

Introduction

The Roma have been subjects of various policies of assimilation and integration in Europe and have often been perceived as subversive to imperial and, later on, to state authorities for their distinctiveness from majority populations. As a result, the Roma have often been portrayed as a problem that needs to be solved, perhaps rarely more intensively so than during the historical moment of European Union's eastern enlargement. Even though the alleged Roma problem has constituted an issue of debate for many centuries, the plight of the Roma acquires new political, cultural and social dimensions in contemporary Europe. This book starts from the assumption that a more thorough knowledge about the Roma is needed prior to uncritically label these populations as a homogenous group to be targeted by immigration or integration policies. Each book chapter is an outcome of a *multi-sited ethnography*¹ that combines anthropological, cultural studies and political science approaches to understanding the historical process of collective identity formation of the Roma. In addition, the book calls for a re-evaluation of the conceptual tools prevalent in policy making and scholarly literature on Romani studies and puts to work an alternative set of concepts for uncovering the meaning of fieldwork material.

The analysis of extensive fieldwork material offers a multi-faceted picture of the Roma in different contexts of interaction. This approach highlights the pitfalls of taking for granted the homogeneity of this group, as well as the importance of understanding the different needs and interests of these diverse groups of people. Although several previous scholarly attempts have questioned the homogeneity of this group and proposed an understanding of the Roma as a heterogeneous category, there have been rather singular and only recent attempts² to go beyond binaries and to propose third-space categories, such as *hybridity*,³ for understanding the politics of belonging and identification of these people. This book adds to this proposal by employing Homi Bhabha's concept of *hybridity* in uncovering the meaning of the often contradictory and confusing fieldwork material. The fieldwork data identified paradoxical choices of distinctiveness and similarity of the Roma with other minority and majority groups. For example, in censuses the hetero-identified Roma do not often self-identify as Roma and they choose to identify with other ethnic groups, while in other social situations the same people self-identify as Roma. The diversity of Roma identifications challenges the necessity and the adequacy of policies

1 George E. Marcus, "Multi-sited ethnography: Five or Six Things I Know about It Now" in *Ethnography through Thick and Thin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

2 Annabel Tremlett, "Bringing Hybridity to Heterogeneity: Roma and the question of difference in Romani studies" in *Romani Studies* 19, No.2 (2009): pp. 147–68.

3 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994).

targeting Roma as a homogenous ethnic group, as well as that of a homogenous social category. The paradox of Roma identifications varying from strong assertions of Roma identity to complete negations of it triggers this book's inquiry into the reasons *why Roma identifications are so heterogeneous*. The argument unfolding in each empirically-based chapter is that the heterogeneity of Roma identifications is not random, but that it follows certain context-specific patterns. For example, at local level in a multi-ethnic locality in Transylvania, one could observe that within the same hetero-identified Roma group there is a tendency for differentiated and fragmented self-identifications; while at state level, for instance in Romania, and at international level there is an opposite tendency that blurs differentiations and emphasizes a more homogenous collective identity of the Roma.

This book attempts to uncover the reasons for the large array of Roma identifications through the combined method of *thick description*⁴ and *multi-sited ethnography*⁵. The conjunction of these methods offers a contextual understanding of the complex dynamic of Roma collective identity formation at three analytical levels: the local, the state and the international. These three levels serve primarily analytical purposes and they are not used in this book as reified categories with clearly defined boundaries. However, the use of these analytical categories has implications on selecting and interpreting fieldwork material. Several large case studies are chosen to illustrate the dynamics of Roma collective identity formation at these different analytical levels:

- The Roma identifications in a local context with a multi-ethnic character (the village of Cristian in Transylvania, Romania)
- The political mobilization of the Roma at state level in Romania, in the context of EU enlargement
- The international collective identity project carried out by Roma political activists at European Union level
- The international collective identity project carried out by Roma political activists speaking on behalf of multi-governmental organizations (e.g. OSCE) and international NGOs that speak for the Roma
- The bridging role of Roma kings as international, state and local representatives of the Roma

Different conceptual and analytical categories used in this book require specification before launching them in the actual analysis of fieldwork material. First of all, the concept of Roma needs to be examined. Roma is an all-inclusive political term that implies the existence of a Roma collective identity and tends to downplay the several factions and group distinctions that exist under this umbrella-term. It is important to mention that the homogenization endeavor launched in 1970

4 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

5 Marcus, *Multi-sited Ethnography*.

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by some Roma political activists at international level is not entirely welcomed by some groups, for example by the Roma and Sinti in Germany, who prefer to stay apart from the all-inclusiveness of the movement. In this book one could find three terms that refer to the same people—*Roma*, *Gypsies* and *Tsigani*—and the distinctions between them are very important for the topic under discussion. When I use the term *Roma* I refer to the politically correct mainstream terminology that came into being in 1970 when the International Romani Union (IRU) was created. I use the term *Gypsies* when I refer or quote from scholarly literature that uses this terminology. I use the term *Tsigani* when citing excerpts from interviews conducted during fieldwork and when trying to highlight the subtlety of terminology used in the everyday life self-identifications of the Roma. When I refer to the population under study as an author, I use the politically correct terminology of *Roma* for analytical purposes and not for political purposes of strengthening the reification of the Roma as a homogenous group.

Another concept that requires specification is that of *collective identity*. The concept of collective identity is understood here as a useful analytical category which however does not entirely have a reified correspondence in practice. The distinction proposed by Brubaker and Cooper⁶ between *identity as a category of analysis* and *identifications as categories of practice* is crucial for understanding the conceptual and analytical framework of this book. The identifications are hereby defined as empirically observable indicators of the more analytically homogenous concept of collective identity. For this reason, the book offers primarily an overview and analysis of the large spectrum of identifications of the Roma people in real life situations encountered during fieldwork, as well as of collective identity discourses promoted by some Roma political activists. The empirical focus on identifications and collective identity discourses is hoped to offer insights into the mechanisms of Roma collective identity formation without unnecessarily and mistakenly reifying its content. The identifications and the collective identity discourses of the Roma are understood here as political practices that are both structurally determined and intentionally employed. The *concept of politics* is hereby largely defined as an inclusive category that signifies the structural content of different contexts of identifications ranging from local, state and international contexts. The *concept of power* is intimately linked to the concept of politics and is understood here in Foucaultian terms, as immanent and relational. In Foucault's view 'power is everywhere' and it is 'not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations.'⁷ The post-structuralist and contextual understanding of the political, of power, and of identity, constitutes the main analytical foundation of this book.

6 Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity'," *Theory and Society* 29, No. 1 (2000): pp. 1–47.

7 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), pp. 93–4.

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The findings indicate that Roma identifications are contextual and more often than not they represent means in the struggle for resources available within different structural contexts. In such instances, Roma identifications become political tools for negotiating a better standing vis a vis other actors encountered in the process of social interaction. However, the instrumentality of identifications and identity discourses of the Roma does not ignore the possibility of a genuine feeling of belonging to certain categories of self-ascription in the moment of identification. Such feelings could suggest an internalization of these practices as structural content. There are several aspects of identifications of the Roma people that have been identified during the analysis of fieldwork material:

- The extrovert (public) vs. the introvert (private) aspects
- The performed vs. the denied aspects
- The instrumental vs. the felt aspects
- The ascribed vs. the self-ascribed aspects

Methodological limitations allowed access of the non-Roma author only to the extrovert, the performed, the instrumental, the ascribed, and the self-ascribed aspects of Roma identity and for this reason these aspects will feature more in this book than the felt and the introvert aspects. The introvert, the denied and the felt aspects of identity are elusive in the eye of the beholder and are therefore more prone to a speculative type of analysis. Certain inferences about these aspects of Roma identifications are nonetheless made as well, but they remain at the level of hypotheses for future research to be conducted preferably by Roma scholars.

The main argument of this book is based on a constructivist and interactionist approach to understanding identity and each chapter unfolds how the Roma collective identity formation is continuously negotiated in different contexts of interaction with alterity. In contrast to primordialist understandings of identity that assert the existence of a pre-given and clearly circumscribed collective identity, I argue that collective identity in general and the Roma collective identity in particular is formed through an on-going process of negotiation and interaction with the contextual *other*. The collective identity of the Roma is uncovered in this book as a dynamic puzzle of identifications and discursive practices that emerge from different contexts of interaction and are creatively employed by the Roma and the non-Roma alike. Each chapter exemplifies with fieldwork data how Roma identifications and identity discourses *hybridize*⁸ elements of perceived alterity in order to negotiate a better status in different context-specific power hierarchies. In this book, hybridization is understood as a modified version of the concept proposed by Homi Bhabha. In his view, a hybrid is what emerges in the process of social interaction between two different entities, for example individuals, groups, cultures, that engage in a form of negotiation of boundaries inherent to the encounter. A hybrid is therefore a structural product of an encounter with difference. This

8 Bhabha, *Location of Culture*.

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product is under constant change and represents a *third space* that lies between the gaze of *us* and that of *others*. In Bhabha's view the process of identification is always relational and takes place in the liminal space between *us* and *others*. This book uncovers how *hybridity* works in the practices of identification and in the discourses of Roma collective identity. It starts from Homi Bhabha's post-colonial understanding of the term and adds to it through fieldwork examples the idea that the hybrid as a *third space* is not only structurally produced by forces inherent to the encounter with difference, but also strategically constructed by the Roma engaged in a field saturated with power relations. The Roma identifications in this case are understood as means of emphasizing difference concomitantly with the strategic recognition of similarity with the object of difference. The various Roma identifications have therefore a double side—one that strives for *similarity with the more powerful other* and another that strives for *difference from the other*.

The fieldwork in different sites indicates that Roma identifications vary contextually on a continuum between total differentiation from the other, to metonymical identifications with the other, and to identity between us and other. I argue that this large spectrum of identifications is a structural outcome, as well as an indicator of agency that Roma employ to mainstream their position for gaining better access to resources otherwise only available to more powerful groups. I also argue that, by performing certain similarities with the more powerful other, the Roma identifications and collective identity discourses form *third space niches of power resources* with potential to challenge the hierarchical status quo and to transcend periphery. The social creativity inherent to this struggle leads to a proliferation of identification contexts, which in turn could create new centers and new peripheries. The process of creating a plurality of context-sensitive identifications is what I refer to in this book as *the hybridity thesis*. The fieldwork data collected to inform three levels of analysis—local, state and international—indicate that a large spectrum of identifications is the common denominator of the collective identity formation of the Roma at all levels. The argument unfolding from these empirical encounters is that hybridization of identifications simultaneously serves purposes of differentiation from the contextual other and of unification among different Roma groups. A second line of argument in this book to which I refer to as *the instrumentality thesis* is that these different facets of Roma identity are also instrumental for gaining a better standing in local, state and international arenas. Each chapter explains how the hybridity of Roma identifications and identity discourses is not only a structural outcome of encounters with alterity, but also a strategic means of transcending stigma and of balancing the uneven power relations between the self-identified Roma and the more powerful others in any given context.

Chapter 1 is a background chapter that offers a general account of the history of Roma in Europe, an outline of the variety of Roma groups, some considerations on the similarities and specificities of the Roma people compared to other minority and majority populations in Europe, as well as a critical account of the debates on the heterogeneity and standardization of Romani language. The chapter offers an analysis of the relationship between the *ascribed* and the *self-ascribed* appellations

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of the Roma and it maps out the internal fragmentation of the group from a terminological point of view, most notably the ascribed character of the terms Roma and Gypsies. In addition, the critical account of the history of the Roma in Europe places an emphasis on points of contention and of agreement among different historians that wrote about the Roma. The terminological and historical background coupled up with different ethnographic accounts on the Roma constitute the basis on which the chapter draws inferences about the similarity and specificity of different hetero-identified Roma groups with other European populations. Among the similarities among different Roma groups the analysis identified as most recurrent a shared code of defilement and the social practices that spring from it, a shared history of discrimination, and a non-territorial imaginary. These three elements shared by most hetero-identified Roma populations are also elements that differentiate the Roma from other European populations. The chapter concludes the Roma are both vulnerable and powerful actors due to their often uncertain and volatile markers of belonging. The conceptual tools outlined in the introduction are employed for the first time here to explain the survival of Roma distinctiveness and to make the transition to the next chapter that presents ethnographic accounts that illustrate this dynamic at a local level.

Chapter 2 focuses on the identity politics of everyday life of ordinary Roma at the local level. The analysis relies on data gathered through observations and semi-structured interviews in a multi-ethnic locality in Transylvania during several summers of fieldwork in the first decade of 2000. The hierarchical structure inherent to this multi-ethnic locality with a strong Saxon influence provides a relevant background for analyzing the way a foreign cultural item is appropriated and used imaginatively by the Roma in local identity politics. In this particular case, the *Nachbarschaft*—a way of organization of communal life of Saxon origin—is appropriated and re-inscribed by the Roma to mainstream their otherwise marginal position vis a vis other ethnic groups in the village. The chapter starts with a history of the village and it concentrates on its cultural mark—the Saxon *Nachbarschaft*—and the ways it is re-inscribed in the institutional practices of Romanian and Roma inhabitants. It proceeds with mapping the symbolic geography of the village through an analysis of social representations the Saxons, the Romanians and the Roma have of themselves and of each-other. Furthermore, this chapter explains the function of *Nachbarschaft* in the construction and negotiation of these social representations at the local level. The last part of the chapter focuses on the specific ways in which the Roma appropriate and transform the *Nachbarschaft* in order to transcend marginality and to mainstream their position as equal members of the community. This chapter illustrates a case in which the Roma re-inscribe the *Nachbarschaft* as a form of capital that is strategically employed in negotiating local power relations. The multi-ethnic character of the village provides a context of power relations that inspires a variety of hybrid identifications to transcend stigma and to negotiate a better status for the Roma.

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Chapter 3 presents the background of EU enlargement as a structural context in which European Roma identity politics have been crystallizing in the past two decades. It starts with the debates surrounding the legal framework of national minority protection in European Union and its conditional role in EU's eastern enlargement. The chapter continues with outlining the political debates on individual versus collective minority rights and their implications on European Commission's recommendations for minority protection in accession countries prior to 2007. The analysis of these debates and of EC's recommendations indicates that the issue of national minority protection, particularly that of Roma minority protection, became divisive in European politics and created a double standard of Roma minority protection in EU member states and in accession countries prior to 2007. In addition, the analysis shows how the issue of double standards for Roma minority protection in Europe contributed to establishing a hierarchy of power between old member states and accession countries and to a perception of Eastern European Roma minorities at the bottom. The chapter concludes that the double standard for Roma minority protection in conjunction with the unclear threshold of its implementation in accession countries, led to an undesirable increase in negative societal attitudes towards the Roma and to legitimizing the practice of scapegoating the Roma for delaying EU's accession of some eastern European states. Despite these problematic aspects of accession politics that led to an actual increase in negative societal attitudes against Roma, the context of EU's eastern enlargement represented an opportunity for political representation and mobilization of Roma minorities in Europe.

Chapter 4 is a case study of Roma minority politics in Romania in the context of EU's eastern enlargement. The Romanian case is meant to illustrate the mechanisms of Roma collective identity formation and the emergence of political representatives that speak for the Roma in a national context. It explains why the policies meant to improve the situation of Roma in Romania had only been implemented superficially and merely contributed to the formation of different forms of Roma political representation prior to accession. The analysis highlights the way Roma political representatives responded to the Romanian minority policies and illustrates with empirical examples how the formation of Roma agency drew upon Romanian party politics, electoral interests and the reform in public administration in the context of EU accession negotiations. The empirical material in this chapter is generated through participant observation, secondary data analysis and interviews with Roma actors involved in public administration and minority politics in Romania in pre-accession period. More specifically, the primary data were gathered through personal interviews conducted between 2004 and 2007 with members of the Romanian Roma political party, Partida Romilor, and with Roma employees in public administration in four major Romanian towns. The chapter concludes that the Roma were at the intersection of several interests of different political actors involved in the process of accession negotiation in Romania and that they constituted more an instrument for politics than a target for policies during pre-accession years. The context of accession created mutual

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benefits for EU actors, Romanian government, political parties and Roma representatives, but not that much for the targeted disadvantaged Roma groups that remained largely untouched by the minority protection criterion for accession and witnessed an actual increase of negative societal attitudes against them. The instrumental character of the “Roma problem” in the EU pre-accession period had nonetheless proven beneficial for some Roma actors that seized the opportunity to create their own agencies of representation with *Partida Romilor* as the most notable example in Romania.

Chapter 5 analyzes the role of international Roma political activists in the crystallization of a clearly defined political status of the Roma at international level. It starts with an overview of the political status of the Roma in Europe and of the international agencies with significant impact on legitimizing a discourse of a Roma collective identity in the period that preceded the last wave of EU enlargement: the Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues (CPRSI), the International Romani Union (IRU), Roma National Congress (RNC), the Central Council for German and Sinti Roma (CCGSR), the European Roma and Travelers Forum (ERTF), the Open Society Institute (OSI), and the Project of Ethnic Relations (PER). The analysis is based on data gathered through semi-structured interviews with members of these organizations, secondary data analysis of documents issued by these organizations, and biographies of main international Roma political activists. The chapter also offers a theoretical and historical overview of the genealogy of the concept of “de-territorialized Roma nation” promoted by the International Romani Union and analyses the process of its mainstreaming in a political context of discursive competition. The chapter concludes that there are at least three main discursive factions among Roma political activists that advocate different types of political status for the Roma at international level prior to 2007. One faction emphasizes the importance of protecting asylum seekers, particularly the Roma from Kosovo. Another faction advocates the rights of Roma as regular citizens and not as a separate ethnic group, particularly the Sinti in Germany. The third faction attempts to integrate all other factions and to create a collective identity for the Roma based on a common history of discrimination. The heterogeneity of causes and interests of Roma political representation creates a challenge as well as a reservoir of political resources for the formation of a unified collective identity of the Roma around the world, which is mainly negotiated on the basis of a common history of discrimination, human rights and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

Chapter 6 focuses on the institution of Roma kings. This type of Roma political representation has been given little attention in scholarly literature due to its ridiculed character in mainstream media that has unanimously been internalized as unworthy of serious attention. It is precisely for this reason that this book dedicates a special chapter that approaches the Roma kings as a significant and important institution for the construction of Roma collective identity, particularly its stereotypical form. The analysis starts from the assumption that the stereotypical image of the Roma kings constructed by the media has a great impact on the public

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image of the Roma in general and also on Roma's self-perceptions. The chapter starts with a historical background of this institution in Europe. The historical analysis indicates that the institution was created by imperial authorities that needed a representative of Roma communities for tax collection purposes and therefore assigned the Roma kings as mediators between Roma minorities and non-Roma majorities. The fieldwork data were collected through interviews with Romanian Roma kings, observations of their religious and political practices, and visual data analysis of photographs taken by the author at their residencies. The empirical data indicate that the verbal and visual discourses of Roma kings emphasize similarity with the non-Roma, while their every-day practices indicate a more traditional and differentiated way of living. The analysis of fieldwork material offers further insights into the reasons for the identified gap between the discourses of similarity and the practices of differentiation encountered during fieldwork. The discrepancy between Roma kings' discourses and practices is hypothesized to emerge from their historical bridging role between the Roma and the non-Roma. In the same time, this discrepancy is also the reason for their negative portrayal unanimously entertained by the media, the majorities and the Roma minorities. The chapter concludes that the Roma kings' in-between position between the Roma and the non-Roma renders them vulnerable and obliges them to perform a discourse of hybridity to increase, albeit so far unsuccessfully, their legitimacy vis a vis the Roma and the non-Roma alike.

Chapter 7 offers an analysis of the annual international Roma festival in Romania. The festival is a context in which different types of Roma actors meet, such as political activists, cultural representatives and ordinary Roma. The festival is analyzed as a complex platform of intersection and competition between different Roma identity discourses and it offers an overview of the Roma identity puzzle in all its complexity. The complexity of the site offers valuable insights into the ways Roma collective identity re-inscribes itself as an outcome of the various contextual interactions between us and others. The chapter also offers insights into the institution of *Kris* and its role of guarding the Romani code of defilement identified as the most distinctive characteristic of the Roma. The institutions of *Kris* is analyzed here as a form of autonomous law making and as a possible embryo of a polity or at least as a significant element of Roma collective identity formation. The empirically based part of the chapter is divided into two parts following the division of the festival into two days. The first part analyzes the invisible part of the festival, or the unadvertised festival day when the Roma administer the autonomous justice sentences—the *Romani Kris*. Although for ethical reasons I did not directly participate during this day of the festival, I was in its immediate vicinity and I was able to analyze the environment surrounding the main location of the *Kris* that offered some valuable insights. The second part is an analysis of data gathered through participant observation at the site of the festival during its second day which is the public day of the festival, one specially designed for the non-Roma. The pictures taken during fieldwork provide valuable insights into the symbolism of space and the multitude of identity discourses at

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the site of the festival. This chapter alongside previous ones converges towards one main finding of this book which is that Roma practices are often inconsistent with Roma discourses. This discrepancy between Roma discourses and practices is identified as a strategic means for negotiating identity in search for recognition. While the discourses often advertise similarity with the non-Roma, the practices strengthen the specificity and distinctiveness of the Roma's ways of living. This is the mechanism through which Roma minorities maintain specificity while at the same time advocate similarity with the non-Roma in strive for being recognized as equally powerful actors.

Conclusions

The paradox between locally differentiated identification practices and internationally homogenizing discourses of the Roma is explained in this book by two main lines of argument to which I refer to as the *hybridity* and *instrumentality theses*. The analysis does not however indicate that the processes at local level have intentional connections with those that occur at state and international levels, but rather that these simultaneous processes have hybridity and instrumentality as common denominators. The homogenization attempts of the Roma international movement together with the locally differentiated identifications that stress similarity with the more powerful others are ways of creating extra contexts of identification, which, in turn, promise extra advantages for the Roma people through enlarging their pool of symbolic power resources. In other words, the pursuit of similarity and homogeneity creates the ground for empowering the Roma to maintain their specificity and diversity. This ambivalent process of hybridization generates *trans-localities* and *new areas*⁹ or places which are not bounded geographically but take shape in social imagination.¹⁰ These new imaginary *third spaces* or *hybrids* are made of identifications that act as potential generators of power resources.

One could conclude that the homogenization of the Roma identity happens strategically, as well as structurally or independent of intentional action or agency. Mafessoli¹¹ argues that in contemporary times phenomena of heterogenization and homogenization coexist in a *conflictive harmony*. Differentiated group identities undergo a process of *massification* alongside a process of more profound differentiation and these two phenomena support and increase each other. These collective identities are formed and further *massified* in greater societies through

9 Arjun Appadurai (ed.), "Introduction" in *Globalization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

10 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1991).

11 Michel Mafessoli, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society* (London; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996), p. 45.

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a process of creating a larger emotional community of *shared sensibility*. This process is often a structural outcome of individuals' need to accommodate one another—a process that does not exclude the rise of conflicts, but inherently presupposes a field of power relations that establishes, challenges, re-establishes and re-adjusts harmony. The collective identity formation of the Roma is in fact not an issue that could be treated separately from the issue of collective identities in general. The homogenization tendency that makes space for further hybridizations and for a proliferation of identification contexts is a common mechanism to most cases of collective identity formation in a field of uneven power relations. All marginalized groups need to employ a certain amount of creativity to access needed resources, and by doing so they also create new niches of symbolic and non-symbolic power. Each new niche generates new centers and new peripheries and redefines the contextual configurations of power relations. The struggle to transcend periphery inspires the Roma to creatively challenge and generate new configurations of power through diversifying identifications in any given context. The resulting heterogeneity of identifications might unite the Roma in a community of sentiment, which could be forged from above by political activists, but which could also happen independently from below as a result of humanity's need to imagine and pursue a better life.

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