

PETER GESCHIERE

EUROPE AND THE ROMA
THE CHALLENGES OF A GOVERNMENTALITY APPROACH

Review of: Huub van Baar (2011) *The European Roma. Minority Representations, Memory and the Limits of Transnational Governmentality*. Amsterdam: F & N Eigen beheer.

Krisis, 2013, Issue 1
www.krisis.eu

This thesis by Huub van Baar is an exceptionally rich one. It is also an exceptionally ambitious one. The central theme is the Europeanization of the Roma as a minority in the EU context after 1990 – which in itself is already a complex topic since it implies that the Roma, often seen as an exotic element in Europe, are now to be considered as inherently European. But the author casts his net much wider. He aims at nothing less than ‘[...] a critical re-write of the history of European modernity [...]’ (390). To this end part I of the book, ‘Governmentalizing Europe,’ offers an approach to this history in terms of a critical elaboration of Foucault’s notion of governmentality – enriched by confronting it with insights from post-colonial studies – as an alternative to current approaches in terms of governance. It is not easy to summarize the two chapters of part I – the style of argumentation is reminiscent of the type of *enchaîner* that is so dear to the French: circles that lead into other circles, and so on. But some points emerge quite forcefully from all this – notably the ways in which the gov-

ernmentality view helps to overcome the fixation of oppositions that is often characteristic of a governance approach. Van Baar’s governmentality approach rather focuses on the crystallization of shifting positions as a process full of ambiguities. A basic ambiguity that this approach highlights is that (neo-)liberal forms of governmentality do not only imply *depoliticization* – (interventions are presented as technical necessities rather than as politically inspired) – but also *repolicization*: people can use the channels created by such interventions to forward their own claims.

Part II offers a first concretization of this approach by focusing on the historicity of Romani minority-formation in Europe, and especially on shifts in the treatment of Roma in Habsburg Austria in the second half of the eighteenth century (during the rule of emperors Maria Theresa and her son Joseph II). The author uses this episode to develop a quite polemical intervention in a debate between what he calls ‘the Dutch school’ (notably the historians Leo Lucassen, Annemarie Cottar and Wim Willems) on the one hand, and linguist Yaron Matras, on the other. Van Baar accepts the argument of the Dutch historians that the Austrian government’s attempts to impose bureaucratic control over the Roma as a separate community implied an effort to capture them that encouraged stigmatization. But he opposes the idea that this process had only negative and violent effects (Romani ethnicity seen ‘as a deathtrap’). For van Baar – in this respect he sides more with Matras – it is important to emphasize that the new form of government encouraged identity-politics among the Roma which could also strengthen their position. He elaborates upon this view by a very interesting analysis of certain shifts in Austrian *Kameralism* – the development of more scientific forms of government that had parallels throughout eighteenth-century Europe – from police control to more liberal forms of perceiving ‘the population’ as a resource in an emerging vision of ‘bio-power.’ For van Baar such shifts are crucial because this new approach created ‘[...] prospects for Romani minority self-articulation that, so far, have been widely unnoticed’ (147). Elsewhere he refers also to eighteenth-century Austria as exercising ‘[...] newly emerging, bio-political forms of population regulation with new opportunities to express forms of cultural agency’ (128). This view – central to his criticism of the ‘Dutch school’ approach – promises a first concretization of his emphasis in the more theoretical chapters on the importance of *re-*

politization next to *de*politization as an effect of the modern forms of governance. This reader became a bit impatient when at the end of part II it was still not very clear what exactly ‘Romani minority self-articulation’ amounted to in eighteenth-century Austria. It seems to remain a possibility rather than a historical reality. Still, one of the strong points of this part of the book is the cogency with which a more complex view of the Enlightenment is developed – in line with the author’s emphasis on ambiguity – as marked by different and even opposing trends.

For more concrete examples of such *re*politicization the reader has to wait for part III ‘Placing, Scaling, and Timing the Roma in the New Europe.’ The first chapter of this third part (chapter 5) is still quite general, offering an interesting alternative view of what ‘neo-liberalism’ stands for. For van Baar it does not necessarily imply ‘the rolling back of the state’ neither is it an ideology imposed from above. In line with his governmentality approach he proposes to look at neo-liberalism as a constructivist project inspiring ‘a topological reading of power-relations’ (154, see also p. 28). One can wonder whether the author is not over-optimistic about the ability of the academic to give current terms a new meaning. In these passages (as in others) he is quite apodictic in his efforts to give such terms new significations. For some people neo-liberalism is most definitely an ideology that defends a rolling back of the state. Will they adapt their view if confronted with van Baar’s alternative interpretation? Some reflection on the dilemmas of academics when they try to turn current notions into analytical ones that fit with their own argumentation might have been useful. But it is clear that van Baar’s approach is helpful in highlighting the ambiguities of neo-liberal forms of governance and the ways in which new techniques of government can open up possibilities for people to state their claims – ‘re-politicizing’ solutions that are presented as purely technical. Chapter 6 shows also that van Baar’s reformulation of the neo-liberalism notion can be used to analyze how, after *die Wende* of 1990, neo-liberal interventions in Central and Eastern Europe were articulated with remainders of communist rule (the latter’s dealings with minorities but also the continuing role of alternative economies). This chapter also contains the first results of van Baar’s research conducted on the spot, notably those of the unintended consequences of ‘activation’ projects in Slovakia.

Chapters 7 and 8 finally offer more concrete examples of ‘Romani self-articulation’ and attempt to appropriate the possibilities for agency offered by new forms of governance. It is maybe because such *re*politicization has been announced time and again in the preceding chapters (we have now arrived at p. 233) that these Romani forms of self-articulation are somewhat disappointing. In chapter 7, the author describes how he visits several development schemes and notes how meetings are used by the target groups for complaining most vociferously. Maybe my disappointment has also to do with my background in African studies where it has been already accepted for several decades that it might be less interesting to study whether development projects succeed or fail in relation to their stated aims; already in the 1980s, development studies began to focus instead on how people appropriate such projects for their own aims.¹ A problem with van Baar’s chapter 7 is also that these case-studies remain very sketchy. It might have been helpful to push the analysis a bit further here, for instance by returning to these projects after some time in order to study whether all this complaining had had concrete effects in everyday life. The very vividness of these case-studies suggests that the author has much more data at his disposal. But it might be that building up to these more concrete chapters has demanded such an effort – the preceding chapters, mostly theoretical, are long and quite dense – that he is running a little out of steam (or space?). The overall emphasis in this thesis seems to be on theory rather than on more descriptive research into the vicissitudes of Roma projects in the present-day context. His is in itself a legitimate choice.

It is only in chapter 8 ‘Romani memory beyond amnesia’ that their ‘minority self-articulation’ acquires more depth. This chapter sketches in more detail the flourishing of memory and heritage activities among the Roma. The Holocaust and the urge to be recognized as Nazi victims next to other groups played a key role in this. But this was accompanied by growing interest in earlier history. Van Baar links up here with his earlier chapter on Habsburg Austria and the emphasis of the linguist Matras, quoted above, that reconstructions of Roma history do not necessarily encourage stigmatization; it can also have liberating effects. Striking also is that even in this chapter individual Romani actors remain absent. Van Baar continues to refer to ‘Romani activists and their advocates.’ Only

non-Roma (politicians and especially authors) are introduced as persons. If I am right (some caution is advisable here since it is a very voluminous book) the author Ian Hancock and German-Sinti film-maker Melanie Spitta (mentioned for the first time on p. 297) are the only Roma persons referred to by their own names. This raises the question of whether the strong emphasis, throughout the book, on re-politicization and self-articulation does not require more attention for actors as persons. What are the possibilities and the limitations for these 'Roma activists' who remain an impersonal category? What made them act under changing circumstances while others did not? To give one example, van Baar – always up for having a good polemic – takes Michael Stewart and Kate Trum-pener to task for defending a view of the Roma as a people who are not interested in their own history. Indeed, chapter 8 on concerted memory and heritage activity shows that this has become difficult to maintain. But this chapter shows also that all this activity is circumscribed in time. As said, the Holocaust clearly acted as a catalyzer in this respect. So it is quite probable that this interest in history is spreading with different velocity and intensity among the scattered Roma groups. So rather than implying that the characteristic of the Roma as more or less a-historical (à la Stewart and many others) is untenable, it might be useful to be more specific about where and under what circumstances such historical activity emerged. Who exactly were these 'Roma activists' who took these initiatives (or acted as brokers among Roma groups for these outside 'advocates')? Why them and not others?

Van Baar's solid and highly imaginative study shows that his elaboration of a governmentality approach formulates starting points that can also be seminal for a more fine-grained analysis. This is in itself already of great value. The theoretical power of this study gives it also a wider impact. The author convincingly shows what the importance of his governmentality approach can be for the study of minorities and social movements in general. To close with one last theoretical *tour de force*: in an 'Afterthought' at the very end of his book, van Baar shows on top of all this how the same concept can inspire a new turn in *critical security studies*. But this is for another book.

Peter Geschiere is professor of African anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. He is the author of *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* and more recently *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe*.

© This work is licensed under the Creative Commons License (Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0). See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/nl/deed.en> for more information.

¹ Cf. Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (1985) 'Sciences sociales, africanistes et faits de développement'. In : P. Boiral, J.-F. Lanteri and J.-P. Olivier de Sardan *Paysans, experts et chercheurs en Afrique noire*. Paris: Karthala, 27-45.