nation and nationality through the recognition of its group rights (Pieterse 370–1).

In general, constructionist approaches explain the logic of identity formation and the possible political consequences ensuing from the ethnicization of identity (Pieterse 367). Seyla Benhabib (1999) identifies the positions from which both essentialist and non-essentialist discourses emerge and their potential effects. While the constructionist perspective is that of the observer, or of the sociological subject, the essentialist perspective establishes a stable point of identification in political mobilization – a position most suitable for the group participant (301). Gayatry Spivak calls this practical political application of identity "strategic essentialism" and warns of the dangers of committing theoretically to it (qtd. in Prasad 25). Understanding the politics of identity means for Stuart Hall not a simplistic reversal of a negative image with a positive essentialist one, but a deconstructive process involving "becoming" as well as "being" and the "continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (*Cultural Identity and Diaspora* 225).

1.3. Language, Discourse, and Identity

For poststructuralism as a form of radical constructionism, and some postcolonial theorists, language and discourse are constitutive forces, capable of producing social realities, such as race, gender, and class that have no actual existence in the real world (Pascale 3, 24). They are rather "an effect of discursive processes, cultural texts and constitutive performances" (Pascale 7). Contrary to social constructionists, who accept that knowing the world is possible through our lived experience, poststructuralists argue that experience is a form of interpretation (Pascale 7). Therefore, knowing the world is only possible through language, as it organizes the knowledge/power relationship (Pascale 9).

The specific link between language and politics is related to the way in which discourse constructs a particular reality, which can be conceived as an act of political engagement. Celine-Marie Pascale argues that we can consider "[a]ll discourse [as] fundamentally political because discourse advances a particular version of reality, which is used both for further interference and action" (13). For Homi Bhabha, "politically we are constantly constructing the constituencies that we address, just as we are constructing the object of value that we are transmitting" (qtd. in Olson and Worsham 13). Therefore, grasping the real power of the political means understanding "how the political object, aim or constituency, was actually a result of the ethical and practical labour of construction and negotiation" (Bhabha in Olson and Worsham 32).

The functioning of discourse and power is related to the construction of subjectivity. For poststructuralists, the subject (in our case the racial/ethnic subject), is not a pre-existing fixed or essential category; it is not a human, but a constructed discursive category (Pascale, *Cartographies* 31). The subject is also decentred, meaning that it is a "constituted" and not a stable entity (Pascale 3). Subjects are further seen as emanating from social processes, being capable of reifying social structures (Pascale, "Cartographies of Knowledge"31). We can say that discourses themselves "inscribe and are inscribed by the materiality of social, institutional and cultural practices" (Pascale 49). Therefore, the very process of subjectification should be viewed as "the process through which people become bearers of social structures" (Pascale, *Cartographies* 154), resulting from a process of social embodiment (Pascale, *Cartographies* 156). Following Althusser, individuals are seen as interpellated as subjects, "hailed" by culture and power into particular locations, which also involves the element of personal identification (Pascale, *Cartographies* 31). Subjects are additionally seen as produced through repetition; each

repetition, however, creating different variations in different circumstances, allowing for the possibility of resistance (Pascale, *Cartographies* 32).

Race and ethnicity are relational and contextual concepts for poststructuralists, as for social constructionists. They function as signs, part of a system of classification and signification that acquires its meaning not because of some preconceived essence of identity, but through the relations of difference in the signifying field (Hall, "Race, The Floating Signifier" 8). "Race is more like a language, than it is like the way in which we are biologically constituted" and it "works like language" as a discursive construct, a signifier, participating in different meaning-making practices (ibid.). Yet, it is a *sliding, floating signifier*, achieving its meaning in dynamic processes, depending on different contexts, on the constitutive outside (ibid.), interpreted always in relation to something else (Pascale 27), the product of a struggle between discourses to fix the meaning in a particular way (Jorgensen and Phillips 28). But since the meaning of race is relational, it can never be finally fixed and keeps being contextually redefined and appropriated (Hall, "Race, The Floating Signifier" 8). This is a constant process of re-signification with different meanings in different cultures and historical formations, shedding off old meanings and acquiring new ones in an endless process of re-signification (ibid.). The sign is also seen by Bhabha as dynamic in a different sense, being endowed with "discursive ambivalence", not static, but participating in a process, starting with its emergence in a particular discourse and tracing its journey in the way it "flies and falls at a point of relocation" (qtd. in Olson and Worsham 136).

The nation is another form of collective identity subject to discursive formation. Homi Bhabha interprets the nation in narrative form as a system of signification and analyses its language, rhetoric, myths and symbols that require a particular reading (1990). Speaking of the contemporaneity of the nation, Bhabha considers that studies of nationhood should start from "what it means to construct a people, or how a people is inscribed, or how a discourse creates its own authority by referencing 'a people'" (qtd. in Olson and Worsham 148). He discusses new possibilities of transnational articulation, by using minorities without nations, occupying a liminal space "both partly belonging to and not belonging enough" to national space, as a new way of connecting nations and countries (qtd. in Olson and Worsham 149–50).

The concept of agency derives from that of subjectivity in poststructuralism. Since identity is constituted and there is no constant or fixed identity or meaning, there is a possibility for change and transformation, since "agency is always possible and always political," determined partially by the social, or historical conditioning (Pascale, *Cartographies* 34). However, agency is also seen as decentred, not as emanating from the individual, but developing in a non-linear way, without a particular point of origin (Pascale, *Cartographies* 156). Social constraints to agency should not be sought in particular social structures, people, events, or places, but rather in the relations between them, primarily in the "determining force of relationships of domination" and its effects (Pascale, *Cartographies* 157).

Agency and resistance to power have distinct readings in poststructuralism and postcolonial theory. The very concept of hegemony, as a form of domination characterized by instability and incompleteness, requires constant negotiation and the emergence of consensus. Hegemony itself can be seen as bearing "the seeds of resistance" (Jorgensen and Phillips 76), of empowering people with the necessary resources for resistance (Olson and Worsham 145). *Disidentification*, as one particular act of resistance, can be defined as a means of subversion of dominant practices of articulation and of uncovering what is being concealed by them (Pascale, *Making Sense* 29). Anti-racism, as well as ethnic emancipation, are such acts of disidentification, which deny the floating nature of "race" by making it discernible through the relations that produce it (Pascale, *Making Sense* 30). We can look into local contexts for the strategies for challenging hegemonic relations, where they derive their particular materiality (Pascale, *Making Sense* 110).

Hybridity, as a particular form of positionality, is an important concept in postcolonial theory, which is closely related to that of resistance. It derives from the processes of negotiation within conditions of power imbalances, which are seen as opening spaces of possibility for those, who are less advantaged (Bhabha, qtd. in Olson and Worsham159), constructing "cultural authority within conditions of political antagonism and inequality" (Bhabha, "Culture's In-Between" 57).

2. Constructing Subjectivity and Difference through Contestation and Negotiation

2.1. Romani Identity as a Floating Signifier

We can perceive culture as playing an important role in identity politics, functioning as a toolkit, following Ann Swidler's theory (1986), which provides the necessary cultural components to social actors, transformed into particular skills, habits or strategies for action. Organized within stable and durable models, they persist even if the goals change. Discourse and knowledge production can play such organizing and pattern-maintaining functions, which rely on repetition within different local contexts, gaining materiality through processes of social embodiment in different formal and informal institutional setups and practices.

The cultural strategies of the Romani movement involve the selection of particular diacritics from a substantial ethnic reservoir, such as language, traditional values, culture, religion, and history, and their utilization for specific political purposes. Both essentialist and non-essentialist models may compete in identity-building processes and coexist to varying degrees on different levels. Traditional community leaders generally organize ethnic discourse around an essentialist vision of identity, strictly following *Romanipen*[5] in terms of i.e. gender and family relations, boundary maintenance, and particular ethnic hierarchies. Cultural elites within the community may also subscribe to some essentialist ideas, typical of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century processes of nation-building. Frequently, they interpret cultural diacritics as given in discourses of "authenticity" and "purity," or ideas aiming to reify traditional cultural patterns through processes of knowledge creation and institutionalization. Nonetheless, a different postmodern treatment of Romani identity existing predominantly in Roma supranational discourse treats Roma identity as constructed, fluid, and dynamic, based on a revised understanding of the interplay between tradition and modernity, seeking to embody instrumentally traditional cultural elements in a novel way within political discourse and structural practices.

2.2. Identity and Music Contestation at the Roma Music Festival in Stara Zagora

The following section provides an example of cultural engineering related to the efforts of members of the Bulgarian Romani intelligentsia to re-signify and create an upgraded vision of Roma culture and identity, combining traditional models of nation-building with new constructionist practices. During fieldwork conducted at the *Roma Music and Dance Festival* in Stara Zagora (between 2002–2004), I studied how Roma identity was organized and politicized around Roma music culture, and the way different meanings were articulated, contested, or fixed through processes of negotiation between Roma elites and ordinary Roma. Discourses around Roma identity and culture produced by Roma cultural elites became largely informed by traditional forms of nationalism, who looked for the "authenticity," "purity," and boundedness of Romani culture, which was often perceived as "forgotten," "neglected," or "dormant" (see Pieterse 1997). Consequently, they felt a special calling to "retrieve" this cultural tradition, or acquire it through a process of careful learning and training. Interviews with representatives of the Roma intelligentsia at the festival revealed the fixation of particular meanings around Roma music culture as a nodal point, organizing other discourses of Roma identity, culture, the legitimizing of leadership, and interethnic relations. Young Roma musicians were perceived as not being familiar with their music tradition; therefore, one of the intended goals of the Music Festival was to preserve Roma music and popularize it (Interviews with Maestro A.M. and K.L). "Pure" and "authentic" Roma music and dance traditions were treated as being "defiled" by intermixing with other music traditions through cultural contacts, influenced by the development of new technologies and market demands (Interview with Maestro K. L.). This required an "authentic" music tradition to be "retrieved" and preserved through the strict observation of folklore and by imposing firm boundaries between music cultures, occasionally permitting only certain Indian elements as desirable, but excluding any Turkish, Greek, or even Bulgarian vestiges. Such a culture would become the basis for new "High" cultural forms, such as Roma operas and symphonies, and help gain more equality and respectability for the Roma (Interviews with Maestro

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[5] A term denoting the "essence" of Roma traditional identity and culture, a sense of Romanes, the unwritten code of conduct of relations within the Roma community.

K. L and Maestro A. M.). "High" Romani culture could be further learned and popularized through careful processes of educational training, institutionalization of Roma music and the contribution of Roma composers, working in state-supported Roma orchestras, theatres or festivals, recording and distributing it to educate and familiarize young generations with their own culture (Interview with Maestro K. L.). The problem was compounded by the fact that traditional Bulgarian Roma music was not only forgotten by young Roma, but also by non-Roma audiences (Bulgarian and foreign), who preferred Russian or Hungarian music played by Roma, considered to be "authentic Gypsy music" (Interview with Maestro K. L.).

The festival also revealed how the contested territories of culture and politics became the terrain for gaining legitimacy by traditional and modern Roma elites, each in turn promoting their particular vision of Roma identity (Georgieva 18–19). Roma cultural elites, who were often denied legitimacy due to a combination of factors, such as deficiency in terms of cultural institutionalization, state support or media recognition, were confronted by young musicians, who created their own meanings of Roma music tradition, combining eclectically music learned through family tradition and music suitable for market sale, adapted to the tastes of local Balkan and international audiences. "Impure" popular music, invested mainly with Turkish and other Balkan music influences, was their vision of Romani culture, which was constantly re-created through performative experience. This was a productive process of contestation and negotiation of different visions of Romani culture and re-signification of Roma identity through music standardization (Georgieva). Music is, in a sense, political in that it is being organized around certain values meaningful for Roma in the process of constructing their vision of subjectivity, sociality, and identity. As a discursive nodal point music additionally reflected different hierarchies and forms of leadership within the community and problematized processes of the legitimization of authority, which were contextually defined by existing non-Roma elites, various audiences, and macrosocial institutions. Music contestation at the festival provided a good illustration of constructionist theories, such as Brass's elite competition and those emphasizing the role of emotions (Bell) and symbolic resources (for instance, cultural constructionism), as well as the wider interpretation of Barth on the construction of cultural boundaries in processes of interaction. The selected vision of identity, on the other hand, may well be interpreted by Spivak's understanding of strategic essentialism, serving the practical political needs of unification, legitimacy, and respectability. Finally, Roma identity, constructed through processes of music contestation, may be perceived as a floating signifier, produced in the struggle between different Roma discourses of self-identification and the interpellating processes of a constitutive outside, including economic adaptation to existing market demands and music tastes.

2.3. Discursive Trajectories Within the Romani Movement

Language and discourse can have a formative power in the constitution of social and political life (Hall, "New Etnicities" 443), more particularly, in defining the goals and processes of ethnic mobilization. Several nodal points can be traced within the International Romani Movement, related to a number of mobilizational axes, demanding a different status for the Roma vis-à-vis EU structures, the nation state, discrimination and general human rights, social class, poverty, and inequality. These are: 1) ethnic mobilization at the supranational level, supported by EU funds and institutions struggling for the status of a trans-European, non-territorial nation; 2) a minority status within nation states, relying on the support of state institutions; 3) a civic status fighting for general human rights together with other discriminated groups; 4) and social status, related to social class, growing social inequalities, and poverty. The first two trends, which are the dominant contested trajectories within the movement, rely on the ethnic element, which plays a central role in devising political strategies. They can be subsumed under the so-called "ethnic nationalist paradigm," insisting on a combination of minority rights with cultural rights (those of *Romanipen*), requiring the preservation of Romani language, traditional heritage, and occupations (Gheroghe and Pulay 81). The other two trends, organized under the so-called "ethnic civic paradigm," which insists on general human rights and social status, meet less support in political mobilization, especially the last one, accepting Roma as a social, rather than an ethnic group.

The ethnic nationalist paradigm relies on a revised understanding of ethnic identity, which attempts to transform subject locations existing within and above the state produced by culture and power relations, as it happened historically with the term "black" (Pascale, *Cartographies* 31). Central to such identity processes is the need to replace the derogatory "Gypsy" with the positive self-appellation "Roma." It was the social identity of the Roma that was marked as a despised inferior social position for Gheorghe, analysing the history of slavery in Romania (158–9). Therefore, conceptualizing Romani ethnogenesis means re-evaluating "the process by which a social identity is transformed to a cultural ethnic identity" (Gheorghe 159). Ethnogenesis is in such terms treated not as something unique, pertaining only to Roma, but also typical of all eastern European identities in the nineteenth century, when nation building involved "the promotion of old social identities as new national identities" (Gheorghe 159). It is, in a sense, a belated nation-building process, promoting an ethnopolitical identity for gaining equal rights and access to resources on the basis of a "revised perception of identity" (Gheorghe 158–160). One way of defining Roma self-determination, therefore, is a change in political languages, of denying a stigmatized identity, and saying "We are not Gypsies, we are Roma," or "a European nation" (N.G., field notes 2002). Therefore, similarly to processes of re-signification of the term "black" as an "organizing category of a new politics of resistance" among diverse groups against racism and marginalization (Hall, "New Ethnicities" 441), the choice of "Roma" within Romani politicized discourse can be compared to black experience in its attempt to create "a single unifying framework based on the building up of identity across ethnic and cultural differences among different communities" (Hall, "New Ethnicities" 441). Nevertheless, the relative formal acceptance of "Roma" in political discourse does not imply any sense of unity yet, as it is only an ideological construct, serving administrative needs and policy-making requirements, which "does not signify any cultural homogeneity" (Gheorghe and Pulay 82). Homogeneity is "a fantasy" and attempts to achieve some sort of unity in the community resemble nineteenth-century processes of nation-building (Gheorghe and Pulay 82). Processes of institutionalization, however, involving also classification, may result in "reifying fluid identities and varied characteristics" (Gheorghe and Pulay 82). In a sense, political and administrative language and discourse may have a formative power and turn an illusion of homogeneity into objective reality, constructing Roma constituencies and the Roma as a political people.

Social constructionism underpins identity debates in several of the key documents of the Romani Movement. An early one, *The Roma in the 21st Century* (Mirga and Gheorghe 1997), provides a good illustration of different constructionist discourses: mainly of elite competition, emphasizing the leading role of the Romani intelligentsia in identity-building processes; of instrumentalist, symbolic, and affective constructionist approaches, dealing with the symbolism of the nation, the contestation of marginality, the emphasis on self-determination, and the desire for full recognition, as some of the main political goals of the movement. Agency and subjectivity are constructed within a particular context in which the Roma are seen as "entering a new phase of their history," being given the "unprecedented opportunities to become active subjects of politics and policies directed towards them" (Mirga and Gheorghe 5). The power of ethnonationalism, the political space and recognition that the Roma have been struggling for, both nationally and internationally, are some of the discursive nodal points highlighted in the policy paper. Within such a historic context, the Romani elites are considered the ones, who must bring "the Romani issue to the fore in European politics," having the "duty and responsibility to lay out a vision of the future for their people" and choose the direction and strategies they will employ (Mirga and Gheorghe 7). Some of them involve rejection of the marginality of the past, acknowledging the presence of a common interest within the Roma movement and the need for a general shift in the overall image of the Roma in positive terms, as a strategy of disidentification (Mirga and Gheorghe 12).

The document further establishes several of the present movement paradigms: the national, the civic (human rights), and that of minority rights, weighing out their future potential for mobilization, as well as the relations between Roma, interacting with the state, supranational organizations, and the NGO sector. The policy paper employs modernization discourse re-signifying Romani identity, especially in struggles over legitimacy with traditional leaders, thus acknowledging that "[e]thnic identity is not an unchanging structure but is both inherited and constructed" (Mirga and Gheorghe 32). Promoting "a

more flexible, modern and resourceful identity" (Mirga and Gheorghe 32) within the current socio-political context is therefore viewed as a necessity.

A postmodern vision of identity, constructed as a performative act of resistance and used as a political instrument is also evident in Nicolae Gheorghe's self-reflection in "The Social Construction of Romani Identity" (1997), where he acknowledges involvement in processes of "playing with his identities," equally as a sociologist and a Roma activist (157). "[S]ometimes I am a sociologist travestying a Gypsy, sometimes I am a Gypsy travestying a sociologist," confesses Gheorghe, which is also part of a collective process related to bringing different resources to meet necessities (157). In his famous statement that "constructed identity is a crutch, a political crutch," he expresses the idea that identities can be treated as resources, and playing with them may bring different effects in the attempt to build a new collective identity for the Roma and when working with political institutions (Gheorghe 157). In more recent years, Gheorghe highlighted again the role of language and discourse in constructing Roma political identity:

> Most of us working in this field are Roma through our discourse; because we talk about being Roma and not because we live as many Roma do. …So, for many of us, discourse and language are basic assets for legitimizing our positions and building our careers. … We should be aware that the language we use touches other people's sensitivities and has actual consequences for their lives. (Gheorghe and Pulay 43)

Being Roma, therefore, is for Gheorghe a discursive stance, a source of legitimizing power, a construct, which nonetheless may have actual effects on people's lives and sensitivities. It also bears certain relation to Butler's understanding of performativity (Butler 1996), perceiving ethnic and social identities not as given, but as constituted, though appearing as "natural." Performativity additionally can be viewed as a form of resistance to the interpellating power of discriminatory discourse. Such a hegemonic discourse, Gheorghe confesses, once hailed him to the denigratory position of a "Gypsy," when called by an accidental stranger in the street - a painful experience from his youth, which continued to haunt him emotionally throughout his life (Gheorghe and Rostas 45). Performativity, therefore, becomes a strategy of manoeuvring, empowering, opening hybrid, in-between spaces of resistance and contestation to the fixation of meaning and the reification of identity.

2.4. Imagining the Roma Nation

Two main discourses co-exist in the construction of the idea of the Romani nation: a traditional one, following other forms of nation-building typical of the east European region, and a postmodern cultural one, unrelated to territory, but supported by EU institutions and IGOs at the supranational level. In its modern form, the national discourse in the Romani movement started at the World Roma Congress in 1971, although territorial visions of nationhood emerged earlier during the century. It followed the model of romantic nationalisms, "based on the assumption that a specific group of people with distinct culture already exists, but their status is of an oppressed group," which requires gaining recognition by emancipating it and turning it into a nation (Gheorghe and Pulay 74–75). Yet, such a vision was seen more as a symbolic and utopian one, signifying a desire for unity and solidarity among the dispersed Romanies: "Thus, according to many Romani militants the Romani nation exists. However, with its members dispersed worldwide, its experience is more symbolic than otherwise" (Mirga and Gheorghe 18). Unlike existing European traditions, which did not apply to the Romani case, this new vision of nationhood did not rely on a shared territory, but on other (though primordial) elements, such as "the common roots, historical experience and perspectives, the commonality of culture, a language and social standing" (Mirga and Gheorghe 18). Commonality can be viewed as positional and structural, further strengthened by "a sense of adversity at the hands of non-Romani (Gadje) society" (Mirga and Gheorghe 18), playing a homogenizing role for the Roma in processes of interaction. Discrimination and suffering, therefore, find a particular counterpoint in developing the national idea, bearing an affective significance for the Roma: "Even if the idea of a Romani nation is a utopian one, it has an emotional appeal that justifies, at least for the Romani political leadership, the introduction of the Romani issue within a

traditional framework" (Mirga and Gheorghe 19). Nevertheless, what the movement seeks to achieve is a broader political framework in the form of a "non-territorial," "transnational" nationhood and a "truly European people," which intends to address the particular position of the dispersed Romanies (Mirga and Gheorghe 19). The *Declaration of a Nation* of the International Romani Union (IRU), another constitutive document of the Romani nation, refers explicitly to Martin Luther King's famous speech, expressing the particular dream the Roma wish to fulfil:

> We have a dream, the political concrete dream of the rule of law being for each and everybody, in the frames and thanks to a juridical system able to assure democracy, liberty to each and everybody, being adequate to the changing world, the changing society, the changing economy. We have a dream, the one of the rule of law being a method, and not a 'value'. A pragmatic, concrete way how individuals agree on rules, institutions, juridical norms, adequate to the new needs. A transnational nation as the Roma needs a transnational rule of law: this is evident; we do believe that such a need is shared by any individual, independently of the nation he or she belongs to". (qtd. in Acton and Klimova 216–217)

The document clearly envisages a transnational form of nationhood that is to be governed by the rule of law, which must be administered supranationally to guarantee democratic processes. Therefore, although perceived as a dream, nationhood for the Roma is already based on concrete pragmatic instruments that must protect citizenship rights by legal means, applying not only to Roma, but to all living in a cosmopolitan community. Argumentation for the existence of such a nation clearly derives from a perceived long history of persecution and demonstrated willingness for peaceful coexistence.

The initial enthusiasm Romani nationhood provoked was later cooled down by varying degrees of scepticism within the movement. Nevertheless, for Gheorghe, Romani cosmopolitan discourse was "met with relatively little opposition, at least rhetorically," as supranationally, EU institutions have "become engaged on Roma issues in ways unimaginable 20 years ago" (Gheorghe, qtd. in Feffer 2). More than a decade after publishing the *Declaration of a Nation*, the aim of which was to inspire Roma worldwide with its message and symbolism, Gheorghe and Pulay estimated the power of Roma national discourse to reify nationhood: "The fact that these symbols have been adopted by very different segments of the Roma movement over time and particularly from the 1990s onwards, demonstrates that the ideology of striving to build a nation is not solely the fantasy of a few zealots" (Gheorghe and Pulay 75). We can say that today, the idea of nationhood holds equally symbolic, emotive, and pragmatic power for mobilizing and legitimizing the Romani movement. Nevertheless, national discourse remains mostly evocative at the supranational level, while promotion and socialization at lower levels require further efforts.

2.5. The Reinvention of Tradition: *Romanipen*, the Politics of Criticism, and the Pedagogy of Hope

Developing new values on the basis of tradition is part of the internal morphogenesis of the Romani movement vis-à-vis maintaining relations with non-Roma, insisting on Roma participation in all Roma-related initiatives. The reinvention of tradition is considered one of the key mobilizing forces of the movement, based on a revised concept of identity, deriving strength from *Romanipen,* as a codified set of values (Gheorghe and Pulay 84). Such processes require a change in traditional mentality with the purpose of gaining trust in open-market competition and cooperating with *gadje* institutions (Gheorghe and Pulay 96). A "mirror image" to the negative defensive image of the Roma in relations with *gadje* (of Roma *shmekeria*, i.e. "cunning"), is the traditional concept of *pakiv* (meaning "trust" and "transparency")*,* which "comprises a complex of values, such as belief, trust, confidence, faith, respect, and obedience to the elderly – the fundamental elements of the internal cohesion of the Roma group" (Biro 18). These are seen as key values to be employed in political competition by Roma parties, coalitions, and movements, which must also be more open to consensus politics and accountable to their constituencies (Biro 39). In political terms, *pakiv* has been adopted in Roma activism with the purpose of "building bridges between the vernacular and organizational cultures of Roma" (Gheorghe and Pulay 95), referring to a particular discourse of responsibilization. Translating the organizational jargon of capacity building and empowerment to vernacular notions of solidarity (*phralipe* or "brotherhood") and transparency (*pakivale,*

i.e. "trustworthy people"), is perceived as a process, whereby Romani culture is conceived as an "asset," or a "toolkit," to refer to Ann Swidler's theory, providing "blueprints for organizational practices of civic associations" for work with grassroots communities (Gheorghe and Pulay 96). This is a revised democratizing cultural model that aims to delegitimize the authority, non-transparency, and corrupt practices of traditional Roma leaders, often promoting adaptive strategies deriving from the established social capital of the clan and kinship ties within the community (Gheorghe and Pulay 96). *Pakiv* is also a major value explored in Roma-related economic activity, especially in group entrepreneurship through associations. Like Weber's Protestant ethic, as a philosophical outlook towards life in traditional Roma communities, *pakiv* aims to promote "solidarity, self-reliance, and being self-reliant economically" in such grassroots economic activities (Gheorghe, qtd. in Feffer 10). Compared to Weber's concept of *Beruf* ("calling"), as a key element in the capitalist ethic, it serves to provide a sense of respect, as a distinct feature of Romani culture (Gheorghe and Pulay 95). The reinvention of tradition is, in other words, a strategy for "rebranding" Romani identity in positive terms as a "trademark" (Gheorghe and Rostas 54), with a specific value exchangeable in ethnopolitics with the purpose of gaining different resources, but also signifying respect, confidence, trust, transparency, and solidarity, as specific traits of the community. This is a process of rebuilding identity through knowledge and dialogue (Gheorghe, qtd. in Gheorghe and Rostas 45), based on revised traditions, aiming to modernize Roma communities and bring a qualitative change in established relations with non-Roma in the social, political, and economic sphere.

The values embodied in this reinvented tradition also require an open and transparent approach to certain sensitive and taboo issues in the community, which have impeded Roma progress within the movement and in relations with macrosociety. This requires a change of discourse and a *politics of criticism*, associated with the new arising responsibilities in building a new *project identity*. For Gheorghe, Roma "need to forge a new language, based on frank and critical revision of previous approaches to understand the origins of crisis and move forward" (Gheorghe and Pulay 41). This means going beyond the language of "political correctness" and addressing "touchy" or risky issues," even "taboos" within the community, such as "international mobility, chain migration, human trafficking, and criminality; the inequality of women and men amongst the Roma; the "begging business," involving children and teenagers, early child marriages, and the exploitation of children, disabled, or the elderly (Gheorghe and Pulay 41). The appropriate language to tackle such issues should be one "based on solidarity and a desire for change" (Gheorghe and Pulay 47), "one that does not arouse hostility," but provides "alternative frames" (Gheorghe and Pulay 44). In a sense, this is a *critical politics* in Roma identity politics that signals "the end of innocence" and the end of the "essential black subject," as described by Hall ("New Ethnicities" 443–4). It is an end of the binarism in representations of Roma versus non-Roma "through a set of simple reversals" within identity struggles, treating the image of Roma in simplistic terms, as a victim of social injustice, or replacing the essential "bad" non-Roma subject with an essential "good" Roma subject. This means the "recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities" (Hall, "New Ethnicities" 443), which construct Roma within social and political discourse.

The shift in political language within the Romani movement is also related to the pedagogy of hope – of new opportunities for solidarity and fraternity between different sections of the movement, the search for the kind of leadership that will mobilize, similarly to religious leaders, reaching the "heart of people" (Costel Bercus, qtd. in Acton and Ryder 11). In order to overcome sectarianism within the movement, the metaphor of the church has been promoted, implying that the movement should unite various groups despite existing differences (Gheorghe and Pulay 78-79), building bridges and solidarities initially within the community, before establishing partnerships with the wider constitutive outside (Mirga in Acton and Ryder 12).

Conclusion

The Roma movement has raised its unique voice in processes of contestation and negotiation of different meanings and discourses, while simultaneously attempting to shape its political constituencies and

transform existing social structural relations. Like other indigenous peoples, the Roma have chosen ethnonationalism as the key instrument to create a positive *project identity* and re-signify a stigmatized pariah status through a process called *the politicization of Romani ethnogenesis*. The key nodal points of Roma political discourse are seen as related to processes of ethnonationalism, nation-building, the construction of ethnic and cultural identity, elite mobilization, the invention of political symbols and traditions, and the re-signification of traditional values in internal processes of interaction and with non-Roma actors and institutions. Contemporary Roma political discourse is viewed as performing several functions: attempting to create a sense of homogeneity, devising strategies for self-reflexivity and addressing sensitive issues, providing collective coping mechanisms against internal divisions or external threats, but predominantly aiming at new positive representation through normative transformation.

After an initial stage of romantic nationalism, which established the cultural symbols of the Roma nation, the next stages in the development of the International Romani Movement focused on two contested paradigms: that of a national minority, requiring support from national institutions and the transnational, functioning on European level and largely depending on the support of EU institutions and different IGOs. The idea of the transnational, non-territorial Romani nation, although utopian as a discourse, has been viewed as productive mostly at the supranational level, being already materialized in some institutional responses and practices.

Recent developments in the movement discourse have attempted to introduce instrumentally a revised vision of *Romanipen* for the purpose of creating an organizational code for better mobilizing of grassroots constituencies and infusing a sense of unity and solidarity among the Romanies, and thus serve for confidence and trust building with non-Roma partners. This demonstrates willingness for a qualitative value change in the struggle for distribution and recognition of material and symbolic resources in political processes and socio-economic exchange. It bears the promise for a possible structural transformation of relations on a new, more democratic and egalitarian level, if socialized by and channelled through responsible actors and institutions.

The future of the transnational paradigm within the movement will largely depend on the choice of power relations Roma resolve to engage in and the means and strategies for achieving legitimacy. Contextually, this involves the development of processes within the EU community, as well as the need for establishing more efficient communication channels between the different movement levels and new Roma leadership. Promoting the supranational idea, on the other hand, in the contemporary context of uncertainty, rising nationalism, and delegitimization of the European idea may turn Roma into some of its key guardians and adherents, opening new spaces for building bridges across national boundaries. The future of the movement will also depend on the construction of new meanings, the end of essentialist discourses, of the binarism in Roma versus non-Roma relations and representations, the voicing of silenced sensitive issues in both communities, and the extent to which Roma discourse will succeed in destabilizing established hegemonic consensus in interethnic relations. This involves good will and constructive efforts equally on the part of macrosociety and its institutions. One thing is certain, that empowering Roma means gaining greater control over knowledge production and identity construction in the knowledge/power game, and establishing not only new sites of resistance, but also new solidarities. The hybrid, in-between space occupied by Roma both within nation states and transnationally, may be an awkward positionality, though one which bears the seeds of potential structural change, creating a new language and meanings through the power of its authentic ethnopolitical discourse. This promises to be a new voice deserving careful attention, not only because it prefigures structural change in interethnic relations, but also because it is instrumental in setting particular normative examples of universal validity to be respected and eventually emulated in political discourse and practice.

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