Anthropological fieldwork, site and Roma communities: Roma/Gypsies in the Czech and Slovak Republic

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ABSTRACT
The objective of this text is to discuss topics connected to the engagement of social anthropologists, especially in the domain of their fieldwork, and the Roma-oriented research in the context of the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The data that constitute a basis for this text were obtained during our fieldwork in the Czech and Slovak localities inhabited by the *Roma/Gypsies* (several Slovak rural settlements and two northern-Bohemian towns) in 2000–2008. The main argument developed in the text is that the crucial and the most important form of engagement of an anthropologist doing his or her fieldwork is the engagement with the concerns of the people involved. By engaging in their interests and concerns, the research scheme might completely change, and thus become more in correspondence with the perspectives and vantage points of the informants themselves.

KEYWORDS: social anthropology, engagement, fieldwork, Roma

Introduction: inevitable engagement
Engagement in anthropological studies of the Roma can take a variety of forms, and we believe that the Czech Republic is not an exception in this. Roma, being often marginalised, discriminated and unemployed, are supposedly people who need our help. There is a strong pressure from the part of the public opinion, policy-makers, NGOs, and especially governmental and European structures on anthropologists working with the Roma/Gypsy groups that their work should in some way contribute to improving the living conditions or the public image of this marginalised minority. Many anthropologists in the Czech Republic, both before and after they received their degree, work with various NGOs in the projects targeted mostly at the improvement of housing, employment and education of

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the Roma.[1] Another form of engagement may be a direct political involvement, which in some cases grow into the active building of the 'Roma nation' by participating in 'Roma' periodicals or 'Roma political parties'. A 'soft' engagement may take a form of promoting the 'Roma culture', or the Romani language, at the level of literature, music or dance.[2]

Provided an anthropologist is not interested in the field of 'applied anthropology' or in any other kind of direct engagement (political or non-governmental), there still remains fieldwork and its consequences. We agree that the notion of the anthropologist as disinterested observer is a legacy of positivism, as Judith Oakley and Alenka Janko Spreizer stated in the proposal for their workshop *Anthropology and Engagement* for the EASA conference in Ljubljana in 2008 (Mesarič, Repič and Bartulović 2008: 273). The anthropologist is always engaged, doing research, working with the people, encountering their problems, entering into their lives. His or her research has always consequences and we have to be aware of this fact and work with it. So, even when we want to do 'just anthropology' without any further (practical) consequences, we already are engaged. The proposal of the workshop *Anthropology and Engagement* further continues: 'Research and its very process have consequences... Anthropologists have inevitably become involved' (Mesarič, Repič and Bartulović 2008: 273). The same holds true for the anthropological fieldwork in the Gypsy/Roma groups in the Czech and Slovak Republic. In this text, we will not concentrate on the direct forms of involvement (political activism, involvement in the work of NGOs or promoting 'Roma culture'), but purely on the domain of fieldwork and the somewhat subtler forms of engagement, which are inevitably linked to it, or follow from it. We will stress the point of the engagement as listening to and understanding of the people's own concerns and as being (or becoming) more sensitive to them and – finally – actively responding to them. One particular form of this active response and engagement with the topics that concern the people involved is the shift of the initial research focus. To grasp the argumentation about the shift of the research focus, we have to go back to the beginning of our fieldwork.

The choice of the research site and its consequences

Anthropological studies of Roma/Gypsy populations throughout Europe usually draw on the classic idea of the long-term fieldwork of one anthropologist (or a couple) in one site studying what is usually labelled as the 'local (Roma/Gypsy) community' (see Stewart 1997; Gay Y. Blasco 1999; Engebrigtsen 2007). This classic concentration on a locality or a site-oriented fieldwork in social anthropology in general and in the social anthropology of Roma in particular, is maybe best expressed in the common question given to any anthropologist doing his or her own fieldwork: 'Where did/do you do your fieldwork?' In our concern with the topic of engagement in relation to Roma/Gypsy groups, we stress the fact that our most important responsibility towards our informants is to become occu-

[1] Regarding the critical discussion of this point see Jakoubek-Budilová 2008.
[2] The issue is broadly discussed in Jakoubek 2004.

pied with their own interests, notions and their own view of the world, which should be subsequently mediated to the 'other world,' that of the non-Roma/non-Gypsies. The concern with the perspective of our informants, however, begins already in the identifying of the research site. Shifts we have undergone during our own fieldwork suggest that the original question: 'Where did/do you do your fieldwork?' is in our case either a wrongly put question or it requires a further explanation. In the course of our fieldwork, we experienced a shift in the focus of our study and, at the same time, a shift in the understanding of what our field was like. These two shifts happened as soon as we accepted the view of our informants, the way they see and position themselves in the world.

In the year 2000, we first entered Chminianske Jakubovany, a Gypsy[3] settlement in eastern Slovakia (the county of Prešov). Unlike the fieldwork model common in the Western Europe, we did not have an opportunity to spend an extended period of time in our field. The western model of anthropological fieldwork is still not a common way of doing research in the Czech Republic, and the situation is similar in some other post-socialist countries. Instead, we have been returning *there*, during the past years, as often as possible. We have observed many changes in the lives of our informants and developed strong relationships with some of them. We did our research as a couple and we were accepted as such by our informants. If 'It is expected that the initial interests and questions that motivated the research will be refined, and perhaps even transformed, over the course of the research' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 3), then this is exactly what happened to us.

At the beginning of our fieldwork, we were determined to study this settlement as a spatially bounded unit. We simply wanted to study a *locality*, which is a frequent and still dominant practice in the anthropological fieldwork. Our research topic was defined in spatial and at the same time in ethnic terms – we intended to study a locality inhabited by the Roma/Gypsies. In fact, our intention followed the widely spread and common way of writing, speaking and thinking about the Roma in the Czech Republic: the idea of a *local community*. One of the most important things that attracted out attention at the very beginning of the fieldwork was the importance attributed to the family and to social ties derived from kinship affiliations. As our fieldwork proceeded, we became more or less attached to one family in the settlement, which was our host family. This was a good position for the beginning, because we started to gain a perspective from 'inside', a perspective of the members of our host family. This was, we believe, a necessary step to begin the fieldwork, and it allowed us to get to know a part of the settlement very well. It was the part of the settlement where the relatives of our host family lived. However, soon we noticed that because of this attachment to one particular family, we had difficult access to other parts of the settlement. Gradually, we started to realise that our host family did not want us to go to the parts of the settlement where their non-kin lived. We recall a number

[3] The term *Gypsies* is used here as a translation of the Czech term *Cigáni*, which is an *emic* term used by our informants when speaking in Slovak (when speaking in Romani, they refer to themselves as to *Roma*).

of situations when our host family tried to prevent us from visiting other, non-related families in the settlement by stating, for example: 'They are not at home', 'It is not a good family', or simply 'Don't go there', 'Don't drink coffee there', etc. Actually, we learned a lot about the social fragmentation of the settlement by this means (see Budilová-Jakoubek 2004). Taking the perspective (and side) of one family was, however, necessary; we could not live in a settlement without a position, and we could have gained the position only through the affiliation with one particular family.

From locality to kinship

The overwhelming importance of kinship was the primary reason we decided to concentrate more on the analysis of kinship within the settlement. The settlement was interesting in several aspects – it was a rural settlement, formally belonging to a nearby non-Gypsy village, although spatially separated from it. The Roma/Gypsy living in the settlement numbered more than 1,400 people (in 2008), and they were struggling with a lack of infrastructure, poverty and a high level of unemployment (accompanied by other phenomena such as drug abuse). The settlement was significantly marked by the reputation of a ritually impure settlement, since the local Roma/Gypsies were believed by the majority society as well as by the other Roma/Gypsies to eat dogs and horses, i.e. the kinds of meat considered to be (ritually) impure (for the further development of the topic of the ritual im/purity see Budilová and Jakoubek 2005). However strong this classification from the outside (which puts the inhabitants of this settlement into one category of *the ritually impure*) may be, the settlement did not act as one social whole. The unity ascribed to it from others does not bring a unity or a sense of a 'community' within the boundaries of the settlement. The settlement was socially fragmented and the boundaries between individual groups ran along the kinship lines. The Roma/Gypsies from the settlement used the concept of ritual im/purity to reinforce the divisions brought about by kinship affiliations. They regarded their non-relatives as ritually impure and tried to prevent – to a large extent – social contact with them.

The social fragmentation of the settlement, based on kinship, thus influenced the possible cover of our research at the very beginning. As soon as we became a (however special) part of the settlement life, we were confined to the family borders. The effective family borders for us were the boundaries of the kinship group of our host family. The same principle, or the same 'family principle', that rules the lives of all the settlement inhabitants, was applied (and sooner or later must have been applied) to us. Nevertheless, the 'family principle' did not have only its negative face, in form of the informal ban on approaching the parts of the settlement where the non-relatives of our host family lived. This principle had also its positive side, which consisted of the fact that very often we visited (together with the members of our host family) their relatives who lived in other localities. These localities were not only other eastern Slovakian Roma/Gypsy settlements (e.g. Víťaz, Richnava, Spišské Podhradie, etc.), but also two northern Bohemian towns (Èeská Kamenice and Ústí nad Labem), or, more precisely, parts of them. Gradually, we realised that, manipulated by our host family, we were more often visiting their relatives in

other localities than their neighbours in the original settlement in Chminianske Jakubovany. This was highly significant. The focus and the very topic of our research changed, although we did not decide for this change deliberately. The focus of our research changed spontaneously and in accordance with the concerns of our informants. We accepted and followed this change of focus, because it revealed a lot about the perspective of our informants and about the character of the social bonds within the settlement. So we abandoned our original intention and realised that because of the fact that the settlement as a *spatially* defined unit did not form a *social* whole (not to say a *local community)*, we had to adjust our research subject and concentrate instead on a more meaningful research unit. Here we are at the core of our argument. We discovered that what counted in the original Roma/Gypsy settlement was neither of the two criteria (locality and ethnic category) that played a part at the beginning of our fieldwork in setting up the research scheme. What counted there, what was crucial for the people involved, was kinship. Therefore, not only the research focus changed, but so did the final research unit, the very subject of our research activities. After this shift has taken place, our research unit was defined neither in *spatial*, nor in *ethnic* terms, but in terms of *kinship*. The social whole defined in this way – unlike the settlement, *a locality* – functioned as a meaningful social unit. This was the unit our field lead us to, the unit our field defined.

Where do you do your fieldwork?

Only now have we come to a possible answer to the original question: 'Where do/did you do you fieldwork?' However, the answer is not easy. Our research subject is now defined in terms of kinship, because our informants define their meaningful social network in these terms. We have been studying a web of people who are interconnected by kin and affine ties. The people who belong to this web have been living in several eastern Slovak *Roma/Gypsy* settlements (including the original settlement in Chminianske Jakubovany) and in two towns in northern Bohemia (Èeská Kamenice and Ústí nad Labem). This web formed what can be called a 'social whole', for it is within the boundaries of this web where the important social activities took place. Members of this net visited each other frequently, they cooperated in economic spheres, celebrated together every Christmas, birthday, baptism or funeral; male members worked together. In other words: members of this 'kin web' socialised within this network more intensively than outside it; they tried to avoid social contact with their non-relatives, whether they lived in the same locality, or in other localities. They considered only their relatives to be *ritually pure* people, and since this 'purity complex' included a ban on commensality and marriage (between *the ritually pure* and *the ritually impure*), this belief only strengthened and reinforced the boundaries laid down by the kinship divisions. The primary social identity of each person was his or her identity as a member of a particular kin group. These groups, or rather nets were bilateral; hence, there was no distinction between the maternal and paternal kin, between the unilineally and bilaterally connected people. The social groupings or webs that arose from this type of the kinship reckoning were usually named (after one of the dead ancestors or a couple of ancestors, both male and female), but not all the people who actively partici-

pated in this named web were direct descendants of the given ancestor (or ancestors). Also, the affines played an important part in the social activities of these webs of kinship. It is, therefore, hardly possible to speak about the *descending kindred* in this case, and it seems more appropriate to describe this system as overlapping *personal kindreds* (for descending and personal kindreds (see Davenport 1959: 558). Due to the high level of endogamous marriages repeated for generations, most of the people within this web were interconnected by a complex web of kinship ties, both consanguine and affine. From the above described, it is clear that the unit we studied did not correspond to any spatially defined locality. This web comprised people living in several localities and two states, but it usually did not comprise all the Roma/Gypsies living in a given locality. The place of living was not decisive for the social contacts and for the identity of our informants – the locality could (and often did) change –people move for various reasons (marriage, job, family affairs), but their main social affiliation – the kinship one – remained the same. It should be added, of course, that even the kinship affiliation can (and often does) change, since this type of kinship reckoning is very flexible. The character of the kin web changes during the time, as the people marry and give birth to children, as the older people die, and as the various parts of the original web take on a particular name and become independent. We started with the settlement, but in the end we studied an extensive and non-localised kin group. The changed focus of our original fieldwork speaks not only for the fact that family is very important for the Roma/Gypsies. It speaks, for example, for the issue of our informants' identity, for the way they perceive the world around them, for their own perspective. At the beginning, we were guided by our own ideas about ethnicity, identity and local community, but our final perspective is different. We did not change our original intention deliberately – we let our field (and our informants) lead us.

There are no Roma communities

Now we believe that the common ideas about the local Roma communities are implicitly ethnocentric. We are used to supposing that wherever the Roma/Gypsies live in a spatially defined locality (a settlement, a neighbourhood, or a town) they inevitably form a local community. In a sharp contrast to this presupposition, our informants did not share any important bonds or community feeling with the other Roma/Gypsies living in the same locality (unless they are one family). They shared their values and their moral universe (only) with their kin (which was best expressed in the notion of the ritual im/purity). The non-localised kin web, on the contrary, was a set of people with frequent mutual interaction and the feeling of belonging. Almost all social contacts and interactions of our informants took place within their kin web. The members of the kin group shared almost all of their day-to day activities (which usually took place within the boundaries of one locality), the male part of the group worked together (which was a trans-local and often transnational activity), they celebrated important feasts and family events together (this took place also without any regard to localities – people visited each other even in distant places; they could have been anywhere, but together), they spent their leisure time together, and usually married within the boundaries of this group (which was a means of

multiplying and reinforcing mutual links between each other within the group). This kin group did not correspond to any spatially bounded locality and a particular spatially bounded locality (settlement, town) usually comprised more than one of these Roma/Gypsy kin groups/nets. Each of these kin webs stretched across various localities, and members of these webs were usually attached to their relatives (even in the distant localities) more than to their neighbours living next door in the settlement. This situation is similar in most of the described Czech and Slovak localities inhabited by the Roma/Gypsies at present.

The very fact of engagement into people's own concerns, therefore, had its consequences not only for the concept of 'field-site', or 'local community', but also for the notion of the identity of our informants. As stated, our informants call themselves *Cigáni* (*Gypsies*), in Slovak, and *Romové* (*Roma*) in Romani. The fact of identifying as *Roma* or *Gypsies*, however, does not bring a strong feeling of belonging to a specific *community* (of *Roma* or *Gypsies*) for them. The fact of being *Roma* or *Gypsy* meant, in the case of our informants, rather a specific quality of being a human. To be a *Rom* or a *Gypsy* meant, in the first place, to be different from the *non-Gypsies* (*gadže*). But this difference, common with the other, even non-related *Roma/Gypsies*, did not bring any sameness of all people who considered themselves as *Roma* or *Gypsies* (and who were regarded as such by the others). To be a *Roma* or a *Gypsy* did not mean to share some important bonds, solidarity or a collective identity with the other *Roma/Gypsies*. For the *Roma* or *Gypsies*, the primary and strongest social identity in the sense of belonging to a group was defined in terms of kinship. Identifying themselves as *Gypsies*, our informants shared with the others labelled by the same term primarily the notion of the significance of the kinship-based identity and the effort to minimise contacts with non-relatives (for the discussion of identity see Budilová 2008: 410). This idea is further reinforced by the notion of ritual im/purity, which relates to our informants' concept of what does it mean to be a human being. A proper human being, who belongs to one's own moral community, is a relative, who, in turn, is a ritually pure person. In this context, it should be also mentioned that very often we encountered the situation that the particular Gypsy kin groups were in better terms with individuals and groups from the majority society (*gadže*) than with individuals from the other non-kin Roma/Gypsy groups. We have seen this when we described the changes of our research subject, although the non-relatives lived (often literally) door-to-door in a spatially defined unit (settlement, town), they did not form neither a social unit, nor a local community.

What to give back?

To summarise, we are aware that our fieldwork is not detached from various and often even political implications, even though we are not interested in direct political involvement or applied research. If we understand 'engagement' as the sensitivity to the topics and perspectives that concern the people involved, the engagement in this sense may lead to a shift in the research focus, which, in turn, may have important consequences in the changed notions of the *Roma community* or *ethnic identity*. Engagement in this form

is, at the same time, a necessary condition to dispensing with the common-sense, and often ethnocentric, concepts and categories. If we turn back to the topic of engagement, and if we concentrate on the idea of engagement as responding to the people's concerns, we can conclude that our engagement consists in responding to our informants' concerns. The most important thing for our informants is their family. We accepted this point of view and changed our original research topic according to their concerns. This may be one point of our engagement. One of the main purposes of our (field) work, then, is to intermediate a perspective of the people concerned, their own point of view. In the process of our fieldwork, as a consequence of the encounter with the people and the specific, unpredicted field context, we had to abandon our preconceptions about locality, identity and community and start from the scratch. If we can give back something to the people, with whom we work, and who are very important in our lives, as we are probably in theirs, it is an understanding of their own view and mediating it (via publications, papers, lectures, discussions, etc.) to the members of the surrounding society. This is, in our case, a means of giving back something, albeit little, to our hosts for hospitality and priceless knowledge they gave us (Mesarič, Repič and Bartulović 2008: 273).

Another side of engagement

However, our engagement has yet another side. We engaged in the family of our informants not only at the level of academic writing and mediating their perspective. Engagement is always a two-way process. As we started to engage in the kin network of our informants, they also started to engage us. Since our informants wanted to make a comprehensible category out of us, they had to turn us into kin. There is a number of ways of achieving this aim. One of them is to ask the researchers to become godparents of a newborn child. Another possibility is that the informants become godparents of the researchers. Yet, another means is to ask the researchers to act as a witness or a best man at the wedding. We acted as a witness and a best man at their wedding and then they welcomed us saying: 'Hello, family'. In the last few years, we did our fieldwork everywhere where we were with our (supposed) 'relatives' – be it in their homes in the Czech Republic or Slovakia, or in our home. We are spending all important events (weddings, funerals, Christmas) with them. When we cannot be with them, we call them and they call us. So we also do our fieldwork everywhere where we have our mobile phones. In this perspective the question: 'Where did/do you do your fieldwork?' is even more meaningless. But, we can ask: Is this situation still a fieldwork? Or is this a form of engagement? Perhaps it is the engagement in the strict sense of the term.

Conclusion

A form of engagement is an inevitable concomitant of the work of anthropologists. In our story, we tried to point out that engagement may take also a form of listening to and understanding of the concerns of the people whom we work with and being (or becoming) more sensitive to them as well as actively responding to them. We depicted here one particular form of this active response to the informant's concerns consisting in our shift

of the initial research focus from *locality* or Gypsy/Roma *local community* to a non-localised kin group. We showed that this form of engaged fieldwork may bring very important information about the notion of our informants about their identity and the way they see themselves in the world. If one of the main goals of anthropological efforts is to mediate people's own view, then this form of an engaged fieldwork revealed some misconceptions in our common understanding of what is to be a Roma/Gypsy and what Roma/Gypsy communities are.

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POVZETEK

Namen prispevka je razprava o temah, povezanih z delovanjem socialnih antropologov na terenskem delu in z raziskovanjem Romov v kontekstu Češke in Slovaške. Podatki, predstavljeni v tem prispevku, so bili zbrani v okviru terenskega dela na lokacijah na Češkem in Slovaškem, naseljenih z *Romi/Cigani* (nekaj slovaških ruralnih naseljih in dve severno češki mesti)v obdobju 2000–2008. Temeljni argument, ki ga v prispevku razvijava je, da je bistvena in najpomembnejša oblika delovanja antropologa na terenu, ukvarjanje s težavami vključenih ljudi. Z vključitvijo njihovih interesov in težav se lahko raziskovalna shema sicer popolnoma spremeni in tako postane bolj podobna korespondenci s pogledi in izhodišči samih informantov.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: socialna antropologija, delovanje, terensko delo, Romi

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