Chapter 29
The Political Context of Migration in the UK: The Case of Roma Gypsies

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ABSTRACT
This chapter considers the societal response to the arrival in the UK of significant numbers of Roma Gypsies from East and Central Europe in recent years through the framework of Imogen Tyler’s (2013) ‘social abjection’ concept. In particular the chapter examines the relations between media and political discourses surrounding Roma migrants in the context of growing anti-EU sentiment on one hand and a parallel critique of multiculturalism on the other in order to examine the role and function that the Roma have played in these debates. The interplay between these different fields of discourse draws on a ‘consensus of disgust’ that affirms social boundaries and creates physical, social and moral distance from ‘Others’ considered as ‘polluting’ and of less worth. The promotion and incitement of disgust as a mechanism of governance serves wider political and ideological objectives while also inhibiting the potential of social integration strategies, restricting the inclusionary potential of such policies and the assimilation of Roma populations.

INTRODUCTION
The Roma1 are a nomadic people of Indic origins and the largest minority group in Europe with a population of between 10-12 million. Since their arrival in Europe in the 14th century they have dispersed all over the continent. The East and Central European regions have long been home to significant Roma populations with the largest population in Turkey, which has an estimated 2,270,000 Roma (3.75% of total population) followed by Romania with 1,850,000 (8.75% of total population) and Bulgaria with 750,000 (9.74% of total population) respectively (ERRC, 2014). In the light of consistent evidence detailing abuse of human rights, poverty, racist attacks and widespread discrimination expansion of the EU in 2004 and again in 2007 has resulted in a large westward movement of East and Central European
The Political Context of Migration in the UK

Roma, despite the fact that Roma Gypsy counterparts in Western Europe face similar levels of poverty and discrimination (Bell, 2012). Since EU enlargement the population of Roma migrants in the UK has grown to approximately 200,000 in addition to 200-300,000 indigenous Gypsies and Travellers making the UK’s Roma Gypsy population one of the largest in Western Europe (Brown, Scullion and Martin, 2013).

An Amnesty International survey reported that across Europe the Roma fared significantly worse than the general population on a number of indicators such as education, employment, levels of poverty, health and accommodation (Amnesty International, 2012). In the same year a report by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) revealed that on average one-third of the EU’s Roma population is unemployed, 20 per cent are not covered by health insurance and 90 per cent live in poverty (FRA, 2012). Structural racism and widespread anti-Roma prejudice ensures that they remain Europe’s most impoverished and marginalised ethnic minority group (Hancock, 1987). With regards the treatment of its own indigenous Gypsies, who have been present in the country since the early 1500s, the British government’s policy has moved from extermination or deportation in the early modern period towards settlement and assimilation in the modern era (Mayall, 2004). The legislative strategy pursued by successive government in the post-war era, has rarely led to the desired assimilation and absorption into the wider society however. This is due to the ability of Roma Gypsies to resist pressures to assimilate through refashioning traditional practices and lifestyles in a variety of contexts, combined with the desire among much of the ‘settled’ population towards maintaining social and physical distance from members of this group (Smith & Greenfields, 2013). In practice this has meant that following a series of legislation to outlaw nomadism and to immobilise travelling communities, many of the UK’s Gypsy and Traveller population are either living in low-quality public housing in deprived neighbourhoods, or on municipal caravan sites in isolated and marginal locations where social contact with the surrounding population is minimised. The location, design and conditions of many public sites reinforce stereotypical associations of Gypsies with squalor and deprivation.

Sites were rarely anything more than poorly serviced, often vandalised and the focus of local prejudice, discrimination and police surveillance. In effect many sites could be likened to small Bantustans sometimes surrounded with deep ditches, corrugated iron and/or barbed wire. (Belton, 2005, p. 119)

Living conditions also contain connotations of moral deficiency since as Geremek (1991) notes, deprivation and deviance often represent two sides of the same coin. While the former implies a lack of resources and the latter the breaking of societal norms, the assumption is often made that deprivation results from fecklessness and a low regard for commonly held norms. Sibley (1981) notes that the aim of integrating groups who are perceived as non-conforming deviants, is undermined by a parallel need for physical and spatial distancing and removal of the offending group to marginal spaces away from the majority population, which reinforces the minority groups ‘otherness’. These twin yet incompatible desires have meant that the history of policy towards Gypsies and Travellers has been marked by failure and the increasing social, economic and spatial marginalisation of these communities. The next section develops this theme through outlining Imogen Tyler’s (2013) concept of ‘social abjection’ as an analytic framework through which the socio-political context of Roma migration can be analysed and assessed. In this respect the chapter sits within a growing body of literature that examines the situation of Roma and Gypsy Travellers in the context of evolving European institutions and identities and of wider changes in European societies and populations (Bancroft, 2005; Rovid, 2011, Vermeersch, 2012).