

Gábor Bernáth: Winking game - Everyday Practice of Police, Politics and Propaganda, and the Recycling of the concept of „Gipsy criminality” in Socialist Hungary

Summary of research findings

“It is not only the matter of Gypsies¹”; „Do not make difference between people”² – such quotations stood in the headlines of major political dailies in 1958. Only 30 years later a content analysis of the mainstream press found that the press portrayal of the Roma community was strongly dominated by crime. 37% percent of the articles showed Roma people in this context, one fifth of them as “incapable of integration”.³ It was the late 80s’ when György Moldovas book on the heroic war by the police against “Gipsy criminals”, entitled “Life is sin” was published, and gained huge success. This book portrayed Gypsies (and also gays and lesbians) using overtly racist language, and mobilizing brutal prejudices against them. The project was to investigate that how this could happen in a state-socialist country led by the same person from 1956 until the final years of Socialism with state-controlled media, and the official dedication toward the integration of Gypsies as a continuing policy.

It is likely that this transformation of Gypsies into criminals were shaped by different factors: mainly by the changes in specific official practices, and their official sub-discourses. The study followed three individual sub-discourses on Gypsies:

- a historical analysis of police practices from data-collection to different measures of controlling and ‘policing’ certain deviancies;
- the media practices driven by ideological and propaganda requirements and taboos, and;
- the political strategies of assimilation toward Gypsies, which giving a unique perspective to the analysis⁴.

The shift towards the wide-spread portrayal of Gypsies as criminals was evidently shaped by other processes. Such as the real processes in criminality depicted by police statistics, as a whole, and the more and more precise information being gathered on opinion of the general public regarding social issues. There was no possibility to conduct an in-depth analysis of the different professional sub-discourses, such as the changing paradigms in criminology on crime, or the process on Roma integration in the different sectors from housing to education. The purview of this research instead was to observe the “border-territories”: how policing of and policies on Gypsies appear in the press. This was also the plain on which the general

¹ Népszabadság, 1958.08.27:

² Magyar Nemzet, 1958.09.19.

³ Messing Vera (2000): Shifting attitudes of a changing society as reflected by the media. The representation of Roma in the Hungarian press. Budapest: PhD-dissertation.

⁴ Although the concept of Gypsy criminality was also in use before the second world war (referring to so called ‘wandering gypsies’) it was after 1961, -- when the first political decree was accepted on Gypsies by the Socialist Workers Party. Since this, Roma communities became eminent targets of the public policies, so the context changed dramatically.

public encountered these practices: the average person was not informed by policy documents, nor by police statistics.

The analysis focused on how language and a system of categorization and permanent observation was built up, which considered a defined group of criminals as Gypsies, and how this categorization rewrote the classic categories of the former paradigm of criminology. It aimed at observing how this concept gained wider and wider publicity, how it redefined words which later started to become consensual denominations of Roma. Additionally, we asked how this was possible in a system where even the "Gypsy" was a category that had fluid borders.

My question not only how the different stakeholders perceived, but how they used, and for what purpose they used the category of "Gypsy criminality".

I followed the classic study of Stuart Hall and his colleagues to some degree (Hall et al. 1978⁵). They analyzed how the police and the media invented street mugging as an inner-city, immigrant-youth crime. We have a more difficult task in this sense: while mugging became a well defined concept in policing strategies with time, the category of "Gypsy criminality" were, and became more and more, fluid – as new types of crimes appeared (such as rigging

While trying to understand this category from press reports and high ranking police officials' statements, one can observe a rich world of contradictions and inconsistencies. The category cannot refer to the community as a whole since an overwhelming part of the community is not criminal. We could interpret it as something that refers to a part of the community. In the case of the so-called "wandering Gypsies" this has a long history in police practice. Although there had been some attempts to use this concept again⁶, the police nevertheless could not implement it due to the fact that socialist Hungary banned wandering. Another document, based on some "ethnographic observations," suggested the monitoring of the so called "kolompár Gypsies,"⁷ which was also a fluid category. Should we interpret this concept as a category for typical crimes, or special methods of perpetrations? In this case, what kind of crimes should it refer to if, according to an interview with the county's main prosecutor in 1983,⁸ such a wide variety of behaviors were interpreted as a "parasite way of life;" "profiteering with gold, silver, antique goods and foreign currencies;" "thieving;" "skulking that causes public danger;" and prostitution?

None of those who employed this category made an attempt to clarify its specific definition and interpretation. Rather, all of its users made the "compulsory" statements on the white Gypsies, but did not clarify as to what they meant by the criminality of the Gypsies. After a while, these compulsory statements had also faded away. The popularity and intended meaning of this word could only be revealed through turbidity, in that everyone could create his own interpretation and expectations. This concept has a different interpretation in the sub-discourse of criminology, another in the police forces, and yet a third meaning in the press and independent interpretations in the public as well. Even the socialist workers' party officials used it in different ways and for different purposes. All the actors use this

⁵ Stuart Hall et al: Policing the crisis: mugging, the state, and law and order. Macmillan, 1978

⁶ A BM IV/6. bűnügyi osztályának javaslata A kóbor cigányok betelepítése és munkára nevelésére <http://osaarchivum.org/files/fa/357/2/1/1-2.pdf>

⁷ a BM ORK IV. osztály által készített dokumentum (Cigányok szerepe a bűnözésben címmel), 1953

⁸ Zalai Hírlap 1983.12.24.

concept in their own way, and all of these sub-discourses have their own role. All the while, the “statistical data” assigned “factual verification” for the discourse on “Gypsy criminality”, and journalists were able to look at themselves as those who mediate between the people and power by stating questions which occurred in the public. Further, politicians and local decision makers could find scapegoats for the rising tensions caused by the failures of the socialist experiment.

Although it is tempting to see every phenomenon in a dictatorship with sharp boundaries, it was not the case in the topic of this study. Censorship was in operation, and press reports and official declarations regularly condemned prejudices toward Gypsies too. Nevertheless, brutally prejudiced press reports could also be published. Though high-ranking policemen, or prosecutors usually did not speak about Gypsies until the '80s, it was also possible to find counter-examples that demonstrated the issue was not banned. Although police forces conducted a special data-collection in 1974 on crimes that were committed by Gypsies, individual cases were not identified in the press as Gypsy stories until the late '80s. In 1983, suddenly a lot of interviews on criminality began to address the issue of Gypsies - without any structural change before. Political declarations on Gypsies had a long-standing history stigmatizing the community with “criminal aspects” during this time.

The discourse on “Gypsy criminality” took after a kind of hidden discourse in those times, which - even if there was attempts to hide it - was not disciplined because of its public usage.

Methodology

This study is based predominantly on the analysis of texts, mainly crime reports and longer interviews with high-ranking policemen and prosecutors. By interpreting them, I followed speech strategies and applied the principles of critical discourse analysis. It is also the aim of the study to investigate how different data-collection techniques and other knowledge-production systems influenced the issue. The main source of documents was provided by the excellent press monitoring collection compiled by Radio Free Europe from the '50s up to the '90s⁹. Also, the OSA preserved a unique collection of secret police and interior ministry documents called the Collection of Directives (Parancsgyűjtemény)¹⁰ and the Collection on the Hungarian Institute for Public Opinion Research.¹¹

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⁹ I analysed almost 2000 crime reports and more than 100 interviews during the research project. The individual items can be found in the OSA archives under HU OSA 300-40-1, 300-40-2, and 300-40-3 under keywords of „rendőrség”, „bűnözés” and „cigányok”

¹⁰ HU OSA 357-2-1 (Collective fonds: Hungarian State Security Documents)

¹¹ HU OSA 420