

M9 Background information “The workings of antigypsyist prejudice”

The term ‘antigypsyism’ refers to attitudes and practices hostile to so-called ‘gypsies’ and founded on racist beliefs. It covers a diverse range of phenomena, including tendentious media reporting, arson attacks and the educational difficulties faced by many Romani people.

All animosities towards specific groups and individuals classed as belonging to them need to go through a three-stage process in order to come into being (cf. diagram in materials). The first stage involves the positing of at least two homogeneous groups, the ‘us’ group and the ‘them’ group, whose members all differ from the members of the other group by virtue of an apparent (or allegedly apparent) characteristic constructed as immutable. Such characteristics may include ‘race’, nationality, ethnic origin or a ‘culture’ perceived as existing unchanged in perpetuity. The second stage of the emergence of prejudice entails the attribution of specific characteristics to all members of a particular group, following the assumption that ‘all X are Y’. An example might be ‘All gypsies are lazy layabouts’. The third stage involves the evaluation of these characteristics, which usually results in rejection of the characteristics attributed to the ‘them’ group and valorisation of those ascribed to the ‘us’ group. This three-stage process allows us to understand a number of other related mechanisms, which we will now go on to discuss.

One cause of hostility towards other social groups may be the strengthening effect of such hostility on the ‘us’ group’s cohesion and therefore on the individual members’ self-esteem. A fundamental rule of the images and stereotypes attributed to ‘gypsies’ is that they do not arise from the characteristics or behaviours exhibited by those labelled as ‘gypsies’; we should instead regard antigypsyist prejudices as projections, that is, as outworkings of a type of perception in which members of the ‘us’ group transfer onto another group characteristics and activities which social norms and values deem inappropriate for them. This mechanism fundamentally underlies all profoundly held collective prejudices.

The danger inherent to prejudice resides in its tendency to result in social interactions and practices which severely restrict the life chances of those on their receiving end and may lead to their suffering catastrophic loss or damage to property, health and life. Such social interactions and practices encompass, alongside directly violent acts, structural discrimination in arenas such as education. The subtle yet profound exclusionary mechanisms at work here frequently function at an unconscious level and amount to a lack of sensitivity and critical self-reflection rather than to deliberate hostility.

Animosity towards other social groups, social practices, and the formation of prejudices are all subject to the political and historical contexts in which they emerge and exist; these may prevent antigypsyism from manifesting, encourage its development or, in the best case, inhibit it. People’s motivation to commit discriminatory acts or ostracise others stems from prejudices and stereotypes widespread in the majority culture; however, even where these are present, they are not, per se, sufficient to generate antigypsyist practices, which do not appear until the surrounding context meets and interacts with these prejudices.

Many Europeans grow up with prejudices about ‘gypsies’, usually without ever having interacted – at least not consciously - with a real-life member of the Romani minority. Antigypsyist stereotypes and prejudices occur across all arenas of society and find reproduction and dissemination in books, films, songs, advertising and the media, thus entering into children’s lives and mental landscapes at home and school and in the wider social environment. Most of these prejudices are negative in nature, such as the notion that ‘gypsies’ are ‘lazy’ and ‘workshy’; there are, however, positively connotated stereotypes such as the romantic idea of the carefree ‘gypsy life’.

We will now outline some examples of key, interrelated and interreferential prejudices and associations or attributions which make up the antigypsyist mindset. The notion of ‘non-identity’ is central to antigypsyist constructions, currently occurring most frequently in descriptions of ‘gypsies’ as ‘nomadic’ or ‘without a homeland’; such ascriptions deny Romani people a nationality perceived as fixed and thus label them as not possessing the core characteristic of identity formation as the ‘us’ group understands it. This concept of ‘nationality’ defines it not as citizenship, but rather as the combination of an enduring national tradition, a culture exhibiting fixed elements, a national territory and a nation state. A second key notion in antigypsyist ideology is the attribution to Romani people of a parasitical lifestyle. The most concise and illustrative manifestation of this idea may be the frequently encountered construction of an opposition between the

'gypsy' and the 'farmer'. The majority population receives the latter role, that is, the part of those who produce food, while antigypsyist logic assigns to the 'gypsies' the role of those living off the work of the 'farmers' hands. In ascribing to 'gypsies' a lack of assent and adherence to civilisatory principles underlying the distribution of goods, such as property, waged labour and the law, this prejudice constructs their behaviour as archaic, pre-civilisatory and parasitical, and in so doing forms the kernel around which the prejudices and stereotypes referenced above grow.

The third key element of antigypsyist thinking we shall describe here relates to the attribution to 'gypsies' of an attitude to life that is carefree – or reckless - and undisciplined, in contrast to that of the majority society. A diverse range of stereotypes and prejudices act as manifestations of this core belief, including ideas that 'gypsies' are permanently under the influence of drink or drugs or smoke to excess, are sexually unchaste or uninhibited, lend vocal expression to their emotions, and are given to ecstatic and dramatic performances of music and dance.

Antigypsyism is a complex phenomenon which calls for an analysis that takes account of all its diverse dimensions. Educational approaches to the issue should likewise take care to avoid focusing narrowly on one of its aspects and instead seek to do justice to the entire range of factors it encompasses.

Source:

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