

Letter from the outgoing Editor
From *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* to
***Romani Studies*: Purpose and essence**
of a modern academic platform

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“Our journal, we trust, will thrive without self-commendation”, wrote the Editors of the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, David MacRitchie and Francis Hindes Groome, in the first issue of the journal published in July 1888. They went on to declare the aims of the journal to be “to gather new materials, to rearrange the old, and to formulate results, as little by little to approach the goal – the final solution of the Gypsy problem”.

Those who today are bent on demonising the journal, what it stands for, and the society that owns it, will no doubt feast on that choice of wording, while others might cringe. But MacRitchie and Groome’s use of the phrase ‘Gypsy problem’ was not meant to describe tense relations between the Roma and majority society, nor did the expression ‘final solution’ have anything to do with regulating such relations, least of all through persecution or annihilation. Quite the opposite: In the context of the time, decades before the collocation ‘final solution of the Gypsy problem’ came to symbolise the atrocities of genocide, the pair put forward an agenda of strict enquiry, one that would contribute to knowledge and understanding, as they continue to explain in the same paragraph:

There is Grellmann’s old theory, by which the Gypsies first reached Europe in 1417, Pariahs expelled from India by Tamerlane less than ten years before. There is the Behram Gur theory, by which, about 430 A. D., the Jat ancestors of our Gypsies were summoned from India to Persia, and from Persia gradually wandered westward. And there is the Prehistoric theory, by which there have been Gypsies in Europe for more than two thousand years, by which Europe, or a great portion of Europe, owes to the Gypsies its knowledge of metallurgy. These are but three out of many theories, besides which there are a number of minor questions, as, when did the Gypsies first set foot in England, or in North and South America? Then there are the language, the manners, the folklore of the Gypsies. Much as has been written on these subjects, as much remains to be written, if we are ever to decide whether Romany is an early or a late descendant of Sanskrit; whether the Gypsies derived their metallurgical terms from Greek, or the Greeks theirs from Romany; whether the Gypsies have always been dwellers in tents;

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and whether they got their arts, music, and folk-tales from the Gaujios, or whether the Gaujios have borrowed from the ‘Egyptians’”

Some contemporary colleagues like to depict this programme as an ‘obsession with origins’ or a ‘collector’s thrill’. That is, to my mind, negativity by choice, for MacRitchie and Groome’s mission statement can just as well be described as a quest for discovery and a commitment to documentation and as such as a way of producing “accounts that are rigorous, the validity of which can be assessed by others whose world view differs from our own”, as Michael Stewart eloquently defines the modern scientific agenda in his contribution to the current issue.

That first issue of the journal, to which the above quote from MacRitchie and Groome served as an editorial Preface, contained, among other contributions, a survey article on ‘Turkish Gypsies’ by Alexandre Paspatis, featuring casual observations, which might be considered to be a forerunner of modern descriptive ethnographies such as Marushiakova and Popov’s (2016) overview of ‘Gypsies in Central Asia and the Caucasus’; it included a paper on the ‘Annals of the Gypsies in England’ by Henry Crofton, presenting pioneering archive research that would set the ground for contemporary works such as those by Fricke (1996) on Gypsies under German Absolutism, by Pym (2007) on the Gypsies in Early Modern Spain or for Taylor’s (2014) *History of Roma, Gypsies and Travellers*; and it had a contribution on the ‘Statistical Account of Gypsies in the German Empire’ by Rudolf von Sowa, which might be compared with a modern descendant in the form of Szelényi and Ladányi’s (2006) census-based analysis of ethnicity and social class; all these alongside documentation of Romani folk tales and vocabularies, and book reviews. In every respect, the first issue of the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* laid the foundation for the cross-disciplinary field of research known today as Romani/Gypsy Studies.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as a generation of socially engaged researchers emerged and an evolving international circle of Roma activists began to embrace academic arguments to support their nation-building project, the established research tradition on Roma/Gypsies came under critical scrutiny. The quest for knowledge came to be regarded by some as intrinsically serving the cause of equal rights, and mobilisation of research in support of political empowerment came to be seen as morally superior to the plain commitment to provide rigorous descriptive accounts. Nothing symbolises the ensuing competition among researchers to assert their moral superiority over other scholars more than the coining of the term ‘Gypsyism’. It has been used as a descriptive label for the members of the early *Gypsy Lore Society* and subsequently in a dismissive way to refer to a scientific ‘paradigm’ that linked language to Indian origins, and culture with ethnicity (Iovița and Schurr 2004),

supposedly in order to exoticise Romani origins and racialise Gypsies (Mayall 2004: 162–79). It continues to be employed to dismiss as amateurs those who lay a claim to expertise, and as a tag for the alleged wholesale dissemination of fallacies and mysteries (Ó hAodha 2002). Some have defined it as an ideologically driven epistemology, a form of Orientalism (Lee 2005) or Scientific Racism (Acton 2015), others use it to brand any rejection of ideas put forward by educated Roma (Hancock 2010: 40). Some authors do not even take the trouble to offer a definition or description, simply waving the label ‘Gypsyologist’ in the expectation that their audience will instinctively identify it as denoting evil (Brooks 2015: 58). So broad and contradictory are its uses that the term ‘Gypsyorism’ has become void of any consistent propositional content. Its meaning is instead illocutionary: It proclaims that the Other operates on a false and morally discredited premise, and that by implication the speaker/writer is able to assert the purity of their own credentials and motivations and evoke recognition of their legitimacy and acceptability on the part of stakeholders. In this way ‘Gypsyologist’ is like a curse or a charm: By articulating the word with reference to others, one seeks to exonerate oneself.

The existence of such a term and the perlocutionary speech act that it represents tell us something about the divisions, the tensions, and the challenges in the field that has come to be known as Romani studies. My first act after taking over the Editorship of the Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society in the spring of 1999 and assembling the first team of editorial consultants was to initiate a change to the name of the journal. The proposal to adopt the name ‘Romani Studies (continuing Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society)’, a title that flags a modern agenda without completely disowning the past, was adopted by the Board of Directors of the Gypsy Lore Society with just a very narrow majority. Its purpose was to replace the connotations of the old label with a new mission statement. The notion of ‘lore’ – the internal cultural legacy of others – was replaced by ‘studies’ – denoting scholarly activity that answers to universal standards of rigour, realistic objectivity and evidence-based validation. From showcasing the ‘lore’ of others we turned our attention to sharing our own activity as scholars, our methods, and our findings, and opening them to scrutiny and discussion. The term ‘Gypsy’ with its vague and shifting readings of a status- and lifestyle-oriented attribute was abandoned in favour of ‘Romani’ to signal that our interest was in populations that had agency and their own image of themselves.

The change of name signalled to the world that we sought to position our field of investigation on a par with other culture- and language-based academic disciplines and move away from the perpetual image of collectors of mystical trophies whose activities are shielded within the confines of an incestuous club. It invited contributors to submit articles that were of interest not just to the

community of specialists with a particular interest in Romani/Gypsy populations, but which were pitched to the wider community of scholars within the relevant disciplines and neighbouring subject areas, and accordingly to present a critical reflection that would be of value to academic enquiry in general. Quite simply, the new mission statement was to put research in Romani studies on the map of mainstream academic disciplines. This also meant that content would not be limited to descriptive accounts of Romani/Gypsy populations but would extend to cover analyses of majority society, its practices and its institutions, as viewed from the perspective of its relationship with its Romani minorities. Both directions are nicely represented by the two article contributions to the first issue that carried the journal's new title: Clark and Campbell's (2000) analysis of media attitudes to Romani asylum seekers in Britain, and Gay y Blasco's (2000) ethnographic analysis of Gitano Pentecostalism.

This approach to re-positioning the field took inspiration from the establishment of a scientific community devoted to Romani linguistics in the early 1990s. Until then, most networking around the Romani language was linked to language activism and the nation-building project: Resolutions on standardisation and committees on lexical enrichment and spelling flourished but remained largely detached and isolated from methodological and theoretical reflections in linguistics, neither embracing such reflections nor enriching them. The launch of the bi-annual International Conferences on Romani Linguistics in 1993 (a tradition that continues to this day) and the resulting proliferation of high-quality publications and collaborative research projects in Romani linguistics has meant that the scientific study of the Romani language has not only benefited from the state of the art in linguistic theorising but that it has also had considerable input into shaping that theorising in a range of sub-fields including language contact, linguistic typology, language policy and planning, dialectology, and the development of digital resources for language documentation. In the same vein, the journal's new vision was to create a platform for the dissemination of high-quality research that would have an impact on the various mainstream disciplines and subject areas in which contributions were written.

Within a few years of the name change and the adoption of this new editorial outlook, and following some rather difficult negotiations both with external stakeholders and within the GLS Board of Directors, an agreement was reached with a leading and reputable academic publisher, Liverpool University Press, to produce and distribute the journal. This sealed the programme of the journal's transformation from a cottage industry to a publication that was quickly added to the listings of key international indexing and quality assurance agencies and to the content of global electronic distribution packages and would now reach hundreds of major academic institutions. Inevitably, this has

led to a shift in the profile of reader audiences. As annual figures of electronic access climbed to the thousands and beyond, membership in the Gypsy Lore Society has recently fallen to a low last seen in the early 1980s. Engaging with the high-quality content of this journal is now more likely (by a factor of hundreds) to be linked to being an affiliate of a major academic institution than to being a fee-paying, voting member of a closed club.

Yet these developments have not meant that we can take the definition of our field of investigation or the role and status of this journal for granted. In a recent blog post and comment in the *Times Higher Education*¹ my colleague Stephen Hutchings and I call for reforms of modern languages curricula, which in the UK as in other countries typically include the study of a language and the focus on the history and culture of a particular nation-state. We argue that the flow of ideas, capital, and labour in a globalised world and the growing multilingual character of cities make academic discipline boundaries that are based on the legacy of imperial nation states out of date and redundant. Instead, we propose an integrated approach to the teaching of languages and cultures that would feature theme-based enquiry – for example, content modules like ‘New Media and Political Protest in Authoritarian Societies’ (co-taught by staff in Arabic, Russian, and Chinese) or ‘Remembering Communism in Eastern Europe’ (co-taught by German and Russian staff) – that would cut across language-based cultures, alongside offers of specific language skills, while also removing the traditional hierarchy between the study of what is usually referred to as Modern Foreign Languages (the languages of former imperial powers) and ‘community languages’ such as Arabic, Chinese, Polish, Turkish, or Urdu. Our reflections were instigated not least by growing pressure to justify academic programmes with reference to graduates’ career destinations. An academic portfolio that is enriched by the study of diverse languages and cultures, we believe, can be an asset for various career paths that require sensitivity toward cultural and ethnic diversity in the public, private and voluntary sectors.

The absence of an imperial legacy, or even a nation state, has meant that Romani studies has never been a natural candidate for a ring-fenced academic subject area with its own standardised curriculum and bespoke methodology. The vision of Romani studies as represented by this journal over the past eighteen years has been instead one of networking across established subject areas around an interest in particular population groups, explicitly avoiding any strict scripting as to which groups should be included and instead affording contributors the flexibility to set their own descriptive parameters. At the same time, the standards of rigour applied to assess submissions have been those of the mainstream subject areas in which the contributions were written, coupled

1. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/modern-languages-four-reforms-reclaim-future-our-discipline>, published 26 June 2017.

as far as possible with expertise in the particular empirical context of investigation; as an editorial team we have never asserted that there was or could be an epistemology that was specific to Romani studies.

When approached on various occasions by other institutions and asked for my personal opinion on whether it would be a good idea to establish a dedicated department for Romani studies, I always replied by emphasising the networking nature of the field and the need to anchor research on Roma/Gypsies within the norms, methods, and scrutiny conventions of individual specialised disciplines such as history, social anthropology, linguistics, and musicology. Needless to say, I have never tried to establish a dedicated Romani studies programme at my own institution, nor have I sought the title of 'Professor of Romani Studies' despite my track record of many years of interdisciplinary work in this field including publications in recognised outlets for linguistics, international relations, sociology, and migration studies. As we question the rationale and the practicalities of maintaining subject-area boundaries for German, French, Italian, or Portuguese studies, good reasons to argue in favour of Romani studies as a distinct discipline (rather than a network) with a unique and bespoke methodological and epistemological base seem elusive.

Many point to the existence of dedicated departments for Jewish studies as a comparison. In fact these are more often than not organised in the form of centres and combined degree courses that cut across subject areas. In an early article that surveys that field's development, Band (1966) explains that Judaic studies, the forerunner of modern Jewish studies, were normally divided into the study of language and religion, with Hebrew often accommodated in departments for Near Eastern studies, Yiddish in linguistics, Jewish history in history, and Jewish thought in religions and theology. Overall, the purpose of setting up Judaic studies programmes was to give a secular academic perspective on Jewish religion and history and offer an alternative to the tradition of centuries of rabbinical studies, which in turn is closely focused on a particular, tightly codified corpus of texts. The curriculum of modern, secular Jewish studies therefore includes Hebrew, Biblical studies as well as Jewish history and law. Among the popular career aims of Jewish studies graduates, Band mentions teaching at afternoon Hebrew schools, rabbinical work, and social work. Arguably, the emergence of Jewish studies as a modern field has led to a widening of methods and objectives, from the specialised rabbinical study of religious texts (scriptures and commentaries) to a network of cross-discipline approaches, and to a broadening of career opportunities, from rabbinical training to a range of teaching and community service roles. While there is no denying that the proliferation of Jewish studies programmes also reflects a national awakening, particularly since the establishment of the State of

Israel, academically it might well be regarded as a process of network-based diversification rather than a specialised streamlining of content and method.

To my knowledge only four people have so far claimed the title of Professor of Romani Studies. The late Milena Hübchmannová founded a programme in Romani studies at Charles University in Prague, as part of the Institute for Indology. Much of the curriculum in the early days consisted of language classes and the philological investigation of literary texts in Romani, many of them produced by local Romani authors with the support of the programme's own academic staff. As the first programme in Romani studies, it signalled acknowledgement of Romani culture and ethnicity and the practical need to understand the Roma minority in order to engage with it. The fact that the programme continues to exist despite low student enrolment points to its emblematic value to the academic institution which hosts it.

Thomas Acton taught modules in sociology at Greenwich University in London, and upon his promotion to full professor in 1997 he adopted the title of Professor of Romani Studies, albeit without leading a dedicated and comprehensive teaching programme, the new title reflecting instead his personal research and student supervision interests. More recently, Iulius Rostas was appointed Chair of a new Romani Studies programme at the Central European University in Budapest, following a call that sought explicitly to recruit political activists of Roma background to an academic initiative that would supposedly introduce a 'new paradigm' into the field of Romani studies (see discussion in Michael Stewart's contribution to this issue). That initiative was sponsored through external funds and is an example of how financial and political interests are often interlaced when new programmes of this kind are established. Finally, Kimmo Granqvist was appointed to lead a research unit in Romani studies at Södertörn University in Stockholm, an institution that had previously launched its engagement with Roma through a government-sponsored teacher training programme and is now seeking to draw on that investment to develop an international research profile. Interestingly, these two most recent openings each represent different approaches to the global trend toward economisation of research: At CEU, an external endowment is being linked to a commitment to flag political empowerment, turning the university into the site of a sponsored advocacy centre. At Södertörn, the calculation seems to be that a seed corn investment will allow the institution to tap into funds that accompany a growing public and political interest in equality in general and in Roma in particular.

Given the uncertainties around what constitutes the methodological basis for Romani studies as a demarcated discipline, and with the history of adversarial relations surrounding the potential mobilisation of academia for advocacy, platforms for research are vulnerable to demands that they should act

as representation tools rather than mere forums for scientific exchange. This was reflected in debates around control over the Central European University's summer school in Romani studies, which was replaced in 2013 by a Roma-led seminar; by debates surrounding the joint European Commission and Council of Europe's European Academic Network on Romani Studies, accused by some as an attempt by academics to speak on behalf of the Roma;² and by debates surrounding the Council of Europe's support for a European Roma Institute, which pitched itself in direct competition to that Network, promising to 'license' research and teaching on Roma and to subjugate it to the control of those who define themselves as Roma.³ In this climate, assuming an academic leadership position in Roma-related research has often been equated with seeking to speak on behalf of Roma or to represent their interests, while influential teaching and research positions have in turn been regarded as a strategic advocacy opportunity.

This journal has never attempted to fill a gap in representation, to act as a catalyst for policy intervention, or even to serve as a mentoring forum for disadvantaged groups, though it has always offered a platform to early career researchers and an opportunity to launch and develop a track record of publication outputs. We have never taken the trouble to pledge that we would afford equal treatment to contributors "regardless of their ethnic background", to quote a common phrase, since such a commitment was always taken for granted. The conflation of academic research with identity politics has recently been demonstrated yet again when at the 2017 Annual General Meeting of the Gypsy Lore Society a proposal to change the Society's name to 'Romani Studies', consistent with the title of its journal, was countered with two separate arguments. The first was that only Roma should have the right to decide how to name the Society. The second was that the term 'Gypsy Lore' represented, supposedly, an Eastern European research tradition that deserved equal recognition. Both arguments are bizarre. The Society belongs to and is run by its fee-paying members and is not directly answerable to an imagined community of populations that self-ascribe as Roma. And the term 'Gypsy Lore' represents the archetype of Western traditions in the field, by contrast to Eastern European establishments such as *Romistika*, *Studii Romani*, and the like.⁴ What the debate signals is an attempt to embed symbolic power competitions among distinct constituencies, real or imagined, into the running of scholarly enterprises.

2. See http://romanistudies.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/YM_EANRS-Balance-sheet.pdf, April 2015.

3. For a documentation see: <http://romanistudies.eu/news/eri-chronology/>

4. See Marushiakova and Popov (2005) for a discussion of differences between Western and Eastern scholarly depictions of Roma/Gypsies.

For those managing such scholarly enterprises, including this journal, steering clear of such debates will remain a challenge. As Michael Stewart (this issue) points out, those who feel that their voices have not been heard often make their case for participation by putting forward the proposition that Who speaks is as or more important as What they say. Those entrusted with running academic platforms such as scholarly conferences and publications will need to take a firm stance on whether claims for symbolic power and representation made on behalf or even seemingly on behalf of constituencies, real or imagined, mean that there is a justified need to reconsider the broader epistemological basis of scholarly discussion; whether encouraging contributions from Roma or the participation of a larger number of scholars of Eastern European background should mean that the parameters by which we assess and scrutinise quality and rigour should change; and whether the norms to which this journal has adhered so far, such as two-way anonymous peer-review, minimising or at least mitigating potential conflicts of interest in the peer-review process, disregarding authors' affiliations and background, meticulous contextualisation and citing of sources, and especially the commitment to link analyses in our field to trends and key theoretical questions in mainstream academic enquiry – whether all those are the exclusive property of a 'White' or 'Western' way of doing things and should be abandoned or loosened under the pretext of affording representation to others, or whether they are universal norms that define a mission statement around which we can unite as scholars regardless of our diverse backgrounds.

The recent subscription and online access statistics alluded to above make this point quite vivid: If this journal was once tasked primarily with providing a mouthpiece to those who were members of the Gypsy Lore Society, so its mission has over the years altered, and the Society may now have every reason to re-assess its own *raison d'être* and to consider whether one of its principal objectives might be to safeguard the vision, the prominence and the integrity of this journal. The journal's success cannot be taken for granted. The ever-increasing number of publications on Roma/Gypsies in discipline-specific journals in politics, migration studies, anthropology, linguistics, and other areas is proof that our efforts to put Romani studies on the agenda of mainstream scholarship have borne fruit, but it also means that opportunities to publish in this field have widened considerably. Another journal devoted to 'Gypsy Studies' was launched last year, and yet another, to be produced and managed at the Central European University, has recently been announced. The future of our journal, and with it the 130-year-old legacy of MacRitchie, Groome, and their colleagues, depends on a firm commitment to protect and pursue the principles of scientific discovery, on a skilful navigating of partnership opportunities and responsibilities, and on resisting the pressures toward

instrumentalisation of this platform as a scene of competition for power and symbolic representation.

Serving as Editor and being able to draw on a tradition of more than a century has been a unique privilege, but not one that has been effortless; the work was shared among many, and I wish to conclude by expressing my gratitude to those who have served as members of the editorial team at various points in time during the past eighteen years, in particular to the Associate Editor László Fosztó, the Book Reviews Editor Fabian Jacobs, and the former Editorial Assistant Viktor Leggio; to those who have supported the journal by peer-reviewing contributions; to the many contributors; to the staff at Liverpool University Press; and to the journal's typesetting manager, Peter Kahrel; together they have made this challenging enterprise possible and worthwhile.

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