

Children and Sex in Anthropology

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Recently, after four and a half years of incarceration in a Slovak prison, I was granted parole and released into the world of the free with merely an electronic anklet monitoring my movement. Convicted of sexual abuse of Romani minors living in some of the rural ghettos that dot Slovakia's eastern periphery, local authorities staunchly refused to recognize the legitimacy of my research of juvenile prostitution, my home university's ethics clearance of the employed methods (such as interviewing minors without the presence of their legal guardians), and even the very existence of the investigated phenomenon. I had invented it, the prosecution argued, in order to prey on vulnerable children.

In the course of my research, I had interviewed some 150 girls and young women who acknowledged sex work as a source of irregular income and – controversially for contemporary social scientists – pleasure. I had rarely detected more than a nominal measure of contrition while even young teens rejected the majority society's control of their bodies as meddling intrusiveness. In short, these youngsters displayed and demanded a great deal of 'agency'. Unfortunately, a full analysis and publication of the intriguing intellectual fodder encountered in the nether world of Slovakia's Romani ghettos was cut short by my arrest and incarceration.

Slovak media swallowed the prosecution's portrayal of the 'Canadian professor' as a sexual predator hook, line, and sinker. They quoted at length from the luridly written indictment at the center of which was a pre-teen whom I had allegedly 'purchased' for the purpose of sexual molestation. Yet they failed to cover the trial sessions where this story was revealed to be a fabrication and where most of my alleged victims contradicted the indictment and invoked pressure and threats of juvenile detention homes as justification for their cooperation with the police. Alas, their sworn recantations in court had come too late to have any effect on the verdict.

In view of these contradictions, I was curious about the reaction of ‘my people’ to my conditional release and my enforced residence in a community nearby my principal fieldwork site. Within a week my telephone number had been circulated among dozens of former informants, and I was inundated with requests for meetings during which my alleged victims and their close and distant kin offered companionship and sexual services for the duration of my involuntary exile. They all expressed outrage at the way they had been misused by the police and judiciary and declared me to be the only outsider who understands and accepts their version of the ‘Gypsy way of life’. An anthropologist’s dream unfolding at a time when one wrong step will send me back to prison....

That juvenile prostitution continues to thrive in the Romani ghettos of eastern Slovakia is beyond dispute. But my experience shows that it is a phenomenon explored at one’s own peril and for this reason, perhaps, glossed over by the exploding number of scholars, many of them anthropologists, who claim a niche in the burgeoning sub-field of Romani studies. One reason for this curious omission undoubtedly derives from the unease we feel about children’s sexuality, especially when combined with erotic desires that are normally considered a prerogative of adulthood. The suggestion that teens and even pre-teens pursue prostitution not out of despair and sheer economic necessity but also as a means to satisfy sexual desire, as many of my Romani informants claim to do, is dismissed as an outrage, or, as my Slovak prosecutor thought, a ruse used by a make-believe academic to conceal his misdeeds.

Contemporary anthropology has little to say about children and sex and even less about children’s erotic desires and the ways they are gratified. That wasn’t always the case. Responding to Freudianism’s provocative theories about this subject (let’s recall, for example, the enormous impact of Melanie Klein’s work on children’s sexual perversions), the pioneers of modern socio-cultural anthropology sought to demonstrate the new discipline’s relevance in part through documenting – and theorizing about – distant people’s attitudes to and practices in the realm of children’s sexuality. Margaret Mead had complained to Ruth Benedict that all her youthful informants wished to discuss was ‘sex, sex, sex’, and went on to record intimate data that made Havelock Ellis typify Samoa as a place where “nearly every little girl masturbates from the age of six or seven” (Ellis, 1939: 88). Members of the same age group frolicking in trial copulations on Kiribina’s beaches were described in Malinowski’s famous *Sexual Life of Savages* which may have inspired an entire generation of anthropologists to consider children as (also) sexual beings. C. G. Seligman discussed “genital stimulation in young children” (Seligman, 1932: 215) and quoted Isaac Schapera’s correspondence about boys and girls of six rubbing together their genitals in attempted intercourse

(Seligman, 1932: 214). George Devereux employed under-age informants to convey such explicit information about the sexual conduct of Mohave adolescents and pre-adolescents that he (or his publisher?) felt compelled to render much of it in Latin (Devereux, 1961). Geoffrey Gorer's work on the Lepcha of Sikkim (Gorer, 1938) whose consensual pedophilia inspired Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, or Verrier Elwin's richly textured account of the Muria *ghotul* (Elwin, 1947) – a club house where children experimented with sex – are well known. We are less aware of Raymond Firth's attention to children's sexuality in Tikopia (Firth, 1936) or Gregory Bateson's contemplation of the significance of parental masturbation of Balinese and Sicilian infant boys (Bateson, 1947) – a practice still prevalent among the Slovak Roma where I conducted my fieldwork. Numerous other examples of pre-WW2 anthropological accounts of children's sexual desires and practices found their way into Ford's and Beach's influential *Patterns of sexual behavior* (1951) which suggested rather subversively that “a society which permits extensive sex play in childhood and adolescence may thereby increase the chances that sexual relations in marriage will be pleasant and mutually satisfying” (1951: 197).

Reading these accounts nowadays – as I did in the solitude of my prison cell – one wonders how our predecessors got hold of the data they conveyed. Margaret Mead interrogated sexually curious girl-respondents in the privacy of her residence – as did, much later, Gilbert Herdt during his work with Melanesian youths. Verrier Elwin got so close to his young informants that he eventually married a thirteen-year-old tribal girl. Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf's musings about Naga girls' physical assets accentuated by skimpy skirts of barely a “hand's width” led him to bemoan “the necessary reserve of the anthropologist” (Fürer-Haimendorf, 1939: 220). Gorer admitted to having been an object of sexual attention in a society where “almost every woman from eight to eighty” welcomed attempts at seduction (Gorer, 1937: 327). Malinowski confided guilty thoughts and occasional gropings to his diary. Melanie Klein conducted therapy sessions with boys and girls who masturbated in her presence – and occasionally demanded her participation. Such was the case, for example, with six-year-old ‘Erna’ who underwent almost 600 hours of treatment and requested that the therapist touched and smelled her genitals (Klein, 1960: 85). In my case, the mere fact that I had interviewed unattended adolescents – a methodological necessity approved by my university's research ethics committee – was one of the contributing factors leading to a guilty verdict. My judges agreed with the prosecution that I should have limited my encounters with juveniles to public institutions such as schools and community centers supervised by teachers and social workers. That would have been a waste of time, of course.

Times are changing. Perhaps I should have reported the Romani teens and

pre-teens who, often with the knowledge and support of their parents, had sought to involve me in a sexual liaison and had dismissed my protestations with the mirthful assurance that the control of their bodies was their own business. Isn't that also part of the 'agency' enlightened anthropologists have been so anxious to assign to their research subjects? Who sets the limits of that magical 'agency'? The people we so respectfully work with or the western hegemony we claim to abhor? The young sex workers of my acquaintance share some of the attributes of Eric Hobsbawm's pre-political 'primitive rebels'. They are aware of their racial oppression and dismissive of the semi-colonial recipes Slovak society proposes as a solution to the perennial 'Gypsy problem'. They don't want to go to school in order to acquire discipline and inferior skills that promise the career of an under-paid kitchen aide or cleaning lady. They prefer to remain free and enjoy what Nietzsche called a 'Dionysian' lifestyle, which, in the context of the impoverished ghettos they inhabit, is proudly invoked as the 'Gypsy way of life'. Controlling one's own body and sexuality is its core ingredient.

It is early September, and hundreds of children from what is locally dubbed 'Slovak Africa' have tearfully returned to boarding schools where problematic Romani juveniles get reformed and re-socialized. During the summer recess the girls begged outside shopping malls, huffed toluene, and turned tricks. Now, under the supervision of white psychologists and social workers, they will be de-loused, de-toxified, and re-habituated to a pharmaceutical régime that seeks to suppress their 'excessive' sexuality. Vaneska, my thirteen-year-old informant whom I was careful to interview only in the public space outside a shopping mall where she begged and looked for clients, described the six large pills she was compelled to swallow each day and the drowsiness and fatigue induced by them. She, too, has returned to her 'home away from home'. She didn't want to, but she did in order not to jeopardize the release of her father who is serving a six-month-sentence for tolerating Vaneska's truancy. After he returns, it will be Vaneska's mother's turn to go to prison. I sympathize, for the same paragraph of the Slovak criminal code figured also in my prosecution. It is meant to avert children's 'moral decay' or 'feralization'. I was found guilty of violating it by rewarding my juvenile informants with nominal honoraria and thereby contributing to their 'asocial' way of life.

My Slovak and Czech colleagues with research experience in the ghettoized settlements of eastern Slovakia are likely to dismiss this ethnographic sketch as unrepresentative of the majority of local Roma. And indeed, my focus has always been on the so-called 'unadaptables' who are utterly dismissive of the norms and values of white Slovaks (Scheffel and Mušinka, 2019). These are undisciplined people in the Foucauldian sense of successfully subverting the modern state's

'biopower'. They give a fig about table manners, dental care, prudery, sobriety, and sexual restraint. They are fond of Dionysian excess, and that's perhaps why present-day students of Roma tend to dismiss them as an untypical minority doomed to extinction in a world pretending 'integration' and 'inclusion' being distinct from assimilation.

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