

Reconstruction, Recognition, and Roma

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"I now, as I look back on my life, find it very sad that I was told to hide my identity — not many ethnic groups are told: “pretend to be something else” — and to me this is very, very sad. We have to stop this; we have to feel better about ourselves before other people can feel better about us."

Professor Ian Hancock

Introduction

The social theorist Frantz Fanon was at one time a practising psychologist in Algeria during its struggle for independence from France. Writing of his experiences he noted the story of a young Algerian man with no taste for political struggle, but an overwhelming sense that his fellow Algerians viewed him as a conspirator and traitor - a man for the French. So driven was he by the fear that he was seen as something he was not, he threw himself upon French soldiers, trying to tear the guns from their hands and demanding to be arrested. His cry was “I am an Algerian!”. Afterwards, he described his happiness at being struck down by French soldiers - they *recognised* him as their enemy.

To have one’s identity and status recognised is crucial for all, but I maintain this is especially so for the Roma. Apparent indifference to the Roma, and deafness to our claims are often borne from a failure to recognise a genuine difference between us and the societies within which we are embedded. In Britain, for instance, the offer to house

Travellers whose nomadic temperament cannot be tolerated is a refusal to recognise any intrinsic difference between Roma and Gorgio society - a satisfactory solution for Gorgios should be a good enough solution for Roma, and refusal is belligerence. Recognition, then, is key. But what kind of recognition? Recognised as what? And by whom? In this paper I draw upon personal experience, and some theoretical and philosophical reflections to suggest that one conceivably fruitful way to envisage the future for Roma is to engage in two related tasks - the struggle to define ourselves by recognising and setting free the symbols of what we are and can be, and the struggle to have that definition acknowledged and recognised. In particular, I want to say that meeting the struggle to define ourselves is crucial for meeting the struggle to be recognised.

Recognition

Society's preference for Roma is silence and invisibility - they do not want to hear us, and they do not want to see us. And, as the quote from Ian Hancock with which I started this paper suggests, we frequently assume that silence and take on the symbols that secure that invisibility too. I have written of this before and I shall say more in due course. Here I will merely assert that to shake off the silence and refuse the symbols that secure invisibility is essential if we are to make our demand for recognition clear and unequivocal. But let's start with a simple question: what is a demand for recognition? Let me illustrate with clear examples:

The settling of Australia in the Eighteenth Century simply ignored the presence of indigenous populations - the continent was declared *terra nullius* ("an empty land") and claimed for the British sovereign. When Australia became an independent federation in 1901 this failure to acknowledge the presence of Indigenous Australians was made

worse. In fact, the defining laws of the land codified the exclusion - *Section 127* of the Constitution made it unlawful to count “Aboriginal natives” amongst the people of the Commonwealth; *Section 25* gave Australian states the power to exclude people from voting on the basis of their race. Since that time the indigenous peoples of Australia have fought for Constitutional reform and in 1967 *Section 127* was overturned, meaning Indigenous Australians finally counted amongst the people of the Australian Commonwealth. Work on reforming *Section 25* (and related clauses) continues.

Speaking in the winter of 1955 at a meeting of the Montgomery Improvement Association, Dr Martin Luther King Jr said:

“We are here this evening for serious business. We are here in a general sense because first and foremost we are American citizens and we are determined to apply our citizenship to the fullness of its meaning [...] there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. There comes a time, my friends, when people get tired of being plunged across the abyss of humiliation, where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair. There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life’s July and left standing amid the piercing chill of an alpine November”

(Martin Luther King Jr, 2001).

This speech was a landmark statement of the feelings of Black Americans, in response to a landmark event in the Black Civil Rights Movement - Rosa Parks’ refusal to move from the “whites only” seat of an Alabama bus. The ensuing events are rightly famous, but the immediate response - an organised bus boycott - was a clear and seminal assertion of Black Americans’ right to be treated as fully fledged American citizens, embraced and

protected by the Constitution of the USA.

A demand for recognition, then, is a call to be heard, included, and afforded respect. It is a call to have one's distinctive value and contribution to society acknowledged and accommodated. In spite of the potential benefit afforded by their culture world view, indigenous Australians were (and are) ignored; they were not even recognised as people until 1967. The fight is to have indigenous presence, indigenous needs and, by extension, indigenous culture included in the contemporary imagining of Australia. The demands of Black Americans to be heard, to be afforded their "citizenship to the fullness of its meaning", and to receive their time standing in the "glittering sunlight of life's July" was, and is, a demand for recognition. It is a demand to be heard, included, and afforded respect.

Recognition, put like this, is a simple concept at heart and in many ways is more fundamental than calls for equality of goods and opportunity. But this brings to our next question - how is recognition pertinent to the Roma? Again, let me use examples:

Between 1942 and 1943, an extermination camp for Czech Roma at Lety in Southern Bohemia enforced such appalling conditions upon those imprisoned there that many (including most of the children) died of typhus and other diseases. The remainder were transported to Auschwitz. However, despite Lety being an uncontestable symbol of the *Porrajmos*, it is now the site of an industrial pig farm, not a site of commemoration or mourning. And despite a European Parliamentary resolution in April 2005 calling for the removal of the Lety pig farm, the response has been to deny the existence of a distinctive symbol of Roma suffering - the Czech President Vaclav Klaus asserted that Lety was "a labor camp for those who refused to work, and was not just for Roma. It was not a concentration camp in that sense of the word that each of us subconsciously

compares with Auschwitz and Buchenwald". Here a recognition that Roma need symbols and sites to reflect their history and remember their dead is simply lacking.

In Britain in 1968, a Caravan Sites Act was passed calling for local authorities to provide sites for British Roma. The problem for the British Government was how to manage Gypsy itinerancy. However, the proposed campsites were designed to particular plans and specified standards that accorded only with Gorgio notions of desirable living conditions. As the Social Anthropologist, Judith Okely, notes:

"Ideas of public order combined with personal privacy are reflected in many official sites, by the placing of caravans in rows of straight lines. To the architect the aerial plan looks "tidy" and to the passing motorists rows of caravans look to be under control, self-consciously placed. [...] The assumption is that each caravan or nuclear family is a private unit, wishing minimum contact with neighbours. [...]"

When Gypsies choose the layout, they often place the trailers in a circle with a single entrance. [...] Every trailer and its occupants can be seen by everyone else. When the camp members are self-selected, usually in a political cluster, there is no need for privacy and protection from Gypsy neighbours. Few draw curtains, even at night."

(Judith Okely 1984 p88).

The law proved ineffective for the Government and has since been repealed, but those sites built under its provision were built according to Gorgio cultural norms, and perception of needs. That Roma concepts of family or community space differ never came close to recognition or acknowledgement.

In June 2008, two Roma sisters, Cristina and Violeta Djeordsevic (aged 13 and 11), drowned at the Torregevetta beach in Naples, Italy, where they had gone with cousins to sell trinkets. Their bodies were recovered from the sea and left on the beach partially covered in towels for three hours awaiting collection. In the meantime, sunbathers continued to soak up the sun, eat and drink, swim, chat and play, clearly unaffected by the presence of the children's bodies only meters away. Laura Boldrini of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees said:

“Accounts would seem to suggest that hardly anybody intervened to save these children and even in death there seemed to be total indifference as their bodies lay on the beach while people continued to enjoy themselves. I wonder if these people would have behaved in the same way if the children in question were Italian and not Roma?”

There is no recognition that here were lives as vivid as any human life. And there is no recognition because those lives were Roma lives.

These cases - among others that many Roma could provide illustrate why recognition is important - each represents a failure and refusal to recognise Roma as distinctive, as valuable, and worthy of respect. Gaining recognition, then, is important, indeed, crucial. It is also clear what recognition is supposed to be and why it matters, but before moving on there is still a little more to say. And the reason is simple - not any kind of recognition will do.

The sociologist, Paul Michael Garrett (2005) notes that besides the simple *denial* or lack of recognition touched upon above, it is useful to acknowledge three other kinds of recognition:

First, there is *Adverse* or *Negative Recognition* - this is recognition based on negative

stereotypes, such as the Roma as lawless thieves, as dirty itinerants, as culture-less illiterates, as primitive innocents, or as carefree wanderers of the roads and byways. We have seen this type of recognition, and we do not want it.

Second, is *Bureaucratic* or *Tick-Box Recognition* - this is the kind of recognition demanded by official record keeping and institutional monitoring. In some respects this kind of recognition is important. For example, 2011 was the first time that Roma and Traveller categories appeared in the official census of the United Kingdom - these groups are now included in the official count of the people of the nation. In other respects, though, this kind of recognition is no more humanizing than *denial* - among the last things that Cristina and Violeta Djeordsevic did before going to the beach in Naples was to be fingerprinted by authorities in line with new Government policy to record and monitor Italian Roma. This is not the kind of recognition we want either.

Third, is *Positive* or *Complex Recognition* - here we find the kind of recognition we need. This is an awareness, an appreciation, and an accommodation of distinctive cultural values, practices and perspectives. This is no flimsy reliance on stereotype, nor a cold ethnic head-count. Rather, it is a rich and nuanced awareness of what it means to a Roma to be a Roma, and of what the Roma can bring to the collective identities of the societies within which they are embedded. This is the recognition that matters.

So we demand *Complex Recognition*, but let me garnish this notion by referencing the work of perhaps the most important Recognition Theorist to date - Axel Honneth. Honneth identifies three important ways in which recognition is realised in modern societies.¹ At an individual level, recognition is realised as *love* - we recognise and reciprocate the needs of the individuals with whom we form our closest human bonds. At a further remove, we also find recognition realised in formal and legal relationships of *respect* - we

¹We find the most important work in Honneth's seminal 1995 book *The Struggle for Recognition*, but the ideas used here are perhaps clearest in his 2003 publication *Recognition and Redistribution* published jointly with another great Recognition Theorist, Nancy Frazer.

recognise the equality and autonomy of each other as social subjects. And finally, we find recognition realised as *social esteem* - we recognise and value the skills and talents that we bring to our broader social collective. When I talk of recognition, then, I mean *Complex Recognition*; and when I talk of *Complex Recognition* I mean recognition that is realised through *love* and *respect* and *esteem*.

We have said much about Recognition, so let me summarise. The struggle and demand for recognition is important for all, and especially so for Roma - we lack it, and we need it. At its simplest, recognition is a call to be heard, and a call to be afforded a place and a voice in the societies in which we are embedded. But my call is for a *Complex Recognition* - not lazy stereotype, and not mere official “box-ticking”. And this *Complex Recognition* requires reciprocal *love* for ourselves and the individuals we form our relationships with; it calls for *respect* for our autonomy and equality within, and duty and responsibilities towards, society; it requires *esteem* for the values, skills, talents and distinctive things that we bring to the social worlds we inhabit. It is, however, important to note that this recognition calls for something that has so far been missing from any attempt to acknowledge the Roma. This kind of recognition demands that we are given our rightful place as contributors to our societies; it demands that Roma contributions and ways of seeing the world be given proper credit, not simply for their role in the making of our current societies, but as the source of potential solutions as we build our future societies too. Our world is in a state of flux and old capitalist notions of “nationhood” and “national identity” are meaning less and less. As the fugacity of our current order becomes apparent, and conflict grows from resisting this, now is the time to see that the world has as at least as much to gain from recognising the Roma, as the Roma have to gain from being recognised by the world.

Reconstruction

At the beginning of this paper I proposed two related struggles - the struggle to define ourselves and the struggle for recognition. I have said much about recognition so far, but little about definition. Indeed, defining ourselves is crucial, since without it we cannot hope for recognition. So, what is the struggle for definition, and why is it important?

Firstly, how do we answer the question “who are Roma?”. The response needn't be straightforward. Indeed, I don't think it should be. But how we answer is important for how we manage the issue of recognition. To show how, let me explain three ways in which we can engage in the project of definition,² and how those projects occur in the contemporary context with which I am most familiar - modern Britain.

The first way of defining something is to look around and see how the majority of people define it. So, for example, if we want to define *art* we might look at what the majority of people are prepared to count as art, and what they are not. This is *The Popular Definition* and in respect of Roma and Travellers in the modern British popular imagination, the Roma are thieves, law-breakers, free-loaders, dirty, and violent. In terms of recognition, this is what we called *Negative Recognition*. *The Popular Definition*, therefore, is clearly the wrong place to start.

The second way of defining something is to look for more formal analyses. So, for example, whilst in our every day lives we might consider a Doctor to be anyone who is an expert in medical health, the more formal definition of *Doctor* will look to a set of criteria including having obtained a recognised medical degree, a license to practice, registration with an appropriate medical board and so on. This kind of project is *The Official Definition* and in respect of Roma and Travellers we find it manifest in government

²In offering a reconstructive program of the kind that follows, and in highlighting different definition projects, I draw upon work by the American philosophers Sally Haslanger (2000 & 2004) and Joshua Glasgow (2006 & 2009), and my own (Atkin 2012).

policy and social practice.

In many cases, *Official Definitions* will differ markedly from *Popular Definitions*. In plenty of cases, however, they do not and *Official Definitions* for Roma in the United Kingdom run close parallels with *Popular Definitions*, although they often lack the overt racism. To give some illustration, in the late 1960s the British Government felt some obligation to manage Gypsy encampments and populations and worked hard to identify them. The definition that emerged from various Committee reports and policy groups informed much of Government policy from this era and ear-marked the Roma as ill-educated, unsanitary, insular and non-participatory.

Similar definitions find their way into other official policies and action even to this day. In Britain, more Roma experience imprisonment before trial - *the remand system* - than any other group.³ This is simply because the “ingrained nomadism” of the group is perceived as a problem related to lawlessness and irresponsibility. There are many other instances of how the *Official Definition* of the Roma plays out, but in short Roma are defined as poorly educated, lawless, untidy, insular and anti-social.

There are clear problems with this kind of definitional project too, at least with regards to the problem of recognition. On the one hand, and at its best, this type of definition offers mere “tick-box” recognition - it is an ethnic head-count. At its worst it moves us towards something far more pernicious. Frequently, an *Official Definition* becomes the tool of official action, and official action is usually guided towards making the Roma silent and invisible. Again, take the Government projects of 1960s and 1970s Britain. Here the *Official Definition* of Roma is as illiterate, unhealthy, and essentially nomadic. The official action is geared towards settlement, and as a result education and sanitation. But to define Roma as illiterate, unhealthy and nomadic, and to then set out

³See, for example, Power (2003).

to remove these characteristics is, *ipso facto*, to set out to remove the Roma.⁴ Again, this is not the kind of recognition we want.

The third way of defining something is to shift the focus from questions of what something is, or was, and turn instead to questions of what we want something to be, and what we want to use it for. This is *The Reconstructive Definition*. Instead of looking at *where we are* with some concept or category, this kind of definition looks at *where we want to be*. Needless to say, this is the definitional project that I consider to be crucial for Roma, but there are two important elements that need emphasis - first, there is determining what it is that we are aiming to define; and second, there is working to establish that definition. We decide what we want to see, then we work to make it so. But how would such a definitional project work for Roma?

Obviously, this definitional project has not been consciously undertaken in Britain on a wide scale, but there are fragments of it, and clusters of people who are actively engaged in something very like it. In British terms it is worth noting artists such as Daniel Baker, Damien Le Bas, and Delaine Le Bas who are playing important roles in exploring and inhabiting the living culture of British Roma, not as Roma-making-art, but as artists who are Roma. In terms of the concepts I am using here, they are not outliers to some *Official Definition*, but rather, they play the role called for by Thomas Acton (2004), of “self-consciously playing with their identities”, and allowing us “to recognise that constructing effective representations involves the artist as much as the scientist or politician.”⁵ And if their approach is taken as indicative of a reconstructive project for the Roma - and I maintain it should be seen that way - then it is clear that it involves the celebration, exploration and expansion of our culture. And it is crucial to be clear here, this is not merely the celebration of our culture as an artifact, as a dead

⁴This is also the view of Hawes and Perez (1995) - they call this a new kind of definitional genocide.

⁵Acton, of course, takes himself to be paraphrasing the call of Nicolae Cheorgioe (1997). But whoever said it, there are a generation of British artists doing it.

tradition symbolic of some naive past that soothes the Gorgio notion of “wandering innocent” and “true gypsy”. It has to be a celebration, and exploration of a living, growing, moving thing. It has to be an exploration of the distinctive things we value and cherish in those we *love*, with whom our closest bonds are formed. It has to be a call to *respect* the equality and autonomy of the culture that gives rise to those distinctive things we cherish, and which those whom we love cherish in us. And it has to be an outright demand that the *esteem* we have for these things, for the cultural contribution they make, be recognised and acknowledged by society as a whole.

But as I noted before, there are two elements to *Reconstruction* so there has to be more than this if it is to lead to *Recognition*. *Reconstruction* involves action, exploration and cultural imagination on the part of the Roma to say what we want to see, but it also calls for work to establish that definition, to make it so. There has to be a loud and unequivocal insistence that these things be seen as the marker of what it means to a Roma to be a Roma. And whilst it involves the outright rejection of *Popular* and *Official* definitions, it also involves an unabashed visibility, and an unbowed refusal of silence. We define and explore what Roma are, and we say it and we show it until it is seen and until it is heard.

There is so much more to be said about what the *Reconstructive* definition for Roma could look like, but conjectures about the exact explorations, or prescriptions for the best ways of symbol-making have to be ongoing and collaborative, and dialogic. I shall offer one conjecture of my own shortly, but first I want to be clear that however Roma artists, writers and thinkers explore these questions, we have to do it openly and visibly. And wherever we agree or disagree with each other we have to do so loudly and rejoice in its volume. I distinctly recall that my Grandmother would say “you can be proud of who you are, but the world doesn’t need to know”. And my mother would repeat this as though it were a mantra which she wished weren’t true. For them, there was much to

lose by refusing silence and invisibility - work, food and safety. For me, and others like me, the refusal of silence and invisibility does not mean those things. And if I am right that the *Reconstructive* definition is a path to *Recognition*, then there is much more to lose if those that can refuse silence don't.

Refusing Silence

If we are to refuse silence, then, I shall finish by saying something. The task of saying something here, as I see it, is to start looking at what being Roma means for those around me, and what it means for me - it is to look at recognition as *love*. Later, as we establish these things we *love* in cultural and symbolic terms, we can explore together how that generalises for Roma - *respect* - and then, by extension, what society as a whole has to gain from this - *esteem*. I can't chart the symbols of a reconstructive definition through the whole process of *respect* and *esteem* but I can say something about what I *love*, how that leads to my symbol making, and why I think this should be part of the symbols we use to define ourselves. For me a key symbol of being Roma, worthy of *love*, and something we must define for ourselves is *nomadism*.

There are two reasons to talk about *nomadism*. First, I think that this symbol is *the* great icon of Roma - both for ourselves, and for Gorgios, and it is something that I recognise so often in those that I *love*, and which those that I *love* recognise in me. But the second reason is that I think this symbol is the source of much concern, and we must take definitional control: it is we Roma who must explore, reconstruct and assert loudly what this symbol means for the Roma. I shall say a little about both of these points.

So how do I see *nomadism* in those that I love and why do I think it worthy of recognition? It is important to be clear that although *nomadism* is the central and

defining symbol of the Roma, I think it is deeper than simple Gorgio constructions would have it. When I think of *nomadism* as a symbol of the things and people I love *qua* Roma, I see this symbol in a very particular way. Roma *nomadism* is not a simple action *in* the world, it is a *way of seeing* the world. The things I love about those Roma with whom I have formed closest bonds, and which they love about me, is that our *nomadism* is a lens or a prism through which we see the world. There are important effects that follow from this, and it is here that the I see wider values of *respect* and *esteem* following. *Nomadism*, viewed this way, means that nothing is completed or settled - there are no laurels to rest on. It means nothing is ever solved - problems are only problems at this place, solutions are simply things which allow us to move forward to the next place. There is a deep pragmatism to this, and my own philosophical thoughts are deeply coloured by it. We have our eyes on the horizon, and as it keeps changing, so do we. But we also know that it takes single steps to get there, and each piece of terrain is different. Fixedness is simply a false promise. The world could use more of this - dogma is the fetishisation of fixedness, and conflict the resistance to natural transition. This Roma symbol, properly explored, could lead the way for everyone - instead of standing fast and staring the intractable in the eye, Roma *nomadism* seeks out the paths around these immovable objects. There is much more to say about what this symbol of Roma really is than can be said here, but at the very least I think it is key to defining ourselves, and requires much reflection and examination if we are to get this feature of our symbol-making clear.

Let me conclude by saying something about the second reason that this symbol has to be part of our reconstructive definition. As I have said, the symbols and symbol-making of Roma are rich and deep, but we are often pushed to positions of silence. And this has usually been wise - the price of being heard is high when the weight of a silencing authority comes down to strike out the symbols that make you. But where our

silence exists, the symbol-making of others intervenes and Gorgios construct the signs that define us. The detrimental effects of this are shown most clearly with *nomadism*. For Gorgios, the notion of *nomadism* is simple - it is action in the world, it is movement and transience. This symbol-making is problematic for various reasons: on the one hand it feeds the romantic notion of innocent wayfarer, carefree with no sense of permanence. This is the mythical “true” Roma that none of us are, or can be. And by our failing to fit this symbolic benchmark we are to be denied and unrecognised. On the other hand, the Gorgio construction of *nomadism* feeds the dark symbols of criminality and irresponsibility: we can descend from nowhere, do our worst, and slip away into the night. Anonymous and unknown, always moving and never held to account. This symbol is to be struck out - the *nomadism* must be stopped. Whatever moves must become settled.

If we leave the symbol-making of *nomadism* to Gorgios where can our recognition be? In a myth beyond attainment? Or in a sign targeted for eradication? No, there is no recognition there. And there can be no benefit for anyone, Roma or Gorgio. The symbol-making has to be ours, and it has to cut deeper than simple notions of impermanence, rootlessness, and the signs that Gorgio semiotic creates here. The *nomadism* of Roma that I *love* and which *we* must define in demanding *respect* and *esteem* is a far more nuanced symbol than this.

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