

Paradigms of History

Academic Antigypsyism, and Resistance

Von: Dezso Mate

Preface and Arguments

This article outlines the international development, various eras, and positions of Romani people in social science, tracing the trajectory from the establishment of Gypsylorism to today's Critical Romani Studies and scholarship, all within the context of academic antigypsyism. Throughout this research, I aim to explore how academic social paradigms and schools on "Gypsies", spanning from the 16th century until the late 2000s, have continually evolved under orientalist, colonial, and privileged approaches.

The primary argument posits that antigypsyism is a transhistorical, transnational, and transgenerational phenomenon encompassing distinct forms of racism and intolerant attitudes that directly impact Sinti and Roma people. Antigypsyism has systematically deprived and repressed the identity politics, practices, and memories of Romani people. This is not only manifested in day-to-day "othering" and pejorative attitudes towards those who are known as "Gypsy" in the public imagination but is also rooted in social distances, physical actions, and knowledge production. Academic antigypsyism involves a direct "othering" and characterization of Romani people through racism in the discourses in social sciences.¹

Gypsylorism – Representation of the Exotic "Other" in Europe

In the late 1700s, Sir William Jones, a British lawyer and scholar in East India, coined the term "Orientalism" within the framework of colonial administration. By 1784, Jones was an advocate for focusing not only on the country's natural resources but also on its language, culture, and customs, to bolster industrial capital. While Nathaniel Brassey Halhed agreed with Jones on the significance of utilizing indigenous scholarship, Halhed introduced elements of domination and colonial control to the discourse. Most notably, philosopher and political economist John Stuart Mill in his 1874 Anglicist theory of "benevolent despotism" promoted the domination and education of the colonized population by the colonizer's culture, ultimately advocating Westernization.² Orientalism emerged in tandem with economic capitalism, coupled with the political control and manipulation of knowledge production, artistic expression, and representation. Edward Said's seminal work on

Orientalism intricately explores how colonists interacted with, authorized perspectives on, described, taught, and ruled over the colonized.³ Building on this framework, John M. MacKenzie's theory underscores the enduringly charged nature of Orientalism in modern academic knowledge production, political positions, and cultural representation.⁴

George Smith's resources (based on Spellman) indicate that the very first studies on "Gypsies" in the European context appeared in the late 1600s. This academic work not only reflected the values of Gypsyologists but also laid the foundation for the differentiation of Romani "Others". More precisely, they did not consider Sinti and Roma people to be European, Christian, or "white"; rather, they viewed them as "inferiors". Ken Lee argues that Orientalism extends to the creation of an exotic "Other", with Gypsyism representing this exotic "Other" in Europe through an Orientalist discourse of "Othering" that historically permeates arts, culture, academic institutions, and religious bodies.⁵



Fig. 1: Otto Müller Zigeunerin, 1930

Since the publication of Heinrich Moritz Gottlieb Grellmann’s work titled “Dissertation on the Gipsies” in 1783, people have endured consistent exposure to international scientific racism. For hundreds of years, the various manifestations of antigypsyism have molded and erased their historical records and memories. Romani people were academically characterized and controlled, which later radically influenced country-specific practices across Europe including everything from assimilation to genocide.⁶ Over the past 240 years, this publication has significantly impacted social sciences and political decision-making, contributing to the global dissemination of antigypsyism.⁷

The founding of the Gypsy Lore Society Journal in July 1888 marked a pivotal point. However, the concept of the Gypsy Lore school predates its inception, as William John Ibbetson suggested to Charles Godfrey Leland in 1887 that the informal Romany Rais should be formalized into a society. This idea is reflected in the prefaces of the 1907 Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society (JGLS), which highlight George Borrow’s semi-autobiographical works such as “Lavengro” (“Word-Master”, 1851) and its sequel, “The Romany Rye” (“The Gypsy Gentleman”, 1857).⁸ In an earlier era, these studies solidified Roma positionalities and putative norms as those of a subordinate race in the social sciences and public imagination. This school marked the Euro-specific form of whiteness, which includes social distance to the “Gypsy”.⁹

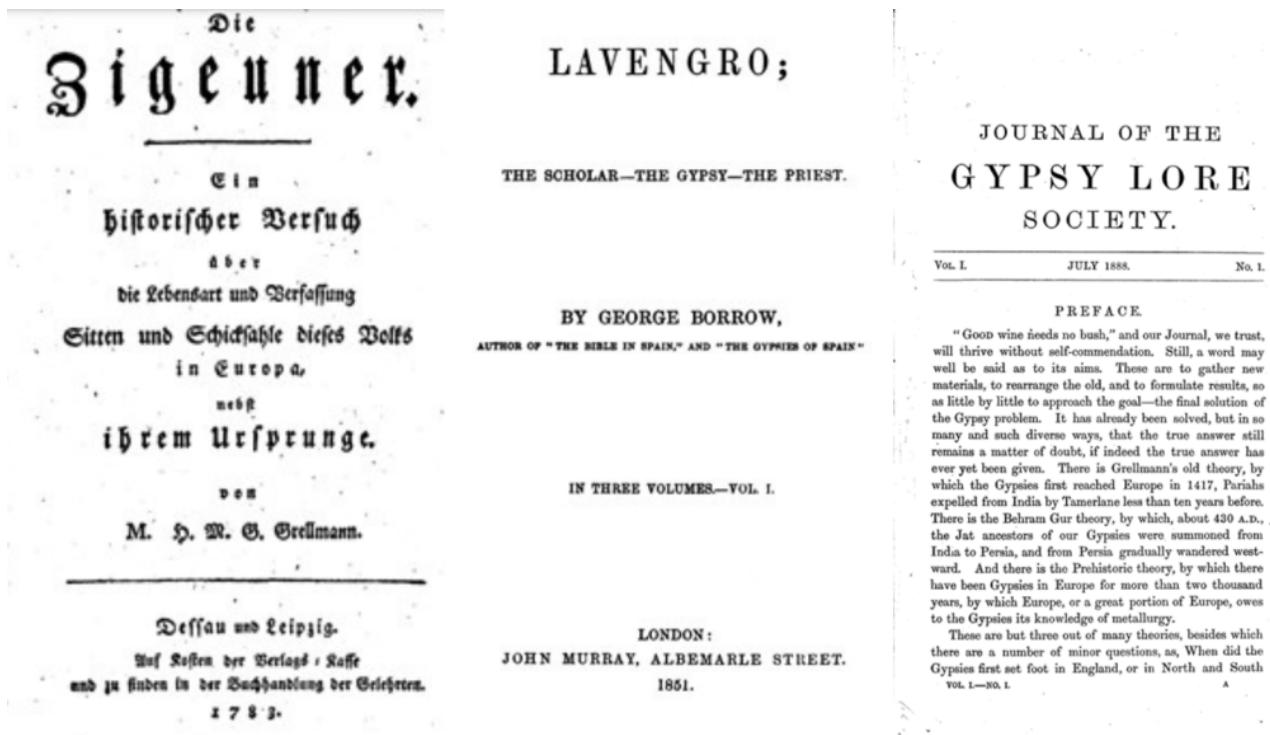


Fig. 2: Heinrich Moritz Gottlieb Grellmann, “Dissertation on the Gipsies”, 1783; George Borrow, “Lavengro” (“Word-Master”), 1851; Gypsy Lore Society Journal, Great Britain, 1888

Manifestation of Criminal Biology

In the early 1900s, the approach of “Scientific Studies on Gypsies”, closely related to Gypsylorism, emerged, classifying Sinti and Roma people based on the science of racism, hereditary criminality, and eugenics. These schools refer to the formal academic studies on Romani people with academic studies on the “Gypsy”, including historical, cultural, political, and linguistic studies.

In 1863, criminologist Richard Liebich applied criminal prejudice to Romani people, associating them with specific social positions, assumed patterns of behavior, and racial-cultural traits. Cesare Lombroso founded the school of criminal biology in 1876 with the Homo Delinquens (Der Verbrecher, 1887, The Criminal Man, 1896). Within this framework, he characterized “Gypsies” as a criminal entity, but not primarily as a race. Viernstein, similarly to Lombroso, criminalized Romani people based not only on race, but also specific physical and biological markers, psychical characteristics, and social class.

In the 1930s, based on the previous racist and biased studies on “Gypsies”, racial hygienist Robert Ritter, the leading “Gypsy expert” of the German National Socialist regime, turned the racist theories into practice.¹⁰ Criminal biology intersected with social Darwinism and culminated in the Nazi policies of persecution and extermination, which directly targeted the Sinti and Roma and ultimately made them victims of the “Final Solution”. Heinrich Himmler ordered that the “Gypsy question” be addressed by targeting “the essence of the race”.¹¹ In the 19th century, the German Reich was one of the leading institutions that subscribed to the views of criminal biology, laying the groundwork for the Sinti and Roma genocide.



Fig. 3: Robert Ritter, head of the Racial Hygiene and Demographic Biology Research Unit of Nazi Germany's Criminal Police, conducting an interview with a Romani woman, 1936 © Galerie Bilderwelt/Hulton Getty Images

Sinti and Roma Emancipation and Knowledge Production

In 1950–1960, based on the previous biased and racist studies on “Gypsies”, ethical responses and new research methods emerged from first-generational Romani intellectuals. Their primary aim was to achieve a dignified cultural and linguistic recognition in European societies and the field of social sciences. The results of “The First World Roma Congress” in 1971 marked a significant milestone. Romani cultural identity politics, led by second-generation Romani intellectuals and their supportive alliances, gained momentum through civil rights resistant actions, contributing to early academic representation. 4 April 1980 is a remarkable turning point in Sinti and Roma history and memory. Sinti civil rights activist and intellectuals began their hunger strike in the Evangelical Church of Reconciliation on the grounds of the Dachau concentration camp memorial site, demanding:

- the recognition of the Nazi genocide of the Sinti and Roma by the Federal Government;
- the immediate end of the special police registration of Sinti and Roma;
- the release of Nazi files from the former Reich Security Main Office.

As a results of their actions and demands, on 17 March 1982 Federal Chancellor Helmut Schmidt recognized the Sinti and Roma genocide.



Fig. 4: End of the hunger strike at Dachau memorial site, 1980; pictured (left to right): Uta Horstmann, Anton Franz, Dronja Peter, Hans Braun, Romani Rose, Jakob Bamberger, Fritz Greußing, Franz Wirbel
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In the 1990s the international Romani civil rights and political movement played a pivotal role in empowering the academic emancipation of Romani intellectuals within public institutions.¹²

The term Romology is a compositum, combining the identity politics of Romani people with the attic-Greek word logos. Rajko Duric argues that Romology is the logos of Romani people's lives, reflecting their historical, linguistic, and cultural heritage, patterns, and roots. Romology can be defined as a transition to modern critical studies on "Gypsies".

However, it maintained a certain distance from the research "subjects", ostensibly preserving objectivity on the "Other" through the language of ethnography, anthropology, history, and sociology.¹³



Fig. 5: World Roma Congress, 1971 [<https://worldromacongress.org/index.php/archive>]

Critical Romani Studies

When we consider the past fifty years of international Romani knowledge production and movements, it becomes evident that current Romani scholarship is assembled from the critical responses on previous schools on “Gypsies”, activist actions, and deconstructive thoughts. Starting in the 2000s, third-generation Romani rights activist, scholars, and their supportive alliances have prioritized resisting antigypsyism, anti-Romani racism, and manifestations of social exclusions through reflective self-narrative knowledge production, and “talking back” to academia and to human rights movements. Critical Romani Studies not only adhere to the ethical requirements of research with Sinti and Roma communities but also lay the groundwork for generating critical knowledge that challenges established power dynamics, prevailing norms, and conventional perceptions. This is achieved through the reflective research findings of Romani scholars, and with their supportive alliances, emphasizing an inclusive ethos that considers diverse perspectives while maintaining rigorous and objective academic standards.¹⁴

Conclusion

When we are considering roughly the last three centuries of knowledge production and schools on “Gypsies”, we can note that the results are frequently limited to non-Romani, external standpoints and perceptions, which often present a racist, orientalist objectification of Romani people. These hegemonic stigmatizations have systematically excluded Romani narratives, thus limiting access to knowledge production and representation.

Academic and public antigypsyism has a profound impact on Romani memory and remembrance of the Holocaust. Romani people throughout history were categorized by antigypsy labels in the social sciences and public discourses. Until the 19th century, they were called wanderers, vagabonds, hoboos, beggars, and tramps. Afterward, they were referred to as nomads or half-nomads, or socially marginalized based on their economic backgrounds. The characterization of “Gypsy criminals” has been a consistent marker throughout history up to the present day. From the 1970s onward (based on ethnographic and anthropological approaches), scholarly discussions of Romani people involved notions such as “culture of poverty”, “underclass”, or “the ethnicity”, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where everyone clearly knows that the talk is about the “Gypsies”.

As of the early 2000s, there has been a shift in Romani scholarship towards the application of political sciences, memory, and critical studies. However, during this period, media representation played a crucial role in shaping contemporary “Gypsy” images.

When researching the history of oppressed communities and their memory, it is important to embrace an approach that considers contextual nuances, potential archival limitations, ethical considerations, and one’s positionality within the broader socio-cultural landscape.

Historical inquiry as a way of making the past less distant is a process of building awareness of unrecognized narratives, reviving forgotten voices, and elevating common remembrances. Acknowledging the history, past events, and lived experiences of Sinti and Roma people allows us to nurture a collective memory and consciousness.

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