

# РОМИ СРБИЈЕ У ХХІ ВЕКУ

ОДЕЉЕЊЕ ДРУШТВЕНИХ НАУКА  
КЊИГА 109

SERBIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND ARTS

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COMMITTEE FOR THE STUDY OF THE LIFE  
AND CUSTOMS OF THE ROMA

# SERBIAN ROMA IN XXI CENTURY

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Professors *Sreten Vujović*, *Dragoljub B. Đorđević*, *Tamaš Korhec*, *Sanja  
Zlatanović*, PhD, *Svetlana Ćirković*, PhD and *Božidar Jakšić*, PhD

E d i t o r  
Academician  
TIBOR VARADY

BELGRADE 2018

СРПСКА АКАДЕМИЈА НАУКА И УМЕТНОСТИ

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Књига 109

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ОДБОР ЗА ПРОУЧАВАЊЕ ЖИВОТА И ОБИЧАЈА РОМА

# РОМИ СРБИЈЕ У XXI ВЕКУ

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др *Светлане Турковић* и др *Божидара Јакишића*

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*Невена Ђурђевић*

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*Мира Зебић*

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## ПРЕДГОВОР

У овом Зборнику сабрани су радови који проистичу из циклуса јавних предавања одржаних у Српској академији наука и уметности у организацији Одбора за проучавање живота и обичаја Рома током 2014, 2015. и 2016. године.

У уводним речима за свој познати *Српскохрватско-цигански речник*, издат 1947. године, Раде Ухлик каже:

„Дабоме, стара је наша навика да потцењујемо Цигане, један ванредно бистар народ, који, гурнут у страну, непризнат и презрен, у многим земљама живи у најцрњој беди. [...] Нови погледи и нови људи одредиће, међутим, и Циганима достојно место под заједничким сунцем, где ће им се указати прилика да развију своје позитивне способности...“

Од тада (од 1947. године) имали смо многе нове и још новије погледе, имали смо и разне људе на положајима, који су били сматрани за нове људе. Питање је докле смо стигли и где су и ко су данас Роми у Србији.

Радови сакупљени у овом Зборнику наравно не дају потпун одговор на ово сложено питање, али доказују да је оно важно. Теме јавних предавања током три године (2014–2016) биле су различите, али их је повезивала заједничка фокусираност на појаве, регулативе и понашања, која су постала значајна при тражењу одговора на питање: да ли ће Роми наћи „достојно место под заједничким сунцем“?

Неколико радова настоји да критички сагледа какве ефекте (и какве шансе) имају мере у домену образовања, као што су, на пример, мере афирмативне акције; и докле се дошло у тражењу „места под заједничким сунцем“ у студентском животу. Поред статистичких анализа, дате су и процене домета појединих мера и норми. У више радова (понегде повезано са образовањем) испитује се и идентитет, показатељи идентитета и значај идентитета, као и могућа коегзистенција сачуваног идентитета и интеркултуралности. У вези са идентитетом не поставља

се само питање чиме се Роми идентификују, већ и питање како на Роме гледају други, и какви су процеси утицали на формирање идентитета (на пример, процес протестантизације).

Један од значајних радова познатог ромског научника Куртијадеа посвећен је проблематици стандардизације ромског језика, те проблема и питања који се постављају у току њеног процеса. Посебан рад је посвећен и проблематици друштвеног и политичког организовања Рома, уз критички осврт на постигнуте резултате (и непостигнуте циљеве). Значајна је пажња посвећена и једном од кључних проблема у животу Рома (и њихове тежње за једнакошћу), а то је питање становања.

Зборник се завршава једним есејом, чији је аутор Мајкл Симонс (Michael Simmons), познати борац за црначка права у Америци и саборац Мартина Лутера Кинга. Од када живи у Европи, његову пажњу је сасвим логично привукао положај Рома и изражава жестоку критику према онима који Роме виде као једну другачију врсту људи, уместо да траже решење за превазилажење изопштености. Симонс поставља питање: “Why are Roma treated as a special form of the human race, and not as an oppressed people?”

Радови у овом Зборнику доприносе томе да се створи једна адекватнија слика о положају Рома у Србији (и не само у Србији), но при томе упозоравају, да то што се пред нама оцртава не треба да схватимо само као слику, већ и као задатак.

*Академик Тибор Варади*



## NO MORE KINGS\*

Michael Simmons\*\*

Thank you for allowing me to share my views on the state of the Roma Movement in Central Europe. I would like to begin by talking about how I began to intersect with the issue of Roma human rights before there was something called a Roma Movement.

Prior to 1991 I knew virtually nothing about Roma. I didn't even know the word "Roma" and used the word "Gypsy". In the US, then and now, people have seen Roma as fortunetellers and secretive but there has not been any open hostility toward Roma. For most Americans Roma were and are invisible.

In my capacity as the Director for European Programs for the American-based NGO, the American Friends Service Committee, I hired the American writer John Feffer to do first-person interviews with a diverse array of emerging political actors in post-communist Central Europe in 1991. During his interviews with Roma, John discovered that many activists identified with African Americans and the Civil Rights Movement. This led me to begin meeting and talking with Roma activists throughout the region.

In 1995, I organized a small seminar with regional Roma activists and veterans of the US Civil rights Movement. In 2001, I organized a week-long training on the methodology of social change for 25 regional Roma activists. The trainers were four African Americans with specific expertise. My early work with Roma also included hosting Roma activists in the US to expose them to grassroots community organizers from the African American community and other communities of color.

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\* Presented at the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, November 2013

\*\* American black activist. During the past 25 years advocate of Roma rights in Europe

During my work with the Roma community I began to develop a more sophisticated understanding of Roma oppression and how it differs from the African American experience. For example, if you look at the African American experiences going back to slavery you find that African Americans always had intimate contact with whites. By intimate I don't necessarily mean sexual, although there were clearly sexual encounters – most of which, of course, were forcible encounters. However, I do mean that African Americans did all of the household chores, including the nursing of white babies. Movies like *Gone with the Wind* and *Band of Gold* are just two examples in popular culture where this type of relationship is portrayed. After slavery, this relationship continued as African Americans were relegated to what I, in a pejorative sense, call “colored jobs”. These jobs include working in white households, cleaning hotel rooms, hospital rooms, chauffeuring and other menial jobs that put African Americans in contact with whites on a daily basis. Although unequal, this contact nevertheless has created empathy and even sympathy in the white community for African Americans. Because of this, overt racist behavior and expressions are extremely controversial in mainstream US society, even if you hold negative views of African Americans.

Compare this with the Roma reality. In this region, Roma are basically kept out of all segments of society. By and large, there are no “Roma jobs” and very few non-Roma have any regular interaction with the Roma community. Yet they still have hardened xenophobic views of Roma. When I ask people about their contact with Roma, virtually everyone with whom I have talked either had their bicycle stolen as a child, or knows someone who has had their bicycle stolen, by a Roma. I have heard this story from Poland to Hungary to Albania and points in between. In mainstream culture it is acceptable to say any derogatory statement about Roma. Recently a person in the Ministry for Education in Romania, whose portfolio was Roma education, said that he would never send his children to school with Roma, and he faced no official sanction or public opprobrium.

Another difference between the Roma and African American experience is narrative. As a result of the Black Power Movement, African Americans have changed the narrative of the African American experience from one of helpless victims to one of a resilient, determined people willing to fight and die for their rights. This has included a reversal on what we call ourselves. During my youth in the fifties and before, the worst thing that you could call another black person was “black”, and you didn't dare suggest that they came from Africa. Dating back to our introduction to the US as slaves, we were called “Negros” and/or “colored”. In the 60's, the black community began to ask, what is wrong with the word “black” or being from Africa? The result of this reexamination is that today we call ourselves black or African American. But this reexamination goes beyond our self-identification. It also

resulted in a revisionist look at our history. As we delved into our experience in America, we began to realize that, contrary to conventional views, we are a dynamic people who have engaged in a struggle for human rights that go back 300 years. Rethinking and understanding our history changed the entire paradigm on our struggle.

If we look at the Roma reality today, what we are faced with is a view of a helpless, hapless people who need to be uplifted by the society at large. Most pictures of Roma are devoid of dignity and depict squalor and hopelessness. I find it as obnoxious as pornography and it reflects what I call poverty porn. However, this depiction belies the historic reality of Roma. By that I mean that if you look at Roma, they have been living among foreign cultures for at least 500 years. Throughout these five centuries they have been oppressed and abused. They have never had any sustained support or solidarity from anyone, yet they survive. They survived pogroms in every country in which they live. They survived the holocaust. But not only do they survive, they are now producing university graduates as they struggle for the right of their children to receive quality education. This clearly suggests that there is a rich history of resistance in Roma culture. However, with the possible exception of the Roma holocaust, there is virtually nothing recorded about this history. One of the results of the failure to view Roma as historical actors is that most of Roma history is told through the prism of anthropology. But where are the political scientists, psychologists, historians, etc., studying Roma reality? Why are Roma treated as a special form of the human race, and not as an oppressed people?

While I do want to make clear that Roma have the right to call themselves anything they choose, if it were up to me I would put the word "Roma" in a historical trash bin and resurrect the word "Gypsy". Similar to "black", there is nothing inherently wrong with the word "Gypsy". If you go to Roma settlements in any country this is what Roma call themselves, but the educated elite have adopted the view that the word "Gypsy" is only a pejorative. However, words have the meanings that we give them. Similar to African Americans saying that "I am black and I am proud" or "black is beautiful" (a formulation that grew out of the Black Power Movement), I suggest the same should be done with "Roma". If I could I would buy a million shirts saying, "I am Gypsy and I am proud" and on the back I would say, "The only thing dirty about Gypsy is in your mind".

But these are just words, and Roma activists must create an environment that galvanizes the Roma community to believe that their worth as a people is defined by themselves and not by the prejudices of non-Roma. How can this be done? I would use all the money spent on trainings and conferences to purchase video cameras and the technology of the day, and give them to young Roma to interview their 80-year-old grandparents and great-grandparents and find out how they have been able to survive. In addition they

should interview their parents and members of their community to develop a documentary living history of Roma resistance.

Let me use my personal history as an illustration. I was once engaged in organizing workers in the US. I would go to academics and labor officials to learn about the labor movement. However, it never occurred to me to ask my mother, who had been a union leader through all of her employment life in a clothing factory. One reason I failed to consider her as a source of knowledge was that she only had a sixth-grade education, had limited writing skills, and was not a theoretician. So here I was asking academics who had never been in a trade union but ignoring my mother's experiences. Similarly, educated Roma fail to utilize the intellectual and historical resources embodied in their community.

Quite often people feel that the word "intellectual" should only be used to describe someone with academic credentials, but education is a function of opportunity and access. In the US children are given IQ tests to test their intelligence. But these tests are a test of environment and experiences, not intellect. For example, if you show someone a computer screen who has never seen a computer, they would say that it is a television. When I was growing up, most families in the black community did not have phones. On an IQ test they would show a phone without a receiver and ask, "What is wrong with this picture?" Well, if you have not seen a phone you don't know the answer. These two examples highlight the deficiency of these "objective" intelligence tests.

Low IQ test results have been the excuse for putting talented Roma children in "special schools" with students who have legitimate learning disabilities. While we struggled for quality education for African Americans, we also established "freedom schools" in the south. (The freedom schools of the 1960s were summer programs that aimed to supplement the poor education that African American students received in segregated schools, as well as to provide an education in rights and organizing.) Roma should establish what I would call "Gypsy freedom schools". The teachers would be Roma and non-Roma and the curriculum should include basic education with a focus on Roma history and culture, computer training, English, and human rights. Also included should be courses on how to develop democratically-run community human rights organizations.

When Roma look at the Civil Rights Movement, many say, *what we need is a Martin Luther King*. What they fail to understand is that while King was a charismatic, powerful spokesperson for the movement, his role was as much symbolic and his main task was one of mobilization, while also being a conduit between white society and the African American community. However, he was not on the ground organizing the black community. I say this not to minimize his contribution but to put his contribution into perspective.

A critical look at the Civil Rights Movement leads us to a more nuanced view of King's role. The commonly known narrative of the Montgom-

ery bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, is that in 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give her seat on a local bus to a white man. The untold story is that Rosa Parks was not the first person to do this. On two other occasions black women refused to relinquish their seats. However, because one was a pregnant teenager and the other was a working class woman with an alcoholic father, the community failed to support them in fear that they represented negative stereotypes of the community.

In the state of Alabama, the civil rights organization National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had been outlawed earlier in the decade. In response the community formed the Montgomery Improvement Association. Nevertheless, the established leaders of the community were in fear of being publicly identified with the movement and turned to King to be the leader because he was a new pastor in town. Initially the boycott was viewed as a legal issue and not an organizing tool. It was the black women in the community that developed what we now know as the Montgomery bus boycott, with King as the spokesperson.

The next significant development in the civil rights movement was the 1957 school integration crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas, followed by the Freedom Rides of 1960. During the same period, the student sit-ins began to spread throughout the south and there was a major desegregation struggle in Albany, Georgia. King played either a marginal role or, in some cases, no role, in these seminal events. Saying this is not to denigrate King's role; it is only to say that the movement was a people's movement that did not depend on one individual.

The civil rights movement was a baptism by fire. When I joined the Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) as a 19-year-old college student I had virtually no experience in community organizing. The SNCC leaders of my project gave new recruits a week-long training focused on security measures but very little training about the complexities of the situations we would face. We were paid \$10.00 per week (equivalent to about \$75 in 2015).

To put the need for security training into perspective, I want to note how dangerous it was for African Americans in the south. For over 100 years, African Americans had to be willing to die for every level of human existence. This included the right to walk down the street, look a white person in the eye, or talk back to a white person. The most minor violation of any of these social mores could result in death. One statistic that illuminates this is that in Birmingham, Alabama, from 1947 to 1963 there were 47 bombings of either African American churches or homes. In spite of this danger, the financial resources of SNCC and other civil rights groups were not spent on trainings, conferences, seminars and meetings with governmental officials to plead our case. Our resources were used to build a powerful grassroots movement that forced the people in power to give us a hearing on our demands for justice.

Compare this with the Roma movement. Over the past 20 years nearly one billion euro has been spent in the name of Roma advocacy and uplift. Can anyone make a correlation between the money spent and the improvement of Roma lives anywhere in this region? A significant expenditure of money on has been on trainings. Every summer, young Roma who speak English attend some training programs. I dare say that there are few Roma who have been to university and who speak English who have not participated in at least two trainings during their adulthood. Most of these trainings are human rights trainings but they lead nowhere. The people who come to these trainings don't come with the intent of going home to organize their community or even share what they have learned. They come to the trainings with the hope of internships and/or employment in a Roma NGO.

People don't just go to one training but multiple trainings and for some it becomes an annual event. But there are no criteria that suggest that a person should have utilized the information from the previous training before they are allowed to attend another training.

Another phenomenon of these trainings is that, because knowledge of English is a prerequisite of participation, you have a relatively fixed number of people in the region qualified to attend the trainings. Seldom are the trainings given in the language of the participants. I am sure that this keeps many potential Roma activists from participating in the trainings. However, there is no organized program that is devoted to teaching English to Roma unless it is in preparation to be a university student. If English is important, and it is, then there should have been a massive peace corps-type program to saturate Roma communities with English language programs.

Because the Roma community feels powerless, they do not consider themselves agents for change. About 6 years ago I was engaged with a Roma community in Hungary that had started a school for Roma. Although there was an empty school building owned by the Catholic Church, the Roma community was not allowed to use or rent it and had to meet in the regular school after the end of the regular school day. The community asked me, along with some friends, to go to Budapest to lobby the archdiocese to allow them to use the building. I said I would not do that but I suggested an alternate plan. I suggested that they get as many people as possible, but it could be only a few, to choose one day a week to picket the local Catholic Church a few hours a day. On the same day I would organize a picket of the archdiocese in Budapest. We would plan a press conference in the community and also get press coverage in Budapest. In addition, others and I would start an international internet campaign to protest the refusal of the church to allow the Roma community to use the building. I was and am sure that with this plan we could have made forced the church to allow the community to use the empty school building. I could not get the community behind this plan and nothing happened.



Some have asked me why did I not just go to the archdiocese in Budapest and lobby for use of the building. As I and many of the others who were approached were non-Roma, and some of us were also expats, we may well have been able to morally shame the Catholic Church into conceding the issue. However, my view is that the process of liberation is as important as being liberated. By that I mean that if I do it, people are not empowered. But, if they see that their pressure led to a victory, it would make them see that they can take control over other aspects of their lives and change their relationship with the local government and begin to challenge national policy.

In the same community, the local authorities discovered that some Roma were using electricity without paying for it. Since the authorities could not locate the person stealing, they chose to punish the entire Roma community. The punishment was so random that they would arrest anyone in a home even if they did not live there. Arrested Roma signed documents without knowing that the documents abrogated their rights and many began serving prison time. The women in the community were enraged about their children going to jail and formed an informal group to talk about the situation as they tried to defend the community. They asked me for suggestions. I told them that I would organize a one-day seminar on knowing your rights with the police, like never going to the police station alone, never signing a document without legal information, etc. Since I don't speak Hungarian I went to every Roma advocacy organization I knew in Budapest asking for someone to come to the community on a Saturday and give the seminar. I could not get one person to do it. Think about this in the context of the money spent on Roma advocacy. I know if I were having a conference on Roma rights on a Saturday and the venue was Paris, I could have found some participants from the same organizations.

During my involvement in the civil rights movement I was arrested over 10 times. These arrests occurred even though all of the basic legal victories of the movement had been achieved and I was always charged with crimes that had been declared unconstitutional by the courts. However, it was only the result of community organization that empowered the black community to make the legal victories a reality. The Roma movement has not yet learned this lesson. Roma legal advocates think that just changing a law or getting a new law passed will result in social change. But these modest victories have no impact on the community if they are not empowered to enforce the law or, worse, if they don't even know that a law has been passed.

Most historians date the modern day civil rights movement as having begun in 1954 with the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision or the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott. But African Americans had developed a movement for their human rights immediately after slavery and it continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This movement was led by the elites of the African American community, the so-called "talented tenth". Grassroots

participation was seldom factored into this leadership and always looked to these elites for direction. The primary significance of the modern day civil rights movement was that it was the first time that the movement was led and directed by grassroots leadership and the elites had to take their cues from the community.

Similarly, the Roma community must develop a movement that is not centered in Budapest, Brussels, or Geneva, but instead in the multiplicity of Roma communities in the region. There is a place for organizations like the European Roma Rights Center, OSI, Roma Education Fund, etc., but these organizations should not and cannot direct an effective, vibrant Roma movement that will improve the quality of life for Roma. This can only occur with indigenous Roma leadership that is directed by democratic Roma organizations.

The histories of oppressed people are told in a manner that, even if they have victories, obfuscates the role of the people themselves. In popular culture, for example, Hollywood's view of the struggles of oppressed people is that it is a fight between "good white people" and "bad white people", and the role of the oppressed is to root for the "good white people" to win – but the oppressed have nothing to do with the outcome. In more formal historical accountings, the focus is always on the "great leaders" like Gandhi, Mandela, King, etc., reducing the grassroots activists to merely bit players, always followers and never leaders. This accounting hollows out the legacy of previous movements. History has shown that successes in struggles of the oppressed have resulted only when the people themselves take control of their destinies and do not rely on the elites of their community. The Roma are no different.

Thank you for your attention.