

Postgraduate School ZRC SAZU

RESEARCH SEMINAR II

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A CONCEPTUAL HISTORY OF GYPSINESS: HABSBERG AND POST-HABSBERG PERSPECTIVES, 1860–1940

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THESIS SUMMARY

In my dissertation, I trace the discursive and material aspects of the concepts ‘Gypsiness’ and ‘Romaniness’ in two successive multinational states, the Habsburg Empire and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, from the 1860s until the 1940s. I pursue one central question: *What does the conceptual oscillation of ‘Gypsiness’ within the race–class–nation triangle reveal about that particular historical conjuncture?* I thus develop a materialist reading of Romani history in imperial and postimperial East Central Europe.

In my theoretical framework, I draw inspiration from Reinhart Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte*, Raymond Williams’s cultural materialism, Pierre Bourdieu’s, Loïc Wacquant’s, and George Steinmetz’s (historical) sociologies of state and fields of knowledge production, as well as Vivek Chibber’s poignant critique of social theory after the cultural turn. With this dissertation, I wish to contribute to ongoing conversations in New Habsburg History, the historiography on postimperial East Central Europe, the historiography on race and class in East Central Europe, and the multidisciplinary field of Romani Studies.

I pursued my research question in a three-step process: (1) source accumulation, (2) conceptual analysis, and (3) materialist analysis of conceptual history.

I first traced the conceptual trajectory of 'Gypsiness' in three clusters of published and unpublished sources: state-produced archival documents, international agreements, and scientific publications. My source materials include Habsburg and Yugoslav administrative, legislative, and judicial documents, statistics and censuses; Central European trans-state communications and Roma-related international agreements; scientific publications in the fields of ethnography, (racial) anthropology, linguistics, geography, and history; school textbooks, encyclopaedias, lexicons, and newspapers; and cherished but few Romani ego documents, encountered in state archives.

From this source corpus, I extrapolated multiple semantic layers of 'Gypsiness' and 'Romaniness', most importantly: legislative Gypsiness, administrative Gypsiness, socio-economic Gypsiness, ethnographic Gypsiness and Romaniness, racialized Gypsiness and Romaniness, ethnicized and de-ethnicized Gypsiness, and minoritized Gypsiness. I then analysed these contradictions within the concept of 'Gypsiness' within a historical materialist framework. Inspired by Reinhart Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte*, I pursued both synchronic and diachronic analyses. Drawing from Raymond Williams' cultural materialism and Vivek Chibber's critique of the abandonment of materialist social theory after the cultural turn, I strove to remain grounded in a historical materialist analysis.

This effort resulted in two main historiographic claims. First, both the Austrian Empire and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia engendered 'Gypsiness' as a socio-economically overdetermined legislated concept, best understood as a nexus of criminalized poverty, mobility, and hierarchies of work and labour. This legislated concept of 'Gypsiness' functioned as a mechanism of structural impoverishment of Romani populations in the increasingly industrialized early-twentieth-century society. Secondly, the new political language of minorities and majorities, which permeated the political imaginaries of post-1919 East Central Europe, created space for a long-term minoritization of Gypsiness/Romaniness. This, in turn, opened up the space for Gypsiness/Romaniness as a politically self-mobilized concept. To sum up, I propose to view the historical conjuncture of late-imperial and postimperial East Central Europe as a period of accelerated structural impoverishment of Roma, but also a period of political self-articulation of Roma as a collective subject.

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