The role of anthropology in developing the "culture concept" in public discourse

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Abstract   A concept of "culture" lies at the heart of much anthropological theory and is also central to public discourses regarding the identity and social integration of migrants, immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers and other cultural 'Others' who seek a place in contemporary European societies. This paper interrogates these discourses, exemplified through discussions about the integration of Romanian Roma migrants in France today, and suggests that popular ideas about culture do not correspond to the relativist and historically contingent stance adopted by most anthropologists. Instead, discriminatory positions toward minority groups are sometimes justified using an outdated cultural evolutionary model; attempts to challenge this model, however, may result in the perpetuation of this same 'primitive'/'civilized' distinction. The paper also discusses how anthropological perspectives on culture are viewed with suspicion by researchers in the activist community and by some scholars in other disciplines. The paper poses the question, therefore, of how contemporary anthropological thinking about culture can contribute to these different discourses, and suggests ways in which anthropologists working both inside and outside of the academy can make their ideas about culture more accessible and relevant to public and other scholarly perspectives.

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This paper addresses the notion of 'culture' that underlies many public discourses about integration and asks how anthropology, as a discipline, can contribute conceptually and practically to the discussion.[1] In these discourses culture is posited as an abstract concept that somehow defines ethnic identity and is seen as both a basis for, and a potential barrier to, integration. Political catchphrases that speak of a 'culture clash' or a 'clash of civilizations' reflect the concerns of an increasingly fragmented and polarized Europe that grapples with how to incorporate disparate peoples in situations of economic migration, global immigration and population displacements caused by war and political uncertainty. In the current context, therefore, it becomes salient to investigate what is meant by 'culture' in these discourses and to interrogate how the idea of culture itself may be subjectively constructed and wielded. Anthropology has a special role to play in this process because of her own disciplinary history: the culture concept has lain at the heart of anthropological inquiry and has been central to theoretical development within the discipline over the past century and more; furthermore, analysis of discourse has shown itself to be a powerful methodological tool in developing a more reflexive and critically subjective ethnography.

I write this article in the aftermath of the November, 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, a city in which I live and work, which were followed by media discussion of how and why certain populations remain ghettoized and culturally isolated from French society. In the context of the attacks, these issues were discussed primarily with regard to religious radicalization; in my own research I do not focus on religious difference as a basic for cultural conflict, but I am also concerned with understanding forces that prevent social inclusion and that foster isolation. I do not suggest that anthropologists' insights into culture and behavior can somehow 'fix' the social problems underlying phenomena such as ghettoization or radicalization, nor that we hold a magic cure for solving the complexities surrounding issues of social inclusion and integration. At the same time, however, it seems that if much of the public debate centers around 'culture', then the theoretical and comparative perspectives of anthropologists position them well to address the issue of how culture(s) and society interrelate.

This article draws on ongoing research with the Romanian Roma migrant population in France, a group with whom I have become familiar through my work as a volunteer with a Catholic aid organization.[2] Although this population represents a relatively small minority of primarily economic migrants,

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1   The impetus for exploring this issue arises from the author's participation at a seminar convened by the European Association of Social Anthropologists in October, 2015 in Prague, at which anthropologists working within various theoretical and applied contexts debated how they could contribute to the public sphere in ways that 'make anthropology matter'.

2   In addition to research with Romanian Roma in France, I have conducted fieldwork on Roma identity in the Czech Republic. In my work with the aid organization, I am interested in understanding the nexus between socialization practices in the home and community, ideologies about gender, and experiences of children at school.

the discourse surrounding their eventual integration into French society reflects a broader national discussion concerning the social inclusion of minorities. Instances of racial prejudice and discrimination affecting this population contribute to discourses regarding Roma cultural identity within the international Roma community as well. In public discourses surrounding the 'Roma problem', as it is often categorized in France, culture takes the form of a discrete set of traits and social practices that indexes a particular ethnic group, often viewed through a homogenizing and essentializing lens. In reaction to outside views on Roma identity, activist groups within the Roma community also take 'culture' as a starting point, as they both criticize non-Roma positions and seek to promote their own cultural identity in positive fashion. These activist perspectives then have, in turn, implications for how culture is viewed on the part of aid organizations, especially as it relates to conditions for social integration imposed by government regulations. Indeed, the concept of culture that underlies state-mandated procedures is also useful to consider within the context of the larger discussion on integration, especially given that these state policies target not only the Roma but migrants from other ethnic backgrounds as well. These various discourses impact not only how the Other is perceived and treated at the level of individual interactions with the public but also informs how he/she is treated at the institutional level, whether we speak about state or municipal institutions, aid organizations or advocacy groups.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to analyze how culture is conceptualized through various discourses about and by the Roma and to consider how popular views contrast with contemporary anthropological understanding of the culture concept. Criticisms by Roma activists about the use of the culture concept by social scientists will also be discussed, and I also address the question of how anthropological ideas on 'culture' are viewed with skepticism by some scholars outside the discipline. In the final section of the article I will examine how anthropologists can contribute to developing a public discourse about 'culture' that reflects the complex and relativist position that characterizes anthropological thinking about the issue and that could hopefully lead to more imaginative models of social integration and to more effective social policies. I also suggest ways in which anthropologists address the criticisms presented by activists and how to find common ground with them, as with members of the public and with scholars from other disciplinary traditions. I begin with some general background context and a brief account of the history and social situation of Romanian Roma in France, in which competing discourses about Roma identity are identified and which form the basis for the following discussion.

Romanian Roma in France: some background

Discussion about the situation of Roma in France takes place within a broader context of discourse about the Roma in general. The Roma have been described

as Europe's largest minority in eastern and central Europe (Csepeli and David 2004). Having lived for centuries in many parts of both eastern and western Europe, they are arguably also the oldest European minority group and have historically been the victims of prejudice and discrimination in the societies in which they lived: their history in eastern Europe includes centuries of marginalization and poverty, serfdom and slavery, pogroms, expulsions, and genocide during the Holocaust (Crowe 1995). The historical and linguistic origins of the Roma in early medieval India have also been studied since the eighteenth century (Matras 2004). Oftentimes, Roma culture and language have been suppressed or prohibited, most recently through forced assimilation policies under communism.[3] Such issues have formed the focus of much of the academic discourse about the Roma which, up until recently, has been dominated by non-Romani scholars.

The emergence of eastern European nations from under the Soviet bloc in the 1990s was coupled with a rise in awareness of the often dismal plight of their Roma citizens. This awareness is promoted through Roma activist organizations and through the work of non-governmental associations that seek to improve Roma lives through education, health or legal interventions, or other social services. In many cases, such activism aims to valorize Roma culture by encouraging the younger generation to reclaim their linguistic heritage, to learn about and take pride in their history and culture, and to agitate for recognition of past grievances and for social reform in the present. In addition to addressing the Roma community itself, activists also connect with the wider public to educate them about these issues.[4] While activist discourse engages, therefore, with some of the same issues as those of academia, the emphasis has been on implementing social change rather than on the production of knowledge.

Discourse about the Roma on the part of the French is complicated by the presence of existing, related minority groups with whom the French have an already established history. France is home to several ethnic minorities such as the Sinti, Manouche or Gitans, who have lived in the French territory for centuries and whom the French refer to (often pejoratively) as 'Tsiganes'. There also exists an administrative category, the *gens du voyage* ('people who travel'), which refers to peripatetic populations that include some of the previously named Tsiganes, but may also include populations that practice similar itinerant lifestyles but do not self-identify as ethnically related to the Tsiganes. Many

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3   It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the socio-political complexities surrounding the status of Roma in different national contexts. It is, however, important to keep this history in mind when contemplating their motivations for leaving their home countries and their present situation in Western Europe. See (Chaudhuri-Brill 2012) for a more detailed discussion.

4   The European Roma Rights Centre, for example, works "to combat anti-Romani racism and human rights abuse of Roma through strategic litigation, research and policy development, advocacy and human rights education" (ERRC 2016).

French use the terms *Tsiganes* or *gens du voyage* interchangeably, thereby blurring ethnic distinctions made by members of the groups in question themselves and homogenizing cultural characteristics of these groups. Whatever their ethnic affiliation, however, members of the indigenous *Tsigane* groups or the *gens du voyage* are French citizens, even while existing largely on the margins of mainstream society.[5] Thus, comparisons between their situation and that of more recent arrivals become to a large extent moot.

Since the 1990s, many eastern Europeans, including Roma, have left their home countries to seek employment and other economic or social advantages within the wider European region. It was in this period that Romanian Roma started to arrive in France, meaning that some families have been in France now for almost thirty years, although many of them still maintain social and economic connections to their home communities. The situation of eastern European Roma in France is made difficult by the fact that these groups with different histories and traditions from those with whom the French are familiar, are lumped with them together in the minds of both the authorities and the public.[6] In particular, many of the Roma arriving from countries such as Romania and Bulgaria have a long history of being sedentary in their home countries, a situation which contrasts with the mobile lifestyle of the *gens du voyage*. The arrival of eastern European Roma into the French context has thus muddied many questions of ethnic and national identity for both Roma and native French, as I have written about previously (Chaudhuri-Brill 2014). The existing suspicion and antipathy many French hold toward the *gens du voyage* has been transferred to the newer arrivals, exacerbated by the portrayal in the media of Roma as criminals and deviants.

Indeed, the main interaction that many French have with Roma in the cities consists of encounters with beggars in the metros or falling victim to petty larceny, such as pickpocketing. The larger context behind this behavior is rarely reported in the mainstream press: for example, the widespread racism in their home country that the Romanian Roma hope to escape through migration, and the fact that even a life of poverty in France compares favorably to that which they experienced before (Sudetic 2013). Through my work on the ground as a volunteer, I have also become aware of the overwhelming obstacles this population encounters in France when trying to raise themselves out of poverty through education and employment. These difficulties would be expected under any circumstances where people must learn to negotiate a foreign

5   The question of ethnic affiliation is itself fraught with tension, since many linguists and other scholars argue that the 'Tsiganes' are related to each other and to eastern European Rom groups by language, culture and history, but this relationship is accepted neither by all members of these groups, nor by all scholars (Matras 2005).

6   For example, in 2010, Nicholas Sarkozy, the French president at the time, initiated a wave of expulsions targeting Romanian and Bulgarian Roma migrants in response to rioting that followed a police shooting at a crime scene involving not Roma, but members of the *gens du voyage* (Vermeersch 2011).

system and social structures in a new language, without the benefit of social capital to draw upon, such as literacy and job skills. However, the situation is exacerbated by legal and procedural maneuvers which claim to promote integration but seem instead to result in exactly the opposite condition.

When Romania acceded to the European Union in 2007, migrants to France were given limited access to jobs, needing special work permits and having their rights to employment and benefits restricted to an initial period of seven years (L. C. 2012). The approach on the part of the French authorities with regard to the Roma minority was to discourage migration in the first place, rather than to develop policies of integration: "official French efforts to deal with Roma migrants and their squatter camps had one underlying theme: to create conditions difficult enough to drive away the migrants already in the country and to deter new migrants from coming" (Sudetic 2013). Tensions between the French authorities and the Roma escalated during the 2000s and came to international attention and criticism under former President Nicholas Sarkozy's policy of expulsion, targeting Romanian and Bulgarian Roma. This policy took the form of providing Roma individuals or families with monetary incentives for their voluntary return, as well as the dismantling and forced eviction of the slums (*bidonvilles*) that had sprung up along roadsides and in vacant buildings in cities across France. Though the seven-year limit has expired and migrants are no longer paid to return, the current socialist government of François Hollande has done little to change this policy of eviction. Despite recommendations toward integration by the Council of the European Union in 2013 that require evictions to be accompanied by appropriate re-housing of inhabitants, such re-housing seldom takes place (Candau 2015).

The conditions of life for Roma in the slums of Paris are harsh and bring with them consequent ills, many of which are the focus of interventions by the aid organizations and municipal authorities which interact with these Roma on the ground. Some of the issues involve basic questions of health and hygiene: ensuring that infants receive vaccinations and preventive care; eradicating rats and other pests that run rampant through the slums; helping individuals who experience chronic illness to apply for medical aid; and negotiating with the authorities to establish access to water and toilets. Other interventions have to do with integration of the Roma into French society: registering children in schools; ensuring their regular attendance; providing adults with French language lessons; helping children with homework and providing literacy support; providing interpretation during interactions with authorities; and assisting individuals to seek employment. Most importantly, assistance is provided to help these migrants establish the paperwork for domiciliation, a necessary administrative precursor to accessing the educational and medical benefits listed above. Discourse about Roma from the perspective of the aid organizations, therefore, centers on social integration in terms of acquiring benefits and developing particular skills in order to move out of poverty.

One of the most delicate issues volunteers and aid workers deal with in their interactions with Roma families involves the subject of early marriage. In many communities, girls typically marry when they reach puberty and are often mothers at thirteen or fourteen, with husbands between sixteen and eighteen years of age. As a result, neither girls nor boys receive beyond a basic education (although even this is compromised due to the constant series of evictions they experience). The consequent lack of education and skills precludes the possibility of their economic progression and has repercussions on educational opportunities for the next generation as well. Volunteers at the organization where I work tread a fine line between tacitly endorsing what are considered illegal marriages (from the point of view of the authorities) while trying to encourage families to allow their daughters to finish school before marrying. At the same time, volunteers provide assistance and support to these young wives and mothers in situations that sometimes involve risk and abuse, even though most of these young couples remain part of a strong and supportive kinship network. However, such marriages remain a sensitive issue, encompassing questions of gender roles and women's health; infant vulnerability; and respect for indigenous traditions within the context of modern society.

The issue of child marriage typifies the nexus of several narratives regarding the Roma. Academic researchers coming from different disciplinary backgrounds study child marriage in terms of its social motivations and its consequences: in relation to socio-economic or kinship networks, for example (Pamporov 2007); in conjunction with child socialization customs (Tesăr 2012), or by investigating the educational, social and health consequences of the practice (Hotchkiss et.al 2016; Cahn 2007; Cozma et.al 2000). On the part of activists, it serves as a rallying point for how Roma culture comes to be vilified by outsiders (Oprea 2005a; 2005b). Finally, it is viewed through the lens of human rights as one of the reasons for the continuing marginalization of the Roma (Timmerman 2003; Reed 2013). Many of these discourses focus on child marriage as an example of cultural 'other-ness' that differentiates Roma from the majority European cultures in which they exist. For majority members of those societies, these marriage customs serve to further exoticize the Roma and to thereby present an argument against the possibility of their social integration.[7] In the following discussion, I will look more closely at the ideologies of culture that underlie these discourses and their implications.

7   In making this claim, I draw upon discussions with fellow aid workers as well as on research I have conducted on French attitudes toward the Roma (Chaudhuri-Brill 2014). Popular reality TV shows such as *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* (and its knock-off, *My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding*) indicate a continuing fascination on the part of the majority to exoticize and 'other' the Roma, and to focus on 'traditional' customs governing gender relations as a locus for such exotic behavior.

Culture: Genuine or Spurious?[8]

Before beginning a discussion of how 'culture' is constituted in public under-standings, it is important to note that the culture concept has also proved problematic within anthropological theory, especially within the American tradition where it formed the backbone of American cultural anthropology.[9] In their 1952 study, for example, Kroeber and Kluckhohn describe more than one hundred and fifty definitions for the term and there is still no consensus within anthro-pology on any one definition that best encapsulates what it is we are studying if we say we study culture. Nevertheless, the concept lies in some form at the heart of much anthropological and social theory of the twentieth century. It is not my intention to provide an extensive review here of the culture concept within anthropology, which has been done by others before (see, for example, Stocking 1968; Ortner 1984; or Hannerz 1993 for discussions of the concept from an historical perspective; Yengoyan 1986 for a critique on its usefulness within anthropology and Trouillot 2003 for a more recent critique, from a postcolonial perspective). I keep in mind this history, however, as I examine the use of the term 'culture' within the particular context of the Roma in Europe and as I ar-ticulate my own understanding of its role in anthropology today.

I start with Tylor's famous definition of culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capa-bilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor 1873). This broad definition still seems to aptly capture what anthropology, as the most hu-man of the human sciences, seeks to understand. However, though Tylor's def-inition includes the important point that culture is something learned and socially acquired, his definition is also rooted in nineteenth-century presump-tions of a cultural evolutionary continuum along which different specimens (cultures) can be described and placed – what I term a 'museum' view, or the idea that cultures can be easily demarcated, that they can be categorized ac-cording to a taxonomy of traits, and that cultural identities correspond neat-ly to these categories and characterizations. Such a model necessarily views cultures as relatively static and conservative. The idea that cultures can be categorized according to a complex of traits parallels the culture-complex notion in archaeology, which perhaps influenced earlier theories on culture,

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8   My apologies for (mis)using Sapir's phrase (in Mandelbaum 1949). While Sapir's distinction
     does not totally apply to the dichotomy I am discussing here, his thoughts on the genuine
     and spurious in culture, both in his classic essay of the same name and in other writings,
     bring up many aspects that are relevant to the point I wish to make: that anthropological
     use of the culture concept concerns the relationship between individual selves and larger
     cultural wholes; the importance of symbolic systems and patterns in the creation of
     cultural meaning; the emotional and psychological aspects of cultural identity; and critique
     of the notion of 'authenticity' when describing cultural forms, among much else.
9   Since this is also the tradition within which I am trained, I am particularly interested to examine
     how the term is treated within a familiar ethnographic context by non-anthropologists.

especially through the four-field approach taken by American anthropology. Tylor himself, however, did not advocate such an approach. As Watson describes, for Tylor culture existed, above all, as a mental construct; observable behavior became of second-order value, and the material culture and artifacts making up the province of archaeologists were, in fact, of third-order significance (Watson 1995: 685). Despite its historical and theoretical significance, therefore, a Tylorean view of culture cannot be equated with modern anthropological perspectives.

Instead, though anthropologists concerned with culture today still focus on aspects of Tylor's 'complex whole', the emphasis is far more on understanding the *process* through which these cultural elements are acquired (or, indeed, transformed) than with simple description. Furthermore, such processes are understood to be always historically contingent and, therefore, relative rather than absolute: as Stocking notes in his critique of Tylor's definition, "we have seen that his notion of culture in its actual usage lacked certain elements crucial to the modern concept: historicity, plurality, integration, behavioral determinism, and relativity" (Stocking 1968: 200). A modern view of culture as dynamic and transformative is less concerned, then, with describing fixed behaviors than with understanding how these behaviors are internalized, transmitted and transmuted through both individual agency and collective processes. Tylor's description of culture as something learned or acquired has developed into the concept of socialization, especially as used by researchers in the field of language socialization. Rather than assuming a homogenous culture possessed equally by all members of a social group, we attend more now to the plurality of cultural voices, including those emanating from the margins. In the postcolonial, post-imperial, and multiethnic societies which form the context for much modern anthropological fieldwork, a Bourdieuvian or Foucauldian practice/praxis paradigm seems relevant to the investigation of structures of power, agency and resistance. Culture may still be seen as a mental construct, especially by those anthropologists working within the interpretive, symbolic tradition, or in the sub-discipline of cognitive anthropology; nevertheless, semiotic-based analyses recognize the interrelationship between mental constructs, behavior and material expression. Above all, the standpoint of modern anthropology, which is deeply influenced by the cultural relativism developed by Boas and his students throughout the first half of the twentieth century, rejects the notion of a primitive/civilized dichotomy between culture(s) and the concept of cultural evolution associated with nineteenth-century social Darwinism, of which the Tylorean definition is a part.

This brief elaboration on the status of the culture concept today seems, then, to be as much about what culture is *not* than about prescribing what it actually *is* (especially since there is no given consensus among anthropologists on this question). What it is not, in the anthropological sense, however, seems to hold considerable influence on discourses about culture outside of

anthropology. Referring back to child marriage in Romani tradition, we can take as a case in point the widely-publicized situation in 2003 of a twelve-year old Romanian Roma girl given in wedlock by her parents to a fifteen-year old groom. The consequent media coverage and public debate surrounding the issue led to the annulment of the marriage by the state authorities (Nicolae 2003). The Romani activist-scholar, Alexandra Oprea has criticized Romanian and Western media portrayal of this case for, in effect, blaming an essentialized Romani culture for the practice of child marriage. She states that, "by implicating Romani culture as responsible for child marriages (a wrong) and positioning it against Romanian and European Union law (a right), the media constructed a dichotomy consisting of 'primitive' Romani culture on the one hand, and progressive, feminist, Romanian/Western/white culture on the other" (Oprea 2005b: 1). In her own usage, Oprea equates culture to tradition, arguing that both are "code words" with "an insinuation of primitiveness" (*ibid.*). This contrast between a 'civilized', white European Culture and a 'primitive', minority or folk traditional culture harks back to Tylor's concept of cultural evolution.[10] Oprea's criticism of how the term 'culture' is understood in popular discourse, therefore, does not prevent her from applying a similar connotation to it herself in the context of discourse as a scholar-activist.

From the perspective of anthropology, the continuation of a primitive/civilized dichotomy in European thought is troubling. Furthermore, reducing culture to some set of essentialized properties or traits of an ethnic group provides justification for stereotyping and for racist beliefs about the group in question. These models, which have been largely rejected by anthropologists, seem to nonetheless hold sway in other contexts. Additionally, in reaction against such concepts of culture activist groups have developed counter agendas which, in turn, have implications for how Roma culture is viewed by others, including Roma and non-Roma.

For instance, a belief in a homogenized and static Romani culture permits the French to assume that eastern European Rom must lead a similar lifestyle to that of the Tsiganes with whom they are familiar: nomadism, seen as an essentialized Romani trait, is assumed to apply to all Roma. Such a perspective also allows them to conflate the Tsiganes with the *gens du voyage* by placing these two distinct, if overlapping, groups in indexical relation with the shared characteristic of a non-sedentary lifestyle. In previous work (Chaudhuri-Brill 2014) I have discussed in more detail how common French views on Roma culture are formed through the discursive practices of politicians and the media, and how they reflect existing ideologies about national, ethnic and linguistic identity.

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10 In order to avoid such problematic terminology, I will use instead the term 'high' culture to refer to a (perceived) contrast between refined elements of social life such as the fine arts and intellectual pursuits and a baser, folk tradition (meanwhile recognizing that this term could be seen as equally problematic due to a connotation of superior rank with respect to an implied 'low' culture).

Additionally, the idea that 'culture' constitutes a set of characteristic beliefs and practices reflects Tylor's definition but does not include understanding how these characteristics are acquired and internalized through processes of socialization. 'Culture' instead becomes something that can be taught in much the same way as mathematical rules and formulas. Indeed, such a view also erases the heterogeneity, internal contradictions and mutability that exist within the group (an aspect that Oprea also recognizes in her commentary on the media's use of 'culture', but which may be less critically examined outside of scholarly discourse).

Not only French or other Europeans take such a view of culture. In fieldwork conducted with Roma adolescents in the Czech Republic during the early 2000s, I examined how Roma identity was constructed and 'taught' through classes on Romani history and culture in educational settings organized by Roma activists and non-governmental organizations that wished to promote a positive Roma identity (Chaudhuri-Brill 2012). While many of the students found the classes interesting, the 'authentic' Romani culture presented to them there through the lens of language and history was alien to the lived reality of many who had been raised under communist assimilation policies resulting in a 'loss' of Romani language and traditions. As a consequence, some students were left feeling ambiguous rather than positive about their Roma identity, since it did not correspond to the Romani cultural characteristics presented to them. Additionally, they felt themselves in a lop-sided competition with others who possessed greater amounts of symbolic capital in the educational setting by virtue of having been raised as Romani speakers with connections to traditional practices in their homes.

The belief that Europeans hold racist views about a 'primitive' Romani culture is shared by many in the Romani activist community; in addition, negative views about Romani culture have sometimes been internalized by Roma themselves, especially under the forced assimilation policies they have undergone. Activists thus seek to counter such narratives on two fronts – with regard to the majority society and within the Roma community itself. They do so by arguing that Roma culture has the same features as 'civilized' white society, but these are overlooked or undervalued due to racial prejudice from outside. Thus, they promote the work of Romani intellectuals and professionals, artists, and writers in order to combat negative perceptions of the Roma as all being uneducated and uncultured. For example, I attended a public debate in Paris about Romani culture, organized by the French leftist newspaper *Liberation* and the organization *La Voix des Roms* ("The Voice of the Roma"). Members of the panel included the Romani filmaker Tony Gatliff as well as Romani and French intellectuals speaking about their work on developing knowledge about Romani history and culture. Online resources target an international Romani audience: articles and links post-

ed on Roma activist websites often highlight the accomplishments of Roma individuals in different fields of art and literature or in public life.[11]

Thus, despite criticizing the racially-charged primitive/civilized distinction, the activist agenda to promote a different view of Romani culture in a sense perpetuates the distinction in the process. This is not to say that the work they do is insignificant: it is true that members of the public are dismally unaware of the vibrant and active Romani artistic and intellectual community, and that a counter-narrative about Romani contributions to society might help dispel some of the prejudice that exists. This is the intention behind the recent decision to establish a European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC) in Berlin (Romea 2016). However, such initiatives do not explicitly affect the situation of the large number of Roma migrants living in the slums who are the direct recipients of the worst forms of racist discrimination and marginalization. Although there are some Roma-led organizations that work with these communities[12] the majority of the volunteers who work to 'integrate' Romanian Roma and to ameliorate the harsh conditions in which they live are native French (with the occasional American researcher, such as myself, or periodic visits from American university students, often working in the field of public health). The desire to promote a Romani 'high' culture to counter the view of 'primitiveness' is thus understandable, yet it contributes to a divide within the Roma community as well.

This dichotomy has conseqeunces upon the viewpoint of the aid organizations regarding the concept of culture in relation to their work. The director of the Roma initiative at the organization where I volunteer expressed frustration and impatience, for example, when I tried at one point to discuss whether disjunctions between Roma socialization practices and school expectations might contribute to children's negative school experiences. For lack of a better word in French, I had used the term 'culture' in place of 'socialization', and in the course of our conversation it became clear that she was irritated by my use of this word. She equated my speaking of Romani culture to a desire that the organization work to promote Romani high culture, an endeavor that she believed did not come under the purview of its mandate, which was to address the day-to-day survival needs of the individuals and families in the camps. Being familiar with the Roma activist organizations, she also faulted them for not involving themselves more with the plight of these Roma, for whom the issues with which the activists were concerned were largely

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11 Additionally, they provide information about anti-Roma practices and contribute political and social analysis of issues affecting Roma populations in different European countries, thus serving to foster a pan-Romani identity and ethos independent of national borders.

12 For example, the organization Romeurope is active in assisting Roma living with health-related issues in precarious conditions. This organization was founded under an initiative by the group Médecins sans Frontières to address health problems specific to marginalized Roma communities in different European countries.

irrelevant. Ironically, then, for the director, the term culture was viewed as a 'code word' for 'civilized' (in reference to a Roma high culture), in contrast to Oprea's argument that the term secretly implies 'primitive' when used by Europeans.

The director was not interested, therefore, to speak about Romani culture in the context of my questions. Instead, she claimed that the Roma in the camps are victims of a more general 'culture of poverty' that affects all marginalized groups in similar circumstances, regardless of racial, ethnic or national background (Lewis 1966). This culture manifests itself through certain behaviors and practices that the aid organization and municipal authorities try to combat through their integration efforts. For example, the culture of poverty results in behaviors such as poor school attendance, or lack of job skills and experience with workplace demands. Under this model, integration is conceived according to a checklist of behaviors that indicate both an individual's willingness to participate in society and his/her acquisition of the requisite documentation and skills to enable this participation. Beginning with the registration for domiciliation papers, therefore, the Roma in the squatter camps are then accompanied to various municipal agencies by volunteers to assist them in fulfilling a series of bureaucratic obligations: registering children for school; registering adults with an employment agency; signing up for French language lessons; seeking the services of a social assistant, etc. Once this list of items is complete, the Roma are considered to have shown evidence of a desire to integrate and of having the necessary tools at their disposal to enable this integration. Of course, in the case of the Roma who are rarely granted any form of housing, oftentimes the lengthy and arduous process of acquiring all of this documentation becomes moot once families are evicted; they sometimes return later to the same squats if those have not been destroyed, but sometimes the families scatter to different areas of the city where they must then begin again the Kafkaesque process of re-domiciliation and all the consequent paperwork.

Beyond the absurdities of the bureaucratic process, what is less discussed is the reality that many children do not attend school, or only irregularly, despite being registered, or that even when someone gets an opportunity at employment they may jeopardise their chances to keep the job or to get a good recommendation because they do not conform to behavioral expectations of the workplace culture (such as punctuality, reliability, timely communication with superiors, etc). Integration can only ever be partial if the reasons behind such contradictions are not understood and addressed, getting to 'culture' at the genuine level, in Sapir's terms.

The primitive/civilized distinction in reference to culture has, therefore, several consequences: not only does it feed into existing prejudices of the majority society against the Roma, but it then influences how Roma respond by promoting their identity in a way that emphasizes 'civilized' aspects of Romani

culture. The perpetuation of this distinction leads aid organizations that work with the most marginalized populations to distance themselves from the activist agenda and to consequently sweep aside considerations of any cultural influences in their interactions with the Roma whom they assist. This position may in turn reinforce city and state ideologies regarding social inclusion and integration, which focus solely on combatting a 'culture of poverty' rather than seeking rapprochement between majority values and the culturally-based behaviors of different groups.

In the kinds of contexts described here, anthropologists have a responsibility to present alternative models of culture instead. For example, after we recognized that we were speaking at cross purposes because of our different understanding of the term 'culture', my colleague and I were able to have a fruitful discussion in which I clarified my use of the word: drawing on comparative research in language socialization and literacy and on practice theory, I suggested that perhaps poverty alone could not explain why so many of the children in the camps refused to continue attending school even after they were allowed to register. Instead, I argued for a more comprehensive understanding of these children's lives, including their socialization at home as well as classroom conditions at school, as a way to comprehend their individual experiences within a broader and richer context. My colleague – who has spent many years cultivating deep relationships with Romanian Roma migrant communities in Paris – declared her interest in this perspective, and suggested that I write a paper about it for the mainstream press, claiming that most people would not understand 'culture' in the terms I had used.

One of the questions I pose in this article is to consider other ways in which anthropologists can contribute to broadening public perceptions of the culture concept. It is worth contemplating here why public perception of cultural differences continues to insidiously reflect an outdated and racist paradigm. How is it that the discipline of anthropology, which is charged with the study of culture, and which has itself moved across several different paradigms, developing new insights, drawing theoretically from other disciplines and other perspectives, and growing in methodological rigor in the process, has yet had so little impact on public sentiment? I pose this question not just in the context of my own concern for the Roma, but also because public ideologies about the culture concept affect different ethnic groups in different ways (why, for example, are some minorites more acceptable than others in the eyes of the majority?). Moreover, as important as it it to engage in public debate about alternative models of culture, it is also imperative to look critically at how scholars in other disciplines view these models and the work of anthropologists. I turn in the following section to this issue, examining criticism directed by Alexandra Oprea toward both anthropologists and the scholarship underlying some aspects of the Romani activist agenda. Oprea's critique arises from her position as a Romani feminist activist. While I disagree

with some of her claims, she raises several vital questions regarding the use of the culture concept which should be countered by anthropologists. This would create a more effective dialogue across disciplines about both the historical contribution of anthropology to the primitive/civilized dichotomy she focuses on, as well as our on-going engagement with many of the valid concerns she expresses.

Anthropology and the Cultural 'Other'

I return now to Oprea's discussion about Romani child-marriage, which focuses primarily on media portrayal of the issue, but which also looks critically at the contribution of scholars and activists to the discourse (Oprea 2005a, b). Her main criticism of the media stems from what she considers an oversimplified contrast between Roma and European cultures, which glosses over historical socio-economic power relations between Romanians and Roma that in turn underlie practices such as child marriage; in particular, she argues that this oversimplification also ignores forms of internal resistance to these practices, such as that by Romani feminists. She also takes issue with how the goals of the Decade of Roma Inclusion, an initiative developed with the aid of intellectuals and activist organizations, have been articulated, with a focus on eliminating racism as the primary obstacle to social inclusion.

The Decade, which was set in place from 2005–2015, has been described as, "an unprecedented pan-European initiative that channels the efforts of Governments, as well as inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations, to eradicate racial discrimination and bring about tangible improvement to the plight of the world's most populous marginalized community" (Kirova 2007). Oprea argues that a singular focus on racism serves to overly emphasize internal/external boundaries between Roma and majority societies, thereby reifying Roma culture as a monolithic and unchanging phenomenon. Instead of conceptualizing issues particular to women within the context of Roma patriarchy, she argues, practices such as child marriage are then taken to be part of this essentialized Roma culture. Consequently, cultural preservation initiatives or cultural education programs designed to advance Roma culture, may, instead, promote oppressive practices within the culture. She suggests that such practices be studied in the context of their origin within historically unequal structures of power in relation to the majority society, and in terms of how these practices may, in fact, be internally resisted through different means.

These are convincing arguments to anthropologists such as myself, who focus on linguistic ideology and discourse analysis as a method for investigating exactly the kinds of practices and power relations Oprea speaks of. However, in the process of researching this article, I have become aware with some dismay that the anthropologist herself is viewed with suspicion on the

part of certain scholars from other disciplinary backgrounds. This comes as somewhat of a shock, because anthropology as a whole has worked hard over the past decades to shed its association with the contexts of empire and colonialization out of which it emerged. As the development of sub-altern and postcolonial voices within the discipline have shown, moreover, it is by encouraging other voices within the context of scholarly debate that old assumptions and presumptions have been revisited and challenged. It is through this process that critical reflection within the discipline has also been fostered. Unfortunately, it appears that we have been engaging in navel-gazing, rather than in communicating these developments to the outside world.

The suspicion toward the anthropologist derives from a distrust of the culture concept, although the idea that is under attack seems to be a version of cultural evolution, originating from the debut of the discipline, as well as positivist claims about the anthropologist's authority to speak about 'culture' in the abstract (see, for example Sparling 2011). Oprea also criticizes what Uma Narayan (1997) has termed the 'anthropological perspective'. This viewpoint, according to Oprea, guides inquiry in the field of Romani Studies. She argues that "the objective of the 'anthropological perspective' is to take an interest in Third World people/cultures while abstaining from any critique thereof" (2005a: 134).

While this point of view appears to be accepted among some feminist scholars, however, it does not resonate at all with my own experiences as a linguistic anthropologist trained in a postmodern American tradition, nor does it reflect the position of the feminist anthropologists I know. Indeed, some of the arguments Oprea advances to advocate a different approach toward understanding internal cultural practices have been articulated by anthropologists as well, many of whom themselves come from 'native' backgrounds. Narayan's comments about the 'anthropological perspective' center on the double-consciousness (Du Bois 1903) of researchers coming from the cultural backgrounds of those they study and the problematic position they endure of being 'authentic insiders' while also being expected to refrain from moral critique of those cultures. Perhaps the relativist positions of many anthropologists is perceived as precluding their ability to make moral judgements. This is a debatable point (and is one that anthropologists also debate among themselves, especially those who are working in applied fields where they are often confronted with moral dilemmas). However, given the divide that seems to exist between anthropological discourse about 'culture' and how it is perceived by our academic colleagues, this debate should perhaps take place on a broader stage. It is possible that in the process we may find more ground in common than at first appears.

For example, Oprea's concern that Romani feminism be acknowledged and understood on its own terms reflects anthropological theories seeking to understand structures of social power and individual agency. It also aligns with

questions of methodology regarding the role of the anthropologist as partici-pant-observer, the disambiguation of the subjective vs. objective nature of so-cial reality, and the production of ethnography. Such concerns reflect the turn, stemming from the work of Clifford Geertz in the 1970s and beyond, toward a symbolic, interpretive anthropology; the move toward a theory of practice/praxis, influenced by developments in French sociology; and the influence of literary theory on a turn toward reflexivity in the writing of ethnography (Ortner 1984). More recently, Ortner (2005) has attempted to integrate these ideas in a social theory that is explicitly subjective, historical, and seen as di-alectically constructed between individual consciousness and collective cul-tural formations. Ortner's position seems to respond directly to the criticisms raised by Oprea and others and to provide an alternative model through which Roma culture and agency can be debated and understood. Ortner argues, how-ever, that there is an argument to be made for maintaining 'culture' as a the-oretical object within the discipline. She argues that, "while recognizing the very real dangers of 'culture' in its potential for essentializing and demoniz-ing whole groups of people, one must recognize its critical political value as well, both for understanding the workings of power, and for understanding the resources of the powerless" (Ortner 2005: 44). While there may be disa-greement among scholars on this point, Ortner articulates a position which can serve as a more productive basis for intellectual debate than attempts to defend the straw man of cultural evolution.

Criticism of the 'anthropological perspective' goes beyond a debate over the definition of culture, however. The notion of the 'authentic insider' sets up a dichotomy between the insider/outsider scholar and suggests an insur-mountable barrier exists between the kind of cultural understanding pro-duced on each side. This position reflects a long-standing tension within the field of Romani Studies between Romani activists and intellectuals on the one hand, who argue that their insider position privileges their understanding of the issues, and, on the other hand, scholars and members of the majority who are involved with Romani studies or with public policy, and whose academic or professional careers may involve decades of specialized study and engage-ment with issues concerning the Roma. This tension raises the larger ques-tion of who can (or should) speak for the Roma, which in turn calls attention to the larger epistemological problem of how knowledge about the Roma (or any 'Other') is, or should, be constructed (and by whom).

The opposition between cultural 'insider' and racist 'outsider' has fueled much heated debate within the scholarly community of those engaged in Romani Studies, particularly among linguists, historians and anthropolo-gists, whose disciplines involve them most closely with issues regarding Romani identity. I will not go into the details of this debate here, but I have discussed it elsewhere (Chaudhuri-Brill 2012). Matras (2005) describes the origins of the dispute between linguists in particular as extending back to

eighteenth-century comparative philology and the realization of the Indic roots of the Romani language. The sometimes enormous-seeming mistrust within the Romani activist community (which includes scholars who self-identify as scholar-activists) toward outside researchers reflects a legitimate concern that ideas about the origin, language, and social practices of the Roma people have been largely produced and disseminated for centuries by non-Roma, whose own prejudices and misunderstandings may have contributed to present-day racist conceptions in the European mind. One means to counter this suspicion, therefore, would be to encourage the development of Romani voices within the discipline, although as sub-altern and minority scholars in anthropology have pointed out, the idea of the 'native scholar' is itself problematic, being embedded in ideologies about cultural authenticity, power, and objectivity (Narayan 1993; Jacobs-Huey 2002).

The fundamental question posed by critics of non-Roma viewpoints, however, concerns whether we can ever hope to know and understand the cultural 'Other'. This points to a larger philosophical debate which goes beyond the limits of the present paper; yet, anthropology as a discipline has been dealing with this question since it's inception – in fact, one could argue that much of the struggle to elucidate the culture concept has concerned exactly this issue. In the process, we have developed useful paradigms and methodologies and have become privy to an enormous body of comparative cultural data. It is imperative to share this more effectively with a wider audience in order to contribute our experience to a discussion that now goes well beyond the bounds of our discipline itself.

Engage, Educate and Exercise

I have demonstrated in this discussion a need to expand public conceptions of 'culture' in order to move discourse beyond a dichotomized, cultural evolutionary model. Cultural difference is understood to lie at the heart of problems with integration, so it is essential to interrogate what is meant by 'culture' in this phrase in order to speak meaningfully about differences. It is just as important to understand what is meant by 'integration', since culture is taken as the reference point for social integration. For example, what exactly did French Prime Minister Manuel Valls (at that point, the French Interior Minister) mean when he claimed in 2013 that the Roma do not wish to integrate into French society "for cultural reasons" (Euractiv 2013)? If this usage is indeed a code word for a racist view of 'primitive' culture, then anthropologists need to enter such discourses and to communicate alternate conceptions about culture more effectively.

This is not a trivial task, since anthropologists themselves are heterogeneous in their interpretation and application of the culture concept. However, at the very least, we can hope to broaden public understandings by putting

our different views and debates within reach of a more general audience and by challenging, based on our scholarship, those public views which we deem wrong and harmful to certain groups in society. Just as important, it is necessary to better engage with colleagues in other disciplines – such as scholars of gender, of cultural or ethnic studies, or of comparative literature – who also use 'culture' as a theoretical construct in their writing but whose usage differs from, or may even contradict, how it is treated from contemporary anthropological perspectives. This dialogue is especially necessary when those disciplines may contribute into the public realm ideas about the 'anthropological' view which are unrecognizable to practitioners of anthropology themselves. Such ideas can be especially damaging for anthropologists, whose work on the ground depends on building relationships of mutual trust and respect with informants.[13] Scholars who take on an additional, activist role, as is frequently the case among those involved in Romani Studies, straddle the boundaries of discourse between public and academic spheres and thus have a unique opportunity to promote alternative models of culture and identity; by engaging more productively with such scholars, anthropologists should be able to make their voices heard in broader contexts (for example, through television or other media, in discussions with aid and development agencies, or in helping to construct educational or informational materials).

In this final section, I describe some other ways in which anthropologists could contribute to developing a more nuanced discourse about the cultural 'Other', which I describe under the rubric of 'engage', 'educate' and 'exercise'.

First it is important to be engaged. By engagement, I mean that anthropologists reach beyond the boundaries of the discipline and those of the academy to connect with members of the public, with scholars in other disciplines, and with representatives of the state in order to convey anthropological perspectives on contemporary issues. It is through dialogue with these different populations that counterarguments to prevailing opinion (or prejudices) can be posed. Because discussions about culture have entered the realm of the political, anthropology, too, needs to be present in political discourse about culture. An example of how this can be done effectively was evident recently in the action taken by almost a hundred academics and scholars in Romani Studies: after a new Thematic Action Plan on Roma and Traveller Inclusion

13   I experienced such negative effects myself when preparing to conduct fieldwork among Roma in the Czech Republic: I encountered many instances of 'gatekeeping' by NGOs and other agencies, denying me access to informants, once I presented myself as an anthropologist. During the course of fieldwork, I became aware of the suspicion attached to the anthropologist on the part of activists working on Roma causes (an understandable perspective, given the memory of German anthropologists whose studies contributed to the dehumanization and extermination of Roma during the Nazi era).

was made public by the Council of Europe on 7 March, 2016, members of the European Academic Network on Romani Studies drafted a letter of criticism and protest against wording in the plan that they felt contributed to perpetuating negative stereotypes about the Roma (Romea 2016). The Council subsequently agreed to re-write certain parts of the text.

Engagement, especially as in the case of the Roma, means also entering into discussion with critics. The criticism expressed by Oprea, for example, seems to argue ultimately for the same kinds of methods and research frameworks that many anthropologists already utilize. In my research among Romanian Roma in Paris, for example, I use participation-observation and other ethnographic methods in order to understand issues of gender identity and women's empowerment, especially with regard to what schooling does or does not mean in this context. This work requires that I move between both Romani and French worldviews, involving French officials, teachers, and other volunteers in my research as well as Romani informants. Drawing upon Ortner's theoretical model, I also try to make explicit my own subjective interpretations, regarding parenting, teaching, or other contexts I encounter. In this attempt at 'thick description' I am finding that in addition to the structure of dominant male relationships within which young girls come of age, I also need to consider other aspects of social life in the camps, such as the expanding role of Pentecostal religion, girls' exposure to non-Romani culture through YouTube and other online videos, and their interactions with material culture in the context of the scavenging work they undertake. This research, while still in the preliminary stage, indicates that Romani female identity and agency need to be understood within the broader context not only of existing patriarchal structures but also in relation to situations of cultural contact and other social influences.

Such methods and questions could be seen as complementing the position taken by Oprea. Nevertheless, the rejection of the 'anthropological perspective' by feminist scholars indicates a lack of communication on the part of anthropologists about their research questions and methods. Thus, finding areas in common with researchers having different agendas and coming from different disciplinary perspectives is necessary to dispel some of the mistrust and misunderstanding that seems to exist. Inviting scholars from these different disciplines to debate these issues at conferences or roundtables would be one way to foster interdisciplinary communication, as would be finding ways to promote less formal dialogue in intramural academic settings among different faculties. Publishing in journals outside of anthropology, or engaging in collaborative research across disciplines would be other ways to promote such communication.

Engagement is also, perhaps most importantly, about entering into deep and long-term relationships with the people whom one studies. Unlike many other disciplines in the social sciences, anthropologists are privileged to

develop intimate and meaningful bonds with their informants within the quotidian complexities of their social worlds. These relationships need to endure in some fashion beyond the limits of a fieldwork project or a research article so that we, too, do not lose sight of the fact that subjects do not simply react to a complex world in static, culturally predetermined ways, but that they may also be active agents in changing the world around them.

The second term, 'educate', consists of talking about what anthropology is, and what it does, to a broad and varied audience. This discussion does not have to promote anthropology as such, but should attempt to convey anthropological concepts such as culture, relativism, ethnocentrism and subjectivity to a wider public in ways that they find meaningful. For example, I teach a version of introductory anthropology in a non-traditional setting, an engineering institute. The second-year IT students taking my social science class on cultural awareness (*ouverture culturelle)* have no particular interest in anthropology, but do find it useful to think about the above concepts in terms of their own experiences and encounters, especially since many students come from North African backgrounds and are interested in issues about cultural identity in France. Writing about contemporary social problems from the anthropological perspective, but for the general public, could also be a goal. Thus, publishing commentary or opinion articles in mainstream media would allow a more nuanced and complex analysis of 'cultural' issues to enter public discourse.

Sharing anthropological knowledge can take place in other, non-academic contexts. For example, at the aid organization that works with marginalized Roma, volunteers hold a monthly meeting at which we discuss some of the 'cultural' issues we encounter, such as child marriage. Workshops are regularly organized to develop knowledge and understanding of state policies or municipal actions that affect the population in question. These are each a context in which I, as an anthropologist, can present a perspective that others may not otherwise encounter. It is in these kinds of debates, at a personal level and dealing with concrete, real-world issues, that all of us learn from one another.

In addition to the urban slums, I have also conducted fieldwork at a different site, a *'village d'insertion'* in the suburbs of Paris. Unlike the slums which spring up in abandoned lots or buildings in the city and which are frequently demolished by the authorities, the *villages d'insertion* are condoned by municipal agencies, which support the Roma in building 'permanent' homes on donated territory; such stability is supposed to engender better integration. In reality, these villages consist of mobile caravan homes on the outskirts of villages, where the residents have no access to water or sanitation, and therefore experience the same kinds of health and hygiene issues as exist in the slums. At this particular village, however, a small project to develop sanitary interventions and establish portable toilets has been implemented, led by a researcher with a background in public health. Although she has worked with

this village for several years, she does not have experience with the broader context of Romani culture and society. We have, however, established a collegial partnership to work together on addressing this issue of public sanitation, each bringing our own intellectual and methodological expertise to the table. This is another example of a context of 'education', where I, too, receive the benefit of learning from my colleague's perspectives and skills, thus gaining insight into another aspect of Romani women's identity, since the sanitation issue incorporates larger questions concerning the female body, personal safety and women's health.

My final point, which encompasses those above, is that we exercise the particular skills and strengths of our discipline in whatever ways we can in our engagement with the world. Whether it be in traditional university settings or in other teaching contexts; in applied work, trying to understand and resolve specific social problems; in interactions on social media or other public platforms; or in our day-to-day interactions with colleagues, friends, or family, we can bring to bear the same tools of participant-observation that we use as researchers and use them to analyse, critique and challenge what we learn from the discourses surrounding us.

Conclusion

Anthropology may have moved into the twenty-first century, but in the public mind 'culture' clearly remains very much a nineteenth-century concept. Despite long engagement with questions of culture throughout her disciplinary history, anthropology seems to have failed to promote a more complex version of the culture concept in the contemporary world. This failure has been on two fronts: that of public discourse, including the media, political institutions and the general public; and that of scholarly discourse, meaning interdisciplinary discussion and debate. Anthropologists should therefore consider how they can better engage in these discourses: publicising their views using different media contexts, educating a wider public beyond the academy, challenging politicans and policy makers, and embarking on open and collaborative dialogue with scholars in other disciplines. Entrenched public attitudes will not change overnight. We see, however, the rise of far-right political agendas across the European spectrum and witness an increasingly ugly tenor in public discourse about the marginalized Other. This makes even more imperative the need for anthropologists to reclaim the narrative about 'culture' and to make their voices also heard in the public domain.

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