

HUMAN RIGHTS MELODRAMA

A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF REPORTS ON POLICE VIOLENCE AGAINST HUNGARIAN ROMS

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Introduction: Hungarian Roms and Human Rights Literature

The Roms¹ are universally cited as Europe's most disadvantaged, disenfranchised and reviled minority group – but only in the past decade has any serious humanitarian attention been devoted to them. Since the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, the West's stereotypical Rom no longer plays music or steals babies. Now he is impoverished, illiterate, and attacked by nearly everyone with white skin, including skinheads, policemen, and assorted xenophobes. Accordingly, Western human rights agencies are clamoring to come to his aid.

This switch in stereotype is certainly grounded in fact. Since they began to immigrate into Europe in the 15th century, the Roms have always lived on the outskirts of society, within their own culture. As a minority unwilling to assimilate and abandon their culture to the majority's, they faced frequent attacks and constant discrimination. Unlike their counterparts the Jews, the Roms typically were less formally educated and had a much lower standard of living than the majority population. Communist rule began to reduce both these social disparities and racial persecution, and Eastern European Roms began to move up the social ladder. Instances of racist attacks and discrimination decreased, as did the unemployment and poverty rates within the Romani community. When the Communist governments fell in 1989, social support and programs devoted to bolstering the Roma also disappeared. Simultaneously, levels of racist violence and discrimination directed against the Roma skyrocketed, particularly in Hungary.

As a Central European nation that enjoyed a relatively mild form of communist rule, Hungary has transitioned to democracy and capitalism more successfully than most its neighbors, but the transition has not benefited all Hungarians. Xenophobia has steadily increased in Hungary, to the point that it is now the most xenophobic country in Eastern Europe (including the Balkans)²– a remarkable feat in a region noted for its intense and historic xenophobia. This regrettable designation is partly due to Western Europe's relationship with Hungary: along with Poland and the Czech Republic, the nation is part of a 'buffer zone' used by Western Europe to prevent immigrants from Central Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and other regions from entering the West. Since 1990, Hungary has experienced a dramatic rise in immigration, which has increased unemployment and strained

¹ See the language note after the final page of paper for an explanation of the vocabulary I use to discuss the Roms.

² **"The most xenophobic country, when measured on a combined scale, is Hungary, followed by Poland and the Czech Republic and then Croatia. These are the countries that have received large numbers of refugees, labor migrants and transit migrants" (Wallace 28).**

limited government funds. For a complex blend of reasons, crime rates also rose during this time and some Hungarians experienced a severe drop in living standards, but these problems were most often blamed on Roma and immigrants. The end of communism meant that xenophobia was no longer taboo, and politicians, journalists, and citizens began to scapegoat minority groups, particularly the Roms, for Hungary's growing social problems (Wallace 1999 5). Now the Roms are not only Hungary's prime scapegoat, but also its most disadvantaged population -- in terms of education, opportunity, income, and employment -- and a constant target of racist attacks (PER 1994).

The Hungarian Roms have always been a disadvantaged and threatened minority, but currently they are facing an altogether new kind of (racism). For the first time in the Hungarian Roms' history, powerful non-Romani organizations want to help the minority to gain political influence, to protect and nurture their independent traditions and culture, and to raise their standard of living. Human rights organizations, both international and Hungarian, devote increasing attention to the situation of the Roms and blame the minority's disadvantages on human rights abuses. In the past decade, powerful NGOs (including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch) and intergovernmental groups (including the European Union, the United Nations, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) have initiated a crusade to protect the minority from aggression and manipulation by the majority population, and to promote the minority to positions of power and influence.

Human rights organizations may aim to empower the Hungarian Roms by calling attention to the abuses committed against them, but their mode of accomplishing this aim may actually undermine it. These Western groups use short reports as the primary means inspire human rights activism, and these reports deserve thorough scrutiny for how they portray the situation of the Roms. Though these reports are brief and factual, they deal with the primary questions of Romani identity and life: (1) Who are the Roms?, (2) What are the main problems the Roms face?, and (3) How can these problems best be resolved while still respecting who the Roms are? Such questions are fundamental to Romani identity and to policy shaping Romani life, but these Western humanitarian groups answer them without consulting the Roms, and for purposes that do not necessarily coincide with the Roms'. For the sake of promoting activism, human rights reports ignore the complexities of the Roms' situation in Hungary and offer an overly simplified and misrepresentative account of the abuse and those involved in it.

A literary analysis of human rights groups' reports can provide a much-needed critique of their treatment of the Hungarian Roms. Humanitarian activists, from slavery abolitionists to feminist suffragists to progressive muckrakers, have historically used literature to further their cause, but human rights literature is seemingly unique among these. Rather than the deeply emotional, personal, desperate tracts that slavery abolitionists published, human rights reports read as pieces of journalism: factual, impersonal, and terse to the extent that they seem to be wholly unbiased and credible. This journalistic veneer makes the reports' manipulations and misrepresentations all the more deceptive and harmful. Ultimately, human rights literature operates as a melodrama, despite seeming like anything but this form. Like all melodrama, it oversimplifies, stereotypes, and seeks more to persuade than to explain.

Whether humanitarian melodrama is an inappropriate or condemnable form of human rights activist literature is a separate, and crucial question, and the focus of the last half of this paper. After examining a human rights report on the Hungarian Roms in detail and explaining how it works as a melodrama, I will analyze it in the context of the current debate on Romani identity and self-determination, and the burgeoning Romani political and anti-discrimination movement. Guiding this analysis will be several central questions: how can literature responsibly encourage humanitarian activism?; how can literature excite sympathy and indignation without being simplistic or misrepresentative?; and how ought literature discuss violence and human rights abuses? Essentially, can a human rights report both encourage activism and present a thorough and complex account of a situation, or is there an inevitable trade-off between the two?

Human Rights Reports: A Description

In the past five years, Amnesty International has released a series of brief reports that focus on the abuse of Hungarian Roms by local Hungarian policemen. These reports, termed Urgent Actions (UAs), present short synopses of the rights violation along with instructions as to how the reader can redress this violation. Amnesty aims its UAs at both current and potential human rights activists, and it solicits the bulk of its new members with these reports (Nummedal 2003). The reports are written in English and—though available to anyone in the world via the Internet—are mainly intended for Amnesty's base of Western members, who tend to be American, Canadian, or British. The UA is the most widely circulated publication Amnesty produces and is considered a primary impetus and tool for activism. Amnesty's lengthier, comprehensive reports on countries are intended more for policymakers

and scholars than for activists. UAs are expected to inspire letter writing and be converted into petitions, as directed at the end of each report. To accommodate and attract activists, the UAs are limited typically to one or two pages and do not provide background information on the event³. According to one of Amnesty's report writers, "to inspire action, the goal is to keep UAs short and to the point" (Nummedal 2003).

An exemplary UA on the Hungarian Roms is a January 1999 report entitled "Alleged Ill-Treatment of Roma in Hajdúhadház⁴." The report focuses on a series of violent encounters between Roms and local Hungarian policemen. The majority of the text details selected facts about the rights violations: how the policemen initially encountered the Roms, what physical abuse and verbal insults they inflicted upon the Roms, and how the Roms eventually left police custody. The last section of text outlines how these incidents violate specific treaties and conventions which Hungary has signed, and then offers specific recommendations as to how Hungarian authorities ought to address these abuses. The reader is supposed to then write to the designated Hungarian government authorities, mentioning these instances of abuse, reiterating how they violate Hungary's treaty obligations, and demanding that the report's recommendations be carried out.

The UA reads like a news article, though with even less detail and context than such an article would typically have. Essentially, all that is discussed in the report are the instances of abuse, who inflicted it upon whom, and when and where this occurred. The reader knows only that, on a certain day in 1999 in a Hungarian town, two police officers stopped two Romani minors, then interrogated, beat, and kicked them to the point that one Rom had to be hospitalized for 10 days and operated upon for head injuries. No mention is made of the past, in terms of precedents, motivations, or historical background for this abuse; and no mention is made of the future, in terms of long-term effects or implications of the abuse. The human rights report presents the instance of abuse without any context.

Even that which the report does include is treated brusquely, with little detail. The town name and date are identified clearly, but the reader (especially the Western activist reader unfamiliar with Hungary or Central Europe)

³ "One of the main requirements for UAs is to keep them to one page (front and back), since distribution needs to be both fast and affordable. It's handy information for many activists, who will also turn some UAs into petitions, prewritten letters for their groups, letters to the editor, as well, of course, into letters to the targeted officials. Also, from my experience as a student, I will admit that many (if not most) students don't want to read much more than one page, front and back. I suspect that most non-student activists are the same" (Nummedal 2003).

⁴ Hajdúhadház is a town in Northeast Hungary.

has no clear image of what this place is physically like. She may be able to find Hajdúhadház on a map, but the reader has no clear image of this place, including what it physically looks like, whether it is crowded or isolated, residential or commercial, urban or rural, wealthy or impoverished, with a large Romani population or few Roms. Such details not only could form precise mental images for the reader but also could help her better understand the abuse and those involved in it.

The report presents the people involved as starkly as it does the setting. The only people mentioned are those who suffer abuse or who commit abuse, and even these people are barely described. The reader knows only the people's genders, ages, and nationalities. According to the nature of the incident, age, ethnicity, job position, and name (or initials) may also be provided. In the Jan. 1999 report, the report introduces "Attila Rezes, a 16-year old Romani youth" and "D.B., who is also Rom and is 17 or 18 years old" and then avoids offering any additional personal information. No other details about the Roms – like family status, personality traits, socioeconomic position, political leanings, or physical appearance – are supplied. The offenders are treated even more brusquely. They are described simply as "police officers," and the reader does not know even their ages, genders, or names.

Description of the actual abuse comprises the majority of the text, and this is dispassionate, impersonal and factual as well. The report is written completely in the third person, even though it is based on first-person testimonials of the Romani victims. After briefly mentioning how the police initiate contact with the Roms (the two Roms are on a roadside and the police pull up to them in a car), the report proceeds directly to accounts of violence. The reader knows nothing of what led up to or precipitated this violence, including what dialogue was exchanged or if any inflammatory remarks or behavior occurred. As soon as the setting and characters are introduced, the description of the abuse begins. These descriptions focus mainly on the weapons used and the parts of the body attacked. A typical description, "During the interrogation, officers reportedly struck Attila Rezes with their fists and with truncheons on his head, legs and shins," lacks any personal detail or emotion. Never is the reader privy to the thoughts or feelings of either perpetrator or victim, and there is no description of either party as the abuse occurs.

The report is simultaneously based on victims' testimonies and absent of detail about the victims. Each statement about the abuse is marked with a precautionary "reportedly" or "allegedly", and the report is limited to a list of the victims' allegations about the perpetrators' wrongdoings. No mention is made of the Roms' behavior or their reactions to the abuse. The reader knows only that the Romani youths were on a roadside, the police stopped

them, and the police insulted and attacked them. The reader knows nothing of what the Romani victims did or said, only what was done or said to them – and even that information is only according to these victims. Following this summary of abuse, the report concludes with a list of treaty clauses that prohibit such abuse, contact information for Hungarian political officials, and recommendations that these officials enforce these treaties.

Notably, no author is listed, nor is where or when the report is written. Because of this casual absence of authorship, the text seems to have no background and no creator. The reader can easily forget that it was written by a specific person or set of persons, that its information was compiled and arranged deliberately and for specific purposes, and that its authors may have certain prejudices or faults. It seems as if the facts are presented without mediation, as if they had not gone through the lens and filter of a middleman author, when of course they have. Without an author listed, the text is more readily considered unbiased and trustworthy. Altogether, the human rights report on the Hungarian Roms presents instances of abuse with as little context and description as possible, keeping the people involved and the setting obscure and generalized and informing the reader only of the specifics of the violence.

Human Rights Reports as Melodrama

Judging by their factual and impersonal style, human rights reports hardly seem like works of melodrama. They certainly contain no trace of the exaggerated emotion or excessive personal description for which melodramas are noted. Nevertheless, the human rights reports on the Hungarian Roms use many of melodrama's key techniques and, when read by activist readers, operate primarily as works of melodrama despite their initial appearance. We can generally define melodrama to be those works that stress the virtues of suffering victims and the villainy of heartless perpetrators. Typically the genre is taken to be synonymous with television soap operas, but such a comparison ignores melodrama's moral function. By inspiring sympathy for sufferers and indignation towards evil aggressors, a piece of melodrama intends "to make jaded readers, audiences, and viewers thrill to ever new forms of pathos and action" (Williams 2001 16). It constructs a Manichean universe, with characters who unambiguously embody good or evil and who lack complex psychologies (Williams 2001 40). Underneath all of its emotion and drama, melodrama's main intention is to delineate a clear moral order and make this legible to the reader through heavily stereotyped characters (Brooks 1976 15).

The typical melodrama plot is a simple trajectory: the central character, completely virtuous and sympathetic, suffers persecution by peripheral, evil characters or forces. Most of the text details these sufferings of the protagonist and demonstrates how this suffering only increases her virtue. Ultimately, the protagonist's own virtues redeem her and rescue her from evil. A melodrama positions its readers to care deeply about the protagonist, and this empathetic connection is primarily based in the character's suffering. Though melodrama may be most easily recognized in clichéd television movies and soap operas, or other fictional 'feminine' entertainment, all kinds of realist and 'masculine' works also follow this formula, including many Western films, action movies, and much historical humanitarian literature⁵. Melodrama was the preferred mode of 19th century slavery abolitionists, as typified in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the other fiction and pamphlets supporters published. The typical abolitionist tract stereotyped slaves as perpetual, saintly victims and slaveholders as racist villains, and used a highly emotional style that involved elaborate character descriptions, many pleading first-hand accounts, and gory descriptions of violence.

Though it aims to inspire empathy and activism like abolitionist literature did, human rights literature seems to adopt an approach opposite to these abolitionists' exaggerated, character-driven melodrama. Human rights literature meticulously avoids characterizing both the victims and the perpetrators; it divulges no emotions and no personality traits; it generally concerns itself more with acts of violence than the people performing or suffering them. As a story, it is too straightforward and devoid of context, personality, or emotion to be involving. How could the reader empathize with a protagonist that they know practically nothing about? The abolitionists would never expect such a text to inspire activism.

Clearly, those writing the human rights report assume their style will be successful, and that the reader will still be spurred to act on behalf of the victim without knowing who the victim or offender is in any detail. Their assumption is based on one of two rationales. The first—nearly opposite to the thought of the abolitionist—is that a reader cares more about the law that is violated than the person that is victimized. Accordingly, how the law is broken ought to be the focus rather than the victim's suffering or the perpetrator's motivations. This strategy presumes that human rights readers are highly rational, unemotional, and legally minded—that they would be ready

⁵ See William's Chapter one for an overview of how melodrama thrives in modern America. She discusses the examples I list, among others. Her main focus is racial melodrama, from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to O.J. Simpson.

to become an activist simply because a law has been broken. Perhaps human rights agencies base their writing style on this presumed activist, or perhaps they are trying to shape the reader into this presumed activist. The reader is most likely a high school or college student (Nummedal 2003) and does not approach instances of violence and racism with a detached, strictly legal mindset. A strictly emotionless, rational activist reader seems like an ideal more than a reality, and this first rationale is unconvincing.

The second rationale for the style of the human rights literature is that it allows the reader to become highly emotional and highly involved in the story, while pretending to be far too factual and brusque to be melodramatic. Though it would seem the opposite, the characters' lack of depth, personality, and emotion may actually create an ideal kind of melodrama. The human rights report does have the basic infrastructure of melodrama. There are only two kinds of characters: perpetrators and victims. All that occurs in the piece is abuse and suffering. The only melodramatic elements missing are the virtue of the victims, the evil of the perpetrators, the redemption of the victims, and the comeuppance of the perpetrators. None of these key points are located within the actual text, but – crucially - the activist reader can readily supply them.

Because of the text's lack of detail, the reader essentially has a blank slate on which to project the melodramatic narratives to which she is so accustomed. Even if the report does not directly portray the policemen as evil, racist, heartless, or malicious, the reader does know that the policemen are violent and insulting toward the Roms. Correspondingly, the report does not indicate that the Roms are morally upright, altogether innocent, or noble sufferers, but their reader is certain that they are victims and members of a persecuted minority group. If the reports were to paint overtly melodramatic portraits of the policemen as evil attackers and the Roms as saintly victims, they would most likely be factually incorrect and so vulnerable to severe criticism. But excluding such melodramatic portraiture from the text does not preclude the reader from consuming the text as a melodrama. Because no characters details are provided, the reader can substitute in those she is familiar with from the abundance of popular melodrama.

When confronted with this account of abuse and suffering, a reader will most likely wonder, consciously or not, why this incident occurs. Even if (according to the first rationale) their main concern is that a law was broken, the reader probably wants to know 'What motivated the policeman to behave so violently?,' 'Why was the Romani teenager selected as the victim?,' and even 'Why did someone dare to break this law?'. The human rights reports

provide no answers to any of these urgent questions, for the reports exclude character descriptions as well as background information that could provide some clue to motivations. Faced with this lack of explanation, the reader can easily answer her own questions by referencing familiar narratives (Cumberbatch 1976 73). The Hungarian policemen beat up the Roms because they are evil and racist, just as the LA Policemen beat up Rodney King because they were evil and racist, just as Ku Klux Klan members beat up African Americans because they were evil and racist, just as Nazis beat up the Jews because they were evil and racist. The Roms are selected as victims because they are a misunderstood, relatively helpless minority like the African-Americans, or the European Jews, or the Native Americans. The reports, written according to the victims' testimony, are essentially a list of the policemen's insults and offenses, and so offer no information to contradict their characterization as entirely evil and racist. Since no personal information is given about the policemen, the reader sees only that they are violent and abusive to a disadvantaged minority and so can easily lump them together with other racist villains so common in popular culture and history. The human rights reports' strict factualness and lack of personal details may ultimately contribute to the reports' melodramatic tendencies, insofar as they encourage a reading of the perpetrator as a raging racist.

The other missing features of the melodrama –the virtuous protagonist, the redemption of the victim, and the punishment of the perpetrator – are also supplied by the reader, but not by references to common melodramatic narratives. Rather, human rights literature positions the reader herself to become the central figure of the narrative and to supply it with these key melodramatic elements. The human rights reader is the melodrama's virtuous hero who suffers (though only in a second-hand manner), who is morally righteous, and who bravely, honorably takes action to correct this unjust suffering and to censure those inflicting it.

If she follows the text's explicit instructions and implicit cues, the reader will suffer along with the Romani victim and feel herself to have power to correct this suffering. The readers do not know the victims well enough to be either indifferent or happy about the abuse inflicted upon them. Rather, because the Roms in the text are so anonymous and featureless, and because the Roms' testimonies are the basis of the text, the reader can easily identify and sympathize with them. The qualification of the victim's suffering as a human rights abuse allows the reader to participate in the suffering even more. According to the rationale of human rights, when one person suffers such a human rights abuse, all humans do, for an essential human dignity has been assaulted. What it means to be

human, and the standard of treatment humans deserve have both been denigrated by such an abuse. The Romani teenager may have been the one to have had his head slammed into the wall and the Romani woman may have been the one to have been called a dirty Gypsy bitch, but the person reading about these incidents is abused and insulted too, for human rights have been violated here and fundamental human dignities have been denigrated. The human rights reader is a victim just like – though perhaps not to the same extent – as the Romani victim detailed in the report.

This Romani victim, according to the report, will not be the narrative's hero, as would usually occur in a melodrama. That privilege belongs to the activist reader instead. The reader is virtuous enough to choose to suffer (unlike the Rom, who unwittingly becomes the victim) by sparing their time and empathy to read this story. The closing paragraphs of the report then encourage the reader to participate in the narrative and enable her to become the narrative's melodramatic hero. The report is structured so that it seems the only solution to this injustice is the action of the reader. Only if the reader becomes an activist, speaks out on behalf of the victim and the broken law, and fights for the moral good will this situation be corrected. Only the reader -- by the sake of her virtuous ability to suffer along with the victims and grow indignant at the violation of a human right -- can help redeem this victim and bring the evil perpetrators to punishment. The reader completes the human rights report's melodrama, as the text situates her as the most important actor, and the only one able to provide the optimal melodramatic conclusion. The text, though it avoids characterizing its only explicit victims, the Roms, as noble heroes, makes a victim of its reader as well and then positions her to be the suffering virtuous hero. The melodrama is complete: the human rights activist-reader and the Roms are oppressed by evil Hungarian policemen, and the activist-reader chastises this evil while redeeming the victims.

Analysis of Human Rights Melodrama

The typical criticisms lobbed at melodramas are that they are overly simplistic and manipulative. Human rights melodramas deserve more thorough analysis and more specific criticisms, since we must recognize that these reports may be simplistic and manipulative for the sake of important aims. To determine its worth, the key questions that must be asked of human rights literature are, 'Does the text represent its characters responsibly? Does it accurately convey to the reader why this abuse occurred? Does it accurately convey how this situation can be

resolved? And, fundamentally, will this text actually benefit those it nominally intends to benefit?' When dealing with other victims and with other instances of abuse, human rights reports may deserve a resounding 'Yes' for each of these questions. Concerning the Hungarian Roms, however, human rights literature cannot be judged so positively.

Melodramatic portrayals of Roms as victims may inspire activism on their behalf, but may be also insulting and disempowering for them. In the human rights reports, the Roms do not have sufficient personality or power to redress their own abuse, and it is the Western human rights activist who must admonish the Hungarian policemen. Historically the Roms have consistently been stereotyped as the constant victim (PER 1994 26), and groups aiming to benefit the Roms ought not reinforce such an image. As they begin to organize themselves politically and socially, Roms have set self-determination as one of their primary objectives. Already in Eastern Europe, non-Romani leaders determine policies regarding the Roms more than the Roms themselves (PER 2002 11). Many Romani activists are particularly insistent that Roms themselves must lead and define the movement to stop abuses against Roms, rather than allowing non-Romani organizations crusade on their behalf⁶.

A similar conflict occurred during the American slavery abolitionist movement, when white abolitionists controlled the movement and limited the involvement of black abolitionists. African Americans were not supposed to be eloquent defenders of their race's rights, but rather an undereducated or silent victim who needed white activists' help to define and fight for their rights (Bacon 2002). Human rights literature treats the Roms similarly, by positioning them as the passive victim whom the Western human rights activist must swoop down to help. While Eastern European media often only report on Roms who are criminals or artists, human rights groups distort equally, representing them only as victims (PER 1996). If the reports provided more details about the victims --making them more complex, rather than simply defining them by their Romani ethnicity and their victimhood—the reader may be able to comprehend the Roms as full humans who are not completely helpless and dependent upon the non-Romani

⁶ “The Romani community itself needs new ideas to govern and mobilize itself, and it is the Romani elites who must fashion those ideas... Is the human rights approach, demanding equality and nondiscrimination, the one idea that can overcome all the problems facing the Roma? Or should the Romani elites focus on the notion of a Romani enlightenment, a Romani emancipation, and a Romani integration as an avenue for overcoming the humiliating Romani position in society? Should it turn toward social and economic rights as a strategy for their own community? Should the elites insist on implementing Third World development strategies for their communities, despite the fact that most of the Romani people live among some of the most advanced and developed societies in the world?” (Mirga and Gheorge 1997, conclusion). These are the main questions of self-determination Roms are grappling with, and which human rights groups answer without consulting the Roms.

activists. Of course, activists ought to empathize with the Romani victims, and human rights literature ought to foster such empathy – but not by playing into stereotypes of Roms as passive, constant victims, and not by positioning the reader activist as having the primary power to redress the abuse.

Another issue is whether the violence the Hungarian police commit against the Roms ought to be considered primarily as a human rights abuse. Certainly the police abuse violates international treaties on human rights, but its presentation in the reports as solely a human rights violation neglects much of its historical and societal context. Human rights literature may distract activist readers from more fundamental, less violent problems that deserve the most urgent redress – like discrimination in education, housing, employment, government benefits, and general society. Because human rights literature lacks background information, the activist reader cannot see that these instances of police violence may be rooted in Roms’ social and economic disadvantages. Such disadvantages perpetuate poor living conditions, crime, and unemployment in the Romani community, which in turn perpetuate racist stereotypes of the Rom, which may fuel Hungarian police violence against Roms. These reports may be addressing a side effect rather than the root problem, and misrepresenting the instance of abuse as a singular racist human rights violation without context. In keeping the report short and the melodramatic narrative straightforward, human rights literature misinforms its readers about the Roms’ situation, ignoring their entire complex situation in order to focus on a particularly violent incident that can be presented as a simple, sensational narrative.

The offenders, as well as the victims, are also misrepresented by the reports’ melodrama. No excuses ought to be offered to the policemen for their abuse of the Roms, but vilifying them – or encouraging the reader to do so by biasing the report so heavily against them – benefits neither the policemen nor the Roms. After human rights activists focused on the murder of three Roms in a Romanian-Hungarian-Romani village in northern Romania, the activists’ crusade backfired. As they encouraged national and international condemnation of these human rights violations, the result “was a severe cleavage between the populations [in the village], serious levels of hostility to outsiders, and a deliberately cultivated solidarity with the local officials who were implicated in the instigation of the mob violence” (PER 1994). Treatment of the Roms in the community worsened, and the offenders were never prosecuted. Human rights groups’ melodramatic approach to conflicts between Roms and Hungarians

(or Romanians, in this case) does not recognize the complexities of the situation or the actors involved, and such simplistic characterizations of the perpetrators can exacerbate these conflicts.

When human rights activists devote more attention to the Roms, this may actually increase Hungarian resentment of the minority and provoke further abuse,⁷ as well as convince Hungarians of these activists' ignorance of the situation. Hungarians certainly do not consider themselves as racist, and they view their own dislike or hatred of Roms as a natural reaction to the minority rather than as a flaw within themselves. They regard activists' pathos for the Roms as unfounded and unreasonable, and they likewise regard activists' condemnations of the Hungarians as deluded and insulting. Human rights reports and resultant letters from activists, which portray the situation as a simple melodramatic conflict between powerful racists and an oppressed minority, can easily be dismissed by those the activism is aimed to chastise.

Moreover, when the report recommends that activists contact governmental authorities to encourage them to live up to the treaties their government has signed, such an action may backfire in a situation like that of Hungary. Hungarian national authorities – those that Amnesty addresses its recommendations to – have already expressed their willingness to improve Roms' human rights, through both these international treaties and a host of national programs over the past decades. Denouncing and chastising these national authorities for the failures of local policemen can make “it less rather than more likely that outside advice will be taken seriously and increas[e] the probability of the least desired reaction” (PER 1994). Central national authorities do not, and ought not, have a great deal of control over local authorities in Hungary. This post-Communist nation is attempting to recover from an overly centralized and dictatorial government and establish decentralized and independent justice systems (PER 1994). Human rights groups ought not encourage national authorities to interfere in local matters or blame these national figures for local failings: “such habits tend to produce a cycle of condemnation and frustration” (PER 1994) that benefits no one involved.

Though human rights literature would have the reader believe she can be the melodramatic hero and come to the Roms' aid while chastising the Hungarians, this belief is misfounded. Identifying police violence against

⁷ “Many think that the Roma are excessively well supported and enjoy positive discrimination, and also live in the limelight of the media; accordingly they had been given houses by the state which they, being too choosy, had the nerve to reject. And on top of all of this they went to Strasbourg to complain about Hungary while tens of thousands of hard-working, law-abiding Hungarians are waiting for flats, jobs, better lives, and are ignored because they belong to the majority” (Kende 2000).

Roms as a human rights abuse may be easy, but acting to redress and prevent such abuse is far more complicated. The reports make activism seem simple and easy, though, by outlining specific things the reader can do to redress the abuse, without acknowledging that these things may well be aimed at the wrong party, undermine Hungarian respect for Western human rights groups, and even encourage more abuse of the Roms.

In trying to encourage activism, human rights melodramas give activists a sense of power, relief, and closure. In the case of the Hungarian Roms, such impressions are unwarranted and false. Human rights literature about the Roms ultimately centers more on the activist than on the victim or the perpetrator, and this fundamental flaw undermines human rights groups' noble aims. As Amnesty explains in a handbook for its members, "The details of cases can be disturbing. However, doing *something* which may help—such as a brief letter to the authorities—can be an antidote to the feelings of helplessness one may have upon hearing grim accounts of human rights violations" (Amnesty 1991 110-111). Activism is intended to aid the activist more than the victim here. Even if the "*something* which may help" does not ultimately help or even does harm, the activist still feels more at ease with herself and the world. The horror she felt when reading about Hungarian police tormenting a Romani boy is mollified somewhat, for she has taken some steps that Amnesty designated as potentially corrective. The helplessness she felt when reading about the abuse is transformed into a satisfaction with her own potential power to correct this instance of abuse and prevent other ones.

Activists ought not always be given this antidote, though. This relief from horror and helplessness is not the ideal means for activists to deal with human rights violations. Encouraging people to empathize with victims of abuse is certainly advisable, as is encouraging people to take action to stop abuse. What this action is, however, and how much relief you permit the empathetic activist to experience are more debatable and crucial issues. Particularly in a situation as complicated as that of the Roms in Hungary -- in which it is unclear what is the best means to stop discrimination, whether Roms want discrimination and segregation to end, and who ought to be leading a campaign to stop discrimination -- an activist ought not be given a sense of easy relief. Perhaps they ought to feel helpless because they are; they ought to feel naggingly troubled -- because there are no easy solutions; they ought not be able to write a letter to a distant political official and stop thinking about the abuse as something terrible and difficult -- because this letter is likely to do nothing and the situation does require intense and sustained consideration. In other human rights reports, when the abuse concerns a specific individual rather than a whole trend of discrimination,

approaching the question of what action ought to be taken is clearer: give him a new trial, get him out of jail, give him access to his lawyers. With the Hungarian Roms, no route of action is a clear solution, and activists should not be allowed to be relieved by some falsely simple route of writing a letter to a relatively impotent politician.

In this case, human rights literature operates as a melodrama so that its readers will more readily become activists, but in so doing it misrepresents the actual human rights situation and the Roms and Hungarians involved in it. Such activism is not only misfounded, it is potentially alienating and destructive. Human rights literature must avoid such melodrama and aim instead to encourage activism with more complex depictions of offenders and victims, placed in greater historical and societal context, and supplemented with more realistic and sensitive recommended action. Such a complicated narrative may not be possible within the confines of a one or two page report, but then perhaps such a cursory report ought not be the standard activist publication. Human rights activism is crucial and ought to be encouraged, but only by means that convey the situation accurately and responsibly: as complex, with no demons and no saints, and without easy solution.

A note on vocabulary within the paper:

When speaking about the Roms, terminology is politically charged and potentially confusing. Roms are often referred to as Gypsies, but this label can be offensive and derogatory, and accordingly I will not use it here. Rather, I use Rom as the singular noun form, and Roms as the plural noun to specify a person of Romani ethnicity. Romani is the corresponding adjective. Oftentimes 'Roma' is used as the plural noun, but I chose to use 'Roms' instead. Just as we refer to the plural of Magyar as Magyars rather than Magyarok (which is how Hungarians refer to themselves) or we refer to Italians rather than Italiani (which is how Italians refer to themselves, Prof. Victor Friedman argues that we should refer to Roms rather than Roma (which is how Roms refer to themselves) so that we do not further exoticize the group, treating them differently than we do other foreign groups. I agree with him and will use Roms accordingly.

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