SLOVAK ROMA BEYOND ANTHROPOLOGICAL ESCAPISM AND EXOTIC OTHERNESS. CONCEPT OF "WHITENESS" AND THE STRUCTURES OF EVERYDAY LIFE

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This paper discusses the etic construction of Slovak Roma as a homogenous group essentialised as a marginal, disconnected, uneducated and asocial "other". The authors acknowledge the severe situation of exclusion suffered by many Roma in Slovakia but argue that diverse social positionalities also exist which are often ignored. Grounded in field research and ethnographic knowledge, the present paper deconstructs Roma homogeneity and tries to provide inside optics to different Roma conceptions. In doing so, the Roma agency is located in different fields, which opens new questions for research. Social situations which avoid the cliché of marginality make it possible to explore the existent interrelations between the overrepresentation of supposed Roma homogeneity and otherness and the muted existence of their counterpart – dominating non-Roma. Using methodological approaches close to whiteness studies, the authors attempt to go beyond approaches focusing on Roma as the exotic others. The role of non-Roma agency and power structures omnipresent in everyday life will be discussed as a key factor often muted in etic constructions of Roma.

Key words: Roma, Otherness, "Whiteness" Studies, Anthropology, Power Structures, Slovakia

INTRODUCTION

Anthropology as a social science has come a long way from its original preference for the exotic other and now focuses on the recognition of others and their views as equal

interlocutors. The propensity to transform the object of study into an exotic other has been overcome and is nowadays understood as part of the colonial past inherent to classic works (Asad, 1973; Stocking, 1991). Anthropologist Johannes Fabian emphasised the nature of expert knowledge of the other as a power act in his work (1983), where he criticised the way in which cultural anthropology by its methodology created the impression of non-European cultures as isolated and as entities existing in another time. Despite acknowledging cultural relativism, the European concept of otherness was produced and reproduced as something inferior. The central way in which anthropology, according to Fabian, contributed to the asymmetric conceptualisation of otherness was the denial of the present and the various ties between the studied environment and the world of the anthropologist. The studied ethnic group, despite the current communication between the anthropologist and his/her informants, has been forced into a distant past in the writing of professional texts. The result of this method of constructing the other is to highlight its difference and the distance between the object being investigated and the investigating subject. Moreover, the division of the human population into closed cultural systems has long been the subject of criticism of cultural anthropologists; according to Adam Kuper, in this sense, the term "culture" is a euphemism for race because its functioning for the explanation of otherness is similar (Kuper, 1999: 240).

However, it is a question of whether mainstream Slovak and Czech anthropology and social science have also followed this debate in their approach to Roma. Literature on Slovak Roma shows a preference for portraying Roma as a specific and problematic group, thus reinforcing dominant discourses which essentialise Roma as marginal, disconnected, uneducated and asocial others. There is also a palpable tendency to describe the causes and consequences of Roma marginality in a reduced way. For example, the most used (and misused) concept that has been employed to explain the situation of Roma in Slovakia is a "culture of poverty". Said concept is based on the assumption that the poor people and inhabitants of socially-marginalised localities are carriers of a specific cultural formula that has been created in the process of adapting to long-term poverty, and which is passed on from generation to generation. "The culture [of the poor] develops mechanisms that tend to perpetuate it, especially because of what happens to the worldview, aspirations, and character of the children who grow up in it" (Lewis, 1969: 199). The implications of a "culture of poverty" on Slovak Roma are often described as resignation from morals and values, loss of respect for formal authorities, aggressiveness, or crime, which may result in total disorganisation of communities and the emergence of an anomic environment. Thus, the defining characteristic of a "culture of poverty" is not poverty as such, but a specific set of standards, values and behaviours that allegedly apply to the homogeneously-viewed, exotic community of Roma.

In previous works (Šotola & Rodríguez Polo, 2016: 11–13) we stated that a certain form of exoticism and even what could be called "academic orientalism" has become a central part of Slovak and Czech social science on Roma. The core of studies concerning Roma focused on populations living under extreme forms of exclusion and poverty. Such preference creates the social imaginary of Roma as real others who are living on isolated islands inside our societies, although these islands are unconnected. For many researchers, Roma offered a pragmatic alternative to the misleading need to conduct fieldwork among some kind of foreign natives living in extreme conditions of alterity. Some anthropologists and researchers in related disciplines could fulfil the

romantic dream of becoming a traveller and living the field adventure among Roma by just driving a few hours to Eastern Slovakia during summer vacations. Thus, for Czech anthropologists, Roma became the most accessible other (together with foreigners living in Czech Republic) geographically speaking, but also in terms of language barriers and economic affordability. In doing so, the object of study was transformed through ethnographic texts into a satisfactory exotic other to colour the exotic narratives of a member of the civilisation who is surviving among the savages. At the same time, any trace of common places within our everyday life which could articulate the proximity and the many aspects shared by the anthropologists and the constructed other were muted; indeed, this led to an overrepresentation of the difference and a preference for presenting Roma as isolated from the world of the non-Roma.

The effects of such practices go beyond the obvious misrepresentation of social reality and surely leave the researcher facing a strong ethical dilemma. Exoticising Roma is a form of anthropological escapism, i.e. focusing on phenomena which are visible on the surface instead of building argumentation on historical, economic and political phenomena and analysing social and power interactions, as would be the case with any other research aiming to provide explanations for current societies. As a result, this transforms the researcher into a subject and accomplice of a consciously-muted white dominance that in the end reproduces and perpetuates Roma oppression. This approach gives ethnographic accounts of dominant discourses of the otherness of Roma, their lack of inclusion and their supposed unique worldview, which make them incompatible with current and former societies (Barša, 2011). The focus on supposed Roma peculiarities and characteristics generates an aversion to examining how educational, political, economic and other societal structures maintain the status quo and the Roma disadvantage versus their non-Roma neighbours. There is a direct relationship between exoticisation and highlighting the otherness of the Roma on the one hand, and their conceptualisation on the basis of homogenisation and generalising statements on the other hand. As put by Abu-Lughod in her famous article, Writing against culture (1991: 152–153): "problem with generalization derives ... from the effects of homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness it tends to produce. When one generalizes from experiences and conversations with a number of specific people in a community, one tends to flatten out differences among them and to homogenize them. The appearance of an absence of internal differentiation makes it easier to conceive of a group of people as a discrete, bounded entity, like the 'the Nuer', 'the Balinese', and 'the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin' who do this or that and believe such-and-such".

Even when the ethnographical accounts of Slovak and Czech provenience attempted to show certain heterogeneity among Roma, a differentiation was made according to ethno-cultural criteria only valid for Roma. This approach to diversity is limited to differentials among Roma subgroups – again unconnected from their white neighbours. A paradigmatic example is the fascination with concepts such as the *ritually clean* and *unclean*. In this narrative the attention is focused on the differentiation between ritually unclean and ritually clean and said opposition is viewed as corresponding to the dualistic life philosophy of the Roma, categorising the whole life into the classes of "good" and "bad". It is held that the idea of ritual cleanliness and uncleanness represents an elementary component of the traditions of the Roma. Such an approach to Roma diversitywe understood as an example of exoticisation, giving substance to an increasing sense of otherness. As we see, neither the vocabulary nor the conceptual framework corresponds with the ones used when the discussion is about the general population.

In the paragraphs above we have outlined our thesis on anthropological escapism in scholarship on Slovak Roma. However, we do not want to oversimplify or generalise our argument. We recognise that, in recent years, there have been many research efforts from Slovak and Czech social scientists to try to go beyond the described limitations and employ more complex research designs and goals. Some scholars have followed the Slovak Roma in their efforts to escape marginalisation, focusing on their migrant trajectories and exploring connections between the various forms of mobility. These scholars focused on participants' attempts to engage in existential mobility, which requires their physical movement to the place of destination, as well as on participants' hopes for upward socio-economic mobility (Grill, 2012, 2016). Others focused on religious aspects and the work of large, small, registered and non-registered churches and religious movements among the Roma in Slovakia, outlining possibilities and effectiveness related to the social inclusion of Roma (Podolinská & Hrustič, 2011). Moreover, some scholars focused on the presence of Roma in local politics and on prevalent mainstream political discourse about Roma, forms of generalisations and labelling of Roma in public life; this focus spanned from creating a fear of Roma and misusing this fear in gaining political successes, to designing and developing repressive and paternalistic policies addressing these fears in mainstream society (Hrustič, 2013; for more complex picture see also Podolinská & Hrustič, 2015). Other scholars researched interactions within the education system, exploring the disproportionate streaming of Roma children into special schools and unequal educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma (Brüggemann & Škobla, 2012). Several field experiences compelled the authors of this study to follow up the scenario of marginality. We investigated the effects of general structural conditions, power asymmetries, and social practices at the local level and their impact on spatial exclusion, as well as the absence of physical infrastructure in so-called Roma settlements (Škobla & Filčák, 2016). A long-term relationship with Roma research participants allowed us to observe their interactions with their white neighbours in fields such as labour searching, attending mass and public celebrations, solving bureaucratic problems to buy a house, navigating their village and region, migrating to foreign countries in search of better possibilities, and returning to their hometown to reconfigure their position. We made an effort to explore how the successful returning migrants have established new hierarchies and contributed to the crystallising of re-shuffled hierarchies at the local level. Roma participants confronted those situations from different positionalities and with different results. Many of these situations have already been published and deeply discussed in our previous works (Šotola & Rodríguez Polo, 2016; Škobla, Grill & Hurrle, 2016).

The aim of this paper is twofold: first, it seeks to discuss the supposed homogeneity of Roma and, second, it endeavours to challenge the concept of Roma as an unconnected social actor. In our opinion, these two topics are closely related, since Roma themselves are not fully masters of their fate – it is the agency of the dominant ("white") class which, to an important extent, determines their lives. In social practice, this means that even if some Roma experience social advancement (e.g. due to labour migration), their acquired economic, social or cultural capital inevitably clash with oppressive structures of the society. Exploring the positionality of Roma in local hierarchies, we therefore clearly give preference to approaches which notice the agency of non-Roma.

METHODOLOGY

The present work is based on the cumulative experience of a decade of diverse field research projects among Slovak Roma and their neighbours. Since 2013, the authors have intermittently carried out participant research, within the geographical area of the Spiš and Šariš regions, stretched across various locations, through regular revisits. The authors participated not only in academic research but also in a variety of evaluation projects and applied research related to the monitoring and evaluation of the European structural funds or under the umbrella of civil society. Through the years, that experience provided a network of contacts, informants and friends among Roma, as well as certain experience interviewing and having informal conversations with non-Roma. Thus, the present study is based on a large body of observational, interview-based and documentary data collected during an ethnographic study of the social world of Roma in Eastern Slovakia.

The deliberately chosen methodology of ethnography allows us to look into the life of the Roma and understand how they overcome structural barriers and social inequalities in everyday life. In other words, the main strength of this methodology lies not just in the approach, in the terrain, in the emphasis on everyday life in the local environment, or in micro-relations between actors, but in putting these partial observations into the wider context of social, economic and symbolic factors and forces which shape a given situation, often presented as "normality". We consider it important to examine the position of the Roma in the context of the social structure of the whole society. Therefore, the authors complemented classical ethnographic methods with archival research in order to obtain more historical data on the late socialist period.

ETHNOGRAPHIES OF THE PARTICULAR

In her famous essay, which relates to the manner in which western cultures investigate other cultures, Spivak asked Can the subaltern speak? (1988). This question gives rise to a difficult riddle for an ethnographer, as it addresses a key element in our work – the question of representation. What could be the answer to a similar question addressed nowadays to Slovak Roma? Can Slovak Roma speak? Current work is exploring the implication of such a question for the way social sciences and policy making approach Roma. As stated by Spivak, the answer is not very optimistic. No, the subaltern cannot speak by themselves as they will not be listened to or be understood. Spivak held that knowledge is never innocent and that it expresses the interests of its producers. For Spivak, knowledge is like any other commodity that is exported from the west to the third world for financial and other types of gain. To think about Slovak Roma in Spivak's terms leads us to pose the following question: has our knowledge about Roma not been mostly created by non-Roma? Subsequently, we can also ask how this knowledge fits with emic perspectives and with the social reality they inhabit. In recent years, we have been intensively focusing on the topic of social mobility for Roma because we see its potential for developing academic debate. At the same time, we have experience with applied research and evaluations of development projects. Within both research perspectives we are moving extensively and intensively in the environment of Eastern Slovakia and predominantly in the Spiš region. At the same time, the topic of vertical mobility is very closely linked not only with the possibilities and conditions of social

ascension, but also with its limits and barriers. We want to present these contexts for a sample of ethnographic data, first at the level of anonymised locality, and then with a larger distance due to the focus on the wider geographical context in which the location (let us call it "A") lies.

Village A is a locality where more than 600 Roma live in different conditions than the usual notion of a segregated settlement. The selection of the research site itself was conditioned by the criterion of the higher standard of living of the local Roma population. The village has approximately 2,500 inhabitants, with Roma living on three streets on the edge of the settlement; however, these Roma organically follow the rest of the village, and so the degree of spatial segregation is minimal. All of our research participants present village A as a good village where Roma are living well-off ("na úrovni"), meaning that local Roma managed to achieve similar standards to those of non-Roma. This similarity is easily deconstructed by researchers, as asymmetries between Roma and non-Roma materialise in spatial segregation (the village is divided into Roma and non-Roma parts), a complete absence of Roma in local institutions and local power structures, and completely differentiated economic strategies – Roma being forced to perform continuous cyclical migrations in order to achieve some income while non-Roma work in the few available positions in the region or move to the capital city; indeed, the latter strategy is unrealistic for young Roma because of prevailing racism. However, still village A is considered by its Roma inhabitants as a good place – a place where they at least experience a better status than what is commonly portrayed by national media. Participants point to the existence of differences among their community, which are often explained by symbolic interpretations of the urban plan. One of the streets where Roma are living serves as an example of diversity among Roma in the village. At one end, weaker ("slabší") Roma are living in state houses. Access to labour for their residents is not regular and depends on occasional opportunities provided by other Roma in more advantageous positions. Next to them, a group of individual houses in good shape seem to compete for having the most colourful façade. Those are the houses of migrants working on construction sites abroad who form a kind of local "middle class", mostly achieving non-Roma standards but always under the ethnic limits of the status quo. The end of the street is marked by an ostentatious villa which belongs to a rich Roma family who have managed to reach a certain business success also connected to the construction sector. However, even this rich family did not manage to cross the ethnic line and had to build their villa in the Roma part of the village. The positive perception held by inhabitants of village A is constructed in opposition to a group of social houses where hundreds of Roma live in conditions of severe marginalisation and absolute poverty. Those Roma are strongly stigmatised as "degeši" and are considered an underclass by Roma and non-Roma from village A.

This narrative proves the existence of an emic perception of diversity applied to the social positionalities of inhabitants of village A. The differentiation is not only a categorisation in material terms of who is rich and who is poor; indeed, there is also the establishment of differentiations which will settle the possibilities and limits for social interaction. Articulated diversity contrasts with the homogenised view imposed by the so-called cliché of marginality. Village A is a well-known locality among researchers, as it lies in the centre of one of the most productive areas in terms of knowledge on Roma. However, in the past researchers shunned similar sites and preferred a clear marginality as an exotic.

Emic subjectivities reveal a spectrum of relatively diverse positionalities. By focusing research on those emerging fields of interethnic interaction, the social researcher not only avoids the cliché of marginality and the anthropological escapism but is also able to collaborate with participants in a respectful way; in addition, this makes it possible to avoid constructing the participants as essentialised objects.

If analysis takes a wider scope and considers a certain regional aspect, the diversity around village A grows in terms of complexity. In just a few kilometres nearby the social researcher will be surprised by the variety of destinies experienced by the local Roma population in the last decades. Just a few kilometres from village A, it is possible to find: a) villages where only non-Roma are living due to violence and pogroms that have taken place in different historical moments; b) geographically-isolated settlements where Roma are kept at the edge of survival; c) medium-size towns where Roma are living in urban ghettos after being forced to leave the historic parts of the city centre by gentrification processes; d) places where Roma seem to experience certain upward mobility thanks to business activities related to tourism, such as pensions and guest-houses; settlements involved in strong dynamics of transformation as their inhabitants accumulate certain economic capital with the emergence of precarious work possibilities in recently-established industries due to dislocation processes of global production; f) even villages where the non-Roma population have decided to leave (white flight) as a solution to interethnic tensions.

This vast diversity leads us to questions that have not been addressed by the present research, and also makes us question how it is possible to explain this diversity of positives. Our interest in social mobility has led us to find the factors and situations that opened the space for social rising and the escape from poverty and marginality for the various Roma. However, the more we were with them and became acquainted with local configurations of power and socio-economic opportunities, the more we realized that we were witnessing many things but not "things that worked". With regard to our participants at different levels of socio-economic rankings, similar stories are repeated that indicate hidden mechanisms which limit their self-realisation and chances. Their ethnicity – however negotiated or hidden – acts as the ultimate stigma; and it concerns all areas of social life. For Roma from village A, or those in the vicinity of the tourist region, it has been and is very difficult to get land or property in areas inhabited by non-Roma. Throughout various political regimes, only the concrete form of the barrier has changed, but the mechanism has remained the same: instead of regulations by the socialist's Municipal National Committee (*Mestský národný výbor*), free-market post-socialism prevents Roma from purchasing the land because of the combined pressure of the mayor and potential neighbours. Roma with higher education are being pushed to work in the framework of precarious and limited projects funded by the European Social Fund. The "better-off" Roma of the locality are not confronted with such strong segregation and lower teaching standards in schools as Roma from settlements. However, in the event that the number of Roma pupils in a new class rises above a certain level, the white parents drive their children to a school in the town, thus showing that they will not accept the numerical superiority of their "accepted" Romani neighbours.

So, although the local configuration of power and its implementation in the local infrastructure and the rules of the game are different, they are always asymmetric, to the detriment of the Roma. We always find a clear example of double standards that differ only in terms of distance between non-Roma and Roma. And so, while in

segregated settlements it is common to suffer from the worse availability of good drinking water, on site A, Roma homes are equipped with water pipes, similar to their non-Roma neighbours. If one delves, however, into the history books, injustice is clearly present; the area inhabited by Roma was equipped with a water pipeline as far away as the last part of the village; indeed, this happened only after many reminders at the national committee and amidst a situation where Roma houses in a hollow suffered from defective surface water pollution because of sewage from the school.

However, paradoxically, many researchers focused on the poorest settlement always being described as unconnected to the rest of the positionalities. Such a bias is common when it comes to the representation of Slovak Roma in the literature. The settlement has been repeatedly portrayed as a medieval island populated by uncivilised people closer to nature and wildness than to our societies. Their social exclusion is presented as a consequence of their wild nature and no interaction with the outside world is reported. Such an approach relates directly to a well-known apparatus serving white supremacy – to blame the victim. Their position in society is described in terms of a poverty trap sustained by their incapacity to escape from it on their own terms, as they are not able to join the majority or to integrate into "normal society" without problems.

The complexity and diversity emerging from the ground demand avoiding explanations centred on the supposed characteristics of a concrete group. Discussion must not only be focused on the different agency and strategies of diverse social actors; indeed, explanatory argumentations should be grounded on the understanding of historic and social causes of complex interethnic interactions.

Experiences in the field show that any related position is far from being unconnected to the others. Social exclusion of segregated Roma is the result of a long-term conflictual relationship between Roma and non-Roma. Their living conditions in a segregated area in demeaning communal houses are the result of State planning and local implementation. In a similar way, the unsatisfactory structural conditions of social houses in village A are the result of housing policies. The lack of jobs in the region and the racist mechanism excluding Roma from internal migration are also out of the scope of Roma cyclical emigrants. Even the profitable business of the richest family is both connected to non-Roma private constructors and to their access to the cheap Roma labour force. A crucial point is the imaginary line which divides village A into one Roma area and one non-Roma area. Roma are willing to break such a boundary in order to avoid space limitation and are also willing to achieve a higher social status. However, non-Roma actively maintain the separation and restrict the housing market according to their ethnic criteria. Diverse positionalities among Roma are not a consequence of Roma intrinsic characteristics, culture or essence, but instead the result of long-term social, economic and political processes.

BEYOND THE ROMA QUESTION: THE RELEVANCE OF WHITENESS STUDIES

A crucial point in observing Roma beyond the cliché of marginality is their obvious connection to non-Roma. Their existence is settled in inter-ethnic scenarios – a fact clearly misrepresented in existing literature. The interests, agency and views of the non-Roma are often ignored behind the term "majority", as if the term was self-explanatory enough. Paradoxically, whiteness studies have largely been a productive

topic on a global scale. A vast quantity of literature exists on the topic, including a range of subtopics as well as discussions on, and criticism of, this theoretical approach (Engles, 2006). On the contrary, in the Slovak and Czech context the following idea seems to be valid: "Most social scientists have perpetuated the mythology that minorities are 'raced' and experience 'race problems' while ignoring white identity and culture [...] Simply put, whiteness constitutes normality and acceptance without stipulating that to be white is to be normal and right" (Bonilla-Silva, Goar & Embrick, 2006: 232).

Conceptualising whiteness may also lead to essentialised arguments which promote a homogenous view on non-Roma, subsequently misleading research to similar inappropriate cultural argumentations as discussed above, but now been whites the simplified objects of study. Instead, our efforts point to an approach centred on understanding whiteness as a basis for a particular agency observed repeatedly in the field and being exercised by non-Roma, the aim of which is to promote and maintain power asymmetries for their own benefit.

The articulation of whiteness opens the possibility of discussing assumed frameworks on significant questions, such as who belongs to the region or national space and its consequence: who is the outsider? Roma are conceptualised as eternal outsiders in the land of Slovaks. A remarkable aspect in this regard is the insistence, in many texts, of the Indian origins of Roma implicitly remarking on their exotic nature and stating their non-belonging to this land. Roma are framed as a minority living among Slovaks. The conceptualisation of any "minority" requires the acceptance that a "majority" exists. It is significant to observe how in debates surrounding "minorities", the so called "majority" is taken for granted, as a non-problematic concept (Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Clarke & Garner, 2010). The concept remains behind the discussion as an unquestionable scenario. Both categories, majority and minority, are complementary and are portrayed as homogenous and essentialised. A classic example is the fact that key aspects of social differentiation (gender, age, social position) suddenly disappear when constructing the dichotomies "we" and "they". Establishing the majority as a distant category serves as legitimisation of power dominance (Šotola & Rodríguez Polo, 2016: 17). The social success of an individual from the minority is understood as a "smooth" integration into the "majority society". Our argument is that such a concept of "majority" is the product of dominant discourses, and thus leads to a significant reduction in the way social mobility is understood in relation to the articulated otherness. Consequently, the "majority" concept is also masking but at the same time strengthening the power domination of all who can present themselves as a "majority". For this reason, we also consider the concept of "integration of minorities into majority" as a project conducted by those who wield the power.

Recognising white agency, its goals and its subjectivities opens a new umbrella of research possibilities to approach power asymmetries observed in the field. Whiteness studies make use of qualitative methods in order to explore interethnic complexity. The personal narratives of whiteness served as a mechanism to shed some light on the way speakers confront their privilege and their complicity in oppression (Thompson, 2006). Such knowledge constitutes a lacuna in the Slovak and Czech context and will certainly provide precious material for any social study attempting to understand the social complexity around Roma. A deeper knowledge of non-Roma will also uncover their privileges and costs. The concept of white privileges and costs refers to the idea that whites experience both positive and negative consequences as a result of racism.

The idea points to psychological aspects of dominance. The cost of racism to those who exercise supremacy will not be comparable to the dramatic economic and social costs of racism that Roma face. However, costs incurred to the "whites" could include guilt and shame when exploring diachronic aspects of local politics and public affairs, irrational fear of Roma despite decades of a mostly peaceful neighbourhood even given power asymmetries, and distorted beliefs regarding race that make whites essentialise their Roma neighbours.

THE PERFORMATIVE CHARACTER OF WHITENESS

Understanding whiteness as a performative act provides the social researcher with a new lens through which to discuss field situations commonly taken for granted, serving as an example of the existence of clear patterns of spatial segregation between Roma and non-Roma. Roma exclusion is commonly understood as their failure to integrate into the "majority". The existence of Roma settlements or colonies not only separated in terms of space but also mostly socially excluded from non-Roma is commonly read as the incapacity of the Roma population to act socially in "our" society. Once the concept of "majority" has been put under question, such a supposition is unsatisfactory. Traditional foreign approaches to spatial and social segregation are from a different perspective. Residential and social hyper-segregation of whites from blacks furthers a socialisation process referred to as "white habitus", which geographically and psychologically limits whites' chances of developing meaningful relationships with blacks and other minorities (Bonilla-Silva, Goar & Embrick, 2006: 232). Whiteness studies have chosen to analyse the mechanisms and strategies implemented by whites to avoid coexistence with other ethnic groups. Knowledge grounded on field experience reveals the active agency of whites keeping themselves apart from Roma. The strategies include: marking the space in ethnic terms; duplicating the public space in institutions and other common places so that socialisation and everyday life will be separated (schools for Roma children and schools for non-Roma, maternity rooms for Roma and separate ones for non-Roma in hospitals, differentiated mass services at church…); controlling the access to property and housing according to ethnic criteria; and controlling the access to labour and education. All of these practices serve as an example of the wide spectrum forming the extreme ethnic segregation under which Roma are forced to live. In order to understand and ethnographically describe such processes, the social researcher should avoid practices previously described as anthropological escapism and include the white areas, strategies and habitus in the research.

To avoid cultural explanations on the basis of a non-existent Roma essence is not to negate the value of analysis of cultural aspects. Roma are present in historic and current literature, cinema and arts in the region. No less important is their presence in all forms of everyday media and in the complex emergence of the virtual world. As a consequence of the argumentations below, Roma should be understood as objects of cultural constructions created under white hegemony (Berger & Luckmann, 1999). In foreign contexts, literary criticism or cinematic studies revealed the importance of focusing on whiteness. More than reflecting reality, media construct reality under white dominance. Anyone familiar with Slovak TV media or newspapers will not escape the continuous presence of Roma as a counterpart of whites as the natural and deserved

centre of Slovak society. The analysis of such cultural motifs from a perspective which takes into account the particularities of whiteness studies will certainly shed new light on our understanding of current societies.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we attempted to critically reflect a trend in Slovak and Czech anthropology and social science, generally described as an anthropological escapism focused on the articulation of the cliché of marginality and exotic otherness as a scenario in constructing etic views on Roma. This optic entails that one of the main differentiation features of the Roma is the sub-ethnic division based on the assumed country of origin (*Slovak, Olašské Roma, Sinti*, etc.). With regard to this perspective, great attention is also paid to the mutual delimitation of the Roma towards other – somehow different – Roma groups, whether based on the concept of ritual purity, or other distinctive signs. These conceptualisations of Roma diversity can therefore be seen as an example of exoticisation of "the other" and can lead to highlighting the inexorable barriers and otherness.

The way of perceiving and presenting local issues related to ethnicity and poverty as cultural dispositions supplies dominant discourses with ethnographic arguments that only reinforce the exotic perception of the Roma groups as the bearers of a unique cultural formula and thus the embodiment of otherness par excellence. This tendency, palpable in the mainstream of the Czech and Slovak scholarship on Roma, is comparable to the openly-reflected sin of anthropological discipline – through the production of knowledge to control the "others" and support colonial forces. In contrast with this, we are convinced that it is time to concentrate more on the forms of power than on essentialisation and alleged cultural characteristics of marginalised groups. The relative stability of the social order at the local level is working through the way social hierarchies are produced and reproduced and sustained. Hierarchies are exemplified in the positionality of Roma who are disempowered vis-a-vis institutions and municipalities where they live. Life truths, such as Roma "laziness", "irresponsibility" and "scrounging on welfare" are common parlance, and are taken for granted; indeed, they do not need to be explained, since they function only as "doxa".

Social trajectories of Roma can be very differential. Not everyone lives in absolute poverty, as the fake image of dominant discourses impose on us, and many of them have experience with at least partial upward social mobility. However, we are not talking about exceptional individuals – about Roma elites – physicians, artists, or teachers, but about whole groups of "ordinary people" living in municipalities of eastern Slovakia, who have to cope with the structural disadvantages they face and who, despite this, have achieved remarkable social advances. Their strategies to manage structural pressures have been our main subjects of exploration.

Not only social hierarchies but also the reproduction of dominant discourses maintain and strengthen power-asymmetric relationships which we understand as dominance. This is the case here with an oppressive hierarchy in which the Roma face significant pressures from the so-called "majority". Part of the power hierarchy is also hiding these forces, by pointing to the supposed essentials of the Roma, which are the main cause of their marginality – it is a strategy known as blame the victim. We examined the role of social science by questioning its active contribution to dominant discourses and giving substance to essentialised constructions, hiding under cultural

argumentation the relevance of white supremacy and in doing so contributing to Roma oppression as the reproduction of dominant discourses maintains and reinforces power asymmetries, which are understood as dominance.

Both the recognition of articulated emic diversity and the identification of structural power-asymmetries at the local level point to the need to understand Roma social complexity in interaction with their counterpart, the non-Roma. We refer to a collection of studies called whiteness studies to explore alternatives and possibilities that enable us to deconstruct certain fallacies which we described in previous analysis. We believe that such approaches will certainly provide new substance to the knowledge of Roma in our region. Whiteness studies are often reacting to postcolonial legacies and questions related to the capitalist system, as well as they are discussing the strong impact of white dominance in interethnic relations. The literature explores the intersectionality of white supremacy, male supremacy and the economic order. Analysing the situation of Roma in Slovakia, we believe that focusing on the local context in a diachronic way could be productive. We give preference to analysis and aim to rewrite the historic impact of interethnic coexistence and conflictual moments (such as forced population movements), the impact of communist politics, and the diversity of their results; we also wish to rewrite the impact of the earthquake produced by the change of the regime in the early 1990s and the lasting decline brought about by the capitalist economic restructuralisation, as well as the impact of emerging job positions in delocalised industries targeting Roma as a precarious labour force. Thus, our aim is to connect knowledge on Roma to their existence among realities, where the impact of the structures of everyday life matters. This impact also makes it possible to recognise the malleability of racial categories and their continuous construction and reconstruction through time.

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