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# Thinking the different in History: A review of Roma historiography from the 19th to the 21st century

Pensar o diferente na História: Um balanço da historiografia cigana do século XIX ao século XXI

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**Abstract**

This article analyzes the historiographic production on the Roma people between the 19th and 21st centuries. We seek to map the main publications on this ethnic minority produced in Brazil and Portugal during these three centuries. After indicating the introductory elements, we point out the difficult historiographical inclusion of marginalized subjects and then reflect on the three stages of Roma studies. The first is characterized by ethnographic and folklorist production, followed by a second moment spearheaded by the works developed in Brazilian graduate programs and, finally, debates promoted by political movements and legal institutions defending the Roma case. These texts vary in style, emphasis, fonts, theoretical background, spatial and geographical scopes, but they all try to bridge this knowledge gap on Roma peoples in Brazil and the western world. Roma historiography faces limited development due to the difficulty of certain knowledge production centers in understanding them as historical and political subjects; the absence of qualified advisors to supervise this topic; the little interest of historians, and limited access to Roma communities, who orally transmit their culture and history. Our proposal is based on the discussions presented by Rodrigo Corrêa Teixeira, François Laplatine and Geraldo Pieroni.

**Keywords**

History of historiography. Historical anthropology. Historiographic culture.

**Resumo**

O presente artigo busca estabelecer uma análise da produção historiográfica sobre os ciganos entre os séculos XIX e XXI. A partir disso, buscamos mapear as principais publicações sobre essa minoria étnica produzidas no Brasil e Portugal nesses três séculos, em língua portuguesa. Após indicação dos elementos introdutórios, a escrita segue apontando a dificuldade de inclusão historiográfica desses sujeitos para, em seguida, pensar sobre as três fases de desenvolvimento de estudos sobre os ciganos. A primeira etapa é caracterizada pela produção etnográfica e folclorista, e o segundo momento é de protagonismo dos trabalhos desenvolvidos no âmbito dos programas de pós-graduação no Brasil e, por fim, de debates promovidos no seio de movimentos políticos e instituições jurídicas de defesa da causa cigana. Os textos apresentados variam em estilo, ênfase, fontes, aporte teórico, recortes espacial e geográfico, mas de algum modo tentam preencher a lacuna existente na produção do conhecimento sobre povos ciganos no Brasil e no mundo ocidental. A historiografia cigana se encontra em situação limitada de desenvolvimento, em função de questões como: a dificuldade de parte dos centros de produção de conhecimento em percebê-los como sujeitos históricos e políticos; a ausência de orientadores capacitados para orientação desse tema; o pouco interesse dos historiadores; e o acesso limitado aos seios das comunidades de ciganos, que transmitem a sua cultura e história via oralidade. A proposta deste estudo se baseia nas discussões apresentadas por Rodrigo Corrêa Teixeira, François Laplatine e Geraldo Pieroni.

**Palavras-chave**

História da historiografia. Antropologia histórica. Cultura historiográfica.



## Introduction

In *History* (2012), François Dosse presents a long reflection – from the perspective of philosophy – on the constitution of History as a discipline and points out a curious fact about the beginning of the 2000s in France. The discussion about the social role of memory has once again come into vogue in French society, which in the author’s own words would denote the “symptoms of true memorial pathologies” (2012, p. 304). This debate – or clash – took on a peculiar form, as, a priori, it was not fought on the academic front, nor led by intellectual circles, but rather took place in judicial instances and legislative houses, which gradually developed laws that aimed to guarantee the maintenance of the memory of events such as the gas chambers created by the Nazis.

The struggle for memory was taken up by different sectors of the French political spectrum. Members of right-wing parties wanted to reiterate the positive view of the colonization processes undertaken by Europe in the 19th century, while the State tried to force teachers to adopt the same view of colonialism (Dosse, 2012). This report confirms a fundamental view taught to undergraduate students in introductory courses: history is not neutral and has been politically instrumentalized over time. Thematic choices, the most valued theories, and spatial and temporal cuts are often made based on personal and ideological interests, but also on the political, social, economic, religious and cultural context in which the historian exercises his or her profession, and this informs us about the historiographical processes instituted by the West, which tend to exclude or devalue the Romani people.

What is said, transcribed or erected as a memorial monument is based on the interests of an era and a group. Therefore, it is concluded that historiographical and memorial oblivions are also the result of political, social, economic, religious and cultural projects, which generally tend to select what should, or should not, be the object of history. History is a weapon wielded by the societies’ ruling groups and serves the interests of specific classes (Carvalho, 2003).

Ultimately, it is possible to state that thematic choices are instruments of legitimization or disqualification of groups, societies and individuals, as it gives the impression that some deserve to appear in the annals of history, while others suffer from chronic historiographical erasure. This is the case with the Romani.

Without the revisionist legal and legislative perspective that France experienced in the early years of the 21st century, Roma were systematically erased from the national historical narratives of a significant portion of Western countries – with the exception of Spain, which experienced a strong appreciation of the Romani culture of the Andalusia region in the



first half of the 20th century (García Lorca, 2011) – and their existence was almost denied by historians, when they, due to different choices, did not take into account the experiences of these groups, as they did with the indigenous and black populations, in the same context and with the same intention: the political struggle to affirm the dignity of these traditional, marginalized and historically persecuted groups. In other words, the Romani enjoyed a “right to be forgotten”, without asking any legal authority to apply this non-legal provision. (STF, 2021, Theme 786).

That said, this work presents itself as an attempt to delimit the advances made by Lusophone historiography on the theme of Romani peoples, in the last three centuries, in Brazil and Portugal, in the search to understand how partial gaps in the Romani history were filled by the texts indicated here. Based on a horizontal reading of the production of historical knowledge, the proposal establishes a dialogue with what we define as 19th century proto-historiography, which corresponds to studies in other areas – such as folklore and ethnography – that, despite their limitations, have provided us, for a long time, with relevant information about the constitution of these groups and their experiences throughout history. Furthermore, we will examine the first historical studies on this topic in the 20th century and the development of some unique approaches that focused on political, religious, social, cultural and legislative issues regarding Romani peoples in the aforementioned temporal and spatial periods.

Methodologically, the article started from the selection of pioneering texts on aspects that crossed the Romani history, such as: police persecution, the cultural transformations experienced by this ethnic group, and the religious dimension present in the collective imagination that led to the creation of popular cults around Romani figures considered to be miracle workers. Based on bibliographical and documentary research, we seek to circumscribe the relevance of the Romani in the ethnic-racial debate and in the social and political dimensions of institutional debates that, as a rule, exclude and marginalize these populations present in Portugal and Brazil, since at least the 15th and 16th centuries, respectively.

### **Otherness, historiography and misunderstanding: some general questions**

Romani. Defining them presents itself as a task of singular difficulty, considering that internally there are three ethnic variations: Sinti, Rom and Calon, the latter being more common in Brazil (PEREIRA, 2009). It is worth noting that the three subgroups indicated here form most of the Romani population, but there are identity disputes within this ethnic group, on the part of groups that claim other identifications, such as the Kalderash and the Romnichals, present in regions such as Romania and England, respectively. In addition to this diversity, we come across the fact



that it is a constituent characteristic of these people's identity: the lack of appreciation of written culture. Thus, it is understood that Romani, in their multiple variations, form a minority group.<sup>1</sup>

Marginalized and historiographically silenced historical subjects, the silences constructed about the Romani, in general, reveal to us a side of societies that were not capable of assimilating the different forms of existence that differed from the moral and civilizational standards that had been in force since the 15th century, the time frame for the arrival of these wanderers in Europe, possibly originating from Northwest India. (Mello, 1981).

Their arrival in Brazil in the 16th century was due to the exile policy adopted by Portugal (Souza, 2017), as a way of occupying the new territories that were annexed to the Metropolis, but also as an expression of the Criminal Law that was in force, a law that not only purged, but stained and indelibly sealed the character of exclusion in those who were considered dissidents of the norm, to the point of formulating negative representations about these groups of nomads who were considered cheaters, thieves, kidnappers of girls and children and condemned for the pagan way of life they led (Pieroni, 2002).

Many of the stereotypes related to Romani have their roots in modern Europe and, through the spread of Western thought to other parts of the world, these negative representations gained strength and notoriety, to the point of appearing repeatedly in literary records since the 16th century. As early as the 15th century, the adjective "gypsy" in reference to those people was adopted as a synonym for offense (Pieroni, 2002). The use of this expression gained strength in literary writings in several countries. But according to the definition in the Aurélio dictionary, a Roma is: "An individual from a nomadic people, originally from India and settled in Europe, who has their own ethical code, lives off crafts, cartomancy, palmistry, etc. and dedicates themselves to music; bohemian" (Ferreira, 2011, p. 68). Not only did literature contribute to this imaginary, but history also played its role, even if it was based on omission.

Marc Bloch states that History is the "Science that deals with the actions of men in time" (Bloch, 2001, p. 54). But which men was Bloch referring to? Historiography helps us answer. For a long time, thinking and making history was centered on great political figures and economic actions. With the emergence of some thinkers in different parts of the world, but, above all, with the Annales School, a new perspective of historical production emerged, bringing with it new subjects and themes, although some themes were still relegated to the background – as is the case of political history.

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth remembering that the word "minority" does not refer exclusively to a quantitative issue, but to the position of social disadvantage that certain sectors have compared to others.



The crisis of paradigms faced by historians in the second half of the 20th century allowed us to broaden our horizons. In the 1960s, influenced by the Annales School's discussion on the crisis of historicism – a historiographical movement that proposes to narrate what it considers historical facts without necessarily having a social analysis of the period studied – and history seen as a social science from an interdisciplinary perspective, English historians began to produce and defend the so-called "history seen from below". Among the exponents of this current it is possible to mention Christopher Hill and E. P. Thompson. The proposal of history seen from below is to produce a study on a historical process focused on those who, for Thompson, were part of the "forgotten mass": peasants, artisans, workers, etc. (Thompson, 2001).

From a French perspective, the crisis of structuralism and Marxism, combined with the rise of the New Cultural History, made it possible to understand new cultural aspects and forms of social organization, that is, subaltern, marginalized subjects who did not find space in traditional historiography were raised to the status of protagonists of historical processes. Until that moment, men who acted and stood out in historical narratives came from dominant categories, which made it impossible to have a broad or balanced reading of spatial and temporal cutouts, while emphasis was placed on explanations centered on the preponderant views that hampered the production of historical knowledge.

Even with these innovations in the historical field, there are few studies done on Romani in the 20th and 21st centuries. A search and mapping process in the database of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel – CAPES, as well as in bookstores, collections and community libraries, allowed us to verify a profound absence of research and publications on this topic. The titles found in these spaces deal almost exclusively with the esotericism that surrounds them.

Productions that discuss the role of Romani in History were almost always made by *gadjés*<sup>2</sup>, taking as a basis an external and functionalist perspective of these individuals, as if human existence were conditioned on the fulfillment of a specific social role. In CAPES journals, through extractors, it is possible to find a total of 352 articles on the Romani people between the years 1940-2023. In comparative terms, in that same period, 3525 articles were published about slavery.

The profound lack of research and academic debates in the most diverse areas of scientific production give rise to the construction or even the continuation of broad stereotypical discourses. "The problem with stereotypes – as Chimamanda Adichie says – is not that they are false, but that they represent only a part of reality" (Adiche, 2019, p. 26). Considerations need to

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<sup>2</sup> Expression taken from Caló/Chibi/Romani, dialect(s) spoken by Romani in Brazil. The expression means "non-Romani".





be made, as this endeavor does not aim at an apologetic defense of the Romani, or the reduction of the historiographical processes in what could be defined as a simple action of “victimization” of the Romani in the face of the dominant culture.

We understand that there are complex situations of which they were authors or colluded to some degree – as is the case of the sale of slaves carried out by Romani during the period corresponding to colonial Brazil (Moraes, 1981) – and such practices cannot be disregarded because they have historically experienced a process of banishment from dominant social circles. Among the reasons that explain the lack of studies on the Romani ethnic group, we can point out two that we consider to be of relevance.

The first: the historical construction of discourses about these individuals enabled an appropriation that translated into social practices of exclusion, motivated by the fear that they came to represent, since in many places, it became very common to associate them with banditry or practices that deviated from the ideals of Christian morality and civilization (Hobsbawm, 2017). This negative association is due to many factors, but the discursive productions at the level of popular imagination and those printed in official documents, the places they passed through, as well as the image representations present in Western literature from the 16th century onwards, deserve to be highlighted. Thus, it can be seen that the discursive productions about the gypsies were articulated precisely by those who saw them as “the others”, leaving no space for dissonant and positive views, since the gypsies did not access the institutions that produced information and discourses. Adding to this reflection, we can also point out that the Romani populations also feared the “others”, since historical racism has always been rooted in social structures, particularly in Europe and, consequently, in America. This discussion can be found in Portuguese authors who address this topic (Bethencourt, 2018).

In this way, these men and women began to occupy a marginal place in historical processes. Michelle Perrot constructed a thesis and defended that there are excluded people in History: workers, women and prisoners (Perrot, 2017). With this, we realize that there is a “categorization” of individuals about whom narratives are produced or not. The Romani people, in turn, do not even fit into the discourses about subjects considered “marginal”. Therefore, we can classify them as the margins of the margin.

The second reason that we understand limits scientific production on these subjects is the fact that their culture is partially transmitted and mostly expressed through oral tradition.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that for some time now this situation has been undergoing transformations that are credited to the entry of many Romani into educational and higher education institutions, and involvement in political activism for the Romani cause.



The absence of cultural elements of a material and lasting nature does not allow us to have a broader reading of certain aspects of the social and historical experiences lived by our object. The discourses that inform our research practice often originate in the centrality of social power. As Maria Auxiliadora Carvalho e Silva wrote: "Discourses about the margins speak more about the center than about those who are intended to be marginalized" (Silva, 2011, p. 18).

The difficulty in studying them finds strength in the groups' internal resistance to revealing certain aspects of their operating logic, their relationships with their peers and the outside world. The objection to "extramural" dialogue, present in most communities, is the result of relationships built with non-Romani over time. The racism present in various social groups and strata against Romani has gained some support in the Academy, which for a long time was closed to dissonant views of this imaginary and, in some situations, this same institution ratified stereotypes and prejudices, covering them with the scientific veneer. Because they did not correspond to the ideals of morality and civilization that generated a process of marginalization, they, in turn, created elements that made it possible to transform their culture into a force of "resistance" and protection against the world that did not welcome them.

### Romani stories, iconography and historiography in the 19th century

The 19th century was the moment of consolidation of history as an autonomous discipline with defined epistemological limits. This fact gave it an identity structure that differentiated it from other areas of knowledge. The privileged themes were of an eminently political nature, whose focus was the great achievements of political figures, the development of a sense of nation through elaborate studies that would serve Nation-States in the process of unification and consolidation or that needed reaffirmation.

German historicism and French positivism were at the forefront of this historiographical action, providing a political transition that preserved the unequal social order and favored the noble elites that resisted the action of time, while accounting for the historical experiences of the triumphant bourgeoisie. The search to accommodate these social groups was not unequivocal, with historicism and positivism adopting different paths and conclusions. The first was anchored in nationalism, while the second, as heir to the Enlightenment, was based on a universalist assumption. Criticism of sources – at that time – became a follower of philology, which in some way limited the possibility of developing a history beyond written documents.

Regarding the 19th century historiographical view of the gypsies, it is possible to state that this period is a tributary of many notions originating from other times, which, added to the new



legal order and the development of medical and biological sciences with a strong biopolitical and racial appeal, gradually implemented by the bourgeoisie and ruling groups, reformulated the view of marginalized subjects. These groups suffered from a marked [de]categorization – thieves, sick, perverse, kidnappers – and social exclusion.

The forms of distinction are established by society, as well as the attributes considered natural and expected for each of these categories. Social gradation has an aesthetic appeal, which is deeply linked to the ideal of beauty and [in] conformity with the models in vogue, in the period in question. Romani do not aesthetically compose the cultural mosaic of modernity and of the centuries after the French Revolution. If we can even speak of a mosaic, since there was an intention of social homogenization, based on the arrangement of individuals into groups or estates. Marginalized groups were objects of contempt and fascination at the same time, as the “exoticism” of the other was an object of consumption for the dominant classes. This is demonstrated in many ways, but the development of the literary genre about travel reports made to distant places in Europe that were considered uncivilized is worthy of note.

It is the travel reports of foreigners to Brazil that will provide us with the first proto-historiographic records – which can also be constituted as sources – about Romani spread throughout Brazilian territory in the nineteenth century. Henry Koster (1815-1816), Auguste de Saint-Hilaire (1816-1822) and Maria Graham (1821-1823) make limited references, but they indicate the existence of groups identified or self-identified as Romani, living in a state of near nature in the backlands and coasts of the country (Ferrari, 2002). The existence of these groups is anecdotal and descriptive information in travel reports, without the intention of studying them in detail, since the texts mentioned were not designed for this purpose. Travelers’ accounts, although eminently descriptive, help us to think about issues such as housing, employment, parental relationships and other topics involving the Romani people.

Going beyond naturalist travelers, Jean-Baptiste Debret deserves to be highlighted, having published in three volumes *Picturesque and Historic Journey to Brazil* (1834-1839), because of the almost sixteen years he spent in Brazil composing the French Artistic Mission (1816-1831). The mission aimed to establish official art education in Brazil, while artists involved in the action tried to create a kind of inventory of Brazilian social reality, with intense approximations to the aforementioned travelers, via naturalist thought. Debret was a painter, draftsman and teacher and the work he launched upon returning to France was not restricted to descriptions, but encompassed an expressive set of engravings that visually materialize what is narrated.

In the second volume of his work, starting on page eighty, Debret establishes a detailed description of the behavior of the Romani he encountered in Brazil. Presenting customs, social and

parental relationships, economic, mystical and religious practices, the Frenchman undertakes a general analysis of the race that he considers degenerate. The narrative is accompanied by an engraving that is now on display at the Castro Maya Museum in Rio de Janeiro.

**Figure 1** – Interior of a Romani House, 1823.



Jean-Baptiste Debret. Watercolor on paper, c.i.e.17,70 cm x 23,00 cm.

Castro Maya Museum - IPHAN/MinC (Rio de Janeiro, RJ)

Demonstrating the involvement of Romani in the slave trade, Debret articulates a visual narrative through the watercolor that accompanies the description presented in the second volume of his work. In the foreground are young, plump, phenotypically exotic Romani women in colorful costumes preparing food. The two young women appear to be listening to the instructions of the older woman standing there. This image representation is in line with what the text indicates about parental relationships, in which older women occupied the role of educators of developing generations. The background shows slaves in different situations, such as those



crowded together in what appears to be an external courtyard of the Romani house; a slave being punished, another in special clothing accompanying the older Roma woman and, in the background, those working in different roles.

This social composition described by Debret is seen through the filters of European and Christian ethnocentrism, from a colonialist and racist perspective that classifies Romani as uncivilized, lascivious in spirit and predisposed to an idleness that is only dissuaded by material needs. Debret seems to see, in the Romani he portrays, an almost metaphysical ineptitude for higher things such as education and the Christian religion in its supposedly pure state, which, in the experience of this ethnic group, was already corrupted by mysticism and esotericism that he defines as spurious and frivolous.

The 19th century was a time of intense intellectual effervescence. At this time, folklore became the object of preference for so-called folklorists who, through interdisciplinary dialogue, sought to understand how it works. It was from this intellectual melting pot that the first impulses to understand Romani culture and people emerged, in order to try to create a historical and ethnographic explanation about the origin of these groups, their customs, beliefs, traditions, kinship structures and the like. This first impetus, for what would later be defined as Romani studies<sup>4</sup> – despite the limitations – represented an important phase in the attempt to overcome the strictly descriptive and negative view held by those interested in the Romani.

In practical terms, at this moment there are at least two authors who are willing to think about this topic. The first is Alexandre José de Mello Moraes Filho, a Brazilian born in Salvador (1843-1919). He was a poet, folklorist, journalist, memoirist, ethnographer, doctor and director of the Municipal Archives of Rio de Janeiro. In 1886, he published a book entitled *Romani in Brazil and Songbook of the Romani*, by Garnier. The latter, which was intended to be a study with ethnographic characteristics, is closer to folklore.

The text was written based on the coexistence with sedentary Romani with hybrid customs who lived in Rio de Janeiro. The contact allowed the capture of elements that the author claims belong to the tradition of the Calons who lived there. He explores in detail the Iberian origins and the unaltered transfer of traditions to this side of the Atlantic, such as language, forms of housing, religious values, religious and ritual practices. In a second moment, the author presents a Romani songbook and vocabulary.

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<sup>4</sup> The Romani studies took on its current form in the 1990s in England, when the University of Manchester launched an attempt at interdisciplinary dialogue under the leadership of ethnology. The main exponents of this new form of Romani studies include Ian Hancock, Thomas Acton, David Smith and Michael Stewart. The main source of debate in this sub-area of Anthropology is the *Romani Studies Journal*, edited by Yaron Matras.



The Reconquest of Brazil Collection of the Itatiaia Press of the University of São Paulo provided a new edition of this work in 1981. The text has an afterword by Silvio Romero dating from 1885 and explanatory notes by Luís Câmara Cascudo. Both agree that Mello Morais Filho makes some interpretative errors and mistakenly attributes to the Romani customs that are not theirs. Infused with the romantic impetus that was in vogue in the nineteenth century, the text presents questions about kinship and religion, which were the two great concerns of ethnologists of that period. Seeking the “survivals” in civilized society – which would be Rio de Janeiro – of the beliefs of the primitive condition of the Iberian Romani, the author seems to be influenced by Edward Burnett Tylor, author of *Primitive Culture* (1871).

This material is rich in information about the Romani lifestyles in Rio de Janeiro in the 19th century. With due reservations, it can be useful in a cursory reading to think about questions about the constitution of parental, economic and religious relationships. The big problem with Mello Morais Filho’s approach is that the author looks at these data from concrete reality as cultural contingents transposed from the past, without any type of addition or rupture.

According to Thompson (2012), there is a tendency among folklorists of this period to view customs as “relics of a remote and lost antiquity, like crumbling ruins of ancient fortifications and settlements” (p. 231). This transposition of elements from a distant and immemorial past takes away all vitality from culture and imposes a passive and unconscious replication on it, without negotiating with the material conditions of the time in which it is triggered as necessary.

The second author is Francisco Adolfo Coelho (1847-1919), ethnographer, folklorist, writer and pioneer of anthropology in Portugal. From 1884 onwards he began publishing a series of studies on the Romani. The analyses took the form of articles, essays and books that were published until 1892. This phase of the author’s writing about the Romani ended with the publication of *The Romani of Portugal: a study on Calon* (1892). The text was initially intended to be a speech at the 10th Session of the International Congress of Orientalists.

In an effort to tie together all the points of Portugal’s national history, he seeks to understand from an internal point of view, the components of Lusitanian culture and the mixtures that emerged in that part of the Iberian Peninsula. Receiving strong influence from theories and schools of thought that were in vogue – such as evolutionism and German historicism – Adolfo tries to understand the role of popular culture in the process of Portugal’s decline, its function in a possible regeneration of nationality and the position of overseas power that it had once occupied in the geopolitical framework.

Among the texts about the Romani, the title published in 1892 deserves special mention. In his eagerness to perceive what is external within the Portuguese national identity, Adolfo is



concerned about the Romani who lived there who, even as Portuguese speakers, would have a closer approximation to the Hindu social organization. This would not be a reserve of Portuguese Romani, but of all those spread throughout Europe, since the morphology, linguistic matrix and other elements of this ethnic group would correspond to an oriental-Indian ancestry, but which added to the process of constitution of Portuguese society, even if in a condition of inferiority. Adolfo was preceded by other Portuguese authors and was succeeded by highly respected scholars on this subject. His importance lies in the break he established with the dominant thinking. Due to the nature of this work and the limits imposed, it is not possible to expand this discussion, which we intend to do individually in a specific article on Portugal.

Therefore, Francisco Adolfo Coelho was the inaugurator of a phase of ethnographic-anthropological studies in his country, on the Romani, even if these were informed by problematic notions, but which were common in that intellectual context. This matrix of thought found an echo in the early years of the 20th century.

## Romani historiography and other arts in the 20th century

In general, the first two decades of the 20th century did not show significant changes in studies on the Romani, even though this is characterized as a time of reworking of many sciences such as history and anthropology, which will experience a paradigmatic overhaul and research tools. The romantic tradition, which predominated in many schools of thought in the 19th century, ended up taking its inheritance to the early years of the 20th century. It is worth highlighting the idealism projected onto the Romani, who would be the personification of an ideal or mythological type of national being, in the Spanish experience.

The tendency to see the historical role of the Romani in the national constitution gained new momentum from 1928 onwards in Spain. The person responsible for this movement is Federico García Lorca, who developed a type of literature that in many aspects escapes historiographical characterization, but which deserves note, as it is a unique attitude in the history of studies on the Romani. With the publication of *The Romani Romance* (1928) Lorca established a double literary movement: the ethnography of the Romani of Andalusia – the autonomous region of Spain where he was born – and the elevation of these to the position of subjects of national mythology, or in other words, the Romani would be the Hispanic group par excellence.

Having lived with groups of the Romani since childhood, Federico felt both attracted and frightened by members of this ethnic group. Capturing the sensitive features of this contact, the author tries to describe the region where he grew up and the Romani with whom he had



contact, escaping the picturesque and the folkloric, seeking what is deep and hidden in these realities (Vargas, 2011).

Although the author tried to escape the folkloric aspect, he was unable to completely detach himself from notions of this nature that purposefully flirted with mysticism. Lorca was not a sociologist, but a poet and playwright who was part of Spanish modernism and the so-called Generation of 27. What he intended to create was a mythological narrative that elevated the Romani to the status of a national myth, as they would epitomize, through their way of life and the culture they held, the Hispanic condition par excellence. In an attempt to break with the folklorists' narrative, Lorca does the opposite, since the idea of popular culture and tradition were central aspects of his work. With this, it is clear that folklore as a means of explaining aspects of national popular culture had intense momentum until the final years of the 1930s, when it was challenged in Western societies.

The 1940s were the peak of a theoretical and institutional dispute between folklore studies and sociology, which sought to assert itself in the institutional field. The challenge to the position of interpreters of popular traditions contributed to the weakening of folklorists' studies while it enabled the emergence of solid social studies on this dimension of culture and its socializing role (Garcia, 2001). In the specific case of Brazil, Florestan Fernandes harshly criticized folklorists between the 1940s and 1950s, dedicating a considerable part of his academic and journalistic work to this debate.

Even with the consolidation of sociology and the emergence of new theoretical perspectives in the field of history, in the first half of the 20th century (see Annales School), the Romani continued to suffer from intense historiographical and anthropological erasure. In the case of Brazil, not even the expansion of postgraduate programs in the Rio-São Paulo axis in the 1970s and 1980s was able to advance interest in this ethnic group.

Since the publication of Mello Morais Filho's book in 1892 until 1989, only eight works – including articles and books – on the Romani have been published. Of these, only three can be considered works in the field of history. These publications were made by Ático Frota Vilas-Boas da Mota (1928-2016), PhD in Literature from the University of São Paulo (USP), Brazilian researcher, historian, professor, folklorist, translator and linguist, who dedicated a good part of his life to the history of Romania and the Romani and therefore became a corresponding member of the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute (IHGB).

It was only in 1986 that we saw the launch of a book about the Romani. This text has no academic affiliation and was conceived by two authors who were enthusiasts of the Romani





cause: Cristina da Costa Pereira and Victor da Fonseca Filho. When published, a controversy arose worthy of filling the pages of *Jornal do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro) since, due to a fight between the authors, Victor's name was removed from the work. The book *The Romani people* was published only by Cristina who, although she graduated in literature from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), she had an affinity with anthropology.

The publication was welcomed by intellectual circles of the time, as stated by Benjamim Santos, director, screenwriter, journalist, poet, director, theater critic and columnist for *Jornal do Brasil* (1986, p. 03). The interest in the Romani was due to the perception that Rio de Janeiro intellectuals had of them, as something exotic and appreciable. The aforementioned author dedicated herself to other publications in subsequent years, such as the books *The Romani people* (1986 and 1988); *The Romani legends and stories* (1990 and 1992), both with two editions.

There is a fourth work by this author dating back to 1989, entitled *The Romani continue on the Road*. The first edition was published by Ribroarte. In 2009, Rocco published a second edition with a change in the title, which became *The Romani are Still on the Road*. With historiographical characteristics, the text is configured more as an essay on cultural anthropology that uses oral history to try to access data on the historical background, ethnic divisions, family and parental structures, birth, marriage and death rites, justice practices and religious beliefs, crafts and poetics of the Romani people.

Finally, in 1992, the book *The Romani: nature and culture* by Oswaldo Macêdo was released, a doctor who was a professor of medicine at the Sorbonne (France) and who went by the pseudonym Taro Caló, as he was a descendant of the Romani from Rio de Janeiro. The text is the result of the effort to understand, disseminate and defend the culture of the Romani people of Brazil, which materialized in the creation of the Center for Romani Studies in 1987 in Rio de Janeiro. This was the first Romani organization in Latin America, but its activities ended in 1993 with the death of Oswaldo Macêdo (Pereira, 2009).

The book can be divided into six main areas: Romani esotericism (witchcraft, tarot, palm reading); oral history; childhood history; historical documents (laws, decrees and decrees against the Romani people); housing problem and Romani organizations. Although it was not produced within the parameters of an institutionalized history, Oswaldo Macêdo's text represents a turning point in studies on Romani peoples, as it addresses the themes mentioned with originality and problematizes the historical condition of the members of this ethnic group.

The 20th century can be defined as the moment when more robust studies on the Romani emerged, although they did not address central aspects of the history of these people,



such as their role in modern colonialism and how the West created an anti-Romani sentiment that was instrumentalized at various moments in history over the last five hundred years. It was only in the second half of this century that a shift away from ethnography, anthropology and esotericism began to emerge to think about these groups from a historical perspective. However, this movement only became concrete in the early years of the 20th century.

## Romani historiography in the 21st century

The Romani experience a complex process of marginalization that is sustained by racism embedded in the societies in which they are present, a fact that can be seen in epistemic marginalization, which materializes in the absence or limited scope of work developed on this topic and, in more extreme cases, the refusal of postgraduate programs to accept research on this ethnic group, due to pure prejudice or lack of qualified guidance. That said, we must point out that despite the obstacles, the Romani historiography in the early years of the 21st century experienced a push towards specialization, as professional historians and researchers from other areas, albeit timidly, focused on the subject from that moment on. With this in mind, there are three issues that need to be highlighted. The first concerns the *stricto sensu* postgraduate programs that have opened the emerging discussion. As a consequence of the professional approach developed at master's and doctoral level, a new type of publication emerged: theses and dissertations transformed into books that, although in limited circulation, served to disseminate other ethnic narratives, without the folklorist, romantic or detractor biases.

The second issue is that, in addition to historians, the Federal Public Ministry has been dedicating itself to developing elaborate studies on the Romani, as an attempt to understand the historical and legal situation of these citizens, in order to act together with communities in a position of vulnerability. This attempt at a historical reading, even if it is not under the supervision of history, becomes positive, as it adds in terms of published works on the Romani. The studies produced by this State institution aim to support its agents directly involved with these populations spread throughout the national territory and which do not find legal support through a specific legal apparatus – such as a Statute –, a fact that makes it difficult for the MPF to manage these groups.

The third point is that in this context we see the emergence of some Romani entities and associations that have begun to promote interdisciplinary publications about these peoples. These three types of historiographical advances and debates deserve a more detailed discussion.

A search in the database of theses and dissertations of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES) reveals works defended in various



postgraduate programs between the years 2001-2020. The records of this funding agency show one hundred and fifty-three defended works – between master's and doctorate degrees – on the Romani, in various areas of concentration, of which nineteen belong to history.

These productions seek to analyze diverse themes involving the Romani, from criminal processes and exile policies, through sociability and arriving at literary representations. Some of the authors adopt more general spatial perspectives, while others prefer a more regional approach. The fact is that this indicates progress, but not in its minimally ideal form, because, if we compare in quantitative terms with other ethnic groups such as blacks and indigenous people, it will be seen that after adding up the theses and dissertations produced in the same period, in the various areas, there is a total of almost ten thousand titles.

Postgraduate programs – not only in the area of History, as it is worth highlighting the efforts undertaken by many anthropologists and sociologists who have greatly expanded the understanding of these groups, as well as psychologists, lawyers and professionals from various areas of health sciences who have drawn some attention to these populations through research developed in PPGs throughout Brazil<sup>5</sup> – have played an important role, but still fail to produce specialized historical knowledge about these ethnic groups present in the history of Brazil since the 16th century, in all regions of the colony, the Empire and the Republic. We believe that the impediments that affect this topic involve, firstly, a socially constructed notion that the Romani, due to their condition of subordination and minority, would not be subjects worthy of note, therefore, their experiences would not require a deeper historical study. In the background, there is the difficulty of access – for those who work with oral history methodology – to these communities that have little openness to non-Romani. Thirdly, there is a lack of qualified researchers in the programs' guidance teams. The guidance provided often takes place through mutual learning between advisors who believe in the topic and advisees who do their best to fill historiographical gaps.

To exemplify this production, we must mention in more detail just over a dozen authors and works that were produced within the scope of some postgraduate program – or with some type of connection to them – in the last three decades<sup>6</sup> and which, in some cases, after the defense were published as books. The choice of these works and not any other works is based on their affinity with the historical discourse present in these productions. Texts on anthropology,

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<sup>5</sup> Those interested in these and other publications can access the repositories of Brazilian Universities or visit the website of the Maylê Sara Kalí International Association (AMSK/Brazil), which provides publications from various areas.

<sup>6</sup> Some professors-advisors have published texts that were not necessarily originally produced as dissertations or theses. There are texts that were produced in programs at foreign universities.



sociology and other areas carry a historical appeal in their lines and can be consulted more freely in the institutional repositories of universities and/or the CAPES theses and dissertations bank. For those who wish to broaden the scope of readings and references, before indicating the chosen books, we can highlight the following Portuguese authors: Manuel Costa; Maria José Casa-Nova, Maria Elisa Lopes da Costa, Eduardo Costa, Olga Magano, Maria Manuela Mendes, José Gabriel Pereira Bastos, Carlos Lopes Sousa, Mirna Montenegro. In Brazil we highlight: Jamilly Cunha, Marco António Mello, Felipe Barocan, Dimitri Fazito, Moriam Souza, Marcos Toyansk, Jessica Medeiros. That said, we will now talk about the selected books<sup>7</sup>, and continue with the argument.

The first book is called *Romaphobia: the Romani in Europe and Brazil*, written by Frans Moonen, who is a retired professor of anthropology at the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB), and which has three editions, respectively in 2000, 2008 and 2011. This text is not the result of a master's or doctoral research but is a separate study that seeks to establish a notion of Romaphobia as a set of institutional practices and political actions that have been adopted against the Romani since the modern period. It is a production from the field of anthropology, but strongly supported by history. Still within the limits of this science, we must mention the studies carried out by Florencia Ferrari<sup>8</sup> and Édilma do Nascimento Souza, both with a PhD in anthropology and who, through extensive ethnographic practice, focus on aspects of the Romani way of life, such as their relationship with non-Romani and childhood in the Calons communities, respectively.

The second work is entitled *Vagrants and Gypsies, Heretics and Witches: The Exiles in Colonial Brazil*, written by Geraldo Pieroni and summarily defended as a master's dissertation in the Postgraduate Program in Social Sciences at the Federal University of Bahia (PPGCS-UFBA) in 1992. The text aims to understand the policy of exile adopted by Portugal in the context of colonization while establishing a detailed reading of ethnic, religious and racial issues involved in this process. Published by Bertrand Brasil in 2002, the book is now in its second edition. In the wake of this theme, Natally Chris da Rocha Menini with her doctoral thesis in History, defended at the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro and entitled *Necessary Undesirables: the Romani exiled in Eighteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro* (2021) deserves to be cited as the third text, as it inserts the Romani into the broader and more complex dynamics of colonialism that victimized, in countless ways, not only the Afro and indigenous populations, but extended its dominion and terror over the Romani.

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<sup>7</sup> The final references include other authors not indicated here.

<sup>8</sup> This author has studies that cover the historiographical dimension of productions about the Romani (see bibliographical references).



The fourth work is by Lourival Andrade Junior and is entitled *Roma Miracle Worker Sebinca Christo: sublimation in unofficial Brazilian Catholicism*. Originally defended as a doctoral thesis in history in the Postgraduate Program in History at the Federal University of Paraná (PPGH-UFPR) in 2008, the text underwent revisions and was published as a book in 2021 by CRV Publisher. With an intense dialogue with the science of religion, the author establishes a reading of an unofficial cult that has aspects of sacredness, devotion and religiosity whose object of belief is a deceased Romani woman with a reputation for miracle work.

The fifth production was conceived a priori as a master's dissertation defended by Rodrigo Corrêa Teixeira within the scope of the Postgraduate Program in History at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (PPGH-UFMG) in 1998. Thinking about the Romani raids in the territory of Minas Gerais, from the Colony to the Republic, the author presents a general history of the Romani's presence in the territory that we now understand as Brazil, for this reason, the work deserved the title *The Romani in Brazil: a brief history*. Through decrees, criminal proceedings, newspapers and laws of the period, it seeks to present a type of legal formation that saw the Romani as a natural threat to the social order. With a second edition, the text was published by Crisálida Publisher in 2009.

It is worth noting that the work developed by Rodrigo Teixeira has become an essential work in studies on the Romani in Brazil. Furthermore, he inaugurated a field of studies that use police sources to consider the perspective of the Romani as objects of direct analysis, not just as supporting actors<sup>9</sup> of narratives conceived from police investigations in the eighteenth-century Minas region and/or other parts of Brazil, in other time frames. Along the lines of this practice, there are two noteworthy works: the dissertation entitled *From wandering bandits to martyrs and miracle workers: social representations of the Romani in the city of Esperantina-PI* (2011) by Maria Auxiliadora Carvalho e Silva, defended within the scope of the Postgraduate Program in History of Brazil at the Federal University of Piauí and the doctoral thesis by Cassi Ladi Reis Coutinho defended at the University of Brasília and called *The Romani in the police records of Minas Gerais (1907-1920)* (2016).

The eighth work is authored by Priscila Paz Godoy and is entitled *The Invisible People: the Romani and the Emergence of a Liberating Law*. Defended as a master's dissertation in the Postgraduate Program in Human Rights and Citizenship at the University of Brasília (PPGDH-UNB) in 2015, the text postulates the idea that the Romani suffer from chronic political and cultural

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<sup>9</sup> See example of *The Gold Dispossessed: Poverty in Minas Gerais in the 18th Century* by Laura de Mello e Souza (2017) and *Tropic of Sins: Morality, Sexuality and the Inquisition in Brazil* by Ronaldo Vainfas (2011).



invisibility, which has turned into legal neglect sponsored by the Brazilian State. The author reports cases of institutional and political erasures such as the absence of data on members of this ethnic group in the demographic census of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). The erasures materialize in the continuous expulsions and deterritorialization suffered throughout history and even in contemporary times, as there is no defense as guaranteed by the Federal Constitution of 1988.

Added to this effort carried out by a few scholars of the Romani is the work developed by the Federal Public Ministry via the 6th Coordination and Review Chamber, Indigenous Populations and Traditional Communities<sup>10</sup> in trying to understand the historical and contemporary demands of the Romani people of Brazil. This effort has materialized in the form of the creation of internal normative acts on the conduct of prosecutors with the Romani communities; documentaries, webinars, surveys and the creation of collections of articles such as the book entitled *The Romani Peoples: Rights and Instruments for Their Defense*. Published in 2020 and with the collaboration of several researchers and professionals in the fields of law, human rights, history and anthropology, the text focuses on the demand for State bodies to act in defense of the rights of this ethnic minority, which is unable to access the constitutional guarantees reserved for them.

Finally, it is important to highlight the studies carried out by associations defending the Romani culture and tradition that emerged in the 1980s. The first social movement in defense of the Romani people to emerge in Brazil and Latin America was the Center for Romani Studies of Brazil (CEC), which was chaired by Mio Vacite (1941-2019) who

was a Roma leader from Rio de Janeiro. Of Serbian and Horahanô origin, Mio was a pioneer in the Romani actions in the country, facing with sagacity and charisma the many political, social and cultural challenges throughout the four decades of his leadership. An activist and violinist, he was elected president of the Romani Studies Center (CEC), the first Roma studies center in Brazil in 1987. In 1990, he founded the Romani Union of Brazil (UCB), based in the city of Rio de Janeiro, appointed by the International Roma Federation as the organization representing Brazil (Cairus, 2020, p. 154).

The Romani Studies Center, located in the city of Rio de Janeiro, held debates and academic and cultural events in Brazil and in South American countries. These events aimed to

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<sup>10</sup> Higher body linked to the Attorney General's Office.



spread the Romani culture among the Roma themselves and supporters of the cause. Mio Vacite was the first president, being succeeded by the Romani Oswaldo Macêdo, already mentioned here, and Marcos Rodrigues. The book published by Oswaldo was produced in the wake of the CEC's proposal to construct a history of the Romani articulated by the Roma themselves. In addition to these authors, the CEC was composed of Ático Vilas-Boas de Mota and Cristina da Costa Pereira, authors already noted in this analysis. Among the founders of the CEC was the Catholic priest Renato Rosso (Teixeira and Pimenta, 2023).

In 1987, the Catholic Church was responsible for founding the second movement to promote the Romani culture: the Nomads' Pastoral, which had Bishop Dom Benedito Zorzi as its first president. His successor was Dom Paulo Moretto and it is currently presided over by Dom José Edson Santana Oliveira. This pastoral has worked to promote dialogue, not only with the Romani people, but also with circus communities. Seeking to encourage the appreciation of the Romani culture, the bishops who preside over the Pastoral support studies carried out in Brazil about this people.

A new type of pro-Romani activism has emerged and gained a new momentum since the creation of the decree on traditional peoples (Decree No. 6,040, of 2007) which instituted the National Policy for the Sustainable Development of Traditional Peoples and Communities. The Gypsy Embassy of Brazil – Phralipen Romani – was created in 2016 in the state of São Paulo and has been chaired since then by the Romani Nicolas Ramanush Leite, who is an anthropologist. In addition to promoting courses and events on the Romani history and culture, the social movement has dedicated itself to producing books on various historical and anthropological aspects of the Romani culture, such as beliefs, traditions, vocabulary, cuisine and dances. It can be seen from this that Romani have struggled, in some way, to fill the historiographical gaps that exist about their origins, traditions and culture.

## **Conclusion**

Realizing that memory and history are constantly disputed due to the conflicting interests of the social groups that govern Western societies, this analysis sought to engage in dialogue with this premise to understand the processes of silencing or giving little visibility to Romani as an object of historical study between the 19th and 21st centuries.

It is clear from the limited number of studies on this ethnic group that history – which sought to look “downward” – is not capable of including all marginalized subjects and victims of the most atrocious persecutions over many centuries, in various parts of Europe and America.



Although inspired by the thinking of Foucaultian and Marxist authors, historians still do not give a minimally satisfactory account of the plural existential experiences that translated into models of alternative societies to the Western civilizational standard.

Therefore, we advocate that, from a theoretical and methodological point of view, historians reevaluate the notion of “history seen or made from below”, to propose plural readings of Portuguese and Brazilian societies, with a view to including significant portions of subjects neglected by the narratives produced in the history workshop. This defense cannot be reduced to a purely epistemological desire, in the sense of including to show plurality or simple alignment with a current of thought in vogue, but so that we can reach other levels of understanding of the same processes that we thought were already clarified, as in the case of Brazilian colonial society that is not interpreted from the Romani’s perspective and even less by the Romani themselves.

That said, we reaffirm that racism combined with low financial investment in the training of researchers interested in this topic leads to the limited number of studies, which despite being few, were able to resonate in some way, since some of these works were read by Brazilian legislators who proposed the creation of National Romani Day to be celebrated annually on May 24, Saint Sara Kalin’s day, the Romani’s Patron Saint.

Therefore, understanding the experiences of these people means reaching another level of historiographical production about the places where the Romani passed through and the traces they have left behind. Therefore, there is a need for financial investment that makes it possible to change this scenario, as well as for researchers already initiated in this theme to be capable of articulating their object of study not only under the old and colonized theories that, as a rule, only ratify the disadvantaged position of the ethnic group discussed here. A reading supported by decolonial theories or Subaltern Studies (Spivak, 2010) can give rise to a new interpretative phase of the works defended in the Postgraduate Programs. Expand the theoretical scope so that, as Ana Paula C.B. Soria (Voria Stefanovsky) (2008 and 2015) and Caterina Alessandra Rea (2017) have already done – whether with other thought matrices or with elements of her own trajectory as a Romani, as in the case of the first author cited – the Romani’s history is structured in a way that contemplates their presence in Western societies, but, more than that, indicates the potentialities present in community experiences and the contradictions that permeate these human groups.

The analysis of this meager production helps us see the short path we have traveled and how much we still must go as historians committed to the struggle for the emancipation of marginalized subjects who are vilified by the limiting narratives constructed about them. Reading against the grain, we can say that all of this demonstrates how there are still many layers of “coloniality” in our historical making, a fact that ratifies exclusionary positions, whether from the





point of view of memory and its places of worship, or of national identities that were purposefully articulated so as not to include everyone. If the history that emerged in the 20th century and that we intend to “make from below” really wants to be recognized as such, it needs to get rid of the shoes of certainties that it wears, to feel the pulse of the earth trodden by other feet that were never noticed, despite the footprints they left all along the way.

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**Conceptualization:** PORTELA, Lenilson; NASCIMENTO, Francisco.

**Data curation:** PORTELA, Lenilson; NASCIMENTO, Francisco.

**Writing – First Draft:** PORTELA, Lenilson; NASCIMENTO, Francisco.

**Writing – Review and Edition:** PORTELA, Lenilson; NASCIMENTO, Francisco.

**Investigation:** PORTELA, Lenilson; NASCIMENTO, Francisco.

### **Competing interests**

No conflict of interest has been declared.

### **Ethics Committee approval**

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### **Research context**

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### **Preprints**

The article is not a preprint.

### **Availability of research data and other materials**

Not applicable.

### **Responsible Editors**

Flávia Varella – Editor-in-Chief

Rebeca Gontijo – Editor-in-Chief

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