

**Valeriu Nicolae - 2006**

## **Towards a Definition of Anti-Gypsyism**

“Rarely does anyone stop to say what it is and what is wrong with it.”  
Kwane Anthony Appiah on the use of racism

The purpose of this paper is to develop a definition of anti-Gypsyism. I will start by giving an example of anti-Gypsyism in Romania.

On October 25, 2005, in the flat of an ethnic Romanian man in Bucharest, police discovered the body of an 11-year-old Roma girl who had been raped, killed, and cut into hundreds of pieces. A Romanian newspaper, *Adevarul*, published the news on October 26. Had the victim been Romanian and the murderer Roma, and bearing in mind the country's long tradition of racially-motivated pogroms, one can only speculate as to what bloody manifestations of collective punishment might have been meted out as a consequence. The Hadareni atrocities of 1993 serve as a grim reminder of what can happen (Pro Europa, 2000). The evening of October 26, a talk show on the Romanian TV station OTV included two items related to Roma: one concerning the rape and murder of the Roma girl, and the other about a fight involving Roma. During the broadcast, several commentators suggested that the murder was related to the fact that Roma parents are unable to take care of their children. Comments on the fight involving Roma included the suggestion from a caller carried live on TV that “Gypsies should be shot dead.”

The thesis of this essay rests on the premise that majority's attitudes towards, and pervasive hostility to, the presence of Roma minorities in Europe represent a factor potentially destabilizing to the European societies. This challenge to stability and peaceful interethnic coexistence needs to be understood as a complex, multi-faceted, pan-European issue, and the means to address this challenge should be complemented by diplomacy. The indicator of this potential for ethnic conflict is the growing anti-Gypsyism in Europe--a form of racism particular to the situation of Roma in Europe and capable of adapting to changes in this situation. Before describing the potential role for diplomacy and Roma diplomats, it is important to set out a clear definition and description of anti-Gypsyism.

Currently, no recognized or widely accepted definition of anti-Gypsyism is available. This definition builds on a previous one published on the site of European Roma Information Office (ERIO, 2005) I argue here that anti-Gypsyism is a distinct type of racist ideology. It is, at the same time, similar, different, and intertwined with many other types of racism. Anti-Gypsyism itself is a complex social phenomenon which manifests itself through violence, hate speech, exploitation, and discrimination in its most visible form. Discourses and representations from the political, academic and civil society communities, segregation, dehumanization, stigmata as well as social aggression and socio-economic exclusion are other ways through which anti-Gypsyism is spread. Anti-Gypsyism is used to justify and perpetrate the exclusion and supposed inferiority of Roma and is based on historical persecution and negative stereotypes. Despite the fact

that anti-Gypsyism fits academic descriptions of racism, until very recently the academy/ academics in writings/ discussions/ analyses of racism have by and large ignored or simply paid cursory attention to the plight of the Roma, and have not made much effort to theorize/analyze the discrimination faced by Roma. Dehumanisation is pivotal to anti-Gypsyism. . I understand dehumanisation as the process through which Roma are often seen as a subhuman group closer to the animal realm than the human realm. Even those rare cases of seemingly sympathetic portrayals of Roma seem to depict Roma as somehow not fully human, at best childlike. Roma are in the best cases described as free-spirited, carefree, happy, and naturally graceful. All these characteristics are frequently used to describe animals.

This chapter outlines a definition of anti-Gypsyism, showing that the phenomenon has profound similarities with the complex of phenomena called racism.

### *Neo-Racism or Differentialist Racism*

Many authors regard the latest manifestations of racism against different minority groups in Europe as what Baker (1995) and Taguieff (2001) call “differentialist” racism. Seen by both authors as a form of racism focused not on biological but cultural differences and what its perpetrators call “natural preference” for a specific “cultural” group this form of racism promotes the incompatibility of cultures and has similar results as biological racism. According to Rorke (personal interview in 2006) this is “a profoundly more dangerous, more insidious form of racism, it has a longer shelf life and can infect the mainstream of political thought and action with greater ease than biological racism. The point made by proponents of differentialist/new racism is that biological racism was fatally discredited with the defeat of German Nazism and in the wake of the Holocaust. When it comes to Roma, biological racism is alive and well; dehumanisation is still central to the anti-Roma discourses. Rorke also considered anti-Gypsyism to be “protean and polymorphous.” This complements what Rorke wrote in 1999:

Although *anti-ciganism* remains well-nigh ubiquitous, like most forms of prejudice it is neither static in terms of its content, nor is it somehow spread evenly across the politics of the European continent. Within different states prejudice against Roma is either less or more pervasive, more or less overt, manifests itself to differing degrees and in very specific direct and indirect forms against Roma, and takes its bearings from the flows and eddies of wider political developments.

Recent surges of anti-Gypsyism in Europe (Nicolae 2006) and, in particular, in England and Italy are explained through cultural clashes rather than biological heredity but the effects are the same as we are witnessing violent social conflicts (Slovakia, Romania, Hungary) and dissolution of social bonds.

This type of interpretation based on cultural differences fails to take into consideration social psychological research carried out in various countries (Spain - Pérez, Chulvi and Alonso, 2001; Pérez, Moscovici and Chulvi, 2002; Chulvi and Pérez, 2003; Marcu and Chrysochoou, 2005). This research has revealed that, unlike other minorities, the Roma are perceived as being closer to the animal realm than to the human one. In Romania for

example, while the prejudice against the Hungarians was expressed (2005) in terms of negative human attributes (e.g., *hypocrite*), prejudice against the Roma was expressed in terms of negative animal traits (e.g., *wild*). Given the existing high level of contact between the majority population and the Roma, it is clear that dehumanisation is not based on misconceptions or ignorance on the part of the majority population. Instead, dehumanisation of the Roma appears to be a legitimising myth that serves to justify the majority's abusive behaviour towards this minority.

The pogroms against Roma in Romania at the beginning of 1990s that resulted in over a hundred burned houses and tens of victims, as well as the frequent attacks by skinheads, are often justified by a part of public opinion makers, intellectuals, and mass-media through presenting the Roma victims as subhuman species (Nicolae 2006). Dehumanisation of Roma and other ethnic groups has a long historical pedigree and made the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century genocide easier to perpetuate and neglect. Refusal to acknowledge or outright denial of the Romani Holocaust has helped preserve the marginalisation of Roma Holocaust victims (Nicolae 2005) and the existing status quo that places Roma in the position of non-citizens or pariahs.

Many academics underline the superficiality of differentialist racism. For example, Balibar (1991) writes: "the neo-racist ideologues are not mystical heredity theorists but realist technicians of social psychology." According to Balibar, it is only at a superficial level that differential racism "does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others but 'only' the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions." His point is particularly relevant in the case of anti-Gypsyism, as behind the talk of difference between the majorities and Roma, old notions of hierarchy remain intact as proved by the polls in Europe (see OSCE report, *Anti-Gypsyism in European Mass Media* [2005], Annex1). Unfortunately, there seems to be no doubt in the minds, actions, and policies of the majorities whose life-styles are deemed to be modern and civilized and whose are not.

Anti-Gypsyism manifests itself not only through racial categorization, which postulates the inferiority of Roma, but mainly through straight-forward dehumanisation of Roma. Anti-Gypsyism, therefore, can be defined as a form of dehumanisation, because prejudice against the Roma clearly goes beyond racist stereotyping whereby the Roma are associated with negative traits and behaviour. Through dehumanisation, the Roma are viewed as less than human; and, being less than human, they are perceived as not morally entitled to human rights equal to those of the rest of the population. Other authors describe this as delegitimisation (Bar-Tal, 1989; 1990) or moral exclusion (Staub, 1987; Opatow, 1990).

The failure by European states (e.g., Italy and Netherlands) to accord official recognition of group status is quite different in intent and outcome to dehumanising racism, but is in my opinion an institutional dimension of anti-Gypsyism. Neither Italy nor Netherlands officially recognize Roma as national ethnic minorities, despite recognizing other national minorities.

## *Biological racism*

“And yet, though there are no races, racism certainly exists!”  
Jacquard and Pontalis (1984)

Racism is a relatively new concept and according to Zack (1996) *The Oxford English Dictionary* dates the earliest appearances of the term “racism” to the 1930s. In fact racism was at the basis of exclusion and violent conflicts since long before.

A series of theories find the roots of biological racism (racism based on an essentialist notion of race, which links itself to nationalism and to the state) much earlier than the 19th century theory of Arthur de Gobineau considered the father of biological racism and the first to write about distinct human races in his publication *Essai sur l'inegalite des races humaines* (1853-55)

Zack (1996) considered that “modern concepts of race derive from eighteenth and nineteenth century pseudo science that rationalized European colonialism and chattel slavery” (p. 3).

As Zack, Williams (1995) believes racism preceded the theories of Gobineau and argues that racism was created to justify the enslavement in Africa as he introduces the early concepts of racism link to the “the rationalization of slavery.”

Kant is also seen by Zack (1994) to have contributed to the creation of European concept of racism as he drew on Aristotle’s theory of essences of natural kind where he thought barbarians to be natural slaves.

Probably the earliest introduction of racist concepts one can find in Plato (2002) who wrote in “The Republic” that there are people “constructed of intrinsically inferior material” (p.39). In 1940, Ruth Benedict defined racism as “the dogma that one ethnic group is condemned by nature to congenital inferiority and another group is destined to congenital superiority” (p. 21)

Scientific or biological racism, based on 19<sup>th</sup> century theories of biological superiority and inferiority of races, is largely seen as compromised and no longer acceptable in political and public discourse. However, in the case of Roma, we often still encounter virulent forms of biological racism, both in political and public discourse (OSCE, 2005).

Long before biological theories of race surfaced in Europe, Roma faced persecution. Banned from living in several European countries, enslaved in what was then Romanian territory, accused of playing a role in the killing of Jesus and often identified with criminals (Lucassen and Willems, 2001), Roma have been continuously rejected by the majority populations.

The European Commission country reports often underline the structural racism against Roma in countries of Central and Eastern Europe, yet some of those countries have already joined the EU and others will join soon. Violence and acts of discrimination,

including state-sponsored rejection, which seem impossible for any other minorities, are often occurrences in the case of European Roma.

For example, in 1998, Great Britain re-imposed visa restrictions on Slovakia in order to prevent Romani asylum seekers from having their case heard in the UK. In summer 2001, the UK government established a “pre-clearance” of air passengers at the Prague airport, which served to single out Romani passengers and prevent them from boarding airplanes destined to the UK (BBC, 2001).

Also in April 2001, the UK government adopted a “special” border policy, singling out persons belonging to seven named groups: Kurds, Roma, Albanians, Tamils, Pontic Greeks, Somalis and Afghans, for “special” measures. Of these groups, Roma and Kurds do not hold passports stating their ethnicity (Roche, 2001).

European Roma are not a homogenous group. Roma can range in appearance from fair-skinned and blue-eyed to very dark-skinned and black-eyed, with the two extremes often seen in the same community or even family. Roma share many physical features with Arabs, Turks, Indians, as well as Europeans. Roma in Europe follow a number of different religions: Christianity (Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant), Islam (both Shia and Sunni), Judaism, as well as atheism. Many Roma are unable to speak Romani. Even those who speak Romani may have difficulties understanding each other as the various dialects are quite different across Europe. Therefore, this measure, which was in place until 2004 in the UK, demonstrated a form of state sponsored discrimination against Roma that somehow operated despite the fact that there is no sure way to identify Roma. The policy cannot be logically based on any known criteria of racial discrimination: appearance, skin colour, religion, or language. The experience of the Czech reporters who proved that the Czech Roma with a darker skin colour was stopped while his whiter colleague was granted the permission to leave for the UK in 2001 suggests that this was in fact a case of imagined biological differences between Roma and others.

Anti-Gypsyism in the UK is not demonstrated only in state policy, but also through official and popular sentiment. Jack Straw, in charge of British diplomacy until May 2006, is known for derogatory comments (transcript interview available at [v.nicolae@diplomacy.edu](mailto:v.nicolae@diplomacy.edu)) targeting “travellers,” who he saw as good for nothing but defecating at people’s doors

“Should we let Gypsies invade England?” was the title of a poll in January 2004. Around 20,000 people paid to call in and tell readers of the *Daily Express* that they were not going to put up with the “gyppos.” The poll was part of a larger media campaign in the British press led by tabloids which lasted for several months (ERIO, 2004). The government reacted by starting talks about measures to restrict access for Roma to the UK.

UK Prime Minister Tony Blair said in the following days in the House of Commons: “It is important that we recognise that there is a potential risk from the accession countries of people coming in.” One day later, accordingly, the *Daily Express* echoed Blair, with

banner headlines “Gypsies: you can’t come in.”

The ideas of Arthur de Gobineau are still widespread in Europe and salient when it comes to Roma. The fear of degeneration coming from mixing of majority “races” with Roma is held by a majority. According to a 1999 poll, less than 1% of non-Roma Bulgarians can imagine marrying a person of Romani origin (Nahabedian, 2000) In 2003, a Gallup poll in Romania discovered that 93% of Romanians would refuse to accept Roma in their families (IPP/Gallup, 2003). In a poll conducted by Focus Institute in 1999 in Slovakia, 80% of the interviewees said that they would never allow their children to marry a Roma ([Pisarova] Slovak Spectator). In an opinion poll conducted among Slovenian secondary school students in 1993, 60.1% said they would avoid any contact with Roma (Ramet, 2005). In a survey conducted in 1986 and 1988 at Spanish schools, 70% of the teachers said they would be upset if their child married a Roma (Calvo Buezas, 2001).

Park (1950) writes that race relations “are not so much the relations that exist between individuals of different races as between individuals conscious of these differences.” The results of the polls quoted above in Romania and Bulgaria (both with a Roma population of about 10%) seem to indicate that anti-Gypsyism has been internalised by a good number of Roma, besides the majority populations.

Opinion polls in Luxembourg (Legrand, 2004), Malta and Denmark ( European Values Study, 1999) show that anti-Gypsyism operates even in the absence of direct contact with the Roma. The poll shows that 25% of Luxembourgish people would not like to have Roma as neighbours, despite the fact that according to the census, no Roma live in Luxembourg. The strongest rejection is found among workers and housewives, the lowest among people who have a liberal profession. Over 30% of those interviewed in Malta declared that they would not want to have Roma as neighbours. No Roma reside in Malta, according to the official census. The report shows that 15.2% of respondents in Denmark would not like to have Roma as neighbours. In Denmark, practically no Roma reside (less than 0.001%).

Despite no social interaction, in conflicts and, in most cases, in any form of contact, the majority populations reject Roma. This reinforces my view that anti-Gypsyism is a racist ideology which has strong similarities with specific forms of racism such as anti-Semitism. Anti-Gypsyism often serves to justify the existing social order whereby the Roma are permanently kept in an inferior social position.

Anti-Gypsyism is also reflected in the form of false consciousness on the part of the Roma themselves. A significant number of Roma deny their roots in an attempt to escape the social stigma associated with Roma identity. Most of them, especially the professionally successful Roma, manage to hide their parentage and eventually lose their ethnic identity and assimilate to the majority that normally rejects Roma. This is usually not possible for other groups facing racism and could be held as an argument that anti-Roma feelings are not based on race or ethnicity, but on stereotypes and historical prejudices against Roma. This is well-reflected in the discrepancies between the estimated number of Roma and the lower results of official censuses as reflected by the documents of the Council of Europe.

A tremendous amount of energy is spent in justifying or legitimising political, economic, and cultural exclusion of Roma. Prejudices against Roma are based not only on race, but on a combination--unique in each region or country--of religion, language, culture and physical appearance. Moreover, Roma are identified based on neighbourhoods, villages, regions or countries where they live, social class, "specific Roma" professions, speaking patterns, clothing, and even behaviour. This complex exercise of building negative stereotypes directed at Roma based on whatever features are shown by the Roma in a particular area is not typical of racism, which focuses on race or ethnicity alone, as shown by a few key features such as skin colour, language, or religion. In this way, anti-Gypsyism is able to adapt and Roma remain targeted regardless of the changes they make in their social status, living conditions, and practices, as long as they admit to being Roma.

Ambalvaner Sivanandan, director of Britain's Institute of Race Relations, wrote in 1973 that racism was "an explicit and systematic ideology of racial superiority." By 1983, he had come to think that "racism is about power, not prejudice." In 1985, he related it to "structures and institutions with power to discriminate." Anti-Gypsyism includes features from all of his definitions of racism; however, it is not reduced to only those. Anti-Gypsyism is a very specific form of racism, an ideology of racial superiority, a form of dehumanisation and of institutionalised racism. It is fuelled by historical discrimination and the struggle to maintain power relations that permit advantages to majority groups. It is based, on the one hand, on imagined fears, negative stereotypes, and myths and, on the other, on denial or erasure from the public conscience of a long history of discrimination against Roma. It ignores not only events where Roma were killed with bestiality, but also any non-stereotypical characteristics in the life of Roma. Prejudices against Roma clearly go beyond racist stereotyping which associates them with negative traits and behaviours. Dehumanisation is its central point. Roma are viewed as less than human; being less than human, they are perceived as not morally entitled to human rights equal to those of the rest of the population.

Like any ideology, anti-Gypsyism can adapt as Roma remain targeted, regardless of the changes they make in their social status, living conditions, and practices, as long as they admit their ethnic roots.

Anti-Gypsyism has such contempt for reason, facts, and intellectual debate that it requires little effort to justify its often ideological contradictions and changes, a feature that links it strongly with fascism.

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