

Review

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BOOK REVIEW

*Romaphobia: The Last
Acceptable Form of Racism.*

Aidan McGarry. London: Zed
Books, 2017. ISBN: 987-1-78360-
399-2. Paper, 294 pages. \$29.95.

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In his book, *Romaphobia: The Last Acceptable form of Racism*, Aidan McGarry gives a powerful analysis of anti-Roma racism in Europe. His aims in the book are to highlight the plight of European Roma and to analyse the underlying causes of their persecution. The quandary, as McGarry sees it, is that Roma persecution in Europe has persisted unabated for over six hundred years. As soon as Roma appeared in Europe in the late fourteenth century they were traded as slaves, or targeted by laws calling for assimilation or death. Roma were targeted for mass extermination during the Holocaust, and even now, they face widespread persecution across Europe. Italian interior minister Matteo Salvini, for instance, insists on compiling a “Gypsy Registry” and cleansing Italian neighbourhoods of Roma camps. The French government targets Roma settlements for demolition and, in defiance of European laws, deports around twenty thousand Roma to other countries every year. Targeted murders of Roma in Hungary, Slovakia, and the Ukraine are encouraged, and ignored. Tabloid newspapers in the UK drum up anti-Roma sentiment. Indeed, the Daily Mail even cite former UK opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn’s past attempts to protect Roma from eviction in London as a reason for his unsuitability to become Prime Minister—in modern Britain, compassion

for Gypsies is a sign of questionable character. For McGarry, then, this persistence is central to the puzzle of Romaphobia—why does this form of racism remain unchallenged and acceptable?

Before moving on to the details of McGarry's book, however, it's worth clarifying my interest in the subject. I am an academic philosopher interested in race and racial identity, but I am also a British Roma (Romanichal). I recognize much of what McGarry speaks of and find myself similarly perplexed by the acceptability and persistence of Romaphobia. In that sense, then, I have a personal interest in his analysis. This means that I'll often tread a fine line between academic analysis and personal reflection. That's as it must be, but wherever I mention personal experience, I will try to balance this with other evidence or comment.

Returning to McGarry's book, then, the key concept in its analysis of Romaphobia is socio-spatial belonging. On McGarry's view, the construction of mainstream identity usually designates an outsider—someone who does not belong—as a foil. This means a social space is constructed, and those deigned not to belong are positioned outside it both physically and conceptually. This, in turn highlights the boundaries of the space, and unifies those that are deemed to belong within it. In Europe, the Roma are placed outside of Gadje' space (physically and conceptually), and are constructed as a threat to it. McGarry explores these ideas in Chapters One and Two, before looking (chapter 3) at the effect that socio-spatial belonging has on Roma identity. He then introduces (in chapter 4) two illuminating examples from Eastern Europe: the Roma ghettos of Lunik IX in Slovakia; and Šuto Orizari in Macedonia. These settlements are the largest in Europe, and both are blighted by what McGarry calls "socio-spatial exclusion" (79). Indeed, at Lunik IX, local Gadje districts have built large concrete walls around the settlement to keep the Roma out of sight, out of Gadje society, and in their place. For McGarry, these sites make compelling illustrations of the socio-spatial foundations of Romaphobia.

In his final two chapters, McGarry changes focus and argues that Roma visibility and socio-spatial presence could play a role in undermining Romaphobia in Europe. In chapter five he focuses on the rise of Roma Pride movements as an assertion of Roma presence in the European space. McGarry's own examples are more recent, but since the early 1970s we have employed a Roma flag, and an anthem, "Gelem, Gelem," to give us some symbols of shared identity.² For McGarry, Roma pride is to be encouraged, and Roma visibility is important for increasing awareness of Romaphobia,

and in helping us to overcoming it. In Chapter 6, McGarry expands his view on the power of Roma visibility by looking at how Roma have used, and can use, the openness of EU borders to assert their full rights as citizens of Europe. This, he takes to be something beyond the mere visibility we see in pride movements, and more an outright assertion of a right to belong in the European social-space.

There are some real positives to McGarry's book, and I find his socio-spatial analysis especially illuminating in framing Romaphobia. It's true I think that Roma are, and have always been, systematically separated and excluded from Gadge spaces. Our access to education, health, law, politics etc. have always been denied or impeded. Moreover, we've been cautious about entering Gadge spaces; it is almost always much safer to stay away. Entering the educational space has meant we risk having our children taken away, bullied, or placed in schools for the intellectually impaired. By entering the health space, Roma women risk having choices over their own bodies stolen away from them—Gadge programs of "stealth" sterilization have been a long-standing imposition on Roma woman. What's more, our concerns are usually unheard, and our caution leveraged into further reasons for Gadjes to police their socio-spatial boundaries against us.

McGarry's spatial analysis also resonates with my personal experiences. Growing up, permitted or "legal" stopping places were few in number and located on the periphery of towns. The only other spaces we could stay for more than a few days without harassment or eviction were abandoned industrial sites, or dumps. When even these spaces were closed off to us and we were forced off the roads and into Gadge social housing, we were first placed in condemned terraces until we "proved" ourselves. Our parents' caution at inviting authorities into our lives and spaces by sending us to schools or registering with local health services was always palpable, and at times oppressive. McGarry's socio-spatial view is a useful academic tool for understanding Romaphobia and its persistence, but it also captures something about the lived experience.

There is, of course, a second element to McGarry's analysis: his claim that increasing Roma visibility and presence in Gadge space will help to counter Romaphobia. I am much more reticent about this claim. The idea of supporting pride and mobilising against Romaphobia is a worthy aim, however, I think Roma visibility and socio-spatial presence as a solution to Romaphobia faces real difficulties. I shall mention three worries here.

First of all, visibility is dangerous for the Roma. McGarry notes this, but appeals to the hard-won achievements of Gay Pride to suggest that visibility is a *process* that refuses denigrative discourse and moves toward acceptance over time. “There is no good reason why Roma pride cannot serve [as an] emancipatory tool for European Roma. [. . .] The key role for Roma is to forge a collective consciousness and to build internal solidarity as well as to project a positive image of Roma identity and to challenge deep-seated Romaphobia” (205).

There are two interacting elements to my concern here. The first is the danger of visibility itself; the second is the persistence of Romaphobia that we noted right at the outset. I think the persistent nature of Romaphobia is a compounding factor on Roma visibility that makes things difficult. Let’s take these points in order.

Visibility is a high stakes game for any oppressed group, and this is true for Roma whenever they are visible in Gadge social-space. I’ll give two examples.

Consider, first, the *Porajmos*—the Roma Holocaust. Estimates vary as to how many of us were murdered, but it may have been as many of one and half million. It’s difficult to give precise numbers because of how those deaths occurred. Many Roma were executed wherever SS Einsatzgruppen found them and their deaths went unrecorded. Many other Roma deaths were recorded “officially” in extermination camps as part of the Nazi bureaucratisation of genocide. Those “processed” in camps tended to be “visible” Roma, i.e. those who had entered into the Gadge social space. Assimilated Roma, and half-Roma children adopted by German Gadge families were frequent victims, and their narratives are common amongst the excerpts and eye-witness statements compiled from the camp records in the Auschwitz Zigeunerlager (State Museum Auschwitz Birkenau, 1992). The *Porajmos* is a stark example of how Roma visibility in the Gadge social-space is a liability.

To give a second, more personal example, I was born during a period of intense Governmental involvement in Roma lives.³ In the early fervour of this period, educational reform⁴ “encouraged” Roma to register their children for school, but they were often sent to schools for the intellectually impaired, regardless of individual needs. By the time my generation was ready for school in the 1980s, we were usually admitted to mainstream schools, but we hid our identity wherever possible. Being known as Roma in Gadge educational space meant hostility from our class-mates, objections from their parents who sometimes withdrew them from the schools

we attended, and low expectations from our teachers. The educational dilemma for me was, quite literally, “pass” or fail. I (usually) “passed.”

As I said, there is more to the worry here than visibility being dangerous; the persistence of Romaphobia is a compounding factor. To illustrate the point, it’s worth turning to McGarry’s guiding example of Gay visibility. The dangers of visibility for the LGBTQ+ community have always been quite clear and Gay Pride takes place against a backdrop of brutal and appalling homophobia. For McGarry though, we have to look to the long-term benefit of efforts at visibility—“Gay pride played a significant role in gay emancipation, but the fruits of this labour take time to ripen” (McGarry 2017, 205). There is, though, a tension between this idea of pride as a long-term process and McGarry’s starting point – the puzzling persistence of Romaphobia. How much time should we expect to pass, risking the dangers of visibility, before we see results? If McGarry is correct that Gay Pride has played a significant role in Gay emancipation, it has done so in a (relatively) short period of time. McGarry identifies the early Gay Pride marches of the early 1970s as seminal. By contrast he dates the first Roma Pride movements at around 2011. In fact, I think we can see attempts at Roma unity, visibility, and claims of citizens’ right much earlier than this. I earlier mentioned the Roma Flag and anthem – these were adopted in 1971 at the first World Romani Congress in London – but there is Roma political activism across the twentieth and twenty first century. Activism in Bulgaria either side of WWI saw Roma participating in local governmental elections. Organisations were founded in Serbia, Poland and Romania in the 1920s and 1930s. Post WWII groups were founded in Germany, the United Kingdom, Finland, France, and Spain. Indeed, in Czechoslovakia there is a long history of political activism and mobilisation (Donnert 2017). After the collapse of communism in Europe in the early 1990s, Roma activism increased even further. So, there is already a long history of pride, visibility, and activism, but we are no further forward with Roma emancipation. I would add that it is not for the want of trying on the part of the Roma. It’s not that there have been no past efforts to unhinge Romaphobia, it is simply that efforts to unhinge Romaphobia seemed doomed to fail. To give a stark illustration of what we’re up against, we have just completed the “Decade of Roma Inclusion.” This was a 2005–2015 initiative involving the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program, the European Commission, UNICEF, WHO, and the Governments of Fifteen Nation States, but the evidence suggests it has had almost zero impact: “[M]ost observers seem to agree that high expectations have brought little

observable change at the local level, such that many Roma communities seem simply not to have benefited from the Decade” (Brüggemann and Friedman 2017, 5).

Obviously McGarry may have a different type of visibility in mind when he speaks of pride, but given Romaphobia’s persistence and resistance to attempts to dislodge it, should we really be optimistic that pride and visibility can serve the emancipatory role for Roma that McGarry believes it can? And should we Roma continue to risk the dangers of being visible when the evidence that this works is, at best, scant?

Turning to my second worry about Roma visibility, McGarry sees a role for it in raising awareness and to “challenge deep seated Romaphobia.” I am sceptical of how much raising awareness here matters. From my side of the socio-spatial boundary, it seems that people are fully aware of Romaphobia, but really just don’t care much. It’s often suggested that there is a clear norm against public racist speech.⁵ From the Roma side of the fence, there is not and never was such a norm. Despite knowing that I am a Roma, people have had no problem telling me they never met a Gypsy who could read, or who couldn’t fight, or who didn’t steal. People who would probably describe themselves as polite and friendly, knowing I am Roma, knowing my children are Roma, take very little prompting to openly express the view that “to some degree, you can see where Hitler was coming from.” I’ve seen signs in shops, pubs, restaurants, which state clearly “No Dogs, No Gypsies,” and I have seen fellow Roma less adept at passing than I am written off at school, refused service in shops, or told they must pay upfront in restaurants because they’re Gypsies. There is no robust norm against Romaphobic speech that I have ever detected. More crucially, though there is no problem with Gadje awareness of anti-Roma sentiment. To give an example, in 2014, in Derbyshire in the UK (where I am from), a gypsy man, Barry Smith, asserted his rights and objected to repeated uses of a Romaphobic slur directed toward him by a bar-worker at his local pub. I’d have been inclined to do much the same. The evening following his complaint, members of the chastised bar-worker’s family beat him to death and set fire to his body. They were found guilty of his murder, but in the UK, racially aggravated crimes attract harsher sentences under Section 145 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003. The sentencing judge, however, saw no racially aggravated motives in the case. He was aware of the Romaphobic slurs, but saw no reason to treat Romaphobia as an aggravating factor. He

was aware of Romaphobia, but attached no weight to it in sentencing. All of which is to say, awareness doesn't seem to me to be the problem—at the very least, it's not one that the Roma can solve simply by increasing their visibility and presence in Gadge space. As noted, that is a dangerous enterprise, and not least because everyone knows about Romaphobia, but very few think it's much a problem.

Turning to my final worry about Roma visibility, I think we have to be clear about who this would benefit. To some extent, calls for Roma to assert their belonging in social space alongside Gadjes—to “project a positive image of Roma identity”—risks subverting Roma needs for pride and visibility toward Gadge ends. Again, the example of the *Porajmos* is illustrative.

Roma were largely excluded from memorialising the victims of the Holocaust for a long time. Official German acknowledgement of the *Porajmos* only happened in 1982, and there was no German memorial for Roma dead until 2012. For the Roma of course, the *Porajmos* was a difficult thing to remember. Gadjes didn't want to remember us, didn't want us to remember, and we didn't much want to remember either. But now Gadjes do want us to join them in remembering—it matters to them now. And interestingly, we Roma have recognized a serious political need for remembering the *Porajmos* too. Acknowledging its impact on us, noting the long-standing refusal of Gadjes to include us in the socio-spatial domain of mourning and “learning from the past,” helps us to unify and improve our understanding of ourselves.⁶ But our need to remember is not the same as the Gadjes need to include us. As such, it is not incumbent upon us to declare our presence in the socio-spatial domain of mourning to assuage Gadge guilt (if there is any), or sooth Gadge sentiments about inclusivity, or to relieve Gadjes of the barely felt burden of their own Romaphobia. So, whenever we are invited to enter some space, my inclination is to insist that we ask why we are included now, and who this inclusion is supposed to benefit. In which case, we must ensure that pride and visibility serve our ends—let the Romaphobes cure themselves.

Despite these words of caution, I want to emphasise that McGarry's book is worthwhile, and makes a real contribution to the rather impoverished discussions of anti-Roma racism. It is clear, its message is positive, and its framework is instructive. I am cautious about the ability of Roma visibility to do much to combat Romaphobia, but then, I think the Roma need to build pride for the Roma, and leave the burden of removing Romaphobia to the Gadjes themselves.

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NOTES

1. This is a Roma word for “non-Roma.”
2. As with all things, there is some controversy here about the flag, who it represents, whether this is just taking on Gadje sensibilities of nationhood, and so on. I have my views, but there’s no need to share them here.
3. From the 1960s to the 1990s, official interest in where Gypsies and Roma lived, whether their children were being sent to school, how they earned their living, etc., was intense.
4. This culminated in the 1967 Plowden Report (CACE 1967) which includes an appendix on the educational needs of gypsy children, and the difficulty of overcoming their “environmental handicaps” and “backwardness.”
5. See, for example Tali Mendelberg’s idea of the Norm of Racial Equality (Mendelberg, 2001).
6. The *Dik I Ne Bister* Program takes European Roma youth to Holocaust sites to help grow our understanding of ourselves, and mobilize our determination to find solidarity and progress for Roma groups.

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