

Report on MA thesis

Ethnicity Revisited: The Case of Higher-Educated Younger Generation Roma in Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe

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Research question, methodology

The thesis lacks any clear identification of a research question. And if there is such an attempt, mostly limited to the introductory part, it is rather abrupt, unsystematic and casual. Anamaria chooses to start with a lengthy discussion of three major conceptualizations of belonging – ethnicity, identity, and diaspora – as a precursor to her empirical findings without really explaining the choice. These are obviously heavy concepts with a complex history of shifting focuses and accents, social philosophies and methodological framings and naturally should be part of our body of knowledge. Nonetheless, it is all too different to link such knowledge to the subject matter of one's own research. In Anamaria's presentation this link is never addressed.

The presentation is extensive, it reads almost like "fiche de lecture", maintaining and following the same structure of argument as the source text. While reading one is left to augur the possible usefulness of concepts (the first mention of Roma, besides the very introduction, is on p. 20) and struggles through a diversity of approaches to the study of very different things, from cognition to psychology through ethnic indifference and nation building. In fact each of the three discussions could be resumed to few pages. Sixty pages necessarily lead to redundancies and lack of focus. Furthermore, each of the parts is basically built around one author/book (Eriksen, Calhoun/Brubaker, Jenkins) and a myriad of authors who substantially contributed to the discussions are mentioned only *in passim* and through the writings of the central figures (I am thinking mainly of Don Handelman's (wrongly spelled with double "n") typology of ethnic incorporation, F. Barth's ethnicity as social formation, or Sartori's methodological observation on conceptual stretching).

If a thesis should exemplify the capacity to work out new paths from existing scholarship, Anamaria's attempt falls short of such expectations. It should be mentioned this shortcoming was pointed out to her after first draft submission (for example, the discussion of ethnicity in Eriksen that bears relevance to what was Anamaria's research intention is the balance of identity communication among stigmatized groups, which is paraphrased on merely one (sic) page of the final draft, as well as his emphasis on the interface between social processes and personal identities).

Despite the tiresome reading, the outcome seems to indicate few basic assumptions for the study of forms of belonging: it is historically and culturally contextual, both individually and collectively embraced, an objective phenomenon in its effects (which might be resumed

simply by the dictum of M. Foucault that representations are social facts) and dynamic, instrumental as well as symbolic, non-exclusive and repertoired around relative values of honour, prestige, powerfulness. It seems to me the rendition does not reach much further than this.

In the following part Anamaria starts with a review of the Roma element in European societies. A general description fits well a text that struggles to identify its subject matter. It provides the necessary deconstruction of the stereotype of Gypsy/Roma perennial nature and transnational collectivity. Moreover, it also makes first steps towards a more focused discussion on what constitutes the discourse of identity in contemporary Europe with emphasis on Roma. There is no reason for distinguishing between “Roma in academic writing” and “The Roma in Europe”, as the chapter titles indicate, certainly not when both draw on scholarly writings of linguists, historians, anthropologists and demographers.

I don't think an attempt to invent a Romani collective identity necessarily evokes a homogenous and unified culture, however it is this assumption, which prompts the ensuing analysis of how a younger generation of Roma working in pro-Roma NGO's feels appealed to the idea. This formulation appears on p. 76 and one can only regret the very poor structure of the text. The substantive discussion of research question and methodology appears even later, on p. 85-88, this time in a more comprehensive way.

The central notion is framing, both as a way of putting meaning in place through individual action on the part of Roma activists working in interrelated networks of advocacy groups and as a convenient methodology for a research that has to cope with a limited access to actors and actions. Actions are not observed, they are only reported and consequently analysed. The discussion of findings may be resumed around four empirical clusters: 1. The resemblance of the narratives of identity formation to Afro-American revivalist movement; unfortunately, this seems to be only an intuitive observation, not supported by any comparative analysis or at least an allusion to relevant comparative framework; 2. Socially embedded re-discovery is central to feelings of belonging and helps to overcome potential cracks in versions of identity; 3. The continuous, almost dialectical relation between identity and identity movement; 4. Downplaying of the diversity of Roma identities due to absence of reconciliatory frames substituted by a resolute future orientation.

The ensuing reintegration of the findings into a theoretical discussion on identity formation should be understood as provisional since neither the interviews nor the way they were collected and conducted (via skype, after a first failed attempt – by the way, a reflexive aspect of the research is missing, an articulation of the modalities and genesis of “subject of objectification” is completely absent) can provide a firm and empirically sufficient ground. Nonetheless, as provisional I find Anamaria's conclusions quite compelling for a future reformulation.

Style, editing and formatting

The narrative is rather verbose and oftentimes redundant (“Going one a step higher in the ethnic incorporation continuum”, “typology as a model of aspects of inter ethnic processes”, p. 23). At the same time the wording is imperfect (typically, the prepositions “as” and “so” are overused and misused) and significantly hinders any comprehension. Hereby I provide few examples, the list could be endless:

“...the reasons for this is due to the fact that the phenomenon the term refers to is

very much tied to its particular empirical context upon which the definition is based on..." (p. 11)

"The basic assumption of the circumstantialist or the instrumentalist approach is the contextuality of ethnicity in the sense that it holds ethnicity, in its various understandings, as the end-result of a specific context, be it the perception of a common threat, the possibility of grasping an opportunity in social standing and so on" (p. 14).

"His field approach and academic background is that of social anthropology as he views it the approach that enables researchers in ethnicity to explore the ways in which ethnic relations are being defined and perceived by people..." (p. 18)

"Or, do practices of commonality in various contexts where overcommunicating belonging to a group can provide an added value to an individual generate feelings of attachment and belonging?" (p. 19)

"The reason for this is, in this case, the nominator is an external actors, not the subjects of the category itself so, it is to be expected that the relevance of the act of naming is higher for the nominator itself." (p. 23)

Some of the statements sound even enigmatic:

"For instance, social statuses may overlap ethnic membership, therefore is one where to establish which belongings informs what action would be difficult." (p. 20)

Formatting in fact does not adopt any style, title chapters are found in the middle of a page or even on a different page than following text. The least to criticize is the fact that some parts still bear traces of first drafting; more important is the absence of logical structure. After discussing in length the controversies in ethnicity studies by heavily drawing on T.H. Eriksen on p. 11-18, the following sub-chapter (1.4) introduces the same author and his work.

References

I am not convinced the literature referred to was actually in some cases properly consulted and referenced. How to explain that Anamaria points to the diversity of uses of the term ethnicity (p. 11) documented by Kroeber and Kluckhohn by referring to a book which does not even mention the term (it is actually about "culture")? Regardless of the fact the publisher as mentioned by her never published it. The nature of some statements – comparison or evaluation of the history of scholarship – would have required itemized references but for no avail (p. 8).

I have occasionally verified some of the references, mostly when it was not clear whether Anamaria is citing from the original source or from a review text. I was repeatedly confused by not finding the object of reference (p. 15, there is no mention of J-P. Bloom on page 45 of T.H. Eriksen's *Ethnicity and Nationalism*; the same applies to Jenkins' quote on p. 18 of which there is no trace on p. 48 of the original source). Not to mention the fact that the citation style is not unified: references sometimes appear in the main text, other times in footnotes. Some of the items cited in the text do not appear in the final list of cited works (ex. P. Worsley 1984, mentioned on p. 16, nor is Worsley's instrumentalist approach discussed on p. 65 of Eriksen's *Ethnicity and Nationalism* as mentioned in footnote 15; the

same applies to Fenton 1999 on p. 20). When attempting to outline F. Barth's critique of primordialist approaches to ethnicity, Anamaria in fact resumes his positive *project* for the study of ethnic boundaries (p. 14). Other claims seem often unsubstantiated (on p. 15 Anamaria mentions a discussion of the subjectivist/objectivist controversy in ethnicity studies in Eriksen on p. 65 which is only remotely related to what is really discussed there).

To assess a thesis with so many shortcomings is a challenge that should be spelled out. Far from insisting on absolute perfection, I believe a balance should be sought. Ideally the work represents a valuable empirical contribution with application of precise methodology and theoretical apparatus supported by clear presentation and narrative. I believe I have provided enough evidence that Anamaria has achieved only in some of these. It is also unacceptable that an official and publically accessible document, representing both the author and the university, is not proofread before submission, which is apparently not the case here.

Therefore I assess Anamaria Remete's thesis as acceptable (in Czech grading scale – 3).

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