A Contemporary History of Exclusion

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Summary: Decades of Exclusion

This book illustrated the history of the Gypsy issue in the context of Hungarian national history based on state policy documents. The many kinds of public discourses about Roma and their various interpretations shaped the relationship between the “majority” and minority, and helped in understanding the social context of the emergence of the “Gypsy issue” along with the local and national power relations that defined it. A critical analysis of official positions on Roma can create tension in the dominant discourse, which is one of the goals of the book.

Contrary to the definitive and dominant narrative on knowledge of the Gypsy/Roma minority in Hungary, this book—as we emphasized in the preface—presents a “counter-history.” One of the goals of the book is to shake the dominant discourse from its position and to critically examine earlier knowledge. In this light, we shared texts that demonstrate how the state pushed Roma communities in Hungary to the periphery, later blaming Roma for social problems and then presenting them as an antagonistic minority. We felt it was important to present the Roma not just as victims throughout history, but also—as far as the sources would allow—as active participants, for example as defenders of freedom against the dictatorial state. The argument advanced in the book is that othering of the Roma influences “majority” identity. Facing the history of Roma exclusion, considering non-dominant points of view and presenting hidden dimensions of Roma history can assist the reconstruction of “national” identity that to this point has been defined by patterns of exclusion. Based on this, the book offers not only a counter history of the official discourses, but also a comprehensive and critical assessment of Roma-related policies, with a blend of top-down and bottom-up perspectives.
Through analyzing source material, the book asked how the borders and cleavages between “majority” and minority within the Hungarian nation formed, and how power discourses created and/or strengthened those. From an ethnic standpoint, in the historical period after 1945 society largely saw itself as ethnically homogeneous, and the representatives of power in local- and then national-level discourses began to describe Gypsies/Roma as a unified minority, separable from the “majority” society. During this period ethnic boundaries within Hungarian society were redrawn, though in reality the Gypsy community, identified based on the “majority” concept of otherness, was ethnically, socially and culturally diverse, just like the “majority.” Increasingly, the idea of Gypsies as Hungary’s largest and fastest growing minority became a “social fact.” From a “majority” point of view, they were in a disadvantaged social position. To acknowledge this, local level experiences were generalized through power discourses, with wholly constructed knowledge—including a large part of social science knowledge and research on the Gypsies/Roma—tied to the prejudices of “majority” society.
Politics, scientific discourses and social practices all reinforced one another. Not only persons belonging to the “majority” but also the self-identity of minorities was clearly influenced by the discourses about them. Discourses on Roma were consciously hiding inequality, oppression and exclusion, and aimed at covering up real social problems and constructing a new social “reality” that would legitimate those in power. In Hungary under state socialism, state power created a separated, and therefore unequal, status for the Gypsy community on a national (or all-societal) level. On the one hand, the state “socialist” system used this status to consolidate its own legitimacy, dividing society into winners and losers, thereby emphasizing to the “majority” its relatively better social position. On the other hand, the unequal status of Roma served to portray poverty and exclusion as the fault of the groups whom it affected, emphasizing an image whereby the state did everything it could for those who had not yet enjoyed the fruits of the socialist system. In reality, Roma did not become the beneficiaries of social policy, while in discourse they indeed were the key beneficiaries, despite quite visible daily injustices. From the 1960s those in
power appeared to be working toward eradicating inequality, but in truth the reproduction of social difference morphed into an intricate ethnic question.

During state socialism, the “majority” was presented as the winner of the “socialist” transition (modernization), while the minority, if it was presented at all, through its own fault was the loser of transition. After the regime change, in theory, the unifying state policy that excluded the minority came to an end, and the developing liberal democracy seemed to provide space for minority self-organization. However, the phenomenon of exclusion remained. It became clear that social practice that imagined national unity had instead split society into constructed groups of Roma and non-Roma “Hungarians” based on power hierarchy. With this, Roma became excluded from the nation and a basic fault line was drawn in Hungarian society. After 1989–90 a series of social phenomena that the “majority” automatically connected to the minority (e.g., poverty, exclusion, unemployment, homelessness) became visible. Despite the homogenizing discourse and the real social disadvantages they suffered, the Roma are made up of heterogeneous groups, much like the “majority” that was also presented as unified and opposed to Roma. The key
group-producing force in Hungary has always been the “majority” society, and consequently it is the “majority” that judges how to label who is Gypsy/Roma. As we emphasized, power discourses created the image of a unified minority that could be distinguished from the “majority” in the interest of creating the image of a unified “majority,” or a Hungarian nation that appears unified.

The colonization efforts of the Hungarian state within Roma policy further squelched initiatives of Roma self-organization, thereby obstructing the emergence of alternative interpretations of exclusion, independent of the state. The practice of exclusion to this day is related to the daily practice of the state and municipal authorities. Discourses that consolidate their legitimacy continue to maintain the image of a unified “majority” and minority, along with their separate-ness and antagonism. Since 2010, Hungary has been constructing illiberal “majoritarian” democratic institutions in which state policies and the attitudes of the representatives of the state are increasingly similar to those of the dictatorial past. The political system has become post-colonial in the sense that it treats exclusion, the hierarchical relationship between “majority” and minority, and subject status as a static foundation.

This book has attempted to reinterpret Roma history defined by official discourses that constructed Roma according to the viewpoints of state power, and which further determined scientific discourse from a perspective of equality and human rights. The main challenge was the fact that the discourses and earlier power relations analyzed had developed specific interpretive frameworks of social science dealing with Roma. The debate over the relationship between “majority” and minority involves critical examination of the representatives of power, which often means the redevelopment and rethinking of established concepts and categories. Referring to the quote from István Bibó at the beginning of his study of Jewry, our task is to create solidarity between groups in conflict and to put an end to the practice of exclusion, which has its roots in the past and has taken on a colonial nature. The concept of the nation must again encompass members of excluded groups. The authors of this volume hoped to make this more possible by putting Roma history in the context of a common past or a national history. Like all history, it is part of an identity struggle and multifold changes that go along with that struggle.