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LECTIO PRÆCURSORIA

Social Orders, Tensions and Saviourism: An Ethnography of Finnish Roma Policy Implementation

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A lectio præcursoria is a short presentation read out loud by a doctoral candidate at the start of a public thesis examination in Finland. It introduces the key points or central argument of the thesis in a way that should make the ensuing discussion between the examinee and the examiner apprehensible to the audience, many of whom may be unfamiliar with the candidate's research or even anthropological research in general.

THE ROMA PARTICIPANT?

This lectio is about Finnish Roma societal participation. Based on almost three years' fieldwork observing Finnish Roma policy implementation, I am looking at the Roma participation at the governmental level but also more generally at the level of societal participation.

To begin with, I'd like to share some thoughts by David Graeber from the 2004 book called *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. Graeber says in the section 'against policy, a tiny manifesto':

> The notion of 'policy' presumes a state or governing apparatus which imposes its will on others. *'Policy' is the negation of politics; policy is by definition something concocted by some form of elite, which presumes it knows better than others how their affairs are to be conducted.* (Graeber 2004: 9, emphasis added)

These general thoughts about policy by Graeber lead us to the implementation of the Finnish Roma policy, the topic of my dissertation. The current study might not be anarchist, but it is a critical study.

In the 1970s the Gypsy loan was launched to improve Roma housing conditions in Finland. The 1970s was a culmination of the strict assimilation politics towards Roma in Finland. Subsequently official Roma involvement in the Roma politics emerged and increased, being previously at almost zero. The emergence of Roma participation and engagement is set into the wider civil rights awakening: the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s was an era of a global civil rights movement, especially in the USA and Europe, and thus alongside these also the Romani movement in Finland was reinforced. As the housing conditions of the Roma were poor, the main goal of the Roma activists back then was the improvement of housing.

The Gypsy loan in the 1970s was a form of governmental support to the municipalities to improve housing for the Roma. Romani activists who entered the governmental structures at the time were able to achieve their goals by acting jointly with the governmental body and

its officials. The governmental body formed is known today as *the Advisory Board on Romani Affairs*, under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

The next turn in Finnish Romani politics took place when Finland joined the EU in 1994 and the first European wide Roma politics was implemented, called *The Decade of Roma inclusion 2005–2015*. However, the one decade was not enough to solve the societal challenges of the Roma in Europe. Consequently, the next strategy, *the National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 NRIS*, was employed. In Finland, the strategy was called The Finnish Policy on the Roma 2009–2017. The study defended today covers this particular policy.

While we talk about transnational Roma strategies, the focus is not, and should not be, only on the content but also on the structures, actors, and discourses. Therefore, there is a need to ask *why* is there a European wide Roma strategy, *what* are the ultimate goals and, as Joanna Kostka (2015) asks in her article, *what the actual problems with the Roma are*. In addition, already in the 1980s anthropologists of law criticized official policies targeting certain ethnic or race groups (Moore 2001). Drawing upon the peculiarity of ethnic policy, the study at hand departs from making the policy practices strange and adapts the approach from Tania Li's (2007) study *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics,* where she questions the foundations of development/policy practices.

While engaging with the European Roma politics with these questions, the study suggests that the European Union is reasonably and legitimately the main stakeholder in Romani affairs and politics, as the EU has legal instruments, policy, and funding instruments by which it can advocate and direct the Roma politics. It follows, that the policy challenges of implementation do not stem from the role of EU as stakeholder, but instead, as Kostka (2015) suggests, from the way the policy is framed. Hence the question, what is wrong with Roma people, is a pertinent one.

With 27 member states following the EU framework, it can be assumed that it is challenging for one framework to reach every country equally and purposefully. Consequently, the study argues that in comparison to the 1970s Roma politics in Finland, the current EU Roma politics have travelled further away from the needs of the local Roma. The Gypsy loan was very concrete achievement, but in the current state, there is what James C. Scott (1998) describes as abstract plans for the abstract people. The impact of the Roma policy is not clear for the grass-roots Roma, not in the concrete way it was clear in the 1970s.

The metaphor of a mountain helps to illustrate the challenges. The ideas and views of the Roma are gathered in different districts in Finland. After several stages, the ideas travel to the top of the mountain where the EU Roma strategies are designed. On the way to the mountain, several processes of filtering and translation take place. The local Roma narratives are merged with the developmentalist and scientific language, often at the expense of local narratives.

With the synchronized forms of reporting and monitoring, Finland appears as a good example in terms of the living conditions of the Roma. There is no segregated housing, no segregated schools, most of the Finnish Roma have houses and apartments with running water and electricity, and Roma children have the digital equipment needed for the schoolwork. Yet these are the basic needs of the human condition and not really the measures for equality, integration, and inclusion. The issues described here indicate the challenges of

national agenda–making and decision-making in the European Roma politics. The situations of the Roma in Europe are not directly comparable.

Nevertheless, there are always many sides to stories. At the level of ministerial ordinance, the EU has fostered the recognition of Roma policies. Yet the higher-level success of Roma politics is not actualized and manifested at the grass-roots level. This leads to the ethnographic part of the study; *how the Roma experience the policy implementation practices.*

I conducted my study on the Finnish Roma policy implementation during the years 2016–2018. During this time, I worked as a project coordinator at the Roma consortium to promote Roma integration and inclusion. The fieldwork actually took almost three years if the participation of the planning phase of the project is included.

The period of the field observations is pivotal for two reasons:

First, it allowed me to observe the project right from the beginning to the end and hence observe how, as time went by, Roma workers started to adapt the new approaches to their work, leaving the developmentalist language behind and employing local community language to achieve their goals. This process De Sardan (2005) calls the principle of selection amid development practices. Second, the project was a rare ethnographic opportunity to observe how 21 Roma workers collaborated during the project, and what issues subsequently emerged.

The concept of developmentalist language leads to the theoretical framing of the thesis. The study is framed within the critical anthropology of development, starting from the theorization of statecraft by James C. Scott. In fact, Scott's (1998; 2009) argument that high-modernist plans tend to misrecognize the history, culture, tastes, and positionality of the people they target, is central to the argument in this thesis as well.

Scott's approach serves as a theoretical frame for the historical relationship between the Roma and the nation-state. In this study the idea is that state evading, in a historical perspective, took place in the social space. Hence Scott's argument about geographical space for evading is further developed, and social space is equivalent to the physical space. Scott's idea(s) is the inspiration and basis of the social ontological domains that I will return to shortly.

The study focuses on the processes and socio-political systems at the national and European level. For this purpose the critical approach in the anthropology of development is employed. Especially works by Tania Li (2007), James Ferguson (1994) and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (2005) are employed to analyze the ethnographic material.

Based on the anthropology of development, the argument in the study suggests that despite the strong participation of the Roma in the development projects, the agenda-making and decision-making are determined by and follow the principles of transnational neoliberal governance. Adapting the ideas from Christopher Kelty (2020), the study argues that Roma participation is hence institutionalized and administrated.

Roma participation is institutionalized and administrated. Other forms of societal participation are limited. It follows, like Kelty suggests in another context: 'it is about making organizations better through the use of local participating communities, which can also be seen as the co-optation of communities into projects not their own' (Kelty 2017: 581). In other words, 'Participation is almost always a normative good. But participation is also aspirational because many things can go wrong, leading to phony participation or to the co-optation of participants in the goals and plans of others' (ibid.).

It follows that the Roma activists at the national level are defined in this study as co-developers. Yet, similar to Li's ethnography in Indonesia, the stakeholders in development practices tend to misrecognize the power relations and inner group dynamics among and beyond the co-developers. The relation between stakeholders and co-developers is the locus of where the tensions emerge, as co-developers are mediators between stakeholders and local Roma communities.

To elaborate participation beyond the relation between Roma activists and the state order, the focus thus moves to cover all three social domains introduced in the study. Before proceeding, the concept of social domains is needed to place the actors in the context of the system and structure.

The social domain is aptly defined by Long (2003: 193) as he says: 'The concept of "domains" helps to identify areas of social life that are organised by reference to a central core or cluster of values which, even if they are not perceived in exactly the same way by everybody, are nevertheless recognised as a locus of certain "rules", norms and values implying a degree of social commitment'.

The social domains consist of social orders and power relations. Consequently, the study defines three key domains of social order: the transnational neoliberal state order, the traditional Roma community order, and the religious order. Each of them has its own social logic, and yet, the religious system of order is more aligned with the neoliberal governance than the traditional form of order.

The important observation here is that the Roma interact between different social ontological domains. The ontological domains do not have solid walls or boundaries and consequently different power relations and hierarchies are at play depending on situation and context. At the same time, from the perspective of participation the forms of agency vary depending on the social domain one is interacting with.

Both in Finland and in Europe, the core instruments to promote Roma inclusion are education and employment. The higher level of education and employment are presumed as access keys to societal participation. However, the *Työnimi* campaign during the project indicates that only having a Roma name can impede access to the labor market. There is a contradiction—the Roma positionality is not considered enough in the key instruments and hence the gap between the Roma and majority in terms of education and employment insists on remaining.

The study suggests a different prioritization in the national Roma politics. Instead of education and employment being the focus, attention should be paid to the overall societal positioning and equality of Roma. This intersectional approach would suggest that Roma policy should not target only the Roma population but also engage Finnish society in general. Basically, this would mean *mainstreaming* Roma politics.

Furthermore, from a theoretical perspective, I argue that the European Roma policies echo a developmental praxis from the colonial epoch with the underpinnings of cultural imperialism.

To summarize and conclude: The study did not begin by framing the Roma simplistically and solely as marginalized, discriminated, and powerless, and hence the prevalent academic narrative is challenged. The study further complicated the dominant narrative significantly by discussing how the Finnish Roma themselves interact with multiple social orders, social orders that not all of them experience in homogenous ways. Hence, the study underlines Roma agency and its various forms, forms of agencies that are

not recognized in the practices stemming from the EU's participatory principles.

To conclude, despite the decades long history of Roma political activism, there are few traces of their equal recognition in Finnish society in terms of social and cultural equality. Furthermore, although Pentecostal Roma activists function as a bridge between neoliberal governance and the traditional Roma system of social order, Roma Pentecostalism as a form of political power is also misrecognized.

Hence, the Roma activists in this study needed to translate their approaches and field activities from religious discourse into developmental discourse to match the requirements of the stakeholders. This is a process of what de Sardan (2005) calls radically different linguistic worlds amid the development praxis.

The participation of Roma in the Roma projects is also a normative and imperative good, yet the form of participation is predefined to match the interests of neoliberal governance. Anything out of the policy objectives and funding objectives is not supported, and consequently Roma societal participation does not take place on people's own terms but are determined from above.

Within this complex apparatus of Roma development, the responsibility of integration and social inclusion is solely placed on the Roma themselves, although they do not possess the societal positionality or power to influence the affairs in the domain of state order, to achieve equality, integration, and inclusion.

The final comment: as the study suggests, the Roma policy implementation goes far beyond the clash of different cultures. It is not adequate to focus on the contradictions between the so called Roma culture and the mainstream culture as this view would foremost provide stereotypes and essentialism. I started with David Graeber and I will also finish with his remarks: 'By participating in policy debates the very best one can achieve is to limit the damage, since the very premise is inimical to the idea of people managing their own affairs' (2004: 9).

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