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Tracing Treacherous Terrain

Ed.: IG Kultur Österreich

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IN-HOUSE PUBLICATION

A New Social Movement?

Spanish Roma and Their Forms of Organization

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The first document that gives us evidence of Roma presence in Spain dates from 1425, when King Alfonso V granted passage to Juan, “Count of Egypt Minor”, allowing him to make his way through the Iberian Peninsula from the north along the medieval pilgrimage routes to the city of Santiago de Compostela. In 1492, the Reyes Católicos (Catholic Monarchs) managed to unify the Spanish kingdoms with a process of social and cultural integration, which included the expulsion of the Jews. It is likely that the Roma were able to avoid expulsion due to their small numbers and nomadic lifestyle, which made it difficult to pin them down, in addition to the fact that they converted to the official religion of Catholicism. In Spanish, the word “egipciano” (“Egyptian”), which is derived from “Egypt Minor”, alludes to the name “gitano”, as Roma are called in Spanish.

Although, generally speaking, the Roma population in Spain is well integrated into Spanish

society, it is still necessary to strengthen our fight against racism, stereotypes and prejudices, all of which are deeply rooted in the non-Roma society in Spain. The Roma and Maghreb populations have the worst images of all the groups within Spanish society. The Roma are the most heavily discriminated group after those from Maghreb. Fifty-two per cent of the Spanish have little or no sympathy for the Roma.

Today, Roma live in both the main Spanish cities and in rural areas. There is no nomadism among the Spanish Roma. In 1991, the Fundación Secretariado Gitano conducted a study on the housing conditions of Roma, which concluded that 90 per cent of Roma have lived in the same city over the last fifteen years. There are no official statistics on the actual number of Roma living in Spain, but according to several studies¹ the number of Roma living in Spain is between 725,000 and 750,000, which means Roma represent 1.87 per cent of the Spanish population. Spanish Roma are the fifth largest Roma community in Europe and one of the most well integrated after 35 years of democracy in Europe.

Social, public, civic and political participation of Roma in Spain is strongly linked to the process of democratization in Spain and to the Constitutional Law of 1978. In 1978, after living on the peninsula for over 500 years, Roma were granted Spanish citizenship under the Constitutional Law, endowing them with the same rights and obligations

1 National Spanish Roma Strategy, 20/20 (2011) and Laparra, M. (coord.) (2007): Informe sobre la situación social y tendencias de cambio en la población gitana. Una primera aproximación. Madrid, Social Affairs Ministry Studies. See also the official statistics from the Council of Europe.

as other Spanish citizens. In spite of sharing the same rights legally, the actual situation of Roma in Spain is far away from being equal. According to the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (“Social Research Center”)², Roma is the ethnic group that is most heavily discriminated against in Spain: More than 40 per cent of the Spanish citizens would not like to have a Rom as a neighbour and one in four wouldn’t want their children to go to the same school as Roma children; the unemployment rate among Roma is 42 per cent, which is 17 per cent above the average unemployment rate on a national scale. There are “ghetto” schools where 98 per cent of the children are Roma. In addition, Roma have much less access to finding an apartment to rent than Spanish citizens.

The Spanish Roma Movement

The way that Roma can combat this situation is to work together in the so-called “Spanish Roma Movement”. The movement is made up of different organizations, religions (Protestant and Catholic), youth organizations, pro-Roma organizations, and public bodies working to improve the situation of Roma in Spain.

I would like to point out here that it is necessary for the Roma to be more active in the political and social arena and to take part in joint efforts so that they can have a greater influence on and build a stronger link to society and government agencies. The initiation of this strategy is linked to the idea of conceiving this Roma movement as a “new social movement”. Is the Roma movement actually a new social movement?

2 Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas 2010, gitanos. [org/areas/igualdad_de_trato_y_no_discriminacion/noticias/26701.html](http://areas/igualdad_de_trato_y_no_discriminacion/noticias/26701.html)

What is a New Social Movement?

According to Pedro Ibarra³, a social movement is a type of group action. They are large informal groupings of individuals or organizations, which focus on specific political or social issues. In other words, they carry out, resist or work toward bringing about social change. In order to be considered a new social movement, the following is also required: a certain collective identity, a certain conflictive behaviour, a sort of informal structure, a network structure. Does the Roma movement fulfill the characteristics described above? Can it be considered a new social movement? Let's have a look at each of the following:

A certain collective identity

"Identity" is a key word in the language Roma use when speaking about public, private, social and political issues. As Roma, we have built our own identity separate from that of the non-Roma members of society. Roma have a strong identity that is based on certain values, such as respect for Elderly. A Roma proverb that conveys this is: "when an older man/woman dies, a library burns down." Another element of Roma identity is that the family is positioned in the center of relationships to the outside, it also means that there is a lack of power of the individuals vis-à-vis the group. The Roma in Spain have developed their own identity, which may change depending on the region or groups. There are, however, values that remain the same across all regions and groups of Roma.

Another key point regarding the identity building process, in words of the Italian sociologist Melucci⁴, is: "Collective identity is an interactive shared definition produced by individuals or groups, [...] it is the result of a negotiation process between different elements and adjustments related to the purposes of collective identity." Therefore, according to Melucci, Roma have been building their own identity since 1425, and the process of negotiation has been impacted by the different anti-Roma laws, which have strengthened Roma identity over time and this strong identity is present in the Roma movement today.

A certain conflictive behavior

This is a key point of our analysis, given the fact Roma have a certain way of carrying out conflicts with society and among the different actors of the Roma Movement. I would like to comment on the conflict behavior in dealing with the majority society, which comes from the lack of recognition of Roma culture and identity within the non-Roma public sphere. Some examples are the lack of recognition of Roma culture and identity in schoolbooks and textbooks, and of Romani also being an official language⁵. Even more importantly, Roma are neither recognized as a cultural minority nor as a social minority.

There is the process of conflict among the different actors of the Roma movement because different actors take different kinds of action. For

3 Pedro Ibarra, *¿Que son los movimientos sociales?* Anuario Movimientos Sociales Icaria Editorial y Getiko Fundazioa. Barcelona, 2000.

4 Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

5 According to the Spanish Constitutional Law, Spanish language is the official language in all of the country but Catalan, Euskarian and Galego are co-official in Cataluña, Basque Country and Galicia, Romani is not considered a language in the Spanish law.

instance, there are some religions that work in close cooperation with civic associations; there is a Roma ethnic movement and a pro-Roma movement; there is a women's movement and a youth movement. Sometimes they are forced to compete with one another for resources and power, which creates conflicts among the Roma themselves.

An informal structure

In spite of the public and political establishment's strategy to develop a Roma movement that likens non-Roma movements, the Roma have maintained a sort of informal movement. The main reason is that sometimes the Roma movement is based on territorial and family concepts rather than the membership to a certain identity. So the processes of relations and participation are often based on family or other concepts, meaning that formal structures based on non-Roma standards and frameworks are avoided. Access to the Internet and social networks contributed to creating new forms of informal relationships between organizations and groups, to making organizations more well-known, and facilitating joint collaborations.

Network structure

Spanish Roma organizations have been created within a non-Roma framework, which is a model consisting of dispersed organizations based on a territory and/or target group. In this way, in the 1980s a large number of local and regional Roma organization set up their activities, some had to compete with each other for space in a certain neighborhood or town, which also hampered the outcome of their actions. In the mid-1990s, things began to change and a process of light collaboration among organizations was set up. This process

could be called the "collective action network", which is indeed a new social movement.

The Roma collective action network in Spain is composed of different organizations that can be identified as the following:

1. Social and ethnic Roma organizations including general Roma organizations, Roma women's organizations, youth organizations, organizations promoting Roma education, which are the current versions of the former, general local Roma movement. These new organizations are very well connected to the community and have profound knowledge of the situation from a grassroots perspective. They usually also have a high level of recognition within the local Roma community.
2. Pro-Roma organizations, which are support organizations for Roma lead by non-Roma, the main characteristic of which is that these consist of highly trained professionals, who sometimes lack deeper awareness and knowledge of the actual situation of Roma.
3. Religious groups: About 95 per cent of the total Roma population are either Protestant or Catholic, both religious groups are very well connected to the community, although there is virtually no mutual collaboration or recognition among the two religious groups.
4. Mass media. In Spain, the most important Roma media are produced by civic associations, such as *Nevipen Romani* in Union Romani, *Gitanos* in Fundación Secretariado Gitano or *cuadernos gitanos* at the Roma Culture Institute.

The Roma movement in Spain copies the main structures, rules of work and methodology used by other minority groups and movements. By considering itself an actual new social movement, the family structured social movement could move substantially further. In order to establish this new paradigm, it is necessary to think about a few things involved.

First, be patient, Roma movements usually want to see the results immediately, without taking into consideration that such processes take place step-by-step.

Second, negotiation without exclusion: The Roma social movement should include all the different Roma groups or target groups (women, youth, students, Roma immigrants, etc).

And last but not least, it is necessary to have real knowledge of the situation, in order to avoid counterproductive behavior, such as paternalism, over-protection or lack of interest for Roma concerns among the majority population.

unionromani.org
issuu.com/cuadernosgitanos

Roma Osmose satellites

Notes from the project blog

There seems to be a general consensus throughout Europe that Spain is an example to follow when it comes to the integration of Roma. There are numerous reasons for this. It is a fact that Spain has been implementing specific Roma-related policies for more than twenty years, and has been a pioneer in acts of institutional recognition of Roma culture. In comparison to some Roma communities in Eastern Europe, Spanish Roma live in socio-economic conditions that are relatively speaking better. Nonetheless, the situation of Roma in Spain is still far from idyllic. Social housing for Roma still leads to the ghettoization in peripheral districts, the life expectancy of Roma is far below those of the general population and illiteracy levels are extremely high (7 out of 10 Roma above the age of 15 are functionally or completely illiterate in Spain). Educational performance is disastrous, with high drop-out rates (especially among girls) and cases of school segregation can still be found throughout Spain. Finally, Roma continue to be the most discriminated community among the Spanish minorities population, much more than other immigrant communities.

Establishing mechanisms for Roma participation often aims at merely legitimizing the policy rather than at empowerment or potential decision-making possibilities for Roma. Anna Mirga