



WHY DO “GYPSIES” STEAL CHILDREN? AN ELIASIAN PERSPECTIVE ON ANTI-GYPSYISM

Zašto „cigani”² krađu decu? Anticiganizam iz elijasovske perspektive

ABSTRACT: *The article draws on Elias’s theory developed in *The Established and the Outsiders*, *The Civilizing Process*, and *The Court Society*, applying it to the case of racism, and particularly anti-Roma racism. The content of the stigma attached to the outsiders in Winston Parva is strikingly similar to that attached to the Roma people. Moreover, the Roma and their ancestors simultaneously constitute local communities stigmatized by established neighbours, while also forming a transnational community through which stigmatization can be observed as a long-term process unfolding in parallel with the civilizing process. The article examines how the topos of “Gypsies who steal disobedient/badly behaved children”, reproduced for centuries in everyday discourse, reveals not only the nature of the figurations into which Roma enter with majority populations, but also the established groups’ we-image, their attribution of group disgrace to Roma communities, and their fears of losing status prestige and the group charisma associated with membership in the established group through failure to conform to prevailing standards of conduct.*

KEYWORDS: *established-outsider relations, Roma, anti-Gypsyism, group charisma, group disgrace*

APSTRAKT: *U članku se primenjuje Elijasova teorija razvijena u delima *Etabilirani i autsajderi*, *Proces civilizacije* i *Dvorsko društvo*, na slučaj rasizma, a posebno rasizma prema Romima i njihovim precima. Sadržaj stigme koja je pripisana autsajderima u *Vinston Parvi* u najvećoj meri se preklapa sa predrasudama koje važe za Rome. Pored toga, Romi i njihovi preci podjednako čine i lokalne zajednice koje stigmatizuju odomaćeni susedi, ali i formiraju transnacionalnu zajednicu kroz koju se stigmatizacija može posmatrati kao dugoročan proces koji se odvija paralelno sa procesom civilizacije. Članak ispituje kako topos „Cigana koji krađu neposlušnu/loše vaspitanu decu”, reprodukovano vekovima u svakodnevnom*

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2 Malo početno slovo označava stalešku, a ne etničku grupu.

diskursu, otkriva ne samo prirodu figuracija u koje Romi ulaze sa većinskim populacijama, već i sadržaj „mi-slike” „etabliranih” grupa, njihovo pripisivanje grupne sramote romskim zajednicama, kao i njihove strahove od gubitka statusnog prestiža i grupne harizme povezane sa pripadnošću etabliranoj grupi, usled nepoštovanja preovlađujućih standarda ponašanja.

KLJUČNE REČI: *odnosi odomaćenih i stranaca, Romi, anticiganizam, grupna harizma, grupna sramota*

The Princes and the Paupers

When asked about their earliest memories of Roma people – fellow neighbours who, until recently, often stood out across the Balkans because of their different “skin colour” – many will recall a disturbing image from childhood. Like a frame from a film, this image is more than just another photograph preserved in a family album of memories. It is accompanied by a narrative without which it would be incomplete. The sight of a Roma family – a mother or grandmother accompanied by one or more children – was often paired with a warning: “The Gypsies will take you away!”, or one of its many variations (“they will steal you,” “they will carry you off,” “I will sell you to the Gypsies,” or “I will give you to the Gypsies”) (McGarry 2017: 4).

In this discursive performance, transmitted from generation to generation as a form of cultural heritage, conspicuous-looking strangers remain passive, even though they are assigned the leading role. They are unwillingly drawn into the upbringing of the majority population’s children, without any opportunity to utter a single word, let alone deliver moral lessons. This small dramatic piece has been performed for so long that its origins disappear into the history of everyday speech, while references to it can already be found in the writings of Miguel de Cervantes at the beginning of the seventeenth century (Bogdal 2010/2019: 78–80)³. The same phenomenon in Serbia is documented by Ivan Janković (Janković 2018), who also points to the tragic consequences that this fantastical belief – grounded in imagined representations, but also in very real social figurations – can produce⁴.

3 Although, for centuries across Europe, there also existed a moral panic concerning Jews who were likewise alleged to abduct Christian children (today, similar accusations are directed at purported Satanic cults or criminal networks involved in organ trafficking), one important detail completely changes the social function and origin of this fantasy. Jews were accused of abducting children for their blood, implying that the children were also killed. Roma, by contrast, are alleged to keep abducted children alive in order to turn them into beggars and thieves.

4 Specifically, the history of crime reporting recalls a case from 1933, when members of a Roma caravan were accused of abducting a “Serbian girl,” whom they allegedly blinded and forced into begging. Angry visitors at the fair in Varvarin killed all the Roma and threw their bodies into the Morava River, together with the animals they were travelling with. A later investigation showed that the girl, Ana, had actually been born blind in Romania, which is why her impoverished family had abandoned her, and that a Roma couple who had no

The widespread diffusion of this *topos* points to its strong embeddedness in real social figurations. “Gypsies” remain a recurring figure of fear. Ancient demons of nature from rural settings are replaced by sexual offenders, homeless people, and drug addicts in urban contexts. It should also be noted that already in the nineteenth century, the prominent criminologist Hans Gross – although himself the author of a text that encyclopaedically covers almost all racist *topoi* concerning Roma – rejected the claim that “Gypsies” abduct children as a “product of popular fantasy”, comparing this belief to the superstition from earlier times that “Gypsies” also eat human flesh. His article *Die Zigeuner, ihr Leben und ihre Eigentümlichkeiten* was translated and published in Serbian as article series in Police Gazette (*Policijski glasnik*) in 1898 (issues 43–47). The argument with which Hans Gross refutes this popular belief is very simple: according to him, “Gypsies reproduce excessively, and therefore they hardly need to feed other people’s children, while at the same time exposing themselves to great dangers” (*Policijski glasnik*, 1898: 343).

Who, then, are these enigmatic “outsiders”, objectively present yet shrouded in a veil of mystery like mythological beings – social, but also ontological outsiders? And, more importantly, what can the study of their relations with the established populations reveal about relations of power, conformity to standards of civilized conduct, and group charisma within the framework of Norbert Elias’s theory?

Anti-gypsyism: The Reflection of the Entrapment within Roma–Non-Roma Figurations

Norbert Elias, in collaboration with John L. Scotson, demonstrated through research conducted in the 1960s and published as *The Established and the Outsiders* (1965/1994), how differences in social power can emerge between two very similar working-class communities in a small English town (named Winston Parva). The more powerful group, the established, succeeded in monopolising power within their relationship with the outsiders by stigmatising them through gossip. It was precisely in this established–outsiders figuration that Elias identified a broader social context in which racism, as well as ethnic and class-based hostility, can emerge. The content of this stigmatising gossip corresponded to the patterns of conduct described in his theory of the Civilising Process, that is, to the norms that gradually developed alongside the centralisation of the state in the West and the formation of its monopolies of physical force and taxation. More specifically, the content of gossips that mirrors racist discourse directed at Roma (as well as at many other racialised groups) can be understood as a negation of the standards of civilised conduct: self-restraint and consideration for others, cleanliness, an aversion to violence, and adherence to work discipline

children had adopted her as their daughter. The role of Roma as dangerous bogeymen who abduct children – mirroring similar accusations historically directed at Jews, accompanied by claims of ritual use of children’s blood – has been reinforced primarily in children’s stories. When members of this outsider group were actually encountered or accused of such acts, the sanctions imposed by the established population were often extremely brutal (Janković, 2018).

(Bucholc, 2024; Elias, 1939/2001, Elias & Scotson, 1965/1994; Goodwin & Hughes, 2016; Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998; Mennell, 1989; Mennell, 1998).

In light of this, attempting to understand anti-Gypsyism as a specific form of racism directed against Roma and their ancestors from the perspective of Elias’s theory of the established and the outsiders – and more broadly of the civilizing process – is highly interesting for several reasons. First, the relationship between the majority population and the Roma and their ancestors constitutes a long-term social process (Lewy, 2000; Mayall, 2003; Tumminelli, 2016), precisely the kind of process Elias himself preferred to analyse. Moreover, as Bogdal points out (Bogdal, 2010/2019), the earliest written sources attesting to the presence of Roma in Western Europe emerge in the context of their conflict with the developing state apparatus, which chronologically coincides with the beginnings of the civilizing process. Ancestors of Roma were witnesses to the “Autumn of the Middle Ages” and occupied a precarious position between nobility, peasants, and burghers – between court, countryside, and marketplace. Like the nobility, they defied absolute rulers, albeit with greater success; they engaged in similar service and productive occupations as the bourgeoisie, yet failed to accumulate capital; they were despised and impoverished like the peasantry, but instead of achieving equality through emancipation, they came to be treated in ways more similar to subjects of (former) colonial populations (Lucassen, Cottar & Willems, 1998). Throughout this period, they offered all strata of society alternative forms of salvation through magic and entertainment, which the clergy never regarded favourably (Soulis, 1961: 145; Richardson, 2021; di Nola, 1987/2008).

Second, the Roma constitute a large transnational community linking numerous countries in Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas, numbering perhaps up to 15 million people, toward whom established populations maintain remarkably stable prejudices regardless of geographical space and historical period. At the same time, the Roma also consist of networks of concrete minority communities in specific settlements, communities resembling “Winston Parva”. For this reason, this racialised ethnic group represents an excellent case not only for the application of Elias’s theory of established and outsiders, but also for examining its connection to long-term social processes and for uncovering the dynamics that shape patterns of social relations which at first glance appear static and eternal (Powell, 2016: 135-136; Mennell, 1989: 124-5).

Finally, in much of Eastern Europe, Roma are often newcomers, or descendants of newcomers, or outsiders. Even when they are not, they are perceived by the majority population as later arrivals, whether for economic or political reasons (as is the case with Roma expelled from Kosovo and Metohija by Albanians). For this reason, the case of anti-Roma racism can serve as a bridge between the findings Elias and Scotson derived from their study of Winston Parva and their broader relevance for understanding loss of power, stigmatization, and gossip in local communities (Bucholc, 2024: 3), which become enduring discourse and the production of lasting representations of both one’s own and other groups. In short, the social position of Roma and the stigma attached to them can simultaneously be studied as a situational, local, and

microsociological phenomenon, and as a macrosociological long-term process across Europe. Indeed, the case of Roma and their ancestors precisely connects these two analytical levels.

For all these reasons, it is hardly surprising that the description of mutual relations and representations among residents in Winston Parva sounds as if it referred to a local community in Serbia that includes a Roma settlement, rather than to two groups of English people in England. The identical attitudes that the established inhabitants of this locality held toward their neighbours – ranging from accusations of deviance, through roughness, loudness, dirty homes, quarrels and violence, uncontrolled children, and hints of promiscuity (Mennel, 1989: 117) – can be heard when speaking about residents of Roma settlements.

However, readers of Elias's study know all too well that its subject is not the Roma. Nor does Norbert Elias here, or elsewhere, refer to the more recent ancestors of today's Roma, the "Gypsies". Yet, much like Max Weber before him, he did not resist to show interest in their distant ancestors and the caste system of India⁵ (Elias, 1994a: XLVIII–XLIX; Weber, 1920/1958; Kubiček, 2017: 202–204). Special attention is devoted to the segregation of their occupations connected with blood, skin, flesh – and more generally with the bodies of dead animals (tanners, butchers, fishmongers, knackers, etc.) – as well as with human corpses (executioners and undertakers) (Elias, 1994a: L), as well as barber-surgeons in the case of Roma. The link between these despised caste occupations is contact with ritually impure substances, a point that will be discussed further below. For Elias, the Indian caste system did not only provide an example that appears timeless and unchanging – its religious legitimation indeed claims precisely this – but also a case that seems to invert the situation observed in Winston Parva, since in India (according to then-dominant historiographical interpretations) outsiders achieved dominance over the established population (Mennel, 1989: 122). In addition to the analysis of caste society, Elias applies the same explanatory model to the Japanese Burakumin (Elias, 1994a: XXVIII–XXIX), who, like the outsiders in Winston Parva, are not physically distinguishable from the majority population in Japan. The reason for their stigmatization again lies in the types of occupations they traditionally performed (also executioners, gravediggers, butchers, and leather workers). In the context of Norbert Elias's historical sociology, it is important to note how religious norms played a similar role to that of later civilizing norms in including and excluding individuals from the community of believers, or from the community of the "civilized." Both religious and civilizing norms can subsequently be rationalized as being essentially hygienic in nature. Prohibited contact with an animal carcass in Hinduism and Buddhism may indeed pose a health risk, but this does not apply to the processing of animal hide, which may be sanitary and safe, yet still retains its status as a taboo because it constitutes a part of the same body of the dead animal. Similarly, civilizing norms often acquire hygienic explanations

5 "As a social phenomenon "guest peoples" existed everywhere within the Hindu community. They are to be found to this day. Contemporary remnants still evident among us are the gypsies, a typical ancient Indian guest people which, in contrast to others, has wandered outside of India." (Weber, 1958: 11–12).

only retrospectively, even though their original origins and functions may not have been related to health risks, but rather to processes of social distinction, self-restraint, and the establishment of boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

Elias's observations on the Burakumin in Japan are highly significant for understanding the position of Roma within established-outsider figurations. Although often poor, the Burakumin are not poorer than other deprived individuals in Japan, and there are also cases of relatively well-situated Burakumin, nevertheless, they are all originally religiously stigmatized because of the occupation practiced by their ancestors. (Elias, 1994a: XXXIV). The same applies to Roma in any European country, since their stigmatization does not cease with upward social mobility (individual or collective), and is equally applied to numerous non-poor Roma, in accordance with the logic of *pars pro toto*, that is, the generalisation of traits attributed to the “anomic minority/minority of the worst”.

Alongside the aforementioned religious taboos (Hindu in India and Buddhist in Japan), through which dominant clergy unified the community of believers (Elias, 1994a: XLI)⁶, Elias also emphasises the importance of social functions that outsiders may perform in relation to established groups. Where such a social (most often economic) function is absent (as in the case of the indigenous populations of the Americas, but also the ancestors of Roma under certain socio-historical conditions), they may be expelled or even exterminated (Elias, 1994a: XXXI).

Roma have traditionally, like Indian castes, Burakumin, and other similar groups, occupied a position that corresponds to Max Weber's historical totality concept of “pariah peoples” (*Pariahvolk*)⁷. By monopolising certain occupations, they entered into a limited, one-sided, and in a sense “tangential” interdependence with more powerful groups. Regardless of possible criticisms of such an interpretation (particularly the drawing of parallels with India), it remains the case that Roma have traditionally performed service occupations, which made them dependent on their customers – the majority population. Since their first appearance in European sources, just like other similar groups elsewhere in the world, they have never constituted self-sufficient communities. The survival of Roma has depended on broader economic systems within which they occupied or created specific socio-economic niches. The goods and services they offered changed according to economic circumstances, but their service-oriented character remained constant. As a group, Roma could survive only within a wider economy and society through which they moved, offering occasional goods and services and relying on spatial mobility and a multiplicity of occupations (Okely, 1983: 30). The service-based nature of such occupations

6 A mechanism that was often also present in Christian churches in Europe (Soulis, 1961: 145), as well as in Islamic relations toward Roma within the Ottoman context (Ginio, 2004).

7 “The purest form of this type is found when the people in question have totally lost their residential anchorage and hence are completely occupied economically in meeting demands of other settled peoples – the Gypsies for instance, or, in another manner, the Jews of the Middle Ages.” (Weber, 1958: 13).

within figurations – members of these “ethnoclasses” must sell their goods and services in exchange for basic necessities, unlike peasants who are in this respect self-sufficient – becomes a source of stigma rather than a religious taboo regarding the materials they handle.

Although it is clear to the reader that the described relations are, at the very least, burdened by what is commonly called racism, Elias himself uses this concept only with considerable reservation (Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998: 106). Indeed – following Weber’s approach (Weber, 1922/1978: 323–325) – Elias is highly cautious when writing about “race” and “racial” (relations, connotations, etc.), consistently placing these terms in quotation marks. He argues that phenomena commonly regarded as “racial” actually constitute a specific type of established–outsider relations, and that insisting on “race” as such amounts to placing the ontological “cart before the horse”. Elias is not alone in this epistemological critique of racism, as similar positions were later also advanced by other major authors (Wacquant, 1997: 227; Omi & Winant, 2014: X; Bonilla-Silva, 2003: 9). The real question for Elias is in fact: how did it come to be that individuals with different skin colour were perceived as members of a separate group, pointing to processes that produced differential power balances at the moment of contact. Over time, skin colour itself became a marker of group belonging associated with unequal power. Physical differences are not of substantive importance here; they function merely as a means of recognition, a “reinforcing shibboleth”. Moreover, by insisting on “race” as a kind of original source of prejudice, we would grant this ideology the status of an *a priori* fact, which would be entirely contrary to Elias’s broader theoretical framework (Elias, 1978/2007). Fantasised representations of certain groups are not “racial realities” existing independently of social relations and subsequently internalised by individuals as part of their worldview. If we were to treat them as such, it would be difficult to explain the widespread diffusion of racist beliefs (especially toward Roma) without partially accepting their validity. This leads to the key question: what is it that generates these beliefs which we commonly refer to as “racist”?

Power Inequalities, Gossips and Collective Images

In brief, Winston Parva is a small suburb of Leicester consisting of three neighbourhoods. The railway line represented a negligible physical but conspicuous symbolic boundary between the smaller Zone 1 (middle-class) and the two larger Zones 2 (working-class) and 3 (also working-class). The first group (Zones 1 and 2) understood itself as “the established”, while the second (Zone 3) occupied the role of “outsiders”. The division between the two groups was based on length of residence in Winston Parva, which structured different power relations. Members of the established group were more powerful within the local figuration. The established group had a strong internal cohesion and was able to stigmatise the outsiders. This resulted in status differentials and power inequalities that excluded the outsiders (Elias and Scotson, 1965/1994).

In Winston Parva itself there were no differences in nationality, ethnic origin, religion, “skin colour” or “race” between the two parts of the settlement and their inhabitants; on the contrary, they were homogeneous with respect to all these characteristics, eventually including material status as well. The fundamental difference was that some were long-established residents, while others were newcomers (Elias, 1994a: XVII). Norbert Elias also relates this figuration to relations between “whites” and “blacks” – but on the basis of other social divisions (ethnic and religious, in contexts where such groups stand in unequal relations of power) (Elias, 1994a: XVI; Smith, 2001: 60), as has also been noted by other researchers of groups stigmatized as outsiders (Bilefeld, 1991, 1995/1998: 16). For Elias, power is a polymorphous property generated within figurations, a property of all social interdependencies (Mennell, 1989: 115). He explicitly states that “what one calls ‘race relations’, in other words, are simply established–outsider relationships of a particular type” (Elias, 1994a: XXX).

A universal regularity of any established–outsider figuration is that the established ascribe superior human qualities to themselves, while simultaneously excluding others not only from membership in their own group, but also denying them any desirable traits, and ultimately taboos on social contact between their members and outsiders. This taboo is maintained through gossip (blame-gossip) directed at presumed transgressors (Elias, 1994a: XVI) and through prohibitions on contact with outsiders. One important element of this process of contamination consists of quasi-hygienic fantasies associated with the bodies of the subordinated (Elias, 1994a: XXVII). Elias rightly observes that presumed dirtiness (to which bodily smell should be added) often plays a complementary or substitutive role in relation to differences in “skin colour”. It is complementary when outsiders are in fact of “different complexion”, and fully substitutes for it when no physical differences exist⁸. Elias particularly emphasises the familiar and widely known image of the nineteenth-century British working class, which was described as “the great unwashed” (Elias, 1994a: XXXV). Similar conclusions have been reached by contemporary researchers of anti-Roma racism, who have clearly shown that poor hygiene and the emphasis on bodily dirtiness either reinforce the discursive topos of dark skin, or fully replace it in contexts where it is absent or where the emphasis on it is delegitimised (Bhopal & Myers, 2008: 95).

Such gossips constitute the local manifestation of what could be described as a racist discourse at the global level. The Roma do not form an established–outsider relationship with a single social group (e.g. Serbs), but rather form such networks of relations with almost every established population across the region and throughout Europe as a whole. For this reason, stigmatizing labels directed

8 As in the case of Jews, or the Burakumin in Japan, who were believed to have bluish marks under their armpits (Elias, 1994a: XXXIV); or in the case of another mysterious community in medieval Europe, which Elias does not mention, but which in a full sense represented “European Burakumin” and the “Pariahs of the Pyrenees”: the Cagots. The Cagots were also craftsmen (carpenters) excluded from medieval French society on accusations of ritual impurity and under the stigma of “white lepers” (Barzilay, 2022: 44–45). Similarly to the Burakumin, the Cagots were also considered physically marked: with deformed earlobes, tails, bleeding from the navel on Good Friday, as well as an unavoidable stench.

at Roma are numerous, resilient, and reflect a significant power imbalance (“cigani”, “ciganštura”, “mandovi”, “kalaštura”)⁹. On the other hand, the opposite term, “gadjo” (*gadža*), similarly to the Jewish “goy”, does not carry the same capacity to function as a strong stigma (Elias, 1994a: XXV). Richard Pym notes an interesting example in which the Spanish, from the eighteenth century onward (in the Age of Enlightenment!), were stereotypically equated with “Gypsies” in French and English imaginaries, i.e. this figuration of established and outsiders was projected onto international relations as well (Pym, 2007). A similar pattern can also be observed in the Balkans, where Croats sometimes equate Serbs with “Gypsies”, just as Serbs sometimes do in relation to Romanians or Greeks.

The possession of social power is thereby equated with individual and group qualities, and vice versa. Norbert Elias illustrates this vividly by noting that the adjective “noble” has preserved a dual meaning to this day (in English, but similarly in many European languages, including Serbo-Croatian): it can denote both high social status and highly valued personal qualities of an individual (Elias, 1994a: XV)¹⁰. “Old families”, or those who perceive themselves as such, everywhere display an ambivalent and competitive intimacy characteristic of aristocratic circles and urban patricians – but in the case of Winston Parva and similar small communities, even of working-class families (Elias, 1994a: XXXVIII). The abolition of ancient estate privileges did not abolish aristocracy; rather, it has led to a situation in which everyone to some extent aspires to noble honour and recognition. At higher levels of abstraction, speaking of the nation, and even of a transnational community of “civilised people”, the role of the peasantry is symbolically assigned to the Gypsies.

Elias’s claim that differences in the degree of cohesion are an important factor shaping social power and its inequalities (Elias, 1994a: XXII) is also crucial here. While this claim may hold in the case of local communities whose members know one another face-to-face, it is less applicable when analysing larger social groups such as “nations”. On the contrary, in the case of Roma, it is precisely those who live in smaller, kin- and neighbourhood-based settlements who in fact display stronger internal cohesion than the majority population, which is far more atomised. This observation is important for any possible understanding of how the theory of established and outsiders operates in the case of larger, more numerous groups, where cohesion and solidarity are not necessarily produced through actual acquaintance and direct relations, but symbolically, through mutual recognition and acknowledgement of belonging to the same group.

Elias’s argues that members of established groups tend to attribute to outsiders generalized characteristics of the “worst” (“anomic minority”) (Elias, 1994a: XIX), which is also highly significant in the context of Roma and anti-

9 Unlike other ethnic groups: the term “Šiptari” still carried a real stigmatizing force when Albanians were subordinated to Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija, whereas this is no longer the case today; the term “Švabe” (“Swabians”) never had such a strong stigmatizing potential, except perhaps in the immediate post-1945 period.

10 In English language, the same relationship can also be observed in the opposite direction: the term “villein,” which originated as a designation for a peasant or a person of low social status, also came to denote a person of low moral character – a wrongdoer or “villain.”

Gypsyism. In any sufficiently large group, whether a neighbourhood or a transnational ethnic community numbering tens of millions, it is inevitable that a minority will violate certain social norms. The norms allegedly violated by Roma in majority imaginaries are precisely – and not coincidentally – the same as those attributed to “outsiders” in Winston Parva. Members of outsider groups are those who fail to conform to norms, and whose anomicity becomes the measure of the normativity (and even normality) of their own group (Elias, 1994a: XXIV). Contact with them, from the perspective of established group members, carries the risk of contamination through “anomic infection”. As Norbert Elias further explains, full participation in the dominance of one’s own group and in the group charisma it carries entails submission to group-specific norms; charisma and dominance are therefore rewards for subordination (Elias, 1994a: XXIII).

The we-image, we-ideal, and they-image are paradigmatically illustrated by the already mentioned example from literature. The plot of Cervantes’s *La Gitanilla* (“The Little Gypsy Girl”) can almost serve as an illustration of Elias’s *Court Society* (Elias, 1969/1983), both as an artistic representation and as a critique of the habitus of courtiers – that is, of the established. The Spanish aristocrat Preciosa, the main heroine of the drama, as a young girl experiences the threat voiced by parents to “naughty” children: she was taken away by “Gypsies”! Although she is unaware of this, as are the non-Roma among whom she moves and for whom she is a “Gypsy” herself (which clearly indicates that there are no physical differences between her and the Roma), her new family constitutes an unambiguous antipode to her true family of Spanish nobility. The band of Gypsies is a kind of inverted court, monastic order, or artisan guild, in which a clear hierarchy exists. In earlier depictions other status symbols of aristocracy are also visible (horse riding, hunting dogs, jewellery and expensive clothing, even ducal or royal titles derived from “(Little) Egypt”) (Bogdal, 2010/2019: 28). Yet its members are portrayed as unruly, greedy, ignorant of Christian morality, prone to theft, deception and lasciviousness. Most strikingly, they are depicted as inclined to incest (as in many jokes still told in the region today). Although Cervantes uses this image of outsiders to criticise his contemporaries – the aristocrats, particularly their vanity (a trait associated with the early stages of the civilizing process and unsuitable for the absolutist court) and their false flattery and insincerity (traits of the “civilised courtier”) – the essence of his work is that Preciosa, although raised among “Gypsies”, retains her aristocratic habitus. She not only remains chaste and uncorrupted, “shy”, but “neither sun nor bad weather succeeded in disfiguring her face or roughening her hands”. As Klaus-Michael Bogdal observes, even nature itself respects her aristocratic refinement. As Bogdal concludes, in a status society, those excluded from honour include not only those engaged in dishonourable occupations – executioners and knacker workers – but also “unfree people and serfs, as well as Jews, Turks, pagans, Gypsies, and Wends (Slavs)”. The stigmatisation of these categories constitutes the reverse side of the grand glorification of the noble, particularly under absolutism (Bogdal, 2010/2019: 50).

Here we arrive at the next major theme: the connection between the figuration of established and outsiders and the civilizing process, and thus the question of where the fantasised content of we-image, we-ideal, and they-image actually originates. Elias and Scotson's study *The Established and the Outsiders* was, after all, an attempt to demonstrate the applicability of this aspect of his magnum opus to contemporary empirical data (Goodwin and Hughes, 2016; Mennell, 1989; Blomert, 2021: 317).

The Civilized Habitus and Its Discontents

The bodily dimension of the fantasised *they-image* of outsiders, and thus of racist discourse, is not accidentally connected to the shame attached to the body and bodily functions in Elias's theory of the civilizing process. Such representations begin with physical differences (most commonly skin colour), but no less emphasis is placed on other bodily traits, as well as corresponding mental and moral characteristics – typically closely associated with a weak control of bodily functions, aggression, and/or sexuality. Although Elias and Scotson only outlined these connections in a preliminary way, it is precisely the possession of allegedly “more civilised” standards that became one of the central elements of the self-understanding of the inhabitants of Winston Parva and the basis on which they distinguished themselves from the “Cockney” newcomers, who in their eyes represented a threat to local traditions and the collective identity of the community (Mennell, 1989: 119).

The scope of this article does not allow for a detailed exposition of Elias's magnum opus, *The Civilizing Process*, and therefore recourse will be made to Stephen Mennell's concise summary. He enumerates the following properties that characterise civilised behaviour: “politeness and good manners, consideration for others; cleanliness and good personal hygiene habits; refinement, gentleness and courtesy; restraint, self-control and composure; and aversion to the use of violence (except in exceptional circumstances). Above all, to be civilised means to live with others in an orderly, well-organised, just, predictable and calculable society” (Mennell, 1998: 29).

A further key characteristic of the civilizing process, which links it to the figuration of established and outsiders, is that the origin of these qualities lies in the increasing complexity of positions within chains of social interdependence. Compliance with these norms of conduct is accompanied by a sense of solidarity¹¹ in a variety of social relations that bind individuals into complex societies in which personal relations play an increasingly minor role. Generalised patterns of behaviour, and especially self-control over (primarily bodily) impulses, are particularly important for inclusion in the prestigious community of the civilised

11 This brings us once again to Max Weber, this time to his understanding of status distinctions: “Every status society lives by conventions which regulate the style of life, and hence creates economically irrational consumption patterns and fetters the free market through monopolistic appropriations and by curbing the individual's earning power” (Weber, 1978: 307).

– the community that adheres to the norms of civilised conduct – and for individuals to experience themselves as part of it (Elijas, 1939/2001: 523–524).

In addition, an important aspect of civilisation also involves “rationality” and presumed work habits (Elijas, 1939/2001: 536–537). The moral hierarchy of national and cultural differences, in which Western Europeans – with the exception of the Irish – occupied the top position as diligent, industrious, and generally skilled workers, while Slavs, Jews, and Southern Europeans were placed lower, are accused of dirtiness, insularity, or laziness (Sennett & Cobb, 1972: 14), illustrates how such perceptions are structured within broader patterns of social valuation. Similarly, other sociologists studying racism have reached comparable conclusions in the case of relations between “blacks” and “whites”: “doing so establish criteria by which they themselves are represented. In the act of defining Africans as ‘black’ and ‘savages’, and thereby excluding them from their world, Europeans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were representing themselves as ‘white’ and ‘civilised’” (Miles and Brown, 2003: 50).

According to Elias, the roots of civilisation are firmly rooted in the soil of shame. Elias defines “shame” as a specific shaping of the instinctual structure, more precisely as a particular excitation, a form of anxiety about social degradation experienced in encounters with other, more powerful individuals (Elijas, 1939/2001: 543–544). As “civilised” people become more self-disciplined and self-aware, their “threshold of repugnance” shifts. They become more disgusted by their bodies; they dress and screen themselves; higher levels of delicacy and restraint are demanded; natural functions become increasingly distasteful; sexuality and aggression are progressively inhibited (Smith, 2001: 149). Shame is produced by any transgression against the rules of the group to which one belongs or with which one identifies. A very high proportion of shame experiences in civilised societies is produced by specific embarrassment about the body. As Johan Goudsblom in his article *Shame as a Social Pain* (Goudsblom, 2016) argues, that shame arises where bonds of solidarity or hierarchy are weakened, which is always experienced as unpleasant and painful. In such situations, when individuals perceive that their behaviour has jeopardized their relations with those more powerful than themselves or with their social equals, and that their social position and the respect accorded to them have thereby been called into question, shame emerges as a particular form of social pain. It signals that the established relations of hierarchy and solidarity have been disturbed, while at the same time expressing the individual’s recognition that they have failed to live up to the standards expected of them within the social group. In this sense, shame is not merely an inner psychological experience, but a socially constituted emotion through which individuals experience the weakening or disruption of the social bonds that sustain their position within a given social figuration.

Analysing narratives about Roma – historical or contemporary, as there is little difference between them – it becomes clear that the civilising process itself, or its presumed negation, constitutes the main mechanism generating the discourse of anti-Gypsyism. In much of the literature on Roma, one finds

representations of their allegedly childlike nature, “spirit of play”, innocence, naivety, and a life filled with joy and adventure. They are portrayed as a “people” who never mature, but remain permanently at the level of childlike mental, moral, and emotional development. Particularly interesting are narratives linking the fact that Roma do not have a state to their presumed characteristics. “Roma have no state” – a claim elaborated by the pioneer of Serbian Romani studies Tihomir Đorđević through a folk tale: “The Gypsy kingdom, as it is said among the people, lasted only three days. On the first day the Gypsy king rode his mother through the town, on the second he hanged his father, and on the third the Gypsies overthrew him. Therefore, for something that lasts a very short time it is said: it lasts like the Gypsy kingdom!” (Đorđević, 1973: 125)¹². Other prominent researchers of the social history of Roma and of representations of their position provide numerous examples that illustrate this point. The Italian encyclopaedist Francesco Predari, in his work *Origine e Vicende dei Zingari* (The Origin and Fate of the Gypsies, 1841), speculated that the Gypsies were in fact descendants of a primitive pre-population of Europe, who – due to a geological and political catastrophe – were forced to live permanently as nomads (Leigeois, 2006: 23). Even more interesting is a text by the Marquis Baroncelli, who invited Buffalo Bill (William Cody) to his estate and, among other things, asked him to express his opinion on the links between Gypsies and American Indians. Cody allegedly confirmed this, stating that they shared “a series of striking similarities.” On this basis, the Marquis concluded that Egyptian peasants (fellahin), Native Americans, Roma, and Basques (!) ultimately shared a common origin (op. cit.: 24–25). The ancestors of Roma were repeatedly identified either with communities from earlier stages of the “evolution” of humankind (primitive peoples, nomads, etc.), or with contemporary “primitive” communities from exotic regions – thus serving as a living illustration that “uncivilised” people do not exist only in the past and/or in distant geographical areas.

The other face of anti-Gypsyism, the one that at first glance appears affirmative, uses representations of Gypsies in order to criticise phenomena perceived as lacking within the “civilised” we-image. As Judith Okely has pointed out (Okely, 1983: 232), “outsiders have projected onto Gypsies their own repressed fantasies and longings for disorder”¹³. Mattijs van de Port, following a similar line of argument, writes on the position of Roma in the 19th century: “The Gypsy camp was Europe’s erogenous zone, the closest wildness, invested with the unfulfilled desires, impossible yearnings and unsatisfied passions of

12 This example from folk literature is particularly relevant in the context of the chapter on the sociogenesis of the state in *The Civilizing Process*. A community that is not capable of organising a political order is also not civilised; in the imaginative logic of the folk storyteller, however, causality is reversed – “uncivilised” peoples are not even capable of founding a state (let alone an empire).

13 In support of this claim, there exists a vast body of Romantic literature across various genres in which the fantasised image of Roma life is contrasted with the proclaimed values of the Enlightenment: sensuality and passion versus reason; spontaneity and freedom versus order; intimacy versus distance; sincerity versus artificial conventions of behaviour. Yet, regardless of whether the image of “Gypsies” is positive or negative, the opposition between this image and the values of “civilised” society remains a constant.

bourgeois civilisation” (van de Port, 1998: 7). Jean-Pierre Liégeois also captures this insight aphoristically: “Ants have always despised grasshoppers, but they have also envied them” (Liégeois, 2006: 139).

Civilisation as an ethical concept in Norbert Elias’s theory provides insight into the sociogenesis of anti-Gypsyism and its interrelations with other social processes. At the same time, “civilisation” as a common-sense, emic category has considerable explanatory power for understanding the content of prejudices against Roma and their ancestors, particularly their uniformity across time and space, which brings us back to the narrative of child abduction from the beginning of the text.

Conclusion

It is precisely fears of the loss of distinguishing hereditary prestige . . . that have to this day a decisive part in shaping the prevailing rule of conduct. Precisely those fears . . . are particularly predisposed to internalization; they, far more than the fear of poverty, hunger or direct physical danger, become rooted in the individual member of such classes, through his upbringing, as inner anxieties which bind him to a learned code almost automatically, under the pressure of a strong super-ego, even independently of any control by others. The continuous concern of parents whether their child will attain the standard of conduct of their own or even a higher class, whether it will maintain or increase the prestige of the family . . . fears of this kind surround the child from its earliest years . . . They continuously add fuel to the fiery circle of inner anxieties, which hold the behaviour and feelings of the growing child permanently within definite limits, binding him to a certain standard of shame and embarrassment, to a specific accent, to particular manners, whether he wishes or not. (Elias, 1939/1994b: 521-522)

The lengthy passage cited above from Elias’s *The Civilizing Process* clearly explains what lies at the root of the threat directed at children that “the Gypsies will take them away.” The centuries-long process of civilization continues to be reproduced, even today, within every family aspiring to the status of “decent people” (van de Port, 1998: 40–42). The very construction of “the Gypsy” within this “grand narrative” represented, from the outset, the darker side of the formation of the European cultural subject who conceived himself as the bearer of world civilization and progress (Bogdal, 2010/2019: 12). Distance from the Gypsy became a measure of one’s own degree of civilization (Bogdal, 2010/2019: 140).

In the theoretical introduction to *The Established and the Outsiders*, Elias likewise emphasizes the capacity of communities to impose cohesion upon their members precisely through the tabooing of contacts with stigmatized groups. More than that, images of outsiders play a crucial role in the internal conflicts of the established themselves. Condemnation for failing to comply with proclaimed standards is accompanied by an automatic association with the

stigmatized outsiders and by the loss of prestige and power within the privileged group (Elias, 1994a: XL), whether through “the Law of Similarity” or “the Law of Contact or Contagion.” This threat constantly hovers over adult members of the established group, but especially over the heads of children who have yet to become established within it.

What, however, constitutes the actual content of collective fantasies about outsiders remains an open question in Elias’s work. For him, such discourses represent social facts *sui generis* – neither rational nor irrational. They are “protean historical phantoms”: images that appear entirely arbitrary, although they are not. Here, as in *The Civilizing Process*, Elias stresses that the contents of these fantasy-images acquired during childhood exert a powerful influence upon patterns of affect and conduct later in life (Elias, 1994a: XXXVI). The fear instilled in children from an early age that they might be “taken away by Gypsies” is, in fact, the shadow cast by the fears of older generations that their descendants may fail to acquire the standards of civilized conduct, lose the prestige and power associated with them, and ultimately become “like Gypsies.”

This mechanism establishes a clear distinction between those who are shamed in order to be corrected – that is, members of one’s own community – and those who are humiliated in order to be excluded because they are perceived as incapable of being “corrected” (“Gypsies”). As Smith observes: “Unlike shaming, humiliation does not pull its victims back into their proper place. Instead, it pushes them out of their old place; it displaces them. Instead of trying to reform the victim, humiliation deliberately weakens and damages her. The humiliated victim is not reintegrated into the group but cut off from it” (Smith, 2001: 155).

Gossip is of central importance in figurations in which the established and the outsiders are not physically distinguishable and live within communities characterized by face-to-face interaction, as was the case in Winston Parva. In such situations, group membership is known to community members themselves but not necessarily to outside observers. By contrast, a developed and recognizable racist discourse assumes the role of local gossip and rumour once the figuration of established and outsiders becomes a long-term historical process.

Unlike gossip, however, racist discourse does not require the objective existence of local cohesion and intensive communication among the established. Indeed, in the case of Roma populations and immigrants from the Middle East in Western European countries, the opposite often holds true: it is they who display stronger internal cohesion than the dispersed established populations (Hogenstijn, van Middelkoop & Terlouw, 2008: 147), a fact that is today frequently interpreted as yet another indicator of their alleged “uncivilized” character.

Racist narratives enable communities of the established to sustain a common *we-image* across vast territories and in the absence of direct interpersonal contact. In this way, fantasies of their own group charisma and of the group disgrace attributed to outsiders, together with fantasy-images of the latter’s supposedly “uncivilized” habitus, are transmitted across generations. They survive in diverse discursive genres – from everyday speech to literature – and can always be reactivated as ready-made frameworks of perception and understanding.

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