

**WHO ARE ROMA IN THE CITY?
ABOUT LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, EXCLUSIONS,
AND AXIOLOGICAL STEREOTYPES**

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Over several centuries, powerfully impactful stereotypes and cultural clichés have clustered around Roma and become anchored not only in colloquial language or popular culture, but also in the discourse of politicians, officers, and local and nationwide administration workers, as well as surfacing in some research publications. For this reason, it is crucial to scrutinize multiple myths about the homogeneity of this group, its nomadic character, and its reluctance to integrate, along with the ascription to its members of some allegedly intrinsic traits which are commonly perceived as negative (e.g., laziness, deceitfulness, propensity for crime, and/or inclination to beggary). These stereotyped perceptions are discussed in my article, where I build on critical Romani studies to propose an alternative framework in which to approach the historical genesis ascribed to Roma. At the same time, I depict the distinctive cultural situation of this group, which is bound up with the specificity of the Romani language and the traditional unwritten moral code, called *Romanipen*. I also offer a brief account of the persecution-marked history of various Roma groups. In doing this, I draw on the notion of Romaphobia. In this article, I look at language, in this case the Romani language, as a phenomenon that contributes to the exclusion of a cultural group that uses it on a daily basis. It is a linguistic-cultural and political history of alienation, subordination and marginalization.

Keywords: Roma, city, language, exclusion, Romaphobia, minority, stereotypes, values.

**ЦЫГАНЕ В ГОРОДЕ: КТО ЭТО?
О ЯЗЫКЕ, ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ, ИСКЛЮЧЕНИЯХ
И АКСИОЛОГИЧЕСКИХ СТЕРЕОТИПАХ**

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За несколько веков вокруг цыган сформировались мощные стереотипы и культурные клише, которые укоренились не только в разговорной речи

или народной культуре, но и в дискурсе политиков, служащих, местных и общенациональных административных работников, а также в некоторых опубликованных исследованиях. По этой причине крайне важно тщательно исследовать многочисленные мифы об однородности данной группы, её кочевом характере и нежелании интегрироваться в местные сообщества, а также стремление приписать её членам некоторые якобы внутренне присущие черты, которые обычно воспринимаются как отрицательные (например, лень, лукавство, склонность к преступлениям и / или к попрошайничеству). Эти стереотипные представления обсуждаются в моей статье, где я основываюсь на критических исследованиях цыган, чтобы предложить альтернативную основу для подхода к предполагаемому историческому генезису цыган. В то же время я описываю особую культурную ситуацию этой группы, которая связана со спецификой цыганского языка и традиционным неписанным моральным кодексом, называемым *Романиэ*. Я также предлагаю краткий отчёт об отмеченной преследованиями истории различных групп цыган. При этом я опираюсь на понятие ромафобии. Я рассматриваю язык, в данном случае цыганский язык, как явление, способствующее обособлению культурной группы, которая использует его ежедневно. Это лингвокультурная и политическая история отчуждения, подчинения и маргинализации.

Ключевые слова: цыгане, город, язык, культурное обособление, ромафобия, меньшинство, стереотипы, ценности.

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There is no short answer to the question of who Roma are, but it is not what this article is about either. I will reflect on language as something that separates, excludes, or constitutes a tool of exclusion, and the related stereotypes and prejudices of a racist nature. It will be a linguistic-cultural and political history of alienation, subordination and marginalization. Roma are an extremely diversified ethnic group which is sometimes referred to as a “non-territorial nation.” As such, Roma are neither monolithic nor homogeneous. Their characteristics and migration-marked history defy any rigid typological frameworks. Typically, Romani-studies works open with an outline of the genesis of Roma, wherein their genealogical roots are traced back to India. Given that Roma have lived in Europe for several centuries, I do not believe that this ancient history would have a substantial bearing on my study, which is limited to a small, contemporary Romani community in the city of Wrocław. Particulars of this distant past do not represent a necessary starting point for depicting this community. Researchers associated with critical Romani

studies point out that, in fact, the focus on the Indian lineage of Roma results in the reproduction of the clichéd notions of their “strangeness” – of them being “not from here,” that is, not from Europe [Czarnota et al. 2020]. When encountering such statements, one is tempted to ask which of the nations that currently inhabit the European continent actually did not “wander over” to these parts from somewhere else. Constructing narratives about Roma in this way patently exoticizes this ethnic group, with European literary culture boasting a long tradition of representing “Gypsies” as exotic. Such exoticization, however, is not the only effect because the constant citing of the otherness of Roma as their distinctive feature excludes them from the circle of “real” and “legitimate” Europeans. This is one reason behind the perpetuation of the stereotyped perception of Roma as a nomadic people, with being nomadic considered by some authors (often quite inadvertently) as their inalienable cultural characteristic or even their genetic propensity. This evident discursive practice powerfully reinforces the sociopolitical marginalization of this group. The language which is employed to describe Roma has affected their past and present social position, which has made them the target of an array of mechanisms that can be described as violence-based. I examine the implementation of some of such mechanisms below.

Statistics indicate that Roma are at the moment the largest ethnic minority in Europe, with their number oscillating between ten and twelve million people [Kledzik, Pawełczak 2014, 363]. These figures are estimates because EU countries do not systematically collect data on Roma, and, additionally, members of this minority often do not recognize their ethnic belonging, conceal it, and/or fail to officially register their stay in EU countries for fear of legal and administrative consequences (not to mention the lack of knowledge of the local language and procedures in place). All these factors make it practically impossible to accurately establish the size of the minority [Śledzińska-Simon 2011, 11–12]. As already emphasized, the group is dispersed across several countries, and envisaging it as one undiversified community is misguided. The umbrella term “Roma” encompasses numerous subgroups which differ in lifestyle, economic and social status, attitude to tradition, religious observances, etc. Additionally, the language spoken by Roma, that is, Romani, is itself far from homogeneous. The fact that it is still an unwritten language without a universally recognized literary standard has prompted the emergence and rise of its multiple varieties and dialects. They are so divergent that communities inhabiting adjacent areas or regions often have difficulty communicating with each other. All this should make researchers wary of the notion of “Romaness,” constructed

as a determinant of the collective and individual identity of Roma. Emilia Kledzik and Paweł Pawełczak stress that “Romaness” conceived of as “a monolithic set of values cultivated by all those whom non-Roma consider to be Roma exemplifies a constructed identity imposed on groups which not only speak different languages, but also are often in conflict with and deny each other’s right to *Romaness*” [Kledzik, Pawełczak 2014, 364]. If any kind of ethnic communality is indeed cultivated among Roma, it is to be found among the still sparse Romani elites whose members are university-educated. Nevertheless, most Roma subgroups quite strongly emphasize their autonomous status, both in relation to non-Roma and vis-à-vis other Roma communities [ibid.].

Complex and multifarious as it is, Romani culture is to a large extent based on *Romanipen* (“Romaness” or “Gypsyhood”), that is, an unwritten and uncodified set of laws the non-observance of which brings about various consequences for an individual (or a group of people) within their community. One of the pivotal distinctions is between Roma and non-Roma people, called gadjos (or gadje), as *Romanipen* does not apply to one’s relations and dealings with non-Roma. According to the traditional rules, Roma should not cultivate contacts with gadjos, that is, with strangers – those who do not deserve respect¹. *Romanipen* includes models of conduct², rules of in-group coexistence, taboos, and sanctions. Because customary law is regarded by Roma as supreme, they give precedence to the traditional principles of life over the legislation of respective countries they inhabit. This may provoke multiple misunderstandings between Romani communities and state/local authorities, and between Roma and the social majority. For groups that observe traditional principles, the avoidance of external contacts often makes the community more hermetic. As a result, gadjos are all the more inclined to perceive “Gypsies” as inaccessible or impenetrable. As a result of the numerous myths and stereotypes that have clustered around Roma over ages, they are believed to be not only mysterious but also hostile “specimens”. Importantly, however, not all members of Romani communities adhere to the *Romanipen* rules with equal rigidity. While *Romanipen* is undoubtedly part of the culture of this group as a whole, Roma are not immune to the influences of majority societies, which prompt them to update and remodel their traditional ways of life. Respective Romani groups produce their own modified versions of *Romanipen*, and, consequently, their customs vary quite considerably [Kledzik, Pawełczak 2014, 366–367].

¹ A Rom whose lifestyle violates the prescripts of *Romanipen* may also become a gadjo. See: Romapedia: <http://romopedia.pl/index.php?title=Romanipen>

² As understood in cultural anthropology.

Because *Romanipen* has never been written down, describing it in accurate detail is a major challenge. “Manifesting that one is a Rom” is counted among its primary rules [Szewczyk 2016, 43]. This principle is directly bound up with speaking Romani, as this language is one of the fundamental modes of expressing Romani identity. Despite long years of dwelling in Romania, Poland, or any other country, Roma use Romani to communicate with other members of their community. It should also be spoken to clearly mark one’s difference from gadjos [ibid.]. A clan-like structure and allegiances are typically cited by Romani-studies sources as another unifying aspect of Romani communities. Fidelity and loyalty to one’s family, which is apparently one of the most precious values to Roma, is also inscribed in *Romanipen*. Blood bonds hold this group together and cement its togetherness. The eldest family members serve as the first teachers who transmit the knowledge of customs and tradition to children. Also, Roma communities are characteristically endogamous, which means that they abide by the cultural principle saying that one should marry within one’s group. This consolidates the separateness of the community and prevents the loss of its members. Belonging to a given family is bound up with social prestige or the lack thereof. One’s descent is also an essential determinant of one’s economic standing [Kledzik, Pawełczak 2014, 365]. *Phuripen*, another crucial rule, concerns expressions of respect for the eldest family members, where family, as understood by Roma, is emphatically not limited to parents and children, unlike in majority societies. Family stands for the entire extended line or clan, and its members do not necessarily live in the same place. The eldest community members are deferred to by the younger ones, and age is one of the central factors in the social structure of the group. Because of the fundamental orality of Romani culture, the eldest are the repositories of cultural knowledge. Sustaining the community is among the most important identity processes. It is in their community and in their families that Roma find support and help. This is indicated by two other principles which, though less axial than those listed above, are still significant and meaningful: truthfulness (*čačipen*) and hospitality (*pativalo*) [Szewczyk 2016, 44].

The system of customary law is also associated with the *mageripen* code, with “defilement” or “tainting” as its fundamental notion. A person who breaches the rules is regarded as “defiled” – guilty and ritually impure. Those defiled are in various ways (and to various degrees) excluded from the daily goings of the community [Bryczkowska-Kiraga 2006, 100; Kwadrans 2015, 201]. Thus, the world is split into things which are both physically (e.g., corporeally) and ritually pure and impure

[Kledzik, Pawełczak 2014, 365]. In the most conservative communities, *mageripen* is upheld as an ensemble of binding moral and legal rules, while less rigorous communities tend to regard it as a set of guidelines on ethics and mores. Nevertheless, *mageripen* has a pronounced controlling function. If a rule is flouted, guilt and punishment are decided by dedicated internal institutions: *Šzero Rom* or *Kris*, depending on the community. *Mageripen* is supposed to “regulate a Rom’s relations with strangers (who are impure by their being non-Roma and by their non-observance of *Romanipen*), with women (made impure by their reproductive physiology), with the defiled and defiling objects and animals” [Szewczyk 2016, 45]. In the context of femininity-related defilements, it should be borne in mind that Romani communities are essentially patriarchal. Women are responsible for domestic chores and take care of children. Men make decisions and rule family life. It is on entering marriage that girls come to be acknowledged as mature community members. Marriage is in most cases concluded exclusively in an intra-community ceremony [Kledzik, Pawełczak 2014, 365], as a result of which Roms and Romnis often are not recognized formally as spouses.

As mentioned above, the notion of “Romaness” is frequently used in a superficial way to depict the identity of Roma. “Nomadism” is a similarly frequent and superficial association. Nomadism, which is attributed to this group, is linked to a range of stereotyped perceptions of this ethnic minority. In the popular imaginary, nurtured among other things by cultural production (films, literature, poetry, music, etc.), Roma’s heightened mobility connotes freedom, romanticism, a desire to find out about the world, and the incapacity or inability to put down roots in one place. In the context of thus-conceived nomadism, narratives about Roma abound with entrenched topoi, such as camps, trains of Gypsy caravans, singing, and also reluctance to commit to a job or to use the right to education. Emphatically, repeated resettling and being always on the move have often been caused by dire socioeconomic conditions and persistent persecution, which Romani communities have confronted and are still exposed to [Szewczyk 2016, 51–54]. As Andrzej Mirga and Nicolae Gheorghe explain, “being widely dispersed throughout Europe and even beyond it, the Roma have no territory of their own. Being a minority everywhere, they share a similarly imposed identity characterized by political and social marginalization and stigmatization. Their social roles and positions are, accordingly, described as pariah, middleman, or marginal, and as such they are both the subject of rejection and the target of assimilationist policies. <...> [The Roma] remain in an underprivileged, subordinate, and inferior position in society, as is evidenced

by their humiliating social, economic, and living conditions” [Gheorghe, Mirga 2001]. Rather than from any distinctiveness of alleged “Romaness,” this status results from the centuries-long experience of discrimination, marginalization, and, for some Romani groups, even extermination. For example, the state law in Romania made Roma slaves of wealthy landowners and the church from the 14th century until as recently as the 1850s. Indeed, the history of Europe is replete with applications of violence and coercion mechanisms against this ethnic group. For instance, as early as in 1471, Switzerland (where Roma hunts were held) introduced anti-Roma laws, which propelled violence, exiles, deportations, and executions on no other grounds than one’s Romani origin. Other countries soon followed. The 16th century witnessed mass expulsions of Roma from the Holy Roman Empire, France, and England. The English legislation adopted during the reign of Elizabeth I made being Roma illegal and punishable with death, also for children conceived by Romani married couples. In Spain and Hungary, Roma were forcibly relocated and forbidden to speak Romani. In this way, they were supposed to be stripped off their cultural identity and, so to speak, to “blend in” with majority societies. In the Nordic countries, Romani males were killed, and women and children were chased away. In 1830 and 1926, respectively, Germany and Switzerland launched schemes under which Romani children were compulsorily brought up by non-Roma families. Research has shown that numerous stereotypes about Roma which are part of our contemporary narratives had become deeply entrenched across Europe by the 17th century. Such stereotyped notions include inborn criminal propensities, falsity, immorality, and aversion to stable occupations. As nation-states began to arise and consolidate in the 19th century, anti-Roma hostility only exacerbated. Roma came to be referred to as an “inferior” and “lower” race, falling outside of the idea of a “pure” race [Śledzińska-Simon 2011, 11–14; Kott 2019]. Meanwhile “the development of the modern capitalist market economy engendered the belief that the Romani lifestyle was backward and unproductive and that, as such, it should be banned” [Kott 2019]. As the perception of Roma as people with inherent criminal leanings aggravated, the German and French police were encouraged to trace and register all activities undertaken by Roma in their respective countries before World War I. Anti-Roma policies ranked among social priorities at the time, and the public was informed that police officers took care to prevent the spread of what was derogatively referred to as “the Gypsy plague” [ibid.].

World War II marked a critical moment in anti-Roma violence. The available data do not suffice to accurately calculate the toll that the

Holocaust took on Roma. While the statistics based on the accessible archival records indicate from 100,000 to 250,000 victims, indirect sources suggest that as many as 1.5 million Roma were killed during the war. Five hundred thousand victims is the figure commonly regarded as realistic. Emphatically, the Porajmos (the Devouring), or the mass killing of Roma and Sinti (collectively labeled by the Nazis as *Zigeuner*, that is, Gypsies), took different courses for different Roma or Sinti groups. Sławomir Kaprański reports,

<N>umerous Romani communities were almost entirely killed. At the same time, other groups did not face persecution at all, or were only mildly afflicted by it. The former category included Romani groups in Germany, Austria, Croatia, Bohemia and Moravia, the Netherlands, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and some other occupied parts of the USSR, which lost between 50 and 90 % of their members. Other groups in these countries and some communities of Polish, Serbian and Hungarian Roma lost between 20 and 30 % of their members. At the same time, there were Romani communities in Romania, Italy, France, and Slovakia which lost fewer than 10 % of their members, or were barely targeted by genocidal persecution, which was the case for Bulgarian Roma [Kaprański 2020, 19].

One would be tempted to believe that the Porajmos was a critical and last moment in the history of European violence against Roma.

However, new discrimination forms against Roma appeared in the aftermath of World War II and, especially, of the establishment of the communist bloc. As early as in the 1950s, Central and East-European countries began to implement drastic assimilation policies. Depicted as part of their inborn nomadism, the mobility of Roma was prohibited as a fundamental threat to the assimilation of this group. Romani groups were ordered to settle down, and Roma were placed in communal apartment blocks and forced to work under productivization campaigns. Discrimination and segregation were also practiced in education. Romani children had special curricula put in place for them which were based on race-related considerations, rather than on the particular needs of students. A disproportionately large percentage of Romani children were committed to special schools and correctional facilities. In the course of time, these policies resulted in increased numbers of low-qualified or unemployed Romani adults. As a consequence of deteriorating living conditions, the so-called “Romani ghettos” [Gheorghe, Mirga 1998, 18–22] came into being in Romania and Slovakia. A range of practices strongly redolent of the Porajmos was also instituted, which is perhaps most vividly exemplified by the mandatory sterilization of Roms and

Romnis in Czechoslovakia (from 1958 on). Most birth-control interventions in Romani communities were performed between 1972 and 1991. According to estimates, tens of thousands of people were forced to undergo this procedure. In 2004, the European Roma Rights Centre sounded alarm saying that Romnis in the Czech Republic were still sterilized without their knowledge, let alone consent [Zlamalova 2014].

The democratic transition and, subsequently, the development of capitalism in the countries of the former communist bloc triggered other processes that furthered the marginalization of Romani groups. The emergent free-market economy, involving competition for jobs, combined with decreasing commitment of the states to welfare to make poverty worse and more ubiquitous among Roma. The fall of regimes, the emergence of a new reality, the privatization of companies, the changing rules of the distribution of accommodation, and the budding nationalist tendencies all fueled subsequent waves of migrations of Romani groups to Western Europe [Gheorghe, Mirga 1998, 22–24]. In this study, with its focus on Roma of Romanian descent who have lived in Wrocław since the 1990s, it is essential to grasp the socioeconomic context of the post-transition era in Romania. I will address it in the following section.

Yet, before concluding my article, let me examine the attitude of modern majority societies to people of Romani descent and, in particular, the phenomenon known as Romaphobia. In March 2021, the Market and Social Research Institute (Polish: Instytut Badań Rynkowych i Społecznych) polled Poles about their attitudes to other national and ethnic groups inhabiting Poland. In the survey, 68 % of the respondents declared a dislike of Roma. This was the second-worse score, with Arabs being the only less-liked ethnic group in Poland, as the mere 28 % of those polled stated that they liked Arabs³. For many years now, Roma have been recognized as a group inviting the greatest dislike from the public. Their presence often breeds anxiety and a sense of threat among majority society, which is connected with a range of persisting stereotypes about Roma and to the fear of the other, the stranger. According to McGarry, it is this irrational fear that fundamentally underpins Romaphobia, which he calls “the last acceptable form of racism” [McGarry 2017], an insight worth repeating at this point. Prejudice against Roma is also described by other monikers, such as, for example, “anti-Tsiganism” and “anti-Gypsyism” in English, and “antycyganizm” in Polish. However, these terms are derived from “Tsigan,” “Gypsy,” and “Cygan,”

³ See: <https://natemat.pl/345803,sondaz-sympatii-polakow-lubimy-amerykanow-arabow-icyganow-juz-nie>

names which are offensive in and of themselves, and additionally do not convey as clearly as Romaphobia does the fear that is the major engine powering negative attitudes to this community. The structure of the term mirrors that of “homophobia,” “Islamophobia,” and “xenophobia.” McGarry stresses that this collective fear of Roma is founded on the spatial and symbolic separation of Roma and non-Roma. As the impression of strangeness and exoticism of Roma has been consistently nurtured, and along with it suspicion and distrust, conjectures have morphed into socially accepted “facts,” reinforcing the belief held by non-Roma that Romani communities are distinct, secretive, and not trustworthy [McGarry 2017, 2–6]. McGarry posits an intriguing thesis, namely that “Roma communities have been used by nation-builders and state-builders to furnish material power and to generate ideas of solidarity, belonging and identity that have served to exclude Roma from mainstream society” [McGarry 2017, 6]. This is intimately linked to the concept of constructing nation-states in conjunction with fostering and sustaining the identity of European citizens in the context of boundedness with particular traditions and territories. Roma were never included in these processes on the basis of, among other factors, nomadism, which was attributed to them along with a reluctance to put down roots and otherness caused by their Indian origin, as mentioned above. This provided a convenient starting point for the multifarious exclusion of Roma as those who “are not our folk.” McGarry argues that the Romani community as a nation without territory did not “fit into” the model of nation-states. Consequently, it was troublesome in the context of efforts to construct a European order founded on nationalism, which for its part has a lot in common with racism and intolerance of “strangers” and “others.” McGarry marshals several similarities between Romaphobia and other forms of racism and xenophobia in Europe, including anti-Semitism and Islamophobia [McGarry 2017, 7–8].

With McGarry’s framework in mind, one must not forget that Roma have been excluded not from one particular nation, but from all European nations. This strongly suggests that Romaphobia is endemic to Europe [McGarry 2017, 250]. The consequences of the processes that ousted Romani groups from national communities have persisted until today. Romaphobia is the “last acceptable form of racism” in Europe in the sense that it is still tolerated and accounted for by citing other reasons than racially-driven prejudice: “Policy interventions that exclude and persecute Roma, such as ethnic profiling, are justified by the state and society due to the discourses of abjection which reify Roma populations” [McGarry 2017, 247]. Romaphobia surfaces not only in the

attacks of right-wing extremists on Romani households, in the segregation of Romani children at schools, in mass evictions of Romani communities, or in forced sterilization. It is also emphatically heard in daily conversations of non-Roma and in statements delivered by officials and politicians; it is patently seen in newspaper headlines. It lurks in the lack of proper legal frameworks and integration schemes as well [ibid.]. Nevertheless, Romaphobia still tends to be glaringly evident and grounded in the law. For example, during his 2007 presidential campaign, Nicolas Sarkozy repeatedly stressed that there were too many foreigners in France, which put the national identity of the French at risk. He primarily meant people, including Roma, of Romanian and Bulgarian extraction who used welfare support offered by the state. Importantly, both Romania and Bulgaria joined the European Union in 2007. In the wake of Sarkozy's victory in the election, deportations of members of Romani communities became more frequent and came to feature as a part of an anti-immigrant political game. With media as one of the actors involved, stereotypes about Roma's laziness, criminal inclinations and reluctance to integrate were sustained and bolstered. Their settlements would be dispersed, and they would put on planes to Romania and Bulgaria. Between 2007 and 2009, France sent an estimated 10,000 to 12,000 Roma back to their countries of origin. However, most of those deported have come back to France, which implies that the "migration-deportation-return" cycle is firmly in place [Pomieczński, Chwiedziuk 2017, 7–8]. In Italy in the same period, a surge of anti-Roma media coverages regarding crimes committed by Romani people coalesced with pressures from right-wing parties to make then-PM Romano Prodi⁴ back a regulation "which allowed prefects of police exercise their own discretion in decisions to deport EU nationals who posed threat to the public order" [Pomieczński, Chwiedziuk 2017, 12]. In this case, people of Romani origin were the main targeted group, and the regulation came into force a few days after an Italian woman had been killed by a "Romanian Gypsy," as reported by the press and Internet news outlets in the atmosphere of anti-immigrant hysteria. The deportation lists drafted by the power of this decree included first and foremost Roma of Romanian descent [Pomieczński, Chwiedziuk 2017].

The problem of Romaphobia discussed here is strictly in line with the assumptions of the critical race theory. The social marginalization of Roma, which surfaces on the discursive level and in the modes in which legal and administrative mechanisms are constructed, directly indicates implicit and explicit forms of racism exercised against this group. The

⁴ During his tenure spanning 2006 and 2008.

domination of white individuals is replicated in relations with Romani populations. While the pursuits of NGOs, support schemes, and educational programs help overcome this entrenched domination pattern, centuries-long mechanisms of violence and exclusion are not easily eradicated. At the same time, anti-Roma racism is rather seldom straightforwardly addressed. It would be much easier to overcome if its existence were commonly acknowledged.

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