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# **SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET POLITICS AND SOCIETY**

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Vera Sokolova

# **CULTURAL POLITICS OF ETHNICITY**

Discourses on Roma in Communist Czechoslovakia

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## Introduction

This book maps out the history of the linguistic and social practices directed at the Roma during the communist period and explains how contemporary Czech society has come to understand the Romani population in terms of inherited social, medical and juridical ideas.<sup>1</sup> Rather than focusing on the Roma as the object of analysis, I problematize assumed notions of “Gypsiness” and “Czechness” in mainstream society by highlighting the role of a number of different socialist discourses in constructing images of the Roma as socially deviant and abnormal. By uncovering the lines of continuity in the intersections of ethnic discrimination, social deviance and citizenship from the 1950s to the collapse of communism, this book comes to terms with a variety of questions that have not been so far adequately addressed in the literature. What under-

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<sup>1</sup> This book uses several terms to refer to the Roma: Roma, Romani, Romany, Gypsy, and gypsy. The usage of these terms makes an effort to be historically and conceptually consistent. When referring to arguments I am making, when I discuss the present context and when I use or point to the present self-identification of the Roma, I use the term “Roma.” “Romani” indicates a modifier referring to, for example, Romani population, Romani parenting, Romani behavior, etc. Following the main linguistic trend, I use “Romany” to designate the standardized Romani language. When discussing primary documents, the work strictly adheres to the terminology used in the sources, thus predominantly using the term “Gypsy” or “gypsy,” depending on whether the documents themselves use a capital or lower “g.” However, since the main arguments of the book relate to the discursive production and perception of “Gypsiness,” the term “gypsy” is also used in all contexts when I am trying to demonstrate “gypsy” as a constructed concept. When commenting on rhetoric used in documents, I leave the term as it is. When I refer to Roma as *perceived* as “Gypsies,” I use parentheses to indicate the constructedness of the term. A detailed discussion of my conceptual and theoretical understanding of the construction and “reality” of “Gypsiness” and Romani culture in chapter one makes it clear that I do not consider “Roma” to be some authentic, primordial identity that would signify the “real” essence as opposed to their constructedness as “Gypsies.” Rather, I see both concepts as constructed. The crucial aspect of my distinctive usage of these two terms is the context in which they are constructed and used, how they are politicized and what significations they carry in public discourses. Since “Roma” has been primarily used by people who either identify themselves as such or for various reasons claim to speak on their behalf, while “Gypsy” historically bears the connotations of speaking about the “Other” from the superior position of the “Self”, in the general narrative of the book I maintain this distinction.

lying assumptions informed the socialist regime's understanding of "Gypsiness," and how did these conceptions relate to notions of citizenship, equality and normality? How and why did the meaning of the terms "Gypsies" and "Roma" become imbued in popular discourse with perceived unhealthiness and social deviance? And finally, what implications does this historical process of translating the perceived lifestyles and culture of the Roma into non-ethnic frames of reference have for understanding racism<sup>2</sup> and ethnic sensibilities in the country today?

Two historical examples can illustrate the fundamental questions this book will address. First, in 1958, the communist regime passed a law prohibiting nomadism. Nomads were defined as people who "wander from place to place, even if they are permanently registered in some village, and avoid honest work or support themselves through dishonest activity."<sup>3</sup> Second, in 1972, the Ministries of Health of both federal republics of Czechoslovakia issued a Sterilization Decree designed to prevent the involuntary and ill-informed sterilization of all Czechoslovak citizens by outlining strict requirements an applicant had to fulfill in order to be granted permission to undergo the procedure.<sup>4</sup>

These two laws, passed almost fifteen years apart, had three important traits in common. First, they both claimed to be "protective" laws. Second, nowhere in either law was there a mention of race or ethnicity. And third, both laws were used to target the Roma, denying them basic civil and human

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<sup>2</sup> This book uses a specific definition of the concept of "racism," which is not connected primarily to the usage of the term as derived from physical anthropology. This argument posits that 'racism' is useful only when used and applied in connection with the concept of race and the ensuing fixation on "typical" racial traits. In this sense, this usage describes the racist attitudes of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, referring to the physical mergers on the background of the idea of evolution. The concept of "racism" that this book is using adheres to the argument that racism consists in intentional practices and policies and unintended processes or consequences of attitudes towards the ethnic 'other'. Thus, this book argues, it is not necessary to possess a concept of 'race' in order to describe and analyze prejudices and discrimination towards other peoples.

<sup>3</sup> "Law About Permanent Settlement of Nomadic Persons" (*Zákon o trvalém usídlení kočujících osob*) č. 74/1958 Sb. Ustava ČSSR.

<sup>4</sup> "Decree on Sterilization, Bulletin of the Ministry of Health of the Czech and Slovak Socialist Republic" (*Věstník Ministerstva Zdravotnictví České a Slovenské socialistické republiky*,) Part 1-2, Volume XX, February 29, 1972.

rights. In compliance with the first law, Czechoslovak nomadic Roma, who constituted less than ten percent of the overall Romani population of Czechoslovakia, were suddenly and forcibly settled. Through the same law, many of the settled Roma were deliberately categorized as “nomadic” or “half-nomadic” based on their alleged “deviant” lifestyle or behavior, and had their names placed on a registry, which made them vulnerable to constant surveillance, harassment and discrimination. As a result of the second law, Romani women were sterilized at an astonishingly higher rate than non-Romani women and forced into sterilization either through threats by social workers or through state-promoted financial incentives.

The application of these two laws, arguably the most extreme examples of repressive policies used against the Roma, raises urgent questions about the politics of ethnicity in Communist Czechoslovakia: How and why were these ethnicity-neutral and “protective” laws translated into practice as punitive laws that distinguished the Roma by ethnicity? Why did Czechoslovak doctors, lawyers, educators and social scientists read these laws as a license to enact a policy of Romani assimilation? How and by whom were the boundaries between “Gypsies,” “Czechs” and “Slovaks” drawn and what consequences did these definitions have?

This book explores the “Gypsy question” (*cikánská otázka*) in communist Czechoslovakia and examines what state policies toward the Roma tell us about citizenship and the relationship of state and society under Czechoslovak communism. It illustrates how the Czechoslovak state treated the Roma as a problem, indeed an obstacle to progress, and how it inconspicuously tried to assimilate them out of existence.<sup>5</sup> However, many laws and policies that in practice targeted the Roma, denying them basic civil and human rights, were in theory ethnicity-neutral, treating the “objects” of the policies as “socially backward or pathological” elements. Though there were occasional references to Romani distinctiveness as cultural difference, gradually

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<sup>5</sup> There is, of course, a fundamental difference between the end of the existence of the Roma per se and the end of their existence as a distinct ethnicity or culture separate from the Czechs and Slovaks. Despite the disturbing practice of encouraged and forced sterilization of Romani women, discussed in detail in chapter six, the main process of “disappearance” of “Gypsies” happened in the discursive realms of demographic statistics and scientific studies, based on the Roma’s ability and willingness to conform to the mainstream behavioral and social norms.

“Gypsy” came to be defined primarily in terms of social deviance. The book traces this process of the discursive production of knowledge *about* the Roma under communism, investigating how and why this rhetoric of deviance replaced the rhetoric of ethnicity as the fundamental framework of state policies dealing with the Roma.

The dismissal of Romani ethnic difference as mere social deviance allowed the non-Romani majority to collectively deal with its anxiety about “Gypsies” without explicitly referring to their ethnicity. Though a more general study of the perception of the Roma by Czechoslovak society at large would be valuable, my work focuses on the political and broadly social arena where state bureaucrats and local political officials used the rhetoric of deviance to specifically target, subordinate and assimilate the Romani population. Focusing on the discrepancies between written laws and policies (that were ethnicity neutral and promoted as “protective”) and their implementation (which resulted in punitive practices directly targeting the Roma), this book seeks to expose the intricate relationships between official beliefs, institutional policies and popular consciousness under the communist regime. For it was these relationships that informed each other and together created the mechanisms of social control that enabled the discrimination of Czechoslovak Roma to flourish under the guise of social welfare.

It is impossible to blame exclusively the “regime,” “Roma” or “people” for the discrimination, because there was no main agent or perpetrator that masterfully carried out a plan of coercion and assimilation. Instead, the peculiar shape of discrimination against the Roma was made possible and framed by popular discourses about health, socialization and normality that were reinforced by official communist ideology. Because such discourses were key instruments of power and social control under communism, the following chapters have a strong Foucauldian undertone. At the same time, human agency does matter. For one, the Roma were not passive recipients of their fate. They found means to engage the production of categories and policies, largely aimed at their subordination, in ways that benefited them. For example, at least some Romani women used sterilization, available to them thanks to discriminatory attitudes of Czechoslovak doctors and social workers much more readily than to non-Romani women, as a defense tool against their own

unwanted pregnancies. The Gypsy-Roma Union, even though established as an assimilative institution which was designed to reeducate the Roma into “Czechs” and “Slovaks” and gradually strip them of their own culture, never gave up the struggle of articulating a distinct Romani ethnicity in the face of its continual dismissal. And the profound Romani segregation, both in housing and in the educational system, which was a living contradiction of the official rhetoric of inclusion and equality, throughout the years of the communist regime played a role in providing a sense of cohesion and group consciousness among the Roma, based on which they were able to start building their political identity after 1989.

Perhaps even more importantly, by focusing on local bureaucrats and officials who implemented official policies and projected popular discourses into their evaluations, my work argues that discriminatory policies were in practice a direct outcome of the activities and judgments of local actors who used popular conceptions of “Gypsies” as their frames of reference. Without these local actors, the sometimes well-intended and egalitarian welfare policies of the regime would not have been implemented in such blatantly discriminatory ways. Focusing on the construction of “Gypsy” as a label of social deviance, this work disrupts the comfortable assumption that Roma were easily identifiable subjects whose history can be non-problematically separated from the history of “Czechs” and “Slovaks.”

The discursive shift of replacing the ethnic and cultural content of the term “Gypsy” with ideas from social pathology (for the purposes of assimilation) was accompanied by a redefinition of “Gypsy culture” and Romani collective values with allegations of their filthy lifestyle, incompetent parenthood, unhealthy reproduction, unnatural sexuality, etc. The articulation of the cultural difference of the Roma depended largely on the binary opposition of “normal,” meaning Czech or Slovak, and “deviant” or “backward,” meaning “Gypsy”. The perception of social difference was integral to articulating ethnic difference without using the rhetoric of ethnicity.<sup>6</sup> As a result of these negative and pejorative projections, many Roma tried to escape stigmatization by dis-

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<sup>6</sup> For a similar argument in a different context, see an insightful article by Eric D. Weitz, “Racial Politics without the Concept of Race: Reevaluating Soviet Ethnic and National Purges,” *Slavic Review*, 61:1 (Spring 2002):1-29.

tancing themselves from these notions of “Gypsiness,” which in turn facilitated a social erosion of a potential unified Romani ethnic and cultural identity.<sup>7</sup>

As sociologist Jan Průcha argued, the communist past has produced a certain paradox. Current generations of Czechs (and Slovaks), aged 30 to 60, grew up in an artificially homogenous society, where various kinds of diversity – racial, ethnic, cultural or sexual – were presented as matters distant in time and place. Despite its overbearing ideological component, social education under communism was based on ideas of humanism and equality that instilled in many Czechs and Slovaks the belief that racism is something wrong, detestable and foreign.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, in the aftermath of the Second World War people very rarely encountered difference and diversity, and when they did, they were generally taught to understand such differences as social pathologies. The paradox is that while classical “scientific racism” or explicit racial discrimination were virtually absent in the official public sphere under communism, today’s nationalism, xenophobia and implicit racism have in fact deep historical roots in communist society. In the recent study, Průcha aptly expressed the essence of the problem when he argued that “for millions of Czech the only standard of humanity is ‘decency’ (*slušnost*) – behavior appropriate to generally accepted norms. At the same time, since childhood we are taught that there exists only one decency. To dehumanize the ‘indecent’ ones then is very easy.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> However, this is not to argue that there otherwise certainly would have been a unified Romani ethnic and cultural identity. Even today, Romani unity is mostly regional, often based around clan/family affiliations, with a fair amount of inter-familial rivalry and clash. Rather, this was to point out that the circumstances of the pejorative and negative projections effectively prevented any possibility of even working on a positive and unified Romani identity.

<sup>8</sup> Jan Průcha, *Multikulturní výchova: Teorie, praxe, výzkum*. (Praha: nakladatelství ISV, 2001). For a valuable treatment of contemporary Czech ethnic tolerance (or the lack thereof) toward the Roma from the Western perspective, see especially Rick Fawn, “Czech Attitudes Towards the Roma: ‘Expecting More of Havel’s Country’?” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53:8 (2001): 1193-1219. Fawn also argues that there is a paradox between the derogatory and often discriminatory treatment of the Roma on the one hand and “the ethos of liberalism and tolerance accorded to Czech society by many of its own citizens, intellectual and law makers, and especially by its admirers and supporters abroad” on the other hand. (p. 1193).

<sup>9</sup> Průcha, 11.

In fact, decency – or what I have been calling normality – was used by the communist regime as a mechanism of social control (often in the guise of social welfare), and applied to perceived patterns of Romani behavior, such as their educational habits, sexual habits, forms of public congregation, and so on. However, most authors writing on the Czech Roma, and East European Roma in general, have fairly positive assessments of the communist machinery of social welfare and praise the efforts and intentions of the regime to enhance the economic conditions and possibilities of the Roma. These authors acknowledge that discrimination and repression were taking place, but attribute these shortcomings to the structural impossibilities of communism and resulting inadequacy of the system.<sup>10</sup>

On the one hand, these authors praise communist bureaucrats for their egalitarian values and just intentions, regardless of the final outcome of state policies toward the Roma. On the other hand, they see the assimilative policies toward the Roma as a necessary side effect of the communist ideology and the paternalistic efforts of the regime in general. In many ways, these authors identify “intentions” in a context-free way. What is not adequately addressed in their analyses is an examination of how even “the best of intentions” were inscribed within an institutional and discursive context that transformed intended policy goals from the start, and with the help of local officials “from below,” led to discriminatory policy outcomes quite opposite from what one can purport those intentions might have been.<sup>11</sup>

Another group of scholars, analyzing the high degree of racial discrimination and ethnic violence in Eastern Europe after 1989, argue (or at least assume) that these are relatively new phenomena that emerged as an effect of the democratic and economic transitions after the collapse of commu-

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<sup>10</sup> Among these authors belong, for example, Zoltan Barany, David Crowe, Tomáš Grulich, Vladimír Šedivý, or Viktor Mároši (all discussed and cited later) or the edited volume by Will Guy, ed., *Between Past and Future: The Roma of Central and Eastern Europe* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> A notable exception to this trend is a recent excellent and quite critical study of the institutional treatment of the Roma in the Czech lands during the communist regime by Czech historian from Ostrava University Nina Pavelčíková, *Romové v českých zemích v letech 1945-1989*. SEŠITY Úřadu dokumentace a vyšetřování zločinů komunismu č. 12 (Praha: ÚDV, 2004).

nism.<sup>12</sup> As a number of political analysts have theorized, economic “shock therapy” could lead to social backlashes against reformist ideas in the name of nationalism or protectionism.<sup>13</sup> The successive shocks on Czech and Slovak society after 1989 – democratization, immigration, globalization, market reforms, and insecurity in a new world – are all seen as determinants of xenophobia and intolerance toward minorities.<sup>14</sup> As a correlate to this view, the communist regime is seen as largely a-xenophobic and neutral on the question of race. According to sociologist Pavel Říčan, “the Roma were accepted quite well [...] Racist aversion against them – if it existed at all – was low.”<sup>15</sup>

While not disparaging the significance of post-communist political and economic shocks, my work emphasizes the historical continuities between contemporary xenophobia and the strategies the communist regime used to deal with the “Gypsy question.” Rather than seeing democratization and post-communist shocks as historical ruptures that produced xenophobia from within themselves, my work argues that these events simply facilitated the explicit manifestation of xenophobia, while the origins and underlying motivations for xenophobic and racist behavior were rooted in the kinds of political practices and popular discourses this book will narrate.<sup>16</sup> The communist re-

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<sup>12</sup> The proponents of this view include, for example, Eric Hockenos, *Free to Hate: the Rise of the Right in Post-Communist Eastern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Timothy Garton Ash, *History of the Present: essays, sketches and dispatches from Europe in the 1990s* (London: Penguin, 1999); also by the same author: *Magic Lantern: the Revolution of 1989 witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague* (New York: Vintage, 1993); *The Uses of Adversity* (Cambridge: Penguin, 1989); or Paul Polansky and Marcus Pape (discussed and cited later.)

<sup>13</sup> For example, Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> Renata Salecl, “How to Identify with the Suffering Other” and Gyorgy Csepeli, “The Role of Fear in Ethnic and National Conflicts in Eastern Europe”, both in *Grappling with Democracy: Deliberations on Post-Communist Societies, 1990-1995*, ed. Elzbieta Matynia (Prague: SLON, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> Pavel Říčan, *S Romy žít budeme – jde o to jak*. (Praha: Portál, 1998), 25.

<sup>16</sup> Other authors, who have argued in similar ways, include Toby F. Sonneman, “Old Hatreds in the New Europe: Roma After the Revolutions,” *Tikkun*, 7:11 (1992):52 or Rodolfo Stavenhagen, *Old and New Racism in Europe. New Expressions of Racism: Growing Areas of Conflict in Europe* (International Alert, ed., SIM Special No. 7. Utrecht: Netherlands, Institute of Human Rights, 1987).

gime's obliviousness to issues of ethnicity and racial discrimination was embedded in the post-WWII self-perception of Czechoslovakia as a country of ethnically homogenous society of Czechs and Slovaks. This belief, which was in direct contrast with the relatively progressive attitudes towards ethnic minorities during the interwar First republic, enabled the communist state to approach the Roma not as an ethnic group, but rather as a socially deviant and backward segment of the population that ultimately led, I suggest, to the visible radicalization of xenophobia and ethnic tensions in Czechoslovakia after the collapse of communism in 1989.

However, this is not to argue that the xenophobic, ethno-centric tendencies in communist Czechoslovakia, which this book explores and narrates, are somehow specific only to Czechoslovakia, Eastern Europe or Czechs and Slovaks. Parallel legislative and social examples of the processes of linguistic labeling toward the Roma are readily available also in Western Europe, in countries such as Germany, Austria or the United Kingdom. Mechanisms of social control, aimed at diverse minorities and social groups are also not reserved only for undemocratic and totalitarian regimes but are an integral part of functioning democracies as well, as is discussed in detail in Chapter one.<sup>17</sup>

### Structure of the Book

*Chapter One* introduces the theoretical and conceptual framework of the work and contextualizes this study within the relevant, mostly anthropological and historical, scholarship. The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section discusses the limits and benefits of different concepts of culture and applies those debates to my attempt to define "Gypsiness" in constructivist

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<sup>17</sup> The discursive processes, which this book describes, can be perhaps better labeled as a form of tribalism, or ethnic nationalism, as analyzed and put forward especially in the works of Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson. I am grateful for this argument and observation to the anonymous reviewer for *ibidem*-Verlag, who commented on my manuscript. See, Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006); Peter F. Sugar and Ivo John Lederer, eds. *Nationalism in Eastern Europe* (Seattle, London: University of Washington Press, 1994, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.).

terms. I also discuss the problems of writing a history of a “culture” and explain the strategies I will use in relation to this issue. The second section of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of discourse analysis, which reflects the influence on this study of Foucauldian concepts of decentralized power and discourse as a mechanism of social organization and control. The third section takes the totalitarian thesis as its starting point. Cold war histories of East European communist regimes often envisage these regimes as artificial, monolithic leviathans that controlled and hegemonically ruled over a mass of relatively passive people. By critiquing this thesis as well as institutionalist conceptions of power, I open up a conceptual space to articulate an alternative conception of power based on the domination of certain types of discourses in politics and society. I then compare the politics of race in the United States with the politics of ethnicity in the “Gypsy question” in Czechoslovakia to argue that despite differences in regime type both countries exercised similar forms of power to marginalize a significant segment of the population. Finally, in the fourth section I discuss the politics of gender in communist Czechoslovakia and explain how the discourse of “normalcy” was used to subjugate Romani women in quite different ways than Romani men.

*Chapter Two* introduces the context of the immediate post-WWII situation, where my narrative of Czechoslovak strategies to the “Gypsy question” begins. The chapter analyzes how the Roma came to be regarded as a “foreign” and “filthy” element in society and interprets these stereotypes as part of an exclusionary and xenophobic process of nation-building, manifested in the widely-supported expulsion of ethnic Germans and Hungarians from Czechoslovakia. Inherited policies toward Gypsies from the interwar period, such as Law 111/1927 on “wandering gypsies,” played a significant role in infusing cultural norms into the Roma legislation of the first two postwar decades. The chapter traces the continuities of these norms and analyzes how they became integrated with communist ideology in the 1950s – particularly with regard to the anti-nomadic law of 1958 – to create a composite notion of “Gypsy asociality.” The product of this and other laws in the 1950s and 1960s, I suggest, was the evolution of a new type of discriminatory cultural politics of ethnicity grounded in official perceptions about how Romani social behavior failed to correspond to socialist norms of decency.

*Chapter Three* examines the presence of the “Gypsy myth” and stereotypes in Czechoslovak popular discourses. It discusses the world of imagery, fact, and fiction about “Gypsies” that created the frameworks for interpretations and implementation of policies that legitimized Roma’s assimilation and discrimination in terms of elevation backward, inferior and dangerous people. The chapter shows that stereotypical images of “Gypsies” were not only available to the Czechoslovak population during the post-WWII era, but that they were being used and reproduced in the production of Czechoslovak fiction, entertainment and academic writing about the Roma throughout the communist period, providing a “sense-making space”<sup>18</sup> for scientific studies allegedly proving Roma’s mental inferiority, tendency to sexual promiscuity and propensity to criminality.

The following three chapters delve directly to the heart of the communist assimilative efforts from three substantially different angles. Building on the foundational analysis developed in the first part of the book, they focus on different political and social arenas where Czechoslovak society’s recognition of Romani identity only in terms of demeaning, asocial expectations was particularly paramount. These chapters comprise the major case studies of the book and focus on how official socialist rhetoric was translated into practice by political actors at the local level, producing significant discrepancies between official policies, their implementation, and their concrete effects on Romani lives.

*Chapter Four* discusses the life and death of the only political body that the Roma were allowed to create during the communist period. The Union of Gypsies-Roma (*Svaz Cikánů-Romů*) was created in the hopeful atmosphere of the second half of the 1960s, leading up to the Prague Spring in 1968. The circumstances of the establishment and dissolution of the Union reveal that the regime actively sought to suppress Romani attempts at articulating Romani ethnic identity and thus to fill the category of “Gypsy” with positive valuations. The regime permitted the establishment of the Union only in exchange for its function as a primary organ of assimilating the Roma. The records of the activities of the Union disclose that on several occasions the Union lead-

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<sup>18</sup> This concept is borrowed from Kathleen Stewart’s analysis of production and existence of culture and identity in Appalachia and explained in detail in Chapter one.

ers sought official recognition for Roma as an ethnic national minority. This struggle for recognition resulted in a number of different power tactics by the Party, such as cutting the Union's budget and ultimately dissolving it for "failing its integrative function."

*Chapter Five* discusses education as the primary site of the socialization of Gypsies into proper "socialist citizens." It first examines the "Gypsy question" in the world of the social sciences, following the shift in the Czechoslovak social policy in the early 1970s that facilitated the rise of anthropological, psychological and criminal studies of "Gypsies," thus gradually transforming the "Gypsy question" into a discourse of social deviance. Educational texts also romanticized Roma as "wandering gypsies," were both fascinated and repulsed by their "wildness," "filthiness" and "primitiveness," and employed the colonial rhetoric that Czechoslovak society was "civilizing the savage." These sentiments unconsciously reveal how fanciful yet harmful images of Roma as the "Other" became a significant way in which Czechoslovak society attempted to deal with Romani difference without having to recognize the Roma as a distinctive ethnic group. Further, the chapter discusses the inextricable link of "Gypsy" parenting and family environment with social pathology, showing how these notions led to discrimination against Romani children in the educational system. The ways in which both Roma and non-Roma were educated about issues of difference, normalcy and pathology go far to explain the presence of xenophobia in society at large and its resurgence after the end of the Cold War.

*Chapter Six* is concerned with the disquieting practice of sterilizing Romani women, analyzing its circumstances and consequences. It traces the shift in Czechoslovak population policy toward emphasizing "quality rather than quantity" in the early 1970s and the gradual conversion of these concerns into a discourse of social deviance and sexuality. This shift in focus allowed the Czechoslovak state to define respectable citizenship in terms of "proper" gender relations and restricted definitions of "proper" parenthood to the nuclear family, excluding the Roma from meaningful membership in the national community without explicitly referring to their ethnicity. "Gypsy" sexuality and parenthood during the communist period were defined explicitly in terms of primitiveness, unhealthiness, and ignorance, while "Czechoslovak"

sexuality and parenthood were defined in terms of civilization, healthiness, rationality, and progress.

This juxtaposition of “normalcy” and “deviance,” which supplanted ethnic difference, enabled Czechoslovak (non-Romani) society to deal collectively with its anxiety about “Gypsies” without comprehending the ethnic and racial dimensions of those encounters. From the testimonies of sterilized Romani women as well as from the documents written by local medical doctors and social workers, it is clear, for example, that much of the initiative to pressure Romani women to undergo sterilization came from these local health practitioners. The doctors, shielding themselves with the rhetoric of population policy, insisted they were solving a socio-economic problem. Yet, at the same time, by urging Romani women to undergo sterilization they clearly interfered with Roma’s reproductive rights and reintroduced biological difference into the organization of Czechoslovak society.

Finally, the *Conclusions* provide a conceptual ending to the book by bringing the preceding chapters together in a discussion of current patterns of explicit and implicit ethnic intolerance and xenophobia that were built up through the communist period. It discusses the consequences of the policies and rhetoric used under communism on the ethnic sensibilities and tolerance of Czechoslovak society after the collapse of the communist regime. The popular rhetoric used after 1989 to describe the Roma reveals how much current racist and xenophobic attitudes are embedded in the history of Czechoslovak society’s attempts to deal with the “Gypsy question.”



# I Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

According to various demographic studies, at the beginning of the 1970s the Romani population in Czechoslovakia numbered approximately 300,000 people, constituting about two and half percent of the overall Czechoslovak population.<sup>19</sup> The demographers conducting the 1969 census cheerfully announced that these numbers positively reflected the government's efforts at assimilation:

. . . in 1968 the population of Gypsies *naturally* increased by 5,905, but the absolute difference since the previous study showed an increase by only 2,474 Gypsies, which means that more than 3,400 Gypsies were *released* from the new study [...] This fact demonstrates a satisfactory speed of Gypsy integration with the rest of the population.<sup>20</sup> (emphasis mine).

Clearly, being a "Gypsy" in communist Czechoslovakia was not a fixed identity. Acquiring the label Gypsy in the official census of the socialist regime was by no means based solely on one's ethnic origins, but was rather a culturally constructed category that served changing political objectives. On the one hand, the Roma were considered "citizens of Gypsy origin," a phrase that, at least on the surface, indicated a recognition of the distinctive ethnic roots of the Romani population. On the other hand, all throughout the communist period the Roma were denied the status of being a national ethnic minority.

While scientific studies, as well as the media, consistently operated on the assumption that one was born, rather than became, a "Gypsy," the official position of the regime was that one could in fact fully "shed" one's Gypsiness through successful assimilation. Those Roma deemed to be fully integrated

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<sup>19</sup> Karel Kára, "Cikáni v ČSSR a jejich společenská integrace," *Sociologický časopis*, 12:2 (1977): 366-379; Květa Kalibová, *Demografické a geodemografické charakteristiky romské populace v České republice* (Praha: Univerzita Karlova, 1995); and, by the same author, *Sources on Information on the demographic situation of the Roma/Gypsies in Europe*. (The European Council, Feasibility Study, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Vladimír Srb and Olga Vomáčková, "Cikáni v ČSSR v roce 1968," *Demografie*, 11:3 (1969): 221-239; 221.

into the majority society were no longer counted during demographic studies as Gypsies. In other words, the number of “Gypsies” fluctuated not because the Roma were physically leaving or disappearing, but because they could be defined into and out of existence by the whims of those in power, depending on the Roma’s willingness and ability to conform to accepted ideological and social norms.<sup>21</sup>

The questions of how exactly this difference was measured, by whom, and what categories and tools were used that informed these surveying methods, are missing from the communist works discussing the politics of the “Gypsy question.” It is important to note that very sporadically socialist monographs on the Roma include historiographical information and meaningful footnotes, which would provide evidence for the authors’ conclusions. Rather, the works often state simply “research 1962,” which one assumes was supposed to self-evidently satisfy all potential inquiries into the validity of the questions asked and the legitimacy of the methods used. How well many of the Roma were “cured” of their “Gypsiness” by the end of communism was demonstrated in the 1991 census (the first post-communist census to recognize “Roma” as a nationality) when only 114,116 Roma in Czechoslovakia officially declared themselves as Roma. The official statistics compiled by Regional Committees (*Národní výbory*) in 1989 claimed that Czechoslovakia had 399,654 Gypsies. In 1990, on the other hand, the representatives of newly established Romani organizations estimated the number of Roma to be approximately 800,000.<sup>22</sup>

The malleability of Romani identity, from the point of view of official definitions, popular perceptions and Romani self-affiliations, makes it very problematic to historically trace “Roma” as a homogenous (even if internally structured) group. Writing a linear history of the Roma or mapping out Czechoslovak ethnic discrimination by assuming a stable Romani subject is a theoretically futile and analytically unproductive effort. Instead, this work tries to point out the necessity of producing a multi-layered analysis sensitive to the processes according to which “Gypsies” and “non-Gypsies” could coexist

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<sup>21</sup> For a detailed discussion on *how* “Gypsiness” was determined see Chapter five.

<sup>22</sup> Milena Hübschmannová, *Šaj Pes Dovakeras: Můžeme se domluvit* (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého, 1993), 26.

and were constantly being defined and redefined by different actors across the political spectrum.

This chapter discusses the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the book. It is divided into four sections: the first explores the viability and limits of the concept of culture as a tool of understanding difference in communist societies. The second section explains the significance of using a discourse analysis as one of the main analytical approaches for this study. The third part of the chapter focuses on the political frames of hegemony and marginalization and the mechanisms that perpetuate these systems of domination in various political contexts. Finally, the fourth section discusses the intrinsically gendered dimension of Romani marginalization and discrimination and positions this history in the context of the relevant gender scholarship.

## I.1 The Problem of Writing Romani Culture

One recent night in Prague, a friend and I were discussing a report on the evening news in which young Romani people from various regions of the Czech Republic complained about the futility of trying to find employment in the country. My friend passionately tried to explain to me why he would never employ a Rom if he had to choose between comparable Romani and non-Romani applicants. He insisted his point of view was not racist:

It's not about racism. It's about culture. There are cultural differences that you just can't get around. I share a culture with Czechs, but there are obvious cultural gaps between Roma and myself. It's not racial discrimination, it's only a cultural preference.<sup>23</sup>

His argument left me deeply disturbed, but I knew that I had heard arguments like this countless times before. It was yet another instance when "culture"

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<sup>23</sup> Zdeněk Salzman used a very similar example in his afterword to a recent book on new ethnography in East Central Europe when he argued that "the typical comment by the Czechs is said to be: 'I'm not a racist, but I don't like the Gypsies.'" Zdeněk Salzman, "Afterword", in *Changes in the Heart of Europe: Recent Ethnographies of Czechs, Slovaks, Roma and Sorbs*, Timothy McCajor Hall and Rosie Read, eds. (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2006): 341.

provided a cheap shelter for ignoring the historical marginalization of a people and was given the explanatory power to justify the exclusionary practices of cultural membership. Furthermore, there was another troubling aspect of my friend's use of "culture," one that concerned the communist regime's strategy for dealing with ethnic difference: that the concept of "culture" became a mechanism for translating characteristics affiliated with a particular ethnic group into seemingly ethnic-neutral rhetoric of social deviance and "asocial behavior."

This section theorizes the hidden face of "culture" in communist Czechoslovakia. It first provides a brief overview of the evolution of the concept of culture in anthropological writing, a detour, which I believe is necessary for a meaningful discussion of the limits of the concept of culture and how it relates to this book. Secondly, these theories of culture are applied to the Romani studies literature in order to problematize the sharp boundaries between Romani and non-Romani culture in that literature. I then briefly discuss my own use of the concept of culture as a *subject of discourse*, which, at least in communist Czechoslovakia, was appropriated as a political tool for marginalizing the Romani population on the basis of their perceived asocial characteristics.

"Culture" is one of those words that travel with biblical elasticity from one context to the next. Constantly changing shape like an amoeba, culture often comes to rescue those needing a safe verbal refuge for both simple ideas and complex arguments. The positive aspects of culture are easy to recount and celebrate. The concept of culture can be, above all, an important tool for the political and social emancipation of marginalized groups. However, not all dimensions of the culture concept are positive. While celebrating and building on the positive aspects of culture, there are great dangers in defining the boundaries of a particular culture too neatly and dogmatically. Culture is a living process, not a product that can be packed in a box and displayed in a museum. Moreover, "culture" has to be always situated in the context of individual and collective power and access to power.

"Culture" emerged historically in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Western social sciences as a strategic tool in understanding the self and the other. The first, elite definition considered culture the highest attainment of a people. Behind this defi-

inition was the idea that culture was a privilege, something one had or did not have. This definition made an explicit distinction between high and low culture; there was nothing relative about it.<sup>24</sup> Culture, like the concept of dignity, then came across as an universal standard of value and became a critical area that needed to be protected, cultivated and passed on to the masses in order to civilize them. A second, philosophical definition adopted a much broader vision of culture as that which defines humanity as other than pure nature. This definition applied the idea of culture as a form of refinement, an area of intervention designed to cultivate and nurture the values of humanity. This intervention of the superior was seen as a noble enterprise, transmitting values that were seen as universal to peoples who were thought to live in the “state of nature.” Even though remarkably different, these two definitions appeared historically at the same time and worked together to promote ideas of European expansion and domination.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a response to these highbrow notions, British anthropologist E. B. Tylor defined culture as a total way of life of a people.<sup>25</sup> Tylor’s idea of culture as “the complex whole,” also used by Franz Boas and Marcel Mauss, tried to communicate that culture was a possession of everyone, not a thing of the privileged few. This concept pointed to the totality of social life and attempted to define culture as the overarching structure that organizes all its parts and activities. This definition quickly became a cornerstone of modern social sciences and rapidly evolved into a critique of Western superiority and domination, arguing for the equality of all cultures. In other words, anthropologists and ethnographers, while studying the social structure of tribal cultures, discovered that all cultures are similar in their ability to create a total way of life and are equal in their capacity to produce complexity and a comprehensive social structure, which was then used as a way to justify the equal worth of all cultures.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> This notion of culture was bound up with class hierarchies. See, for example, Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>25</sup> Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (New York: Harper, 1958).

<sup>26</sup> Franz Boas, *Anthropology and Modern Life* (New York: Norton, 1928); Edward Sapir, *Culture: Genuine and Spurious* (Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1999; first published in 1924); Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: Norton, 1967); Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psy-*

Building on Tylor's understanding of culture, Ruth Benedict used her account of Zuni culture to argue against the idea that "Western" culture represents the pinnacle of humanity.<sup>27</sup> She pointed out that tribal societies represented a kind of "golden age" of civilization and possessed virtues and qualities that the West has since lost. Although she had the benevolent intention of portraying non-Western cultures as having alternative systems of values, she also portrayed those cultures as totalities. Based on her *gestalt* approach to culture, Benedict argued that we cannot understand the parts of a culture before the culture is perceived and grasped first as a totality. There is, however, a paradox in Benedict's theory. On the one hand, she assumes that all cultures are similar in their ability to create a total way of life, believing that we have to take a leap of faith and assume this complexity before we begin to analyze it. On the other hand, she also implicitly argues that Native American cultures exist on a simpler scale than Western cultures, and so we can totalize, and therefore understand and analyze, these cultures in a way that we cannot do for Western ones. This inherent judgment and evaluation of cultures as being simple or complex resulted from Benedict's failure to reflect upon, on the one hand, the power relationship and distance between her own dominant background and position as an observer and, on the other hand, the Zuni culture she studied.<sup>28</sup>

One of the first anthropologists to take seriously the relationship between the anthropologist, his or her context and the ethnographic field he or she studies was Clifford Geertz. Geertz looked at culture not as a totalized whole, but as an ever-changing web of significations that people use to get on in the world. He suggested that "culture" cannot be explained by objective causes (as, for example, Marvin Harris tried to do in his interpretation of ritual cannibalism as a result of protein deficiency<sup>29</sup>) because it is not itself "objective" like nature, but inter-subjective, bound up with what people consider meaningful in their encounter with others and things in the world. The implica-

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*chological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1973).

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1934).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, especially chapter one.

<sup>29</sup> Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism: the Struggle for a Science of Culture* (New York: Random House, 1979).

tion of this view for studying other societies is that scholars have to in some sense “participate” in the society in order to get a “local knowledge” of what are or are not meaningful human expressions in that society. Writing culture, according to this view, involves a dialogical relationship between a scholar and society according to which cultural expressions reveal themselves depending on how the scholar immerses him or herself in them.<sup>30</sup>

Roy Wagner’s study of “cargo cults” picked up this approach, which Wagner expanded into an argument about culture as a *process*, a dialectical relationship between invention and convention.<sup>31</sup> Wagner argued that our very realities upon which we base our behavior, actions, institutions and theories are the results of human invention and its conventional interpretation. He asserted that implicit in Western anthropology is the idea of salvaging “cultures” for archival purposes. This salvaging idea gave anthropology tremendous sense of urgency to preserve and record the richness and diversity of human possibility before various cultures fall prey to the forces of modernization. Wagner criticized the earlier constructions of culture based on the collection of finite and peculiar characteristics, poignantly calling these collections “museum assemblages,” that resulted in over-determined systems of otherness that one studied and reproduced.<sup>32</sup>

Wagner’s work represents a break in anthropology’s understanding of the concept of culture that ushered in reflexive anthropology, which dissolves the hard boundaries between subjects and anthropologists, and tackled the notion of difference from new angles. Kathleen Stewart, for example, argued that since things are so “black and white” in America, it is not surprising that African-American culture has become a “talisman” of cultural difference in the

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<sup>30</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description”, in *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); and *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

<sup>31</sup> Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

<sup>32</sup> Wagner, 27. For insightful elaborations of these arguments see, for example, Jean-Paul Dumont, *The Headman and I: Ambiguity and Ambivalence in the Fieldwork Experience* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978); Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); or the documentary movie *Trobriand Cricket: an Ingenious Response to Colonialism*, dir. Jerry W. Leach (Berkeley: University of California Media Center, 1975).

United States.<sup>33</sup> Instead, Stewart tried to find the “other” America *within* the American self. The challenge for Stewart was how to present cultural difference in a way that will make a difference. Unlike Lila Abu-Lughod, who argued for salvaging the concept of culture for the purposes of political mobilization of marginalized groups,<sup>34</sup> Stewart was willing to completely abandon culture and find it in latencies, excesses and gaps. Her work sought out a more discursive concept of culture, one based on the tradition of fieldwork-based writing that attempts to find “culture” in stories people in Appalachia tell, as well as in the pauses, silences and spaces that surround those stories. She argued that often more important than *what* people tell is *how* they tell it and what they decide *not* to tell, for culture exists in the *act* of speaking, which is socially determined and results in collective “sense-making.” Stewart concluded by suggesting that culture can be evoked and developed only through “multi-layered narratives” of the poetics in the everyday existence of things.<sup>35</sup>

However, culture is not just about what is or is not signified through the act of speech. It is also bound up with relations of power that predominate both within societies and between them. Abu-Lughod argued that culture is an “essential tool for making other” and hence “cultural difference” is not a reality but a relationship of power and dominance. *Defining* a people as a totalized culture can be a form of domination because it enables one group to label, and thus make “real,” behaviors and experiences in ways that the defined group might reject or not identify with. Both Abu-Lughod and Arjun Appadurai, for whom culture represents a “tool of incarceration,” argue that the concept’s emphasis on essential difference has some legitimacy, but that the differences that matter are not taxonomic in nature, but ones bound up with

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<sup>33</sup> Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>34</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, “Writing Against Culture,” in *Recapturing Anthropology*, Richard Fox, ed. (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991). Abu-Lughod first proposed these ideas in her *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in Bedouin Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) and further developed them in *Remaking Woman: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> Stewart, 35.