

“Roma/Gypsies: Stereotypes and Realities”

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summarized by [Stephen Pitcher](#)

Professor Silverman commenced her discussion of Roma with an exercise she’s used at all levels of teaching—asking people what images came to mind when they hear the word “gypsy.” Responses included “brilliant colors,” “wagons,” “free spirit,” “pick-pocketing,” “Irish tinkers,” “little opportunity” (based on first-hand impressions in Bulgaria), “people wearing lots of gold,” “fortune-telling,” “flamenco,” “concentration camps,” “door-to-door selling” (in Britain), and “deception” (in Boston). Delving into gender and age-group divisions, it was seen that both men and women are associated with flamboyant dress and accoutrement, men are more associated with music and women with fortune-telling, and even children can be pick-pockets (Silverman noted that students are invariably fascinated by discussions of school-age crime: “You will not hear a *word* in your classroom,” she said). While these responses were somewhat more nuanced than what she customarily got from children, the same “bifurcated stereotype”—positive/negative, romantic/criminal—emerged.

Having identified a stereotype, it is interesting to trace it to the representations giving rise to it: if you ask in an American classroom whether anyone actually knows any gypsies, most students will admit that they don’t (in Europe the situation is somewhat different due to the presence of obvious Romani neighborhoods or encampments); yet in the absence of first-hand information, a powerful, somewhat negative, stereotype develops, assigning the Rom a place (shared to some extent by Jews in Europe and African Americans here) among the “Other.” Dr. Silverman posited that a stereotype always grows out of one kernel of truth, but winds up revealing more about the person adopting the stereotype than those to whom it refers. And while stereotypes influence the perceptions of the society wielding them, they can influence those represented as well: a stereotyped group might well be tempted to cash in its supposed genetic ability to play music (or basketball).

A series of pictures were shown. A cluster of clearly impoverished Rom corresponded to the generalized conception of modern Rom—yet not all Rom are poor, or colorful; some are educated professionals. Students can relate to the insult, and inaccuracy, of being generalized. A photo of a Macedonian Romani wedding in New York alluded to Romani India-to-Macedonia and Macedonia-to-New York diaspora movements, while another New York Macedonian wedding photo depicted Romani musicians from Bulgaria—music-making has been a traditional occupation for Roma since the 14<sup>th</sup> century, though the kinds and styles of music have changed along the way.

Cher’s iconic “Gypsies, tramps, and thieves” album cover summed up the mainstream critique of those living outside society, reflecting the belief that nomads don’t really *work* and don’t really *belong* anywhere—that they live outside the law (a strange misconception, given the many, extremely strict laws under which Rom, and most other nomadic groups, exist). A flyer for the Sixth New York Gypsy Festival exemplified the wholesale appropriation of “gypsy” music: each year, the Statue of Liberty is shown

playing a different, ostensibly Rom-affiliated instrument (in the image displayed she is brandishing a tambourine). Another poster commemorates Madonna's infatuation with gypsy music; Silverman related that some degree of protest attended Madonna's facile adoption of gypsy culture, in response to which the singer invited a Russian Rom along with his 75-year-old uncle to play with her band, as well as an extremely experienced Jewish fiddler from Ohio (and in fact, Jews and Gypsies do play together in many parts of Eastern Europe).

Posters advertising the Manhattan gypsy punk band Gogol Bordello (apparently the front man claimed to be one quarter Rom, which claim was stoutly denied by Rom everywhere, until he became more successful and thus gained acceptance: in music it can be useful to be Roma, but if you're looking for a job . . . forget it); and the movie *Borat*, which lampoons a "Kazakh" village which is, in actuality, Romani, and whose residents were appalled at the film's depiction of bestiality, incest, and other activities they find repugnant; a lawsuit against Sacha Baron Cohen failed ("No one who sues Cohen wins," said Silverman).

A Gypsy Travel Company poster indicates that there are *some* activities for which the word "gypsy" has a profitable association, and one advertising "My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding" refers to a television show which has been the source of enormous stereotype-based discord. The show is based on one that premiered in England several years ago, garnering the largest viewership of any show in the nation, ostensibly depicting "travelers" (people of Irish descent typically engaged in metalwork, music, and middleman peddling, in something of an occupational overlap with Rom) and awash with sex, violence, and big clothes. (Silverman: "Yes, it's reality TV, but your students need to learn to deconstruct 'reality' TV.") Rom and travelers were both upset by the show's wild exaggerations, and their children found themselves accosted in class with demands that they demonstrate their alleged fighting skills. This, said Silverman, is what your students are starting out with, in terms of ideas about Romani culture.

Q: It seems like these projections of Gypsies are like those of African Americans forty years ago.

Silverman: Exactly. It has been questioned why this has existed without much protest, but Gypsies are so much more disorganized; it's starting in Europe, but even to get Gypsies to a Holocaust memorial takes a year of organization.

Roma are known to have originated in India—their language is clearly descended from Sanskrit—and departed (for reasons that remain unclear) around 1200, reaching the Balkans around 1300 and the British Isles by the 1430s, and ultimately North America, South America, and Australia. Various terms have been given them: "gypsy" (reflecting an erroneous belief in an Egyptian heritage); "zigeuner," or "tsigane" (possibly related to the name of a heretical sect from Asia Minor); and "sinti," which could be connected to the Sindhi, a people inhabiting the Indian subcontinent's Sindh Valley. Nomadism was a primary trait of this diaspora, with a few exceptions—in the Ottoman Empire, which was very tolerant of diversity so long as the taxes got paid, Rom settled down and even in some cases converted to Islam, for convenience's sake.

For the remaining members of the diaspora nomadism remains a defining cultural attribute. Rom feel that when you're sick, you need to get on the road; that if you stay in one place too long, you'll exhaust your economic resources; and that there's so much family to meet or get reacquainted with. Rom have traditionally had a primarily oral culture, rather than a literary one, so meetings are usually set up by passing the word, or through a system of regularly occurring meetings, or at life-cycle events—weddings, funerals, holidays, etc.—where one is expected to show up. Some nomadic peoples practice animal husbandry—“pastoral” nomads; Rom are, by contrast, “service nomads,” whose labor as metalworkers, horse doctors and trades, and musicians are needed in many places. (Dr. Silverman was surprised to learn from an Institute participant that in India there *are* pastoral Rom, who regularly attend the annual livestock-trading festival in the Rajasthan town of Pushkar.) There are various kinds of diasporas: the classic diasporas are considered to be the Jewish and Armenian ones, who have homelands from which they've spread out. It is different with Rom, who have no notion of India at all—it's not part of their oral culture, and they certainly feel no deep-seated yearning to go back to India; they are an essentially stateless people.

Q: Was there one major migration out of India or a series of them?

Silverman: We're now thinking there were a series of migrations, due to degrees of linguistic variation among the dialects. There even remains the question of whether Rom can be considered one people. Today about 40 percent don't even speak Romani, with some giving it up voluntarily and some being forced to stop speaking it.

Rom's traditional occupations are typically codified by gender and age. Students would be interested in the ways in which young people participate in these trades: how do they receive their education? If Rom seem apathetic about institutionalized education, it is useful to reflect that a classroom is not going to teach you how to shoe a horse: you learn that from your family.

Q: Is there a tension between [the strategies of] remaining marginalized vs. getting an education?

Silverman: Absolutely! There's been tremendous tension since the '50s: “These trades won't work any more, we have to become integrated.” There are many more Rom integrated now. They're not *less* Rom because they're not fortune-telling; they're still Roma: identity doesn't depend on being a fortune-teller.

Q: I saw a documentary on roofers in the southwest, who sign on to do your roof and then disappear.

Silverman: If you google “roofing scam,” you'll be told that every roofing scam is done by a gypsy, and every gypsy scams. We need to interrogate stereotyping in journalism.

Q: Some of these occupations seem not to support a nomadic lifestyle.

Silverman: Nomadism today is not really possible, nor can one say that there are real nomadic Roma any longer; they've had to adapt their nomadism, as have a number of other peoples—Sudanese camel herders, Kazakhs, others. Romani nomadism is still

practicable in the British Isles, where ways are being found to make it compatible with social registration.

Other important cultural characteristics include the enormous value placed on kinship, and an extremely strict system of religious taboos particularly evident in cleansing and dietary proscriptions. The upper part of the body is seen as pure, while the lower is polluted, so separate vessels have to be employed in washing them; upon moving into a new house Rom will often rip out the sink, not knowing how it's been used. Laundry is done in separate loads or separate machines. Food served to a non-Rom (*gadjo*) person should be prepared in separate pans, served on different plates, and washed in different basins from food for Rom. Many Rom have adopted other religions, however, or created syncretized versions of their own incorporating new elements. Pentecostalism is very popular among conservative Roma in the United States; the Los Angeles area features born-again Christian ceremonies in Romani. But whatever degree of cultural purity or modification a Rom is coming from, there seems to be a widespread realization that you *have* to get a formal education, so there are more and more Rom in schools.

Romani history includes periods of outright slavery (e.g., in southern Romania from 1300 to the 1860s, when Rom were enslaved by the church and nobility and traded like cattle at auctions) and genocide, as in the Nazi period, when 500,000–1,000,000 Rom perished, and such atrocities as the complete extermination of the Gypsy camp in Auschwitz on August 2, 1944, occurred. While Rom suffered approximately the same percentage of losses during World War II as did the Jews, their experience is far less documented, and Holocaust memorials and museums have been reluctant to widen inclusion of any other than Jewish victims. Rom protests have managed to get at least one of their number on a holocaust museum board, and the holocaust museum in Washington, D.C., now has a section on the Rom experience. Caravans have been stripped of wheels in Eastern Europe in an attempt to forcibly sedentarize Rom, and women subjected to enforced sterilization, especially in Czechoslovakia, where a landmark decision compensating a Romani woman was handed down in 2012. Another form of oppression—of particular interest to young American students—is the widespread practice of “tracking” students who don’t speak the majority tongue into special schools for the mentally disabled, effectively sabotaging their education. It has been reported that in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, a Romani child is twenty-seven times more likely to wind up in special school than is a Czech child. (Ironically, Eastern Europe under socialism possessed some educational advantages for Rom: forced to go to school, many lost their aversion to institutions; ex-totalitarian areas now have much better educated Romani populations than do areas that were never socialist.)

Numbering 12 million, Rom are the largest minority in Europe today, yet still have the lowest rates of education, political participation, and social integration. Since the fall of Communism in 1989 things have gotten worse for the Rom, with increasing prejudice producing a re-diaspora of Rom migrating westward, which in turn has resulted in a hysterical reaction to this “flood of gypsies.” The Italian government has been fingerprinting *all* Rom since 2010, for ease of prosecution, and they’ve been expelled from France during that period as well; the former activity has been sharply criticized by

the European Parliament, and the latter is illegal in the EU, yet both continue to take place. Rom have faced similar antipathy in America, where some police departments have Gypsy Crime Units, subscribing to the thesis that there are some crimes *only* gypsies do, and *all* gypsies do them; officers are sent to special trainings to learn to identify Rom.

Among other resources, Professor Silverman referred her listeners to the University of Texas Romani Archives and Documentation Center (RADOC), and the work of its founder, Ian Hancock, whose book *The Pariah Syndrome* is available online.

#### Q&A

Q: Could you tell us more about the American Romani? I don't know anything about them—are they nomadic; do they live in trailers?

A: There are many different groups in America, of whom the largest is the Kalderash, who are not nomadic anymore. They're in a crisis in terms of culture—fortune-telling and metal craft are not viable anymore, so . . . what now? Education is really important in younger generations.

Q: There are Romani kids in the Berkeley school system—I have a number of Romani students.

Q: If you want to meet a Rom in old auto repair, drive an old car through a parking lot, some guy will come up and say, "I can fix this for \$100"; your deduction's usually \$250, so it's a good deal. I found this out in Boston, thought the men were Hispanic at first.

A: How would you identify a Romani person in the classroom? I don't know. There are Romani populations in Sacramento; San Francisco has a huge one, Richmond. There are certainly some South Asian physical characteristics.

Q: If I were to go into a Romani home today, would I be free to touch things, etc., or are there still traditional taboos?

A: If you go into a Romani home and drink coffee there, you'll be drinking from a cup especially for non-Rom. They're very strict about whom they would marry, which is why a lot of families are afraid of schools—there's so much mixing. Food contact, sexual contact. . . .

Q: Isn't there a gypsy pilgrimage in France?

A: The Manouche, Catholic Rom, have a pilgrimage of Saint Sara, the Dark Saint and Helper to Jesus. They put a float in the ocean, it's an incredible ceremony, more commercialized and less Romani now, but it's a traditional Rom pilgrimage. In Romani culture generally there are special days of the year; on Easter they go to cemeteries to worship their ancestors and bring them food. Family is not only *living* family but also the deceased generations (but not so far back as to India).

Q: I read that as a culture they're always in the present tense, hence it's different for them to remember historical events, like the Holocaust.

A: I wouldn't exactly agree—Roma who've been through the Holocaust remember it, but won't *talk* about it: it's unlucky to remember something bad, because that might bring it back. It's not that they lack memory, but that their memory works in a different way. There are historical myths, like the one about the fourth nail [in which a Rom withholds the last of the four nails he was commanded to produce, which was to pierce Jesus's heart, as reward for which the Rom are allowed to wander the earth, stealing freely from non-Rom]. Stealing *when appropriate* is fine!