

Chapter Title: 'When they enter, we all enter ...': envisioning a New Social Europe from a Romani feminist perspective

Chapter Author(s): Angéla Kóczé and Nidhi Trehan

Book Title: Romani Communities and Transformative Change

Book Subtitle: A New Social Europe

Book Editor(s): ANDREW RYDER, MARIUS TABA, NIDHI TREHAN

Published by: Bristol University Press, Policy Press. (2021)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv18gfz6v.14>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



JSTOR

Bristol University Press, Policy Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Romani Communities and Transformative Change*

EIGHT

‘When they enter, we all enter ...’: envisioning a New Social Europe from a Romani feminist perspective

Angéla Kóczé and Nidhi Trehan

Introduction

Epistemic violence, that is, violence exerted against or through knowledge, is probably one of the key elements in any process of domination. It is not only through the construction of exploitative economic links or the control of the politico-military apparatuses that domination is accomplished, but also, and ... most importantly through the construction of epistemic frameworks that legitimize and enshrine those practices of domination. (Galván-Álvarez, 2010)

Romani peoples have been constituted as political subjects for centuries through forms of epistemic violence, racialized political and economic exclusion, and cultural erasure. Roma and their life worlds have almost always been the objects of non-Romani researchers and scholars; thus, Romani people have been kept out from the knowledge-making process

themselves. Usually, they have been used exclusively as informants or authentic voices to legitimize non-Romani academic expertise. From the ‘Gypsyologist’ tradition to the ‘benevolent scholars’ of today, knowledge of Romani peoples and communities was recorded and interpreted by non-Roma according to the prevailing ideologies and prejudices embedded in their world view. This was symptomatic of the uncritical, unequal power relationship between a people who are studied and those studying them (Matache, 2017).

As this body of knowledge expanded, replete with various stereotypes effectively reproduced over time, the (de-)authorization of Romani knowledge strengthened and contributed to the dehumanization of Roma (see Trehan, 2009). A significant body of academic work on Roma can be classified as what critical race theorist Sylvia Wynter (2003) defines as ‘racialization’, a classifying mechanism within a hierarchical relationship that identifies social groups as human, subhuman and non-human. Gradually, the stigma attached to Romani identity hardened, and the labelling of Roma as the enduring ‘European Other’ took hold in the collective *imaginarium* (Lee, 2000).

From a critical perspective, knowledge production on Roma is a classifying mechanism that provides a specific lens and theoretical framework to understand the situation of Roma. One dominant approach in academic knowledge production, favoured by linguists, anthropologists and folklorists, narrowly emphasizes the language distinctiveness and the ‘immutable’ cultural singularity of Roma as an ethnic group, and this strengthens their racialization (Acton, 2016). Another dominant scholarly approach is the constructivist one, which challenges the narratives of ‘Gypsy studies’ mentioned earlier and contends that it racializes Roma as non-Europeans (with ‘Oriental’ origins based on linguistic evidence). Kóczé (2020: 3) explains the limitations of these hegemonic theoretical frameworks, suggesting that both are at some level problematic:

While the first, [the] language and culture-centric approach ([whether] consciously or unconsciously), uses socially constructed categories that inevitably do form the basis of social identities, the second school of thought aims to eliminate any kind of ethnicized or racialized term at the expense of neglecting and obscuring Roma identity and its interplay with structural racism.

In the midst of our current ecological, economic, social and political upheaval, which can be understood as a crisis of neoliberal capitalism or 'precarity capitalism' (Azmanova, 2020), Romani people have become (re-)politicized and (re-)instrumentalized through the constructions of 'Gypsies'/'Gypsy criminality' and the 'Gypsy menace'. This has eerie parallels to 20th-century Europe, during the rise of eugenics and Nazi 'race science', which led to the genocidal murders and traumatization of Romani communities across the continent, culminating in the Holocaust (Friedlander, 1995). In this sharp escalation of the racialization of Roma, a majority of progressive scholars have been unable to articulate the centrality of race/racialization in the production of structural violence in neoliberal economies. Furthermore, they have often reinforced the 'colour-blind'/universalist ideologies that masked the enduring structural racism and violence against Roma. All too often in research studies, racism is interpreted in a very narrow sense as an individual moral wrongdoing – as opposed to being structural in nature – that is generally committed by racist, extreme right-wing people. So, the lack of a sociological imagination à la C. Wright Mills, conceptualized as 'the vivid awareness of the relationship between experience and the wider society' (Mills, 1959: 5), contributed (perhaps unwittingly) to the *invisible-izing and silencing of racialization* that became a powerful weapon in the hands of ethno-nationalists and the extreme right, who tacitly instrumentalized anti-Romani racism to enhance the structurally embedded neoliberal racial order. Building upon the path-breaking work of Black

scholars, such as Oliver Cox, Cedric J. Robinson and others, who critiqued Marxism for failing to account for the racial character of capitalism (Kelley, 2017), it is suggested that neoliberal racial capitalism gradually unfolded in East Central Europe and South-Eastern Europe after 1989, imposing a systemic condition of crisis that rendered and normalized the vast majority of disenfranchised Roma as ‘subhuman’ and ‘non-human’ (Kóczé, [forthcoming](#)). Moreover, the structural conditions of neoliberal capitalism forced them to live on the edge of societies, where social, material and environmental destruction escalated (Kóczé and van Baar, 2020).

Arguably, these violent epistemological, knowledge-making legacies led to the subaltern, racialized position that Roma occupy even to this day, a position that leaves Romani communities particularly vulnerable and emanates from the belief that we (the Roma) cede to the non-problematized ‘epistemic authority’ and uncritically accept whatever is being done for our ‘safety’ or well-being. Despite the emergence of a tiny group of Romani intellectuals who had achieved some standing, particularly in post-socialist countries, through education from the 1950s onwards, many among them continued to be denigrated, infantilized and marginalized as a result of structural racism underpinned by epistemic violence, that is, *violence rooted at the source of knowledge production on Roma* (Spivak, 1988). Indeed, as Trehan and Matache emphasize in [Chapter Seven](#) of this volume, the formal adoption of civil and political rights that promote legal equality does not necessarily ameliorate structures of embedded social and economic oppression.

A Romani feminist perspective: the premise and promise of entering together

It is never just about racism, classism or sexism; it is always the combination of several oppressions that create intersectional obstacles for Romani women. Intersectionality is an analytical

concept introduced by Black feminists in the US in the 1970–80s and applied and conceptualized in East Central Europe by contemporary Romani feminists to address the complex reality of Romani women (Kóczé, 2009). In this way, Romani women are similar to other racialized groups whose complex problems are not captured by single-issue social movements. Each of these movements elevated one category and eliminated others. For instance, the Romani rights movement takes up the issue of ethnicity/identity of Roma, women's or feminist movements focus on the issue of gender, the LGBTQI movement focuses on sexuality, and union movements emphasize class. Since Romani women are simultaneously racialized (dehumanized and inferiorized) as Roma, female (with a particular sexual identity) and also as workers (usually underemployed and/or unemployed), the singular focus on inequality does not therefore capture the complex, lived, racialized social reality.

Intersectionality emerged as an analytical tool to explain these multifaceted challenges faced by Romani women. Confronting multiple forms of discrimination rooted in gendered and racialized power, *both within the community internally and at the societal level*, often leads us to suspend our rights in the name of an illusory 'scientific objectivity' as victimized, racialized and passive female bodies who are de-authorized to produce knowledge. By employing intersectionality as an alternative explanation, Romani feminist scholars transcended the limitations of existing scholarship, using a conceptual language to reveal the racialized, classed and gendered intersected oppressions of Roma at the structural, discursive and biographical levels (Kóczé et al, 2018).

Furthermore, we offer the following critiques and insights:

- We need to understand why existing theoretical frameworks do not explain the actual lived experiences of a majority of Romani women (and men), which are produced by the structures of neoliberal racial capitalism. The 'lived

experiences' of Roma must be connected to the structures of the broader political economy.

- Too often, Romani people still feature as informants, ethnographic spectacles, NGO experts (instead of scholars) or activist-scholars whose work is not recognized as an important contribution in its own right. The way forward is to critically reflect on the hierarchical nature of academic knowledge production, as we have begun to do at the Central European University Romani studies programme. This uneasy process entails critical dialogue among Romani and non-Romani scholars, activist-scholars, activists, policymakers and those who implement policies, as well as those who have opportunities to create new knowledge-making avenues and horizons that were hitherto structurally and epistemologically denied to Roma (Kóczé, 2018; Trehan, 2018).
- Ultimately, disruptive epistemological inquiries lead us to diverse perspectives on Romani identity and culture, and Romani life worlds, with the promise of the creation of knowledge that liberates, emancipates and acts as a counter to epistemic violence. There is an urgent need to 'decolonize' Romani studies, as well as to challenge the structural conditions of intersectional racism and sexism, which constantly (re)produce and perpetuate existing racial and gender hierarchies and inequalities. As Yarimar Bonilla, a scholar of post-colonial Caribbean anthropology urges, 'we need to decolonize decolonization ... because clearly the formulas that exist today ... have only served to reproduce the inequalities of empire' (quoted in Jobson, 2020).
- One of the central critiques raised by Romani feminist scholars is about the non-Romani male domination of the genealogy of knowledge production (Brooks, 2012).
- An 'engaged anthropology' encourages meaningful collaboration with the people who are the objects of study in order to generate social change that seeks to combat the mechanisms of oppressive hierarchization (Beck and

Maida, 2013). Feminist intersectional research aims to be non-hierarchical; however, in academic research protocols, there continue to be hierarchical dimensions nonetheless.

- Instead of exposing the racialization of Roma and the mechanism(s) of structural racism, 'segregationists' and 'assimilationists', per Ibram X. Kendi, attribute the oppression of Roma to their culture (see [Chapter Seven](#) by Trehan and Matache). This continues to have a corrosive effect on contemporary structures of thought, crucially, even among some Roma, who have internalized these representations (Acton, 2016).
- Focusing only on Romani culture and marginality, or internal dynamics, without an understanding of the broader processes of capitalist violent race-making and 'othering' in various spheres of society, conceals the scales and manifestations of racial discourses and practices, and hides or disguises the racialized and gendered forces of hierarchical domination in European societies. The gendered racialization of Roma is a process of 'othering' that has profoundly shaped and continues to shape the history, politics, economic structure and culture of European societies.
- The current 'colour-blind' and constructivist sociological approach that is centred around class at the expense of gendered racialization in European academic discourse camouflages the structural racial and gender violence against Roma embedded in a hidden 'racial contract'.
- Emerging critical Romani studies, as envisioned by a fragile minority of Romani and non-Romani scholars, must critique discourses that privilege culturally loaded ethnicity as the only or primary paradigm that frames Romani lived social experiences today.
- In contrast, *epistemic privilege* is socially more complex and tied to opportunities that are structured by gender, race, class, sexuality, citizenship, social networks – even institutional belonging – and so forth. What we mean by this concept is the privilege of those who produce knowledge and who are

assumed to have the right to do so. In other words, no one questions a white male in their production of knowledge today (even on Roma), but if a Romani woman is engaged in this task, then she has to prove her 'worth'.

- A significant number of Romani activist-scholars and intellectuals from Central and South-Eastern Europe, who do not circulate in the 'Anglosphere', have limited access to English-language resources, funds and scholarships for higher education, and when their work is published, it often remains marginal or invisible (see Oprea, 2006).
- Activist scholarship provides us with a unique opportunity to learn from errors and to recognize the highly contextual, political and conditional nature of knowledge production within social science, as well as challenge the commodification and marketization of higher education (Ryder, 2018).

Yes, we scholars and activists engaged with Romani life worlds and producing literature in this discipline know that anti-Romani racism has dangerous consequences for the social fabric of Europe, *but to what extent is our knowledge production, our epistemological enterprise, challenging the ideology, conditions and structures that do not validate the knowledge of the racialized community?* As conducting research in this field has political ramifications – and scholars in socialist countries during the time of Soviet hegemony were certainly aware of this – it requires sensitivity to the ethical and political dimensions of knowledge creation on Romani life worlds (Kovats, 2001).

Romani studies scholars must tackle a number of epistemological dilemmas if the goal is to contribute to scholarship that would both challenge and overcome the inherent disciplinary 'silos' of the ivory tower and the hegemonic bias(es) of the status quo, including the gaze of the intrepid, but often myopic, 'gatekeepers' of the field (scholars who define the boundaries of the discipline). One of the most pernicious outcomes of gatekeeping, which runs

counter to the spirit of free inquiry and healthy academic debates within the field, continues to be silencing. Voices, insights and constructive criticism deemed to be less valuable are muzzled (And scholars who are women of colour are intimately aware of this!); often, it is the silencing of ideas and philosophies that run counter to the dominant ideology of the day. In her classic piece 'Marginality as a site of resistance', American activist and feminist author bell hooks (1990: 341–3) reminds us of the position of the subaltern, who is almost always objectified by the gatekeeper-cum-colonizer:

[There is] no need to hear your voice, when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own.... I am still [the] colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk.

Europa, carpe diem! Romani feminism, a New Social Europe and justice for Roma

In this troubled neoliberal capitalist era, we cannot postpone the recognition of the chronic racialized and gendered dispossession of Roma, which – generationally and even to this day – has taken a huge material and emotional toll on those who are living in the midst of a devastating situation. Europe must allocate resources to compensate for the historical injustices of Roma! Europe must change the perverse, competitive distribution of public goods that benefits and rewards those who are structurally well positioned and further disadvantages the most marginalized.

This piece offered a critical theoretical contribution that re-imagines a radically transformed Social Europe by using the language and insights of Romani feminists who challenge

the intersected gendered, racial and classed violence not as merely coincidental, *but rather as a systemic condition of neoliberal racial capitalism* (Kóczé, [forthcoming](#)). If we want to re-envision Europe, neither the feminist nor the anti-racist Romani movements can afford to ignore the intersectional lived experiences of the vast majority of Romani women who are in a continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and emancipation (Vincze, 2014). Following Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) insights, we must centre our intersectional 'politics of re-envisioning' on those who are in the most disadvantaged situation. The reason is that if we start to develop a language/politics that resonates with the situation of the lived experiences of the most disadvantaged among us, then this will provide the critical basis for solidarity and collective action across European society. As Crenshaw (1989: 167) explains, the goal is to 'facilitate the inclusion of [the most] marginalized groups for whom it can be said: "When they enter, we all enter."' The current political landscape in Europe is replete with political minefields and traps, offering rather illusory notions of inclusion and ambiguous answers to overcome the social exclusion of Roma.

We want to denounce all manifestations of historically accumulated structural, racialized and gendered justice that are not accounted for in the (current) plethora of technical, depoliticized policy recommendations and project-based, piecemeal solutions offered by the European Union and its member states (see [Chapter Two](#)). We want to reclaim our epistemic authority, our critical analysis and our theorization (based on the lived experiences, the situation on the ground, at the root level) in order to sharpen the vision of systemic racialized and gendered decay in Europe.

In this critical chapter, we have discussed how epistemic violence continues to reinforce the structural oppression of Roma, and we have suggested ways in which the deep-seated problems of epistemic violence and injustice vis-à-vis Roma can be disrupted by an emerging body of critical Romani

scholarship, which would become the basis for a radical redressal of one of Europe's most pernicious wrongs. Indeed, there is now a nucleus of such scholars at the CEU in Budapest/Vienna and at Harvard University's FXB Center for Health and Human Rights, as well as in other institutions and platforms across the globe (museums such as the one in Brno in the Czech Republic, cultural centres such as European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture [ERIAC] in Berlin, RomArchives and so forth).

Black feminist epistemologies also offer us a pathway towards achieving emancipatory knowledge (Collins, 2006). As mentioned earlier and in [Chapter Seven](#) by Trehan and Matache, the strong parallels between Romani and African-American experiences of oppression are undeniable, and the quest for justice for Roma has been deeply influenced by the work of US civil rights leaders, from Ida B. Wells, to Martin Luther King Jr, to the Black Lives Matter movement of today.

Inspired by the poignant article of civil rights lawyer and legal scholar Michelle Alexander (2020), 'America this is your chance', after the brutal murder of George Floyd forced the US to embark upon a national reckoning, we too exhort Europe to seize the day and face courageously its racial history and racial present. European public intellectuals and politicians continue to deny and/or underplay the depth of anti-Romani racism embedded within their societies. That is why we welcome the report of the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), 'A persisting concern', officially recognizing, for the first time, that 'anti-Gypsyism ... [is] a key *structural* driver of Roma exclusion that undermines the *process* intended to decrease Roma deprivation' (FRA, 2018: 8, *emphases original*). As Director of the FRA Michael O'Flaherty emphasizes:

the Roma population continue to struggle with challenges we like to believe no longer exist in the EU. Homes without running water or electricity, lack of health insurance, and even hunger continue to be realities

for unacceptable shares of the Roma community in one of the richest regions in the world. (FRA, 2018: 3)

Acknowledging that anti-Romani racism underpins Romani exclusion is the first step in initiating systemic transformation to rectify structural violence in Europe. Indeed, racial profiling, police abuse and violence, and the disproportionate incarceration of Roma are only the tip of the iceberg; all require urgent redressal by EU institutions and member states so that the long-awaited promise of justice for Roma is ultimately achieved.

References

- Acton, T. (2016) 'Scientific racism, popular racism and the discourse of the Gypsy Lore Society', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39(7): 1187–204.
- Alexander, M. (2020) 'America this is your chance', *The New York Times*, 8 June.
- Azmanova, A. (2020) *Capitalism on Edge: How Fighting Precarity Can Achieve Radical Change Without Crisis or Utopia*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Beck, S. and Maida, C. (eds) (2013) *Toward Engaged Anthropology*, New York, NY: Berghahn.
- Brooks, E. (2012) 'The possibilities of Romani feminism', *Signs*, 38(1): 111.
- Collins, P.H. (2006) 'Patricia Hill Collins: Intersecting oppressions', www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Patricia-Hill-Collins-%3A-Intersecting-Oppressions-Collins/a976d21759a3647422ea30252a1997aab5c6cbd5
- Crenshaw, K. (1989) 'Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1: 1–31.
- FRA (Fundamental Right Agency) (2018) 'A persisting concern: Anti-Gypsyism as a barrier to Roma inclusion', <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2018/roma-inclusion>

- Friedlander, H. (1995) *Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Galván-Álvarez, E. (2010) 'Violencia y venganza epistemológica: La cuestión de las formas de conocimiento en Mother India' [Epistemic violence and retaliation: The issue of knowledges in Mother India], *Atlantis*, 32(2): 11–26.
- hooks, b. (1990) 'Marginality as a site of resistance', in R. Ferguson, M. Gever, T. Minh-ha and C. West (eds) *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, New Museum of Contemporary Art, pp 341–3.
- Jobson, R.C. (2020) 'Public thinker: Yarimar Bonilla on decolonizing decolonization', *Public Thinker*, 27 May, www.publicbooks.org/public-thinker-yarimar-bonilla-on-decolonizing-decolonization/
- Kelley, R.D.G. (2017) 'What did Cedric Robinson mean by racial capitalism?', *Boston Review*, 12 January.
- Kóczé, A. (2018) 'Transgressing borders: Challenging racist and sexist epistemology' in S. Beck and A. Ivasiuc (eds) *Roma Activism: Reimagining Power and Knowledge*, Oxford: Berghahn, pp 111–29.
- Kóczé, A. (2020) 'Racialization, racial oppression of Roma', in I. Ness and Z. Cope (eds) *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kóczé, A. (forthcoming) *Gender, Race, and Class: Romani Women's Political Struggle in Post-Socialist Europe*.
- Kóczé, A., with Popa, M. (2009) *Missing Intersectionality: Race/ Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in Current Research and Policies on Romani Women in Europe*, CEU Working Paper Series, Budapest: Center for Policy Studies, Central European University, www.cps-policy-study-missing-intersectionality-2009.pdf
- Kóczé, A. and van Baar, H. (eds) (2020) *The Roma and their Struggle for Identity in Contemporary Europe*, Oxford: Berghahn.
- Kóczé, A., Zentai, V., Vince, E. and Jovanovic, J. (eds) (2018) *The Romani Women's Movement: Struggles and Debates in Central and Eastern Europe*, London and New York, NY: Routledge.

- Kovats, M. (2001) 'Problems of intellectual and political accountability in respect of emerging European Roma policy', *Journal of Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, 1: 1–9.
- Lee, K. (2000) 'Orientalism and Gypsyism', *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice*, 44(2): 129–56.
- Matache, M. (2017) 'Dear Gadje (non-Romani) scholars...', *The Huffington Post* blog, 16 June, <https://fxb.harvard.edu/2017/06/19/dear-gadje-non-romani-scholars/>
- Mills, C.W. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Oprea, A. (2006) 'Re-envisioning social justice from the ground up: Including the experiences of Romani women', *Essex Human Rights Review*, 1(1): 29–39.
- Ryder, A. (2018) 'Paradigm shift and Romani studies: Research “on” or “for” and “with” the Roma', in S. Beck and A. Ivasiuc (eds) *Roma Activism: Reimagining Power and Knowledge*, Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp 91–111.
- Spivak, G.C. (1988) 'Can the subaltern speak?', in Nelson, C. and Grossberg, L. (eds) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, pp 271–313.
- Trehan, N. (2009) 'Human rights entrepreneurship in post-Socialist Hungary: From “Gypsy problem” to “Romani rights”', PhD thesis, London School of Economics.
- Trehan, N. (2018) 'The epistemological enterprise and the problem of structural violence: Intersectional and interdisciplinary approaches to the production of emancipatory knowledge in Romani studies', paper presented at the 'Critical Approaches to Romani Studies' conference, CEU, 24–25 May, Budapest.
- Vincze, E. (2014) 'The racialization of Roma in the “New” Europe and the political potential of Romani women', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 21(4): 435–42.
- Wynter, S. (2003) 'Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation. An argument', *The New Centennial Review*, 3(3): 257–337.