



Treatment and Portrayal of the Roma Community in the State Discourse during the 20th Century in Sweden

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Submitted to

Central European University

Department of Romani Studies Program

*In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of International Interdisciplinary
Romani Studies Postgraduate Specialization Program*

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Budapest, Hungary

2022

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to investigate how the Swedish authorities portrayed and treated the Roma in official documents, as part of the understanding of how the Roma have been excluded during the invention of the social welfare state. Although the promises of equality and equal distribution of services were aimed at all Swedish citizens, Roma remained marginalized throughout the 20th century. To get a deeper understanding of how portraying Roma as *deviant* in official documents is possible, I examine state documents produced during the 20th century. I have used qualitative methodology and discourse analysis to focus on three time periods connected with the following three categories of state treatment of the Roma: Destruction, Assimilation, and Integration. Each category deals differently with the Roma as deviant, therefore, it is important to look at how the modern nation-state promise of universalism and equality of citizens happens together with the exclusion of certain *deviant* groups.

Keywords: *Racialization, Swedish Social Welfare State, Minorities, Roma, Universalism, Post-colonialism, and Equality*

Acknowledgments

I want to start by sending a big thank you to my family, for all the support, love and encouragement that have been pushing me through the writing process and given me the strength and energy I needed to finish this thesis. I would also like to especially thank my Tutor: Andreea Nicutar for inspiring and motivate me throughout the whole program, but also supporting and giving me strength to write this thesis. Your wise counsel and guidance have been of great value to me. I would also like to thank my friends for being patient with also been supportive.

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Introduction

At the beginning of the invention and implementation of the universal welfare state in Sweden, it promised to include *all* citizens, therefore it is interesting to analyze how certain groups of people were not covered by the term “*universal* and *all* ”. This promises of equality and democratization occur together with other forms of exclusion. The Roma people have a long history within Sweden, and it is estimated that the Roma minority has been in Sweden since 1512, and over time several Roma groups have entered the country during different decades. It is of vital importance to understand the diversity of the Roma group because different Roma groups from Europe entered Sweden in various time periods. Since then, the Roma groups have been marginalized and facing stigmatization, persecution, and exclusion (Jan Selling, 2013). It is necessary to analyze the exclusion of Sweden’s Roma from the very beginning of the welfare state system in the 20th century because it declared the importance to be *the* home for all of Sweden’s citizens, (*folkhemmet*) the people’s home (Ministry of Culture of Sweden, 2014, p 25).

The Scandinavian countries are often perceived as role models in terms of protecting the rights of their minorities. Sweden is one of few countries that have been pushing other states to protect and promote their minority rights. The history of Sweden as a modern nation-state is of vital importance today, since the historical forms of inequality and structural exclusion occurred in acceptable manner in the eyes of the majority. The formation of the new modern state resulted in certain problematic structures that are present in the institutionalization of democracy (Taylor, 2014: 316). The exclusion of Roma manifested through various mechanisms, for instance, racialization, in other words categorizing citizens based on their race. Racialization which creates the distinctions of we and them, and *we* need the *other* in order to make sense of the majority’s whiteness (Baker, 2013: 302). When looking at the historical context, the Roma people have been excluded from rights and benefits offered to *all* citizens. This structure of racialization happened at a time when the government was preoccupied with creating equality among people.

Throughout history, the terminology used to describe the Roma groups varied, and terms have changed. Several groups have been named as *Roma*, *travelers*, the *traveling people*, *traveling Roma*, *Tattare*, *gypsy* and *Zigenare* (Jan Selling, 2013: 200). In this study, the term Roma will include the persons who are referred as the national minority Roma and are covered by the

minority policy in Sweden. The terms "*tattare*" and "*Zigenare*" will also be used because the state used those terms in the official government document. This study contains the Roma groups who appeared in Sweden in the 19th century, and it is important to point out that more Roma groups who arrived earlier from 1512 to the 19th century will not be presented in this study.

Aim and research question

This research aims to investigate how the Swedish authorities portrayed and treated Roma in official documents, as part of the understanding of how the Roma have been excluded during the invention of the social welfare state, although the promises of equality and equal distributions of service were aimed for all Swedish citizens. To get a deeper understanding of how the portrayal of Roma as *deviant* in official documents is possible, I will examine state documents produced in the 20th century. I am focusing specifically on three-time periods of three different categories of state treatment: Destruction (1920-1930), Assimilation (1950-1960), and Integration (1990-2000). Each category treats and portrays Roma differently as *deviant*. Therefore, I ask how the Roma were portrayed and treated in governmental documents that cover these three time-periods.

Chapter I. Literature reviews

In this section, I will present relevant research concerning exclusion and inclusion regarding Roma as a minority. This section deals also with the theoretical framework on which the analysis is based.

Swedish society

The research by Ida Ohlsson Al Fakir and Norma Montesino and their "*The Prolonged Inclusion of Roma Groups in Swedish Society*" (2015) addresses the problematic situation of Roma groups in Sweden during the 1950s by highlighting how the Swedish state framed Roma citizens as a problematic issue with certain given characteristics, such as "*socially disabled*" and "*social deviant*". Norma Montesino has studied Swedish so-called "gypsy politics" and has taken a critical approach to previous research on Roma in Sweden in her dissertation *The Gypsy Question: Intervention and Romance* (2002). According to Montesino, the focus on Roma has been dominated by the theoretical perspective on self-chosen isolation and social exclusion has been linked to the culture of Roma. The dissertation focuses on describing Swedish gypsy policy from 1880–1970 at regular intervals and problematizes how the

authorities of the time described the Roma as a primitive people who should be assimilated into modern society.

I agree with Montesino and Ida Ohlsson Al Fakir that the research and studies about Roma during the 20th century have had a perspective where Roma culture, and behavior has been declared the legitimate reason for their exclusion. This thesis continues to discuss the continuity of describing Roma as a *problem* and *deviant* over the 20th century. Additionally, it shows how the historical treatment in state-documents has transformed over time, despite the fact that structural injustice continues until today.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race theory (CRT) emerged during the late 1970s as a new strategy to deal with race according to the civil rights structures during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s in the United States. CRT developed as a framework with the aim to provide an understanding of how the reproduction and maintenance of white supremacy is a part of the legal, cultural, and political conditions, especially in the context of the United States (Graza & Ono, 2019:1). CRT follows five main directions of research

“(1) the notion that racism is ordinary and not aberrational; (2) the idea of an interest convergence; (3) the social construction of race; (4) the idea of storytelling and counter-storytelling; and (5) the notion that whites have been recipients of civil rights legislation. (Hartlep, 2009: 6).

Thus, CRT refers to how white is set against blacks and colonizers against colonizers, and that there are hierarchies created by white (European) in favor of white where the difference between black and white is extensive. As Graza & Ono (2019) emphasize, The CRT offers *“a framework for understanding white supremacy as an immutable fact of a neocolonial state, as well as a praxis for changing it.”* (1).

CRT assumes that production of knowledge is fundamentally political and that it is necessary to challenge the objectivity, neutrality, and the authority of scholars because the racism is embedded in the structure of society, and the legal system serves as the primary, structural, and disciplinary mechanism for upholding a white supremacist racial order. Angela P. Harris (2017) states that the contribution of critical race theory is important in contemporary societies

due to the racism that constitutes racial hierarchies, and therefore the theory is applicable to understand the roots of the racist regimes formed in the European context with the rise of colonialism and imperialism. In agreement with critical race theory, this paper contributes by arguing that state-discourse creates a reality that formed a lasting structure of marginalization towards Roma. The theoretical framework will be used as a tool to explain how the state treatment and protection of Roma in the official document have occurred as a part of the historical origins of power structures based on racialization in society.

Modernity and The Modern Nation-State

According to Gurminder K. Bhambra (2007), the emergence of the modern nation-state within Europe must be understood in the context of colonized relations with non-European subjects. The nation-states were constructed and based on liberal values; at the same time, the nation-state was constructed by colonialism, and at times as an imperial state (2007: 188). The nation-state emerged in a time period of colonialism based on exploitation and values opposed to liberal values (p.107). During the 19th century, the establishment of the sovereignty of a people in a territorial place led to the rise of nationalism and the corresponding, valued people (Inayatullah and Blaney 2018: 258) The national identity and nationhood were emphasized, and the state's responsibility became to guarantee liberal rights to *their* citizens. Some were not considered as “the people” if minorities existed, they were not considered as “the people ” of that nation. Thus, they would not be identified as a part of the history of the state. This shows the historical roots of racial inequality (p.110).

Next to Bhambra’s (2007) arguments, I emphasize the importance of coloniality for understanding how Sweden treats minorities in the context of being a European state. Moreover, Bhambra’s point regarding coloniality is relevant and can be equally applied with nuance to the Swedish-state treatment of its internal minorities to be civilized. I agree with Bhambra’s major points of making the modern state’s racial hierarchy necessary. Exploiting the “others” it creates its self-value. This is part of the process of “civilization” (Inayatullah, 2018). That process of civilization in other forms applies also inside Europe with states operating towards their populations. Thus, it will help me to investigate Sweden from a postcolonial perspective. Here, the construction of “the other” emerges in connection with racialized representations of the minority group Roma in an unequal society with power-relations.

This thesis is relevant because it is continuing the discussion that Montesino and Al Fakir bring in the field of Roma studies in Sweden, and it is necessary to re-examine the understanding of “universalism and equality of all” in the context of Roma in Swedish welfare state. Further, this thesis also contributes to the post-colonial critique of the state and knowledge production.

Chapter II. Methodology

Data collection - Discourse analysis

In this thesis, I use discourse analysis to analyze the official documents produced by the Swedish state regarding the Roma minority. This method is a research tool aimed to understand how the power of systematic language, action, thoughts, stories construct our society. The discourse analysis is a method helping to understand how the world has been constructed through a description of the world, at the same time the discourse included sorting logics on what has been “socially accepted” as good, credible and true” (Jørgensen & Phillips,2000:7). It provides an understanding on how certain phenomena, logics, knowledge, and perspective becomes important while others are not. It is important to ask “*who is producing the knowledge*”, “*whose reality is taking place*” (Jørgensen & Phillips,2000)

Discourse analysis sheds light on the power-relations in society that represents “the reality” and systematic language help to shed light on how other individuals understand the world. When using discourse analysis, the messages provided may reflect and challenge historical, cultural, political, or/and ethical contexts. The construction of the “truth” and social structures in society, maintain the unequal power-structures (12-13).

Material - Data

For this thesis, I have decided to use official state-documents provided by several authorities, both municipalities, committees, and government. The primary material of the thesis is covered by government documents that include the Committee on Legislation on Poverty Alleviation (1907-1921), The National Board of Health and Welfare (1942 – 1944), Inquiry Committee - Gypsy Inquiry (1954) and the Gypsy Section in Stockholm Municipality (1959 -1997). The selection of primary material is based on the actors who had the comprehensive influence in the discourse on Roma during the respective time-period. These documents were selected because the agency arguments had a great impact on how the treatment of Roma and how the transformation in the living conditions occurred and changed.

Chapter III. Analysis

Destruction of Roma – 1920-1930

This section will contain the logic of dealing with the *problem* of treatment of Roma, and these processes connect the state as predominantly hostile to the Roma communities.

In this time-period unfolds the imperial logic of absolute superiority towards the Roma group, logic that can be summed up as “I know what is better for you.” (Inayatullah and Blaney 2018: 255) The conceptual category of destruction refers to a time period when the Swedish state systematically aimed to destroy the minority Roma, both in direct and indirect ways.

That process will be highlighted through two cases.

Case 1: The committee on legislation concerning Poor Relief 1907-1921

The Poor Relief Committee was established in early 1907 and lasted until 1921. Its objective was to relieve suffering and this committee had a huge impact on how the Roma were portrayed and treated in Sweden during the 20th century. This was the first governmental committee that gave public authorities the task to register Roma. The registration was legitimized due to the aim to relieve the suffering of poor people, and Roma were considered Poor. In several documents, the Roma community was portrayed as a “*threat to the society*,” and it stated that “*Roma’s behavior*” was terrorizing the local inhabitants. The registration help was one kind of tool for the state-authorities to present solutions to the problem of Roma, such as removal, eradication, or abandonment of the Roma (SOU 1923:2).

Sweden in the beginning of 20th century were certain interest in the thinking of racial biology and the Roma people were officially targeted, forced sterilization, with the aim to destroy the community. It was also mentioned that the Roma race should not interfere with the Swedish race, and solutions for that was to eradicate Roma, as the statement indicate:

“[...] *From the perspective of racial hygiene, it is maintained that these individuals' intermixture with the Swedish stock involves a weakening of our race.*”

(Proposal for an act concerning the treatment of vagrant, 1923: 85).

One of the received answers for a law proposal held by the committee responded with a description of “*tattare*” as dangerous to society and the solution presented was to eradicate the Roma by separating the children from families. The objective was that in time the Roma identity will therefore disappear.

“The only action that can fully counter and gradually eradicate so-called tartare and comparable persons' wandering, disorderly way of life is to remove their children from the influence of their parents and relatives ... if the children are separated from this depraved tribe at an early age ... and given over to be brought up within an institution or by private persons in a place where their parents do not usually appear, they may be brought up to be decent, productive citizens.” (SOU: 1923:2)

Here we can see the colonial logic of the racial biology thinking, and the value of the witness. Here, the construction of “the other” emerges in connection with racialized representations of the minority group Roma in an unequal society with power-relations, but also the dehumanization and objectification that is being justified.

Case 2: The National Board of Health and Welfare 1942 – 1944

This case study is important even though the Board constructed at the different time-period than 1920-1930, it is important because the argumentation and registrations of Roma during 1920-1930 has a vital importance of the construction an ongoing mission of this National board of health and Welfare. One of the main characteristics of the National Board of Health and Welfare was to operate the racial biology investigations. The National Board of Health and Welfare came up with a proposal to deal with “*zigernare*” and the inspector argued that Roma people have been living a *deviating* lifestyle due to their *race*. As such, the race of Roma should not interfere with the Swedish race. The ambition to have a “*clean*” race motivated the government to implement certain policies (Ministry of Labor, 2014: 94).

There establishment of the *Committee on Legislation concerning the Poor Relief* 1907-1921, which registered the Roma made it also possible to introduces polices which lasted and was implemented during the 1930 – 1940s , for instance the treatment of “vagrants”, but also by register so called “*zigernare* and *Roma*” it was easier for the Swedish government to differentiate because they were considered to be obvious categories that would be separated from other citizens. Later on, the registration of Roma was used in Socio-medical examination and made it even possible for researcher to access the registration to reproduce the classification of Roma (Arnsberg, 1998).).

The argumentation of exclusion as a legitimate act of the state was referring to the differences between groups' behavior, and the continuing of "we" and "them" were a basic element in the argumentation from the National Board of Health and Welfare. For instance:

"Here [one] is facing a special racial problem" (Socialdepartementet, 1942, nr 101).

Assimilation – 1950-1960

This section focuses on the logic of dealing with the *problem* of treatment of the Roma, which can be defined as Assimilation. Assimilation is used here to describe a process where a group's culture must disappear before it can be accepted by the majority of society. Assimilation can be considered violent and is not distinct from destruction because it operates in a way where groups are forced to eliminate their identity, such as values, language, behavior, culture, and traditions to become seen as valued citizens in the majority society.

During the 1950s, the attitude and views on valued citizens changed as part of the end of the second world war and the beginning of a new era with the establishment of international organizations such as the United Nations (UN). Throughout these global changes, the attitude towards Roma people in Sweden started to transform the approach from destruction to assimilation. However, despite the changes in regime and new ideology changes, there is a continuity in the structural logic of excluding Roma. Now, I will focus on two agencies in which this second time period portrayed and constructed the institutional treatment of the Roma.

Case 1: Municipalities

Assimilation as a category in this analysis is referring to a time where the definition of Roma being a *deviating* group was used as an argument to take governmental measures based on assimilation policy. The logic of segregation and it was imaged from the state as temporary period of prepared them to taking them together with the Swedish citizens.

The community of assimilation happen in this decade where the municipalities had an impact on how the Roma possibility to access from the social welfare system services, such as housing, employment, education, and healthcare. For instance, they were denied the right to access education in public schools: the children had to have a home address, and the municipalities argued that the Roma where not able to live among other Swedish citizens.

These statements about the possibility to housing occurred before this time-period (1930) but continued and the ability for Roma to access housing was challenged in the long run. At the same time the government formulated, and the municipality implemented measures to prevent the presence of the Roma in various municipalities around the country. For instance, they were prohibited from selling or buying property, a “crime” punished with fines, and it was stated as “[.] found a prohibition on the sale of properties to Roma under penalty of a fine” (2014, p.169).

This is a process of civilizing them, separating Roma children from their families in order to make them adopt the Swedish culture and identity. This assimilation is an act of the modern state, where the nationalist idea of having “*one and clean nation*”.

Case 2: The Committee of Investigation – The Gypsy Investigation 1954

The gypsy investigations “Zigenarefrågan ” were established to examine the exclusion and bad living conditions of the Roma to present relevant measures to improve their situation and their living conditions. The investigation acknowledged that consequences of the historical state-treatment had marginalized and excluded Roma. Although this gypsy investigation was more benevolent than previous state investigation, the portrait of Roma being “*deviant*” remained. Roma as a group was still described in derogatory terms, for instance, the Roma were still considered to be unable to improve their living conditions because they were described as a “*socially handicapped group*” (Arbetsdepartementet, 72).

On the other hand, registration of Roma’s living behavior, living conditions, and living positions had to be created. The registration of Roma appeared in a legitimate way, which harmed Roma’s possibilities to be considered equal citizens.

On several occasions, the Roma were characterized and described as “socially handicapped” and one of the Investigator visited Roma living in their camps and stated:

“In the camp, however, members cannot be said to be intelligent. They belong to a kind of underclass, among the gypsies who do not think beyond their noses (Arbetsdepartementet, 72).

Here, we can see the pattern of describing Roma as *deviant*, although the investigation declares its will improve the situation of the Roma. They are portrayed as inadequate to shape

themselves their situation due to their “Roma culture” and characteristic as socially handicapped. This relates to the idea of colonial power, where the hierarchy of the inferior, in this case Roma, and superior in the Swedish state. This relation gives the investigator’s role to civilizing “Roma” because they are “unable to do that”. The importance of identification of “we” and “them” is an essential feature of the colonial state and the modernity of the state.

In this case, it is not possible to identify those who are valuable without saying who is not valuable. The logic of assimilation is comparable to the civilizing process in the imperial state, but at the same time is connected to what is happening inside the social democratic state in Europe. In the middle of the process of promises of inclusion and improving the living conditions of Roma, the state oppresses them (B

Integration (1990-2000)

This period covers three logics, first, the state continues its dominance as a hegemonic actor organizing the logic of protection towards its citizens. Second, the structural logic of marginalization of Roma continues. Third, a new ideology emerges, where the state has the intention to include the Roma in a new framework which includes the Roma. In this section, assimilation is changing to integration in terms of ideas of coexistence with the majority society, in other words, integration.

The integration ideas must be understood in the historical context of the beginning of the Swedish Roma movement in the 1960s, fighting for basic human rights in Sweden. The movement was led by Roma activists, among them the key figure of Katarina Taikon, who was inspired by the civil rights movement in the USA. The movement set a new agenda where Roma rights came to matter and the agenda of collaboration between the Swedish state and Roma started. Now, I will focus on two agencies that have portrayed and treated Roma in the official state documents.

Case 1 – The gypsy section in Stockholm municipality 1959 -1997

This section was created in 1950 and lasted until 1997. It had a vital influence on how the Roma were registered and on their living conditions. Its stated purpose was to counteract the vulnerability of the Roma and the section's goal was to improve the living conditions of the Roma.

The registration of Roma started in 1954 “*zigenarinvetering*” when the police provided a special survey that was to cover all Roma in Sweden. to legitimize the registration, authorities used the arguments such as “provide help to include Roma”, but on the other hand, according to the colonial logic, the registration means that the state wanted to control the group and also name it the “zigenare problem”. In this logic where Roma was portrayed as a problem, it also created a situation where the state appeared as the actor with the responsibility to solve the problem by creating a relationship based on its superior knowledge.

In this case, I will only focus on how the historical treatment appeared in this gypsy section and how it was portrayed from 1990 to 1997. After a gypsy investigation in the previous period, it was determined that the Roma should have access to school, households, and employment.

Case 2 – Policy of Inclusion -Ratification of the Framework for national minorities

The integration for the Swedish state referred to a society where there were a new beginning and the Swedish state argued for a inclusive state. This is the beginning of the contention of the document and the Swedish state ratified the *Framework Convention on the protection of national minorities* in the year 2000, at that moment Roma became acknowledged as a Swedish national minority. In the same period, the Swedish church and the government-held officially apologized for the historical treatment of Roma. Practically, Roma was now entitled to full citizenship and Roma’s rights were recognized (Jan Selling, 2016).

The state ratified the European framework with the intension to provide equality to their citizens, including the Roma minority. The integration meant that the Roma should be included in the work of Roma on non – discriminatory principle. The perspective on Roma being the outsider with certain characteristic changed, and now the Roma people should be involved in the framework of Roma issue. Although the Roma minority were not racialized in official document, they were still portrayed in a way that the state is an actor who has the superiorly authority to improve the Roma peoples (Government office of Sweden, 2016).

Conclusion

Along the 20th century, the state’s treatment of Roma was largely organized in the logic of “we and “them” even though the process of destruction has changed to integration. The state-

discourse highlight that the process of the continuity of the Swedish state referring to marginality and deviance of the Roma minority. The similarity of portraying Roma as “problem” that need to be solved, happened in the begging of the 21st century even if in the eyes of the state ends up in the 20th century with integration. Although the integration was announced, the full inclusion is still falling short, which made the actors to push for different concepts and frameworks, so called inclusion strategies. Practices of inclusion has transformed to “rights” and “new politics” and inclusion strategies stresses that the integration must be more advance in order to provide the equality to the Roma people in Sweden.

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