

Romanians and "The Gypsy Problem":

An illustration on Global Issues Involving Ethnic Minorities

As I was reading about the troubles [Isabel Fonseca](#), the author of "[Bury Me Standing](#)", encountered when doing fieldwork on the Gypsies in Eastern European countries, such as [Romania](#), where she was often derogatorily called "gypsy lover" by those who equated Gypsies with congenital criminals, a Romanian friend walked by and asked what I was reading. When I read "Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and their Journey" out loud, he promptly replied: "What you doing reading about Gypsies? Gypsy lover. They are *bad*." A little shocked (one thing is to read about such prejudices and another to witness them), I first tried to brush the conversation away stating that I was strictly interested in their dances and explaining what an interesting case they present, having traveled from India to Spain and both influenced and been influenced by the music and dance forms of all the countries in their journey. Shortly after returning to my reading, I realized a unique "fieldwork on your backyard" situation had presented itself to me, and I had to take advantage of it. I went to him and asked him to tell me why the Gypsies were so bad, "so I could hear the other side of the story".

Amazed with the precision of the accounts and attitudes related in the book, I listened as he answered: "They do bad things, they send their children and handicapped to beg. They steal, they cheat. They cannot be trusted". He pointed out that the Gypsies did not want to integrate and be productive members of society, a fact that cost them much suffering, as is to be expected, during [Ceaucescu's](#) communist regime, and earlier in the

19th Century during USSR occupation. Exactly what a "productive member of society" is would surely have been defined slightly differently during that time than how it is defined in today's capitalistic Romania. I was able to infer from my friend's statements that he had not considered that Gypsies' definition of a "productive member of society" might simply be very different from his own and that of the Romanian majority.

He held all of the prejudices and misconceptions depicted in the book: "They live twenty people to a house." "They would sell their kids, their mother, anything." He conceded that "sometimes people get together and run them out of their houses, but it's their own fault," referring to many of the massacres, ousting, and incinerations the [Gypsy minority in Romania](#) endure. Many of such cases, witnessed or researched by Fonseca, were detailed in the book. My friend echoed the apparently general feeling that Gypsies are responsible for many current Romanian issues. Furthermore, Gypsies are not only commonly blamed for many internal problems: the sentiment that Romanians' reputation is being harmed by local Gypsies who migrate West, was also clearly reflected in my friend's comment stating that: "They go abroad and give Romania a bad name." Nevertheless, he failed to mention that, similar to African-Americans' situation in the U.S., [the Gypsies were slaves in Romania](#) for over four centuries, or that part of the integration problems arise from the alarming illiteracy and unemployment rates, isolation (forced or by choice), discrimination, number of orphans and glue-addicted street children, language barriers for those adults who are not fluent in Romanian and for the children who start school in what is essentially a foreign language to them (resulting in high academic failure and drop-out rates), etc. All of these are typical snow ball effect

social problems which expectedly raise criminality among a given group of people, not because of genetic or cultural predispositions, but due to precarious cyclic social circumstances.

He also commented on the alcoholism issues among male Gypsies, stating: "My dad had some Gypsy construction workers, and he said they were the best workers, but then they would go drink it all." He claimed that "they have a lot of talent and potential, but they waste it." As an example, he mentioned that "a well recognized soccer coach in Romania said they are really good players and they can win a game for you, up to when they are 14 or 15, then they start drinking, they don't show up to practice, you can't trust them, you don't know if they'll show up to a game or not ... it's just their way of life." Romanians, like most other Westerners, not only recognize "the other" in Gypsies' way of life, but judge it as immoral in comparison to their own. I told my friend that as an artist who would love to live off her art and never have to hold an eight to five job, I identify with the Gypsies' refusal to adhere to modern western standards of life, such as the epidemic of unhappy individuals who are miserable in their every day jobs throughout their whole lives just to barely survive from paycheck to paycheck. My friend was able to see from that point of view, and he granted that he had trouble holding a regular blue-collar job himself. It seemed that he understood how the Gypsies would feel that way even more strongly.

During our conversation, I brought up some of the general issues of minorities integration versus assimilation, by comparison with indigenous populations in Panama,

where attempts to preserve a particular tribe's culture are taking place through bilingual education efforts, alongside a heated debate regarding another tribe's polygamy customs and government attempts to eradicate it. My friend understood the depth of the effects such external interference would have on that particular tribe's culture. He stated his strong belief that government should not interfere with such personal choices, and quickly made a connection to the contemporary issues for gay and lesbian couples, as well as the current situation with Mormons, in America. Returning to the fine line between integrating minorities into mainstream society and wiping out their cultural heritage, I mentioned Hispanic immigrants in the U.S., citing typical opposite ends of the spectrum problems, such as adults who can't speak English and children who can't read or write Spanish, or who refuse to speak it because they are ashamed or because they get teased at school. I was able to refer to findings from [Suki Ali](#)'s article "Reading Racialized Bodies: Learning to See the Difference", as we discussed how and when children become aware of race and ethnic differences. He bluntly admitted: "I know I'm racist", explaining that when he was little his parents would threaten him saying: "If you don't behave we'll give you to the gypsies!" I reassured him that I understood the difficulty in overcoming concepts that we have come to rationally refuse but that form part of the paradigm that surrounded us as we grew up. Thoughtfully, and sincerely, he added: "I know I have to get over that part of myself, and realize that they are people, just like any other, and give them a chance." As our conversation came to an end, we concluded that one of the challenges humanity faces nowadays, in diverse but similar circumstances around the world, revolves around answering the question of how we can all be equals but different at the same time.