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Europe Invents the Gypsies

A Story of Fascination and Contempt

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Eine Geschichte von Faszination und Verachtung)

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Prologue

The idea of writing a European history of the ostracism of the Romani people, who are pejoratively called ›gipsies‹ in English, owes more or less to a coincidence. It dates back to the exciting and excited years after the collapse of the socialist system and the opening of the Iron Curtain in the early 1990s. Having long since been concerned with the topic of the foreign and the native in literature, I was asked to present a few explanatory approaches that did, at the time, carry weight in the humanities at an event during a time in which the explosive increase of violence against foreigners all over Germany awoke fear of a past that was considered overcome. When researching the pogroms in Rostock-Lichtenhagen, whose scale and concurrent circumstances reminded the president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Ignatz Bubis, of the excesses of November 9, 1938 – and with good reason –, I happened upon the statement of a sixteen-year-old student who had actively participated in the acts of violence and who had been asked – almost as if to reward her – for an interview: »If gipsies had burned to death, it wouldn't have bothered me. – The Vietnamese, yes, but Sinti and Romani don't matter.«¹ I couldn't easily forget the raging contempt and the disconnect from human emotion that became visible in the glib »don't matter«. The offender justified her wish to kill by hierarchising the victims. She believed foreigners, no matter their background, far below her. The ›gipsies‹, however, were »scum«² located outside the realm of humanity.

Looking back at the history of the Romani people over the six hundred years of their presence in Europe, one will constantly find that their persecution and annihilation had not ›bothered‹ the majority of the population, just as Rostock's ›upright citizens‹ hadn't been bothered by the possibility of them burning to death after the teenagers had committed arson in the asylum seekers' housing. But what is their instinctive contempt for those people, who are complete strangers to them, based on? Weren't we able to observe flamenco conquering the dance studios and evening classes and artists such as the Gipsy Kings celebrate global successes at that same time? And wasn't it possible that their cheerful songs have helped lighten and lift the mood at the barbeques at the sidelines of the manhunt in Lichtenhagen, without the concerned parties even noticing? I was unable to find a quick and simple explanation of the coexistence of fascination and contempt: not with the aid of sociological or psychological theories on foreigners and foreignness nor with the analogy to antisemitism that suggested itself

¹ Anonymous, *Jetzt geht's los: Heim für Heim*. In: Stern 45, 37 (1992). p.21.

² According to a 16-year-old locksmith's apprentice in the same interview. Quoted from Anonymous, *Jetzt geht's los: Heim für Heim*. In: Stern 45, 37 (1992). p.21.

at first glance. Without taking a detour through the history of the relationship between the Romani people and other European peoples since their immigration in the 14th and 15th century, without trying to illuminate this dark side of Europe's progress towards modernity, every explanation had to remain insufficient – particularly in light of the ensuing incidents in Romania, Italy, France, Hungary, Slovakia and the Kosovo. It was quickly revealed how fragmented, vague and laden with prejudgements the little we know about the Romani people's past was at the time. Whether we liked it or not, the dust in the archives and libraries needed to be raised in order to arrive once more at the settlements, villages and pitches of today's Romani people after a lengthy journey through time. At the same time, I began to realise that after the end of the communist systems in Eastern and South-eastern Europe, a marginal topic would become central in regard to the political, social and cultural formation of our continent, not least because this is a group of more than ten million people. The future viability of the mental construct of Europe will not least of all have to be measured by its treatment of the Romani people.

Why were and are members of the Romani people perceived as a threat downright reflexively as soon as they appear anywhere? What do the markings of threat look like that they were and are inscribed with? Their bodies, their appearance, indeed their sheer existence. And how did it happen that their presence and proximity aren't tolerated and that a coexistence seems unfathomable? In order to develop a solid explanation, one must look back as far as the medieval invasions and land appropriations of the Mongols and Turks, who had taken their path across Europe's eastern flank, which was considered open and vulnerable, just as the Romani people had done. The earliest names for the unfamiliar strangers such as ›Tatars‹ and ›Egyptians‹ point towards this connection. The nomadic lifestyle consolidated the conception of a people from the steppe or the desert. The groups of Romani that had immigrated in smaller or larger tribal groups were not directly associated with the aforementioned conquerors but were often considered their weak vanguard or the wicked ›scouts‹ they had left behind. Already in the early days, a threatening side was attached to the foreignness of the peaceful immigrants. But the hate for gipsies is not just a mere offshoot of antisemitism, as many claim.³ If one traces the development of the relationship of the Romani people with the native population more closely, hardly any signs can be found for this notion, which became established after 1945 in light of Germany's racist policy of extermination, which had applied to Jews and ›gipsies‹ to the same extent. In this book, the Romani people shall not be considered in the context of the history of antisemitism and persecution of the Jewish people into which they have also been

³ Cf. Dotschy Reinhardt, *Gypsy. Die Geschichte einer großen Sinti-Familie*. Frankfurt a.M.: Scherz, 2008. p.120.

placed by the Romani people themselves for understandable political reasons. The aim is to show that the roots, reasons, development and function of the condemnation of the Romani people and the fascination with certain elements of their lifestyle are different than those of antisemitism, even though there exist historical parallels and overlaps and modern sociobiological racism has confronted both groups with the same will for extinction. The most important differences shall merely be touched upon in the following. While the Romani people were considered mysterious strangers of uncertain origin, Judaism was regarded as one of the roots of European civilization and was inextricably linked to another one of those roots, to Christianity. That's why the time and the circumstances of the Romani people's arrival in Europe are of such eminent importance for the ensuing developments. A similarly grave difference can be found in regard to the Jewish people's self-definition, which was conveyed to outsiders in many different ways, while hardly anything could be gleaned about the culture of the Romani people. When considering the history of the fascination with them, it is relevant that the lifestyle of the ›gypsies‹, whose non-literate social system that practiced oral tradition was compared to that of the ›savages‹ beyond the boundaries of Europe, has been idealised as folklore from the beginning of the 17th century onwards. In any case, the impecunious Romani people as perceived, unlike the Jewish population, as apparitions of the forests, the heathlands, the steppes and the roads and not as figures of the cities, of trade, economy and culture.

The aspiration of showing the exceptionality and uniqueness of the history of persecution and fascination therefore inevitably demands a return to the earliest sources and an expansion of the field of research to the entire European territory. The national perspective would have led to constrictions. The German perspective especially so, even though the darkest chapter of this book, which deals with the National Socialist policy of extermination, will lead back to the country from which the account will set out. At the end of my research a study that should have been divided into several volumes was lying on the desk in front of me. I reduced and condensed it into one single volume, without losing sight of the European dimension; however, I have refrained from tracing each national development in detail. Certain countries such as Spain in the 16th or Hungary in the 19th century will be dealt with in greater detail if important developments took place there or if works of literature were published there that had an influence in other European countries. That way, I was able to describe the overall context while simultaneously avoiding the risk of the interwoven threads fraying. Without sacrificing research findings and insights, I have reduced the scientific apparatus, which presents with a certain heaviness, to the necessary minimum. Trusting in its persuasive power, I have not further explicated the theory this work is based on, which was so important to me in the

beginning, but have incorporated it into the concrete account of the subject at hand. In doing so, experts are not deprived of theirs while readers, on whose curiosity and interest the author relies on, are given theirs.

There are only few phenomena that could be called European and observed over the course of several centuries. Therein lies an opportunity to discover rules of the epochal change of societies that have inadequately been termed ›occidental‹. Following the logic of their aspiration, projects completed in recent decades have concentrated on ›big‹ phenomena: the process of civilization (Norbert Elias), the formations of states and nations, the revolutions and epochal sea changes (Reinhart Koselleck), comprehensive intellectual movements such as the process of theoretical curiosity (Hans Blumenberg), the role of religions and the religious or remarkable special developments such as the history of education in Germany (Georg Bollenbeck). My initial consideration asked why insights into ›long-term developments‹ couldn't be gained from the other side: from considering the marginal that was unable to find entrance into history due to its putative insignificance. The Romani people, who arrived via various migration routes and who reached almost every sweep of country on the continent and eventually the British Isles, posed such a marginal European phenomenon. Despite nationally, regionally and linguistically varying manifestations, the process of perception, attribution of an identity, acceptance and exclusion turned out to be strikingly homogeneous and insightful for an understanding of the dark sides of the European progression towards modernity. At the time of their ›arrival‹ during the transitional period from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Age, they were caught up in epochal changes they sought to withdraw from: Jetsam from times gone by at the shore of modernity. Soon they represented – initially in a mostly negative way – the conditions overcome, the obsolete, behaviours that made their contemporaries blush with shame or incited their anger. The European societies on the brink of the Early Modern Age were looking for patterns of perception that would allow them to assign the suddenly appearing strangers a social place. This process was attached to a great degree of emotionality from the beginning and was accompanied by resistance, ostracism and persecution.

Where the thinking and feeling of the Romani people are concerned, we are looking back into an impenetrable fog that is probably never going to lift as we're lacking suitable testimonials. We are, however, confronted with the fundamental experiences of a corporative and autochthonous population that stem from the conflict with lifestyles that are perceived to be strange and threatening. With these experiences, however, we find ourselves in a place of inattention, of vague observation and negligent description in which the strangers are ›created‹ and not witnessed. The image of the ›gipsy‹ is iridescent, blurred and interpretable. The

judgements and statements with which this lack is meant to be compensated are all the more severe for it. When enlightened anthropology discovered that the ›gipsies‹ are a people of Indian origin with their own language that had evolved from Sanskrit around 1800, two contrary tendencies set in that crossed paths in the middle of the 19th century in the field of ethnography. On the one hand, scientists, writers and members of the authorities left nothing undone to reduce the people that had risen to the status of Indo-Europeans to the level of a parasitic people of pariahs resistant to civilisation. On the other hand, the Romantics disseminated their picturesque or sinister gipsy characters and secured them a permanent medial presence by creating a new genre, ›Gipsy Romanticism‹. What people imagined as their particular lifestyle, their primitiveness and artlessness, their independence and freedom was thus stylised as a multi-faceted alternative to the bourgeois industrial society. A new phase set in towards the end of the 19th century when the ethnographical knowledge about the various groups of European Romani collected in the context of humanistic research and disseminated among a large audience was voided by theories of crime and race that were directly aimed at inciting political actions and the ›folklorised‹ nomads were turned into pathologically ›antisocial‹ and ›work-shy‹ people by a scientific authority. The ›great story‹ of a primitive people amidst civilisation was always, from their arrival in Europe to the annihilation by the Nazis, written without the Romani people themselves.

From the beginning, the invention of the ›gipsies‹ with these ›great stories‹ has been the flipside of the self-creation of the European cultural subject that conceives of itself as the carrier of the progress of global civilisation. At the same time, it is always the radical cleansing of the self-image from what it is purportedly threatened by. In this book, the behaviour towards ›gipsies‹ is compared to the fear of dementia, where a person meets themselves in a situation they experience as the absence of anything humane: as a regression to creatureliness, as the loss of language, writing and memory and any history, but also as the loss of all that is cultural, which constitutes a significant part of one's identity. This is precisely what corresponds to the image of the ›gipsy‹ that European culture has created: nonliterate, creatural, without history or culture.

This book is going to tell a different story, a story that progresses without generating progress, about changes of which Europe can hardly be proud, about missed and ruined opportunities. In the words of Zygmunt Bauman, it's about the »permanence of the alternative, destructive potential of the civilizing process«⁴, about that which I call the ›evil memory of culture‹. In my history, three levels will be interlinked: a genealogy of the knowledge about

⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989. p.28.

›gipsies‹ in all its manifestations, from rumours to academic science, from empirical observations to chimerical allegations⁵ and lies; an archaeology of the forms and patterns in which this knowledge has been represented and passed on, with literary discourse leading the way; finally, a cultural history of what parts of both have entered into Europe's historical memory in what way, what it effects and which developments it has put in motion or prevented, which ones it has accelerated or decelerated.

One more remark on the terminology chosen here. In those instances in this book when we are approaching the reality of people who have existed in the past or live in the present, we shall be talking about the Romani people or Romani groups. That is the most comprehensive term possible. In most European countries, Romani or Rom – the Romani word for man/husband⁶ – has prevailed as the collective noun. It also includes the smaller group of the German Sinti. In the 19th century, however, the name Romani primarily referred to those tribes living in Eastern Europe. Large subgroups of Spanish Romani called themselves ›Calé‹, French groups ›Manouches‹ and Russian ones ›Kalderash‹. These and other endonyms are used when they serve the purpose of a more precise social and ethnical contextualisation. The exonym ›gipsy‹, whose etymological origin could not be satisfyingly clarified as of yet, is, just as its equivalents in other European languages, from ›Zigeuner‹ to ›Tattare‹, itself an important element of what is examined here as a history of fascination and contempt. Sinti or Roma are born, ›gipsies‹ are a social construct based on an active inventory of knowledge, images, motives, behavioural patterns and legends through which they are ascribed collective characteristics by being talked about. The active inventory, which becomes firmly established in the form of figures of thought and perception, is passed on persistently but is nevertheless changing constantly through the ›editing‹ according to rules that will be revealed in this book. Since these are colloquialisms and medial representations, are the invention of an ethnic group in a figurative sense and not thinking, feeling and acting subjects, the term gipsy can and must now (from here on in) be used without quotation marks. The discrepancy between the continuous representation of the ›invented‹ gipsies in various discourses, particularly those of art and literature, and the virtual lack of historical personal testimonials of the Romani people, who lived a nomadic lifestyle over long periods of time, had no culture of writing that was their own and did not appear in the political picture, is immense. For it, too, an explanation shall be

⁵ See Peter Schäfer, *Judenhaß und Judenfurcht. Die Entstehung des Antisemitismus in der Antike*. Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010. p.285f.

⁶ Siegmund A. Wolf, *Großes Wörterbuch der Zigeunersprache. (romani t'siw). Wortschatz deutscher und anderer europäischer Zigeunerndialekte*. Mannheim: Bibliographisches Institut, 1960. p.198. Accordingly, Romni means woman/wife.

offered. Focusing on the history of the image of the other, however, does not preclude the possibility of learning something about the actual culture, lifestyle, history and language of the European Romani people in the archives, the scholarly treatises and in the works of literature and art.

Individual works of literature will be particularly emphasised, because only in a close analysis of the text can literary criticism assert its strengths and glean insights that cannot be reached with historiographic or sociological methods. They are an indicator for the fact that historical events »have left traces behind them; they subsist and exercise, in this subsistence even within history, a certain number of manifest or secret functions.«⁷ Unlike historical sources they elude quick accessibility due to their uniqueness and ambiguity. Literary works can pass on images and clichés but can also expose them, they have the ability to ensure continuities but can also stage fractures, they can claim self-evidence and defamiliarize the self-evident. In addition to the texts examined in detail, as many works as possible, of which a great number have been forgotten nowadays, are consulted in comparison in order to mark automatisms and repetitions next to particularities and variations, but they shall remain in the background for the sake of improved readability of the book. For the same reason, exemplary individual studies and overviews alternate.

Maybe consternation is the impression that remains in light of the destructive energies as well as the phantasies of power and annihilation shown in this book. Maybe what remains is the compassion for the victims of history resulting from it. But one mustn't forget that this book primarily deals with the ›inventors‹ of the gipsy and their constructions thereof and that the history of the Romani people can only be sketched in a very indirect way for the aforementioned reasons. It deals with the scholars, intellectuals, writers and scientists, with the ›carriers of culture‹ from whose knowledge and skill result animosity and exclusion most of all, but fascination and romanticising as well. Their responsibility can be denominated beyond any emotional indignation. Not least of all, it's possible to explain which alternatives, different courses and possibilities would have been possible at certain points in time by looking in this direction. It's not very illumination to equate the history of suffering with an unalterable fate, as some of the Romani accounts tend to do.

When writing a book like this, one is constantly and persistently asked the question of which lesson should be drawn from the results and findings. As soon as the dust of the archives is shaken of, one is supposed to raise a warning and admonishing finger. One might indeed be

⁷ Michel Foucault: *Foucault Live. Collected Interviews, 1961 – 1984*. Edited by Sylvère Lotringer. Translated by Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston. Semiotext(e), 1996. p. 27.

in a position to recognise signs of threat early now, to draw precise connections between the past and the present and to compare constellations. But the solutions of the conflicts and problems cannot be delivered to the experts who could, at most, contribute to the easing or dramatization of current situations perceived to be critical with this knowledge. This book makes possible a look in the mirror, even though it is about the invention of an other to the European peoples. We learn more about ourselves, our thoughts, emotions and behaviours, about exclusion, appropriation and civilizing arrogance than about the Romani people. When reading the texts consulted for this book, one feels how an asymmetry is created with every denomination, description and judgement of the foreigners called gipsies, how the authors puff themselves up, how their egos grow, how they fall under the spell of delusions of omnipotence and ultimately believe that they live up to the image of European culture, even though they actually just cut a pitiful figure. Today, in light of the resurgence of the ›hate of gipsies‹ in Europe, the history of their condemnation seems like a revenant whose appearance terrifies us just like antisemitism and nationalism – like one of the ghosts about whom it is said in Henrik Ibsen’s (1828-1906) eponymous play: »[W]e cannot shake them off.«⁸ One could agree with Ibsen if »shaking off« meant suppressing. The aim is to contest the idea that conflicts, problems and historic catastrophes are inevitable. Ghosts like the contempt for gipsies can be chased away if you drag them into the light from the darkness of hate and animosity towards the foreign and the other. The European Union has created one of those rare situations in which dealing with current social and ethical discrimination makes it possible to handle the ghostly past at the same time: both the most recent past, about which the survivors of persecution and annihilation no longer remain silent and the long history told in this book.

⁸ Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts*. In: *Ibid.*, *Four Major Plays*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. p.121.