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Solidarity, Citizenship, Democracy: The Lessons of Romani Activism

I. Introduction

Roma¹ are increasingly perceived as an avant-garde, de-territorialized, trans-border nation, challenging the so-called Westphalian international order and providing a more adequate model to ‘the globalized world’ than that of the nation-states. This vision poses a challenge for international political theory and can be assessed in the framework of contemporary debates on the boundaries and nature of political communities.

By studying the case of Roma, the normative relevance of different transnational attachments can be analyzed including transnational political and civic solidarities, trans-border ethnic and national attachments, as well as hybrid and diasporic identities. Such analyses lead to more fundamental questions about the relation of political action and solidarity to self-determination, citizenship and territoriality.

Assessing the political participation and representation of Roma is a real challenge for political theorists. A great diversity of transnational actors has emerged in the last three decades that claim to represent Roma, to speak or advocate on their behalf. Such actors include expert bodies under the auspices of international organizations, various NGOs, worldwide or European Roma congresses, forums, platforms, as well as self-appointed Gypsy Kings.

In the case of Roma, these theoretical issues are raised not only by scholars, but also activists, policy-makers, opinion leaders, politicians, as well as common people. How can we integrate “them” into mainstream society? What does it mean “to integrate them”? What is the role of local and national governments, and what role should the European Union and other international bodies play? Who speaks for Roma? Who are their legitimate representatives and on what grounds?

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¹ I refer to the term “Roma” as a category of ethnopolitical practice.

The preoccupation with Roma has deep historical roots, having taken both romantic and malevolent forms ranging from the adoration of pure and free savages to their expulsion, forced assimilation, enslavement, or extermination. The scientific study of Roma has similarly deep roots in disciplines such as linguistics, art history, sociology, anthropology, history, and more recently political science. However, very few scholars reflected systematically on the questions of the social integration and political participation of Roma in the framework of normative political theory.

On the basis of the case of Roma, three distinct but interrelated developments can be distinguished: transnational political and ethnic solidarities come forward, post-Westphalian citizenship constellations thrive, and claims of transnational forms of democracy are being advanced. Accordingly, lessons can be drawn concerning 1) transnational solidarity, 2) post-Westphalian citizenship, 3) transnational democracy, and 4) political theory in general.

2 Roma were banished from almost every European city and state in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.
3 For instance, under Maria Theresa in the Habsburg empire and in several Eastern European soviet satellite states.
4 In the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia from the fourteenth century until 1840.
5 By the Nazi regime in the Second World War.
7 The pioneering political scientists who in the recent years have begun researching Romani political activism are Zoltán Bárány, Ilona Klímová-Alexander, Martin Kovats, Aidan McGarry, Eva Sobotka, Nidhi Trehan, and Peter Vermeersch.