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Analysing Contradictions: Reflections on Ethnographic Work with Romanian Roma

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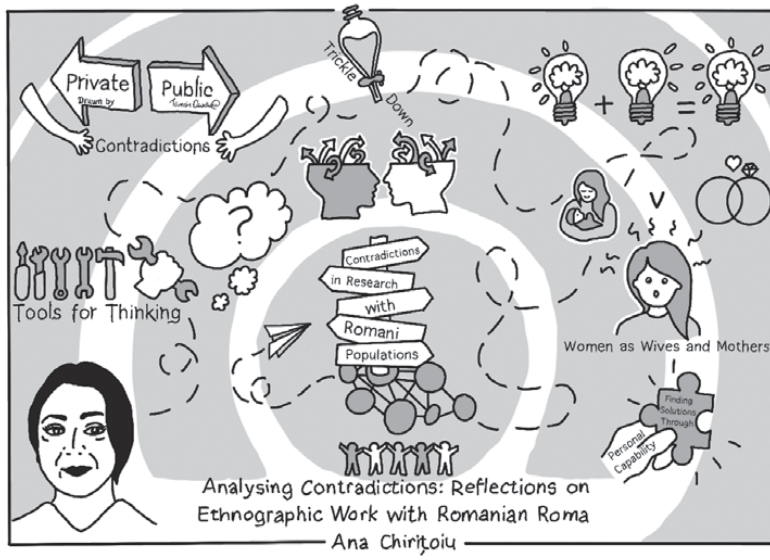
Themes discussed in this chapter

- how crises of the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic make salient competing or contradictory demands that society places onto vulnerable groups such as Romanies;
- how contradictory demands cut across scales from the structural level to the personal and familiar and back, and tend to be resolved at great personal cost along gender lines;
- confronting the epistemic discomfort of investigating the workings and effects of contradictory demands placed upon vulnerable communities.



Introduction

Between December 2019, when COVID-19 began its global spread, and December 2020, when the first vaccine was authorized, under government-mandated lockdowns the spectre of contagion reigned across all societal scales, darting from the inter-personal to the geopolitical and back. Almost overnight, borders were closed, interaction moved online and whatever people had thought of as public space before 2019 turned into wasteland. The fear of others, kindled by medical and political imaginaries alike, drew existing inequalities into sharp relief and enhanced them (Ryan and Nanda, 2022). As ever in documented human history,[1] in the year 2020 fear of contagion reawakened dormant apprehensions regarding so-called 'problematic' social groups and the urge to contain them.[2] Across Europe, Roma, along with other stigmatized categories with which they partially overlap, such as homeless people (Schneider, 2020) and low-income migrants (Voicu, 2020), were targeted by persistent albeit unsubstantiated suspicions that they might contaminate society at large (OSCE, 2020). In short, the policies adopted to tackle the spread of the virus affected various social groups differently, bringing structural violence along with class, gender and racial inequalities into sharp focus, and they exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities to the point where they turned 'morbid' (Murji and Picker, 2021; see also Berta, 2020; Creţan and Light, 2020; Dragos, 2020; Gay y Blasco and Rodriguez Camacho, 2020; ERGO Network, 2020; Aradau and Tazzioli, 2021; Matache and Barbu, 2021; Gay y Blasco and Fotta, 2023). Likewise, the repressive measures set in place to limit the spread of the virus also affected various groups differently, and for some of them even

turned violent. Amnesty International (2020) reported several instances of state violence against Roma across Europe under the guise of militarized quarantines, ethnic profiling, the disproportionate impact of fines and police brutality.

All of these fast-paced developments helped to spell out a point that Romani activists had been making for several decades (for example, Sigona and Trehan, 2009), namely that Roma are ultimately perceived by majorities as not belonging to the body politic (Gay y Blasco and Fotta, 2023), and as threatening to the rest of society. Not only did public opinion show little interest in the welfare of these populations whose precarious living conditions left them more exposed to the virus than majority groups (Singer and Rylko-Bauer, 2021), but it also scapegoated them as responsible for the crisis by conflating infectiousness and criminality (Costache 2020; Dragos 2020; Plainer 2020). In Romania, where my research is located, the state-sponsored scapegoating of Roma mainly took the form of police violence, the cordoning off of several Roma localities and outspoken racism by the media, the social media commentariat and public intellectuals (Breazu and Machin, 2022). The fear of contagion was coupled from the outset with the fear of lawlessness. Law was mobilized not only to contain the spread of the virus but also to avert crime. Indeed, in discourse and practice the two became blurred, as discriminatory securitization measures were taken in the interest of public health. The Romanian Minister of Internal Affairs made this concern explicit by declaring, in April 2020, that the authorities would keep a watchful eye on 'areas with heightened risk of criminality, communities with people who have recently returned [from abroad] and are known for [their] criminal activities' (Amnesty International, 2020, 25). These areas became equated with breaking the quarantine rules and infecting the rest of society to which, more ambiguously than ever, Roma did and did not belong.

This chapter draws primarily on my ethnographic research in a Roma neighbourhood in southern Romania that I call 'Mahala', against the background of my prior experience as a non-Roma-engaged researcher in a community development non-governmental organization – both of which took place between 2010 and 2018. Throughout 2020, I was away from Romania and I kept in touch with my former hosts from Mahala via social media. Some of their stories and reflections about the first pandemic year that are included in this chapter stem from these online conversations; others are far more recent, as we all took the time to reflect on what had happened after we felt that the pandemic was becoming a thing of the past, as late as 2022.

The chapter emerges not so much from research undertaken during the pandemic but instead from the very distance that this crisis put between me and my former hosts. This sense of distance and helplessness, and the

realization, stronger than ever before, that there was nothing I could do about my friends' access to healthcare or the manifest antigypsyism that engulfed them, shed a new light on my previous research findings, particularly on how my interlocutors navigated competing demands, tackled the contradictions that came to define their place in society and simply 'stayed with the trouble', in Donna Haraway's (2016) apt phrasing. This chapter is my reckoning with the contradictions and the 'trouble' that plague the lives of the people I worked with, as they were made more salient than ever before by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In what follows I aim to show that the pandemic acted as a catalyst for bringing into plain sight the contradictions that besiege Romani livelihoods in my fieldsite and elsewhere across Eastern Europe. First, I elaborate on the notion of 'contradiction' as I use it in this chapter. Then, by way of providing the context of my argument, I comment on the contradictions encapsulated in the two main topics that were raised among non-Roma publics and institutions in relation to Roma in the earliest months of the pandemic: infectiousness and lawlessness. And finally, I move on to Mahala to show how these and other contradictions reverberated in my interlocutors' sociality and how, or whether, they were resolved.

Competing demands

Although it was not a novel phenomenon by any measure (Resnick 2020), the antigypsyism prompted by the pandemic, or rather its intensity, became for me an 'ethnographic hunch', one of those research insights that 'deepens what I think I know, sparks an ethnographic dialogue, turns around my thinking, and creates a strand of investigation through my research, analysis, or both' (Pink, 2021, 30). What stood out as I witnessed the speed and ferocity with which anti-Roma sentiments resurfaced in Romania was the contradictory pull of the competing demands placed upon Roma. On the one hand, Roma were instructed, perhaps even more insistently than the general population, to respect hygiene rules. On the other hand, a majority of Roma had been living for decades in unsanitary, overcrowded conditions (for example, European Commission, 2020), and were therefore simply unable to suddenly comply with the prescribed rules of hygiene and social distancing. Similarly, Roma were singled out in the media and by authorities for not respecting quarantine and other social distancing regulations – which was not ascribed to material conditions but rather to their presumed collectivist culture. These explanations served to bring once more the Roma's (collective) adherence to the social good into question, and to conveniently obscure the fact that the belonging of Roma to the social body that they were now urged to protect had been denied through centuries of slavery, deportation and racialization (Vincze and Stoica, 2020).

This is what I mean by contradictions: the competing and often clashing demands that broader society places upon marginalized groups, and that these groups in turn place upon their individual members, often resulting in interpersonal conflicts or personal impasses. The term that the Roma from Mahala use for such situations is, coincidentally (and by virtue of translation), the same one that Haraway (2016) uses: 'trouble' (Romani: *beleaua*). I had already picked up on the contradictions that encroach upon and, to some extent, define Romani lives during my doctoral field research (Chirițoiu, 2022). What the pandemic made more salient, however, was the way in which they are transferred and mutate, across scales, all the way to the individual level, where they either get resolved or result in 'trouble'. Structural processes such as racialization or social exclusion eventually end up being interiorized in group relations and handled privately. Navigating and solving competing demands is something that the Rom of Mahala would refer to as 'being capable' (Romani: *san capabilo/capabila*). More often than not, it is an attribute of women, whose task it eventually becomes to solve these contradictory demands.

Being 'capable' is one of the highest praises among the Rom of Mahala,[3] and is usually reserved for seemingly impossible situations, akin to a catch-22, on the successful resolution of which hinge women's personal worth and renown among their peers. Because contradictions are reproduced from the structural and state level onto that of the family and gender relations, contradictory demands placed upon women were virtually endless in my fieldsite: women were supposed to keep the house clean without ever being seen doing housework, prepare food without their clothes or hair ever smelling like food, be truthful without ever telling anything upsetting and so on. It would be easy to dismiss these demands as manifestations of patriarchal Roma culture; however, this label does not do much analytical work, so I suggest focusing instead on the dynamics of emic obligations and responsibilities that correlate with the structural demands placed upon Roma from outside. To illustrate, if a Roma woman smells of food in public, or of anything else but perfume, she is labelled far more harshly than a non-Roma woman who might have just emerged from the kitchen. At the same time, many households in Mahala rely on wood for heating, and it is a woman's job to make the fire; as I learned, the smoke impregnates hair and clothes, demanding one to wash before going out – unless the bathroom is occupied by someone else, in which case going out needs to be postponed or done under the nasty looks from passers-by. Roma women would summarize this series of constraints by concluding that they needed to be 'three times a woman' and show that they were capable not only of doing all the work non-Roma women would do, but also of making it look effortless.

The examples provided showcase the extent to which Roma have interiorized and naturalized the contradictions that result from their structural position and translated them into emic norms and values. The

same process was accelerated and made particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the contradictions between national belonging and enclavization, which became visible in social distancing regulations, were reflected in gender relations or internalized as family conflicts.

In the following sections of this chapter, then, I focus on the implications of the pandemic for the Rom of Mahala, attempting an ethnography of contradictions – not just as they exist 'out there' but also how they permeate our analyses, methods and ethics, keeping in mind that this is a process of scaling 'queer[s] categories of knowledge and being' (Posocco, 2019, 140).

Tackling contradictions is not a straightforward endeavour, for reasons to do with the intellectual history of anthropology, which has cultivated a low tolerance of contradictions and ambivalence as far as writing goes and an inclination to explanatory positivism that peaked with structural-functionalism but did not entirely wane from our approaches. Very crudely put, accommodating contradictions in our analysis risks portraying our interlocutors as non-logical; conversely, straightening out their contradictions for them is a condescending gesture. How, then, does one work with – rather than against – contradictions and, more importantly, what might be the benefits of such work? Moreover, what can we describe as a contradiction, especially where our interlocutors do not see one? We can begin to address these questions from the cues in our field: if the people we work with tend to be unbothered by contradictions, perhaps because these are so frequent in their lives, we could try to do the same in our analysis: portray them as things that are merely there and that we, much like our interlocutors, need to stay with; as things that need to be explained, but need not be explained away.

Anthropology has a long and complex engagement with contradictions: for instance, in 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois (2015 [1903]) described how African Americans developed a 'double self' under the pressure of contradictory societal forces; this argument is still relevant today. For Marxists (and Hegelians) contradictions are central to explaining the clash between forces and relations of production that may eventually result in the demise of capitalism (Harvey, 2014). For ontologists, contradictions instantiate radical alterity (Heywood, 2018); and for phenomenologists, they are crucial to understanding how conflicting values are reconciled (or not) at the individual level (Berliner et al, 2016). This latter approach was criticized for insufficiently engaging with power and thus failing to recognize that 'contradictions consist of encounters with the social, political, and economic conditions on which people are reliant …, and which more than often "work against" them' (Jovanović, 2016, 4).

One of the most original takes on contradictions is that authored by Gregory Bateson and his collaborators (1956) through the concept of 'double bind', which he defined as a situation in which, 'no matter what the person does, he [*sic*] can't win' (Bateson, 1972, 201). What is particular to Bateson's conceptualization is the fact that, more than in common situations where

one feels caught between two conflicting demands, double bind interactions are necessarily shaped by hierarchy: the person who makes the conflicting demands is someone in authority, hence contradictions develop between two communicational levels, which are in turn shaped by contingencies. Since Bateson's argument builds on observations of individual psychology and behaviour, its impact on anthropology was limited, but it is nonetheless an important reminder that contradictions are the result of hierarchies and that they do not rest solely at the structural or at the individual level but are the product of encounters between them.

Taking my cue from Bateson's conceptualization of the double bind, in this chapter I take a hybrid approach, focusing on how structural factors are transposed onto cultural and practical contradictions, to be navigated all the way down to the level of the individual and their immediate social surroundings. I suggest that contradictions are 'good to think with' insofar as they reveal connections and, perhaps more importantly, breaking points between the various scales that our work cuts across (and, implicitly, the breaking points in our own understanding of them). I argue that the point of dwelling on the messy side of things is to use them as heuristic devices that enable us to grasp connections, parallels and conflicts which we might otherwise be tempted to flatten out or explain away.

Enclavization

The fact that Roma were singled out during the pandemic for endangering the social body to which they were repeatedly told they did not belong, and that they were expected to keep up with strict hygiene regulations when they had lived for decades in unhygienic conditions without the authorities doing anything about it, illustrates the contradictions faced by anthropologists working with Roma in particular, and with vulnerable populations more broadly. These examples also draw attention to the relation between states and Roma, which emerges as the main source of these contradictions, and whose treatment of Roma is best described as 'structural racism' (for example, Kóczé and Rövid, 2017). In order to capture this dynamic whereby states actively seek to contain Roma communities while at the same time leaving them to their own devices, I use the term 'enclavization', which I view as a two-sided process: as the inhabitants of such enclaves internalize this 'autonomy' and come to see themselves, for better or for worse, as separate from the social body, the enclaves are transformed into 'Gypsylands' (Rou. *țigănii*).

The setting of my ethnographic research (2016–18) could be described as such an 'enclave'. A marginal neighbourhood on the outskirts of a southern Romanian town, Mahala is assumed to be one of the largest and most compact *țigănii* in the country. It is located at the town's periphery, on the swampy grounds of the river that flows west of the town, where agriculture

meets small industry and the meandering rows of peasant-style dwellings are punctuated by occasional Art Deco villas. A place where the town's earliest industries began, this area was already infamous in the early 20th century as a place of crime and prostitution, but only became known as a *țigănie* a few decades later; its ill fame preceded the actual presence of Roma. After the Second World War, when industry developed elsewhere in town, Mahala and its surroundings fell into the dereliction in which it finds itself to this day.

Apart from providing basic infrastructure such as gas, electricity, water and asphalt (recently), the state is largely absent from Mahala: its most frequent emissaries are the police and gendarmes who check for irregular connections to the power grid or break into the households of suspects. State authorities tend to tackle the various Roma groups living in Mahala as a collective, through the mediation of a leader.[4] Despite its in-between belonging to the town's geography and its demographic heterogeneity, Mahala is typically dubbed as a dangerous 'no-go' area by the media and non-Roma locals and is in effect an enclave,[5] although other authors might dub it a 'ghetto'.[6]

Mahala's enclavization intensified during the pandemic, due to the widespread suspicions towards Roma that I outlined earlier. Mutual distrust also figured prominently in the accounts of life in Mahala under the lockdown that I was able to collect remotely via online communications with my friends there. One friend, for instance, observed that becoming infected with the virus became a source of shame and mutual blaming inside the neighbourhood. As she commented, the Roma appeared to have taken over the stigma that non-Roma projected onto them and turned it inwards, against one another. She added that, in the earliest months of the pandemic, when the virus still loomed unknown and moving about town was restricted, families whose members became infected were shamed and avoided by others. This caused previous alliances and hierarchies to reshuffle and prompted some people to hide the fact that they were sick for fear of being marginalized. Mutual suspicions and accusations made their way not just between related families, but also down to the individual level, and often resulted in 'trouble', *beleaua*. For instance, one woman told me that she went to visit the parents of her son's wife and was offended because they did not invite her inside the house, as would have been customary in non-pandemic times. Even though she visited with her in-laws in the courtyard, in the open, she nonetheless became sick and blamed this visit for getting the virus. Her son then got angry with his wife, because her parents had not only offended his mother by keeping her in the courtyard but had also infected her. Another woman who had been travelling brought the virus home unknowingly, infecting her husband, who died due to complications. Her children stopped talking to her, and continue to hold their father's death against her. Such conflicts were a result of tensions between external social distancing recommendations

and difficulties to control viral spread, on the one hand, and on the other internal norms and hierarchies that are in place precisely to control one's behaviour and relationships.

Add to this dynamic the Mahala Rom's mistrust of the authorities. While they were keenly aware of the dangers of the virus, the Rom were less convinced that the measures instituted by the state were going to protect them from infections, particularly quarantining, wearing masks, avoiding gatherings and producing a written declaration when leaving the house, as the regulations demanded. Deeper fears, which I had become familiar with since long before the COVID-19 pandemic, had to do with how they might be treated in hospitals, especially now that the situation was so dire. This mistrust against the state-mandated measures also persisted among the non-Roma, but the Roma in Mahala experienced these measures as yet another instance of the many obstacles that authorities raised against them, associating the COVID-19-related restrictions with their history of persecution by the state and with their lack of access to state services. Against this background of mutual suspicion, conflicts would erupt in crowded pharmacies and doctors' waiting rooms, where Roma were harshly interpellated by the non-Roma workers and customers asking them to queue and to wear masks, whereas Roma felt that the mask was but a detail: their bigger worry was what might happen to them if they ended up in hospital.

The observance of pandemic regulations was also erratic among non-Roma, as I noticed myself after moving back to Romania in late 2020, and as the low vaccination rates attested. But because Roma stood out as different from the majority, their behaviour was more likely to come into focus and be judged collectively, especially because the non-Roma always commonly assume that Roma deviate from norms. Soon enough the authorities came up with the notion that Roma constituted a special public that needed to be addressed separately. To this end, local Roma leaders were invited to address their constituencies and explain the risks of contagion and the measures taken to prevent it. Even the national coordinator of the vaccination programme appealed to Roma in the Romani language, urging them to get vaccinated. As one Romani activist commented, the fact of addressing Roma publics in Romani, even though less than half of all Romanian Roma speak the language, evidences the fact that Roma are 'not quite Romanians' but a different group than the majority.[7]

Amid the shortages in the health system and the restrictions that were put in place, the Roma of Mahala found that their access to healthcare had become more limited and their surveillance by the police harsher than ever before. However, if before the pandemic these issues could be negotiated through money and acquaintances, during the pandemic their sense of precariousness grew. One of the richest men in Mahala reportedly stated: "Even if I have money I can well die." Due to this reshuffling of social capital and relations,

the local leader of the Mahala Roma resorted to his political connections with non-Roma in state institutions to negotiate access for Roma to healthcare when most hospitals declared they were out of beds, and to help people navigate restrictions, for instance to visit relatives in the hospital, which was officially not allowed. His ability to mobilize his political connections to help fellow Roma at a time when even the richest ones felt that their money would not get them very far consolidated his leadership. He became known as an effective – 'capable' – leader because he managed to work a system that to most Roma and even to most non-Roma had become inaccessible.

The limits of capability

In the autumn of 2020, I caught word via Facebook that my former hosts from Mahala had become infected with the virus and were hospitalized. I was not in Romania at the time, and even if I had been, visiting them in the hospital would not have been possible. I wished them good health via Facebook and awaited news of their recovery. When we met half a year later, they asked me if I knew they had been sick. I answered that I knew. They were disappointed that I had not reached out to see how they were doing and had not wished them well personally via the phone. "Have you still not learned our ways?" they reprimanded me. I realized that the pandemic had blurred the scripts I thought I had learned during my stay with them. I knew that in cases of personal distress I was supposed to call and see how they were doing. But I also reasoned that, were I taken to hospital with a disease that made breathing difficult, I would not want to be engaged in unnecessary conversations. Not knowing how best to resolve the contradiction between these demands, I did nothing (apart from sending the get-well message via Facebook, as tens of other acquaintances did), causing my former hosts to conclude that "I had remained still a Romanian (non-Roma)" despite their best pedagogic efforts.

It would be fair to say that a lot of people were similarly confused – something that my Roma interlocutors referred to as the virus "making us all crazy" (Rou. *ne-a înnebunit*). One example was related to me over a Facebook call by a former interlocutor from Mahala whom I called to see how she was holding up. She told me that she had unwittingly caused 'trouble' inside her family when she asked her young daughter-in-law to bring her some medicine from the pharmacy during lockdown. Quarantine rules requested a written declaration upon leaving the house that testified that the person carrying it went to work or had a medical emergency. The woman did not have a medical emergency as such but was suffering from severe stomach pains. She calculated that, since the daughter-in-law was visibly pregnant, the police might let her get away without a fine, which turned out to be true. However, the young woman's husband had forbidden his wife from leaving the house for fear that she might endanger her pregnancy. The young wife

found herself in a conundrum: she could not pit her husband's restriction against her mother-in-law's request, so she went to the pharmacy knowing full well that her husband would beat her up when he found out she had disobeyed him, which he did. (Had she disobeyed her mother-in-law, she likely risked the same treatment.) The woman's mother-in-law recounted this episode to me full of remorse and frustration, as an example of how her well-being and her family relations were complicated by the virus and the anti-pandemic measures. She had no intention to stir conflict in her son's marriage, but how was she supposed to get her stomach medicine, since doctors were not attending to anything that was not the virus and therefore she had no paper at hand to show the police? The episode shows that, while the increased restrictions and deprivations altered everyone's lives, in Mahala, due to pre-existing norms and hierarchies, their full force was transferred onto the most vulnerable members of the group, young women. In this case, the young wife could only resolve the contradiction she was faced with by the clashing forces of the pandemic and the demands of her own social group at the cost of a very private 'trouble'.

Another woman, a close friend, recounted in distress a visit she had made to a private clinic with her pregnant sister-in-law, who was afraid to go to the check-up on her own. My friend brought her one-year-old daughter along, as she had nobody to leave her with. At the clinic, the pregnant woman was admitted for her check-up; my friend and her daughter waited in the lobby for a few minutes, until a nurse came and started shouting that they had no business being there and urged them to get out immediately. My friend called me on the spot in anger asking how she could file a complaint against what she saw as a blatant case of discrimination, so that somebody could do something about it. She was especially distressed because this was not a public hospital, where they knew what treatment they might expect as Roma women, but a private one: "If they even discriminate us on our own money, where can we go?" was her very pertinent question. As she recounted the episode, she reasoned that because of COVID, the nurse might have been especially careful – as she was shouting at my friend to get out, the nurse asked what she was thinking, bringing a child into this environment – but the tone of her voice and the brusqueness of her behaviour had almost brought my friend to tears and caused her to recall many similar instances when she had been denied entry to public places or treated poorly on account of being Roma. Torn between the private insult and the public precautions, she gave up on filing her complaint and instead became frustrated with her sister-in-law who had brought her along and hence had 'caused' the incident. Once again, broad structural issues ultimately accumulated and erupted in interpersonal relations.

These two incidents show that, while wary of the risks posed by the virus, the Roma lacked the resources to fall back onto, especially social ones, so as

to navigate the non-Roma systems and institutions on which their survival came to depend. Second, these incidents also indicate the extent to which Roma end up internalizing responsibility when even things well beyond their control go astray. A series of processes, some of them private and others much less so – the pandemic, the way women socialize, how Roma are treated in public – accumulated into the contradictions that my interlocutors were faced with. The contradictions were resolved at high personal costs.

Conclusion

I started this chapter with an appeal for researchers working with vulnerable populations to engage more squarely with the conflicting demands and pressures that shape the lives of our interlocutors. Contradictions are uneasy and, at first sight, it may seem that they risk compromising the coherence of our analyses. And yet, critical moments such as the pandemic might provide an opportunity to analyse how seemingly contradictory behaviours are often the result of systemic tensions becoming transposed in private lives and relations. Likewise, practices that the wider public might write off as being specific to Roma, such as unruliness or disrespect for regulations, are in fact the result of competing demands that their marginal position accelerates.

When my friend blamed her sister-in-law for dragging her along to the clinic where the nurse was rude to her, I interjected that it was obviously the fault of the nurse, not of her sister-in-law. But for my friend, blame within the family was easier to handle than blaming an entire system to which she barely has any access. Interiorizing blame and contradictions is obviously very costly and troublesome, and even contradictory from an outsider's point of view, but it renders these issues manageable. Although pernicious, privatizing public contradictions and solving them through their personal capability is the only way they can do anything at all and possibly get some closure. Haraway pointed to this when writing that the solution to living in troubling and troubled times is 'to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response' (Haraway, 2016, 1). Apparently, the Rom had known that all along; for the rest of us, it took an ample crisis – whether COVID or the climate disaster that Haraway is writing about – to start living and thinking with contradictions, and probe our capability of handling them.

Lessons and recommendations

- As researcher, you must pay attention to the contradictory and competing demands that shape people's lives. These contradictions are not always easy to identify during fieldwork and to write about later on. They do not need to be flattened or otherwise

'resolved', but only to be depicted accurately by paying attention to their movement across scales.

- As researcher, you must acknowledge that your understanding will always be partial, time- and context-dependent. A moment of the crisis or unexpected events have a potential to bring into focus aspects in the ethnographic data that you previously ignored.
- Following 'ethnographic hunches' (Pink, 2021), you must be prepared to review your previous conclusions and arguments.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

[1] See Herring and Swedlund (2020) for several case-studies prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

[2] While fear of contagion is an ample topic in anthropology (for example, Douglas, 1984 [1966]) and well beyond (for example, Kristeva, 1982; Goffman, 2009; Tyler, 2009), in this article I adopt a socially constructionist view of it, building largely on Paul Farmer's injunction that the violations to the human right to life and health can be analysed as 'a symptom of deeper pathologies of power that are linked intimately to the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer abuse and who will be shielded from harm' (2004, 7).

[3] I use the term 'Rom', or 'the Rom of Mahala', to refer strictly to the Roma group I worked with in Mahala, and 'Roma' to refer to the minority at large.

[4] This points to the useful distinction drawn by Ignacy-Marek Kaminski (1987) between external and internal leadership among Romani groups from Poland: while internal leadership emerges somewhat organically inside the group, in accordance to emic norms, an external leader is trusted by the group to mediate its relation to state institutions and representatives, and is largely a creation of non-Roma.

[5] I do not use references throughout this section, as they would compromise the anonymity of the place.

[6] See, for example, Gay y Blasco (2003). For a critique of applying the term 'ghetto' in the postsocialist context, see, for example, Pulay (2015) and Teodorescu (2018).

[7] Valeriu Nicolae as interviewed by Andreea Orosz (Orosz, 2021).

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