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Title of Session: The sociology of Roma/Gypsies/Travellers – between mainstream and specialisation

Name of Session Convener(s): Thomas Acton

University/Organization incl. City: University of Greenwich, London, UK

Chair: Valdemar Kalinin

University/Organization incl. City: Education Departments, London Boroughs of Hamersmith and Camden

I) Title of Selected Paper: Rethinking sociological understandings of the Lom: Gypsies at the crossroads of Armenia, Turkey and Europe.

Name/s of Author/s: Adrian Marsh

University/Organization incl. City: Södertorns University, Stockholm & University of Greenwich, London

Abstract: The Lom are an ethnic minority present in Armenia, Turkey, and possibly other states, some of whose members are commercial nomads, and speak Lomavren, a dialect reported instances of which embed archaic Indian elements in an Armenian matrix. They have been presented within European scholarship as “Armenian Gypsies”, a third strand of Gypsy-dom alongside the Roma and the Dom. This paper will discuss this identification as an example of past dominant European paradigms about the Roma, which obscure diversity though their promotion of universalist conceptions of identity. It will show how current socio-historical research is deconstructing those paradigms, and thus raising important new questions about the Lom, and their place in Armenian society during its traumatic disengagement with the Ottoman empire. It will argue that critically

informed current sociological research is crucial to this revolution in historiography, which is also rewriting the foundations of contemporary Romani Studies.

II) Title of Selected Paper: The need for Romani Studies in Romani education

Name/s of Author/s: Valdemar Kalinin

University/Organization incl. City: Education Departments, London Boroughs of Hamersmith and Camden

Abstract: At the last Congress of the International Institute of Sociology we held a series of 4 sessions on Romani Studies, which showed the range of interest and work now being carried out on the sociology of Gypsies/Roma/Travellers. This work is commenting on and analysing the situation of Romany people in relation to migration, housing employment and education, and the accession of Eastern European countries to the European Union. Despite an enormous amount of work, and the emergence of a small Romany intelligentsia, the position of Romany people in Europe remains pitiable with very high rates of unemployment and poverty.

During our sessions it was argued by some that in fact Romani Studies is responsible for this marginalisation of Romani people; that it benefits the experts on Roma, but not the Roma themselves. It was argued that by making Roma distinct, it sets them up for discrimination and persecution, and what they need is normal education, not Romani education.

In papers offered to other sessions, this writer shows his commitment to getting Roma into normal education. But he would argue that when Romany people just try to assimilate and “become normal” they cut themselves off from the advancement of their own people. In the former Soviet Union and state socialist countries, despite their oppressive systems, at least some Romani people by creating a written language and literature kept their identity and became examples to lead their people to education, whereas in Western Europe, Gypsies who became educated hid their identity, and so could not be role models. Without a real understanding of Romani history and language, Roma youth cannot understand the deep-seated historical reasons for racism and the oppression of their people and the need for education for all to create a society that works for everyone.

III) Title of Selected Paper: The challenge of the new paradigm in Romani Studies for sociology?

Name/s of Author/s: Thomas Acton

University/Organization incl. City: University of Greenwich, London, UK

Abstract: Romani Studies has undergone in recent years a kind of intellectual decolonisation. The increased numbers of Romani Studies scholars who identify as Gypsy/Roma/Traveller themselves have produced new questions, challenged residual racisms, and demanded that sociological explanations, and the accounts of human behaviour underlying linguistics, geography, anthropology and political science, make sense for “people like us” rather than some intangibly different, othered “them”. To reach this point they have had to face down disciplinary challenges from linguistics, anthropology and political science that an inter-disciplinary approach lacks intellectual rigour. To face down these challenges they need to draw deeply on a sociological theory of social mobility which looks at all dimensions of social stratification, and not just class. It therefore has a considerable potential impact on social theory itself.