

RECENSIONI

Sam Beck, Ana Ivasiuc (eds) | *Roma activism: Reimagining power and knowledge*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2018, pp. xvi-242.

This interdisciplinary book is divided into three parts (each one subdivided in three chapters): *Renewing methods*, *Renewing sites*; *Renewing methodologies*; *Renewing activism*. The main thread linking the various contributions to *Roma Activism* is a critique towards policies and practices based on the principle of “positive discrimination” – a preferential model of operation in the EU liberal agenda, which often falls into the trap of essentialism, thus weakening the same processes of inclusion which is intended to promote.

In the first chapter, Hub Van Bar assesses the processes at play in Eastern Europe since 1989. By using the category of “nongovernmentalism”, the Author highlights the emergence of Roma civic organisations, the involvement of European governmental agencies, and the financial support of prominent donors. The imposition of policies to counter anti-Gypsyism aimed at opening new perspectives for Roma or pro-Roma associations, but in the medium term it has led to a reduction in their autonomy. Furthermore, the gradual professionalization of stakeholders has produced the rise of a “Gypsy industry”, as well as an ethnic turn in policy making, resulting in a more symbolic than real participation of the interested communities. Finally, the de-politicization of Romani issues diluted activists’ strategies of empowerment into generic requests for labour market inclusion of Roma individuals as disadvantaged people. In conclusion, Van Baar postulates the development of a “critical Anthroposociology of nongovernmentalism” that will align local and international instances, favouring also the collaboration among organizations and groups working in the field.

Chapters two and three show the incongruities between international activists’ policies and local understandings of conflicts. Anna Chiritoiu examines the events related to the slaughtering of three Roma involved in a



murder and the burning of Roma houses by an angry mob in Transylvania (1993). The timely mobilisation of activists created tensions among the local Romani movement and the transnational organizations. The latter mobilized victimhood and trauma as an emotional hook, leaving the conflict unsolved and sharpening the contradictions between humanitarian sentiments and strategic procedures functional to its resolution. As highlighted by the Author, only a new epistemology within the Romani movement, pointing at a dialectical confrontation between the various actors, can accommodate such a contradiction.

Laszlo Foszto, indirectly involved as an expert in two separate cases, focuses on the discrepancies between activists' agenda and local understandings of conflicts. In the first, a Hungarian-speaking Roma community (Rumengre) in Transilvania was involved in clashes with local populations. The ethnic interpretative framework used by the pro-Roma activists (i.e. Roma vs Hungarian) was rejected by the Rumengre, showing how, in some cases, discourses based on Roma perennial victimhood can be inappropriate. The second case, which is centred on the Romanian parliament's controversial proposal to use the ethnonym "Tigan" instead of "Roma" in official documents, underlines both the limitations of univocal homogenisation in the non-neutral field of identity definition and the importance of self-identification and naming for the communities involved.

The second section is opened by Andrew Ryder, with a Galilean dialogue on how Roma researchers challenge the *European Academic Network of Romani Studies* in relation to the notion of objective and neutral knowledge, and its epistemological implications. Contesting the legitimacy of current power hierarchies in the field, the Author highlights the substantial irrelevance of the Roma component in defining the network's strategy, since its participation in EU-funded research seems useful only insofar as it grants access to funding. Ryder advocates for a paradigm change that will lead to inclusive forms of research, with real impact on the life of Roma communities.

Angéla Kóczé, drawing from feminist and critical race theory, particularly the category of intersectionality, develops a critique of mainstream Romani studies. Using an auto-ethnographic approach, she analyses how Roma women's access to academia challenges long-established hierarchies and power relations imbued with racism and sexism. The Author criticizes the use of the category of "ethnic" instead of "race", since it conceals the racism against the Roma; nevertheless, she is confident that the work of the first generation of Romani and pro-Romani feminist researchers can lead to a pattern change.

In chapter seven, Ana Ivasiuc examines the production and diffusion of a “gray literature” produced by non-governmental organizations and donors as part of a militant advocacy discourse. Such texts contribute to amplifying a pervasive narrative of Roma victimhood based on Orientalist clichés that allows access to funds sustaining paternalistic interventions. This discourse has not yet led to significant goals in terms of Roma communities empowerment, emphasising instead their perceived shortfalls and inadequacies and contributing to neglecting their agency. This discursive system should be deconstructed through an immersive ethnography in specific contexts that will also promote a renewal of forms of activism.

Margaret Greenfields opens the last section, focusing on the under-researched nexus between Roma-related activism, research, and policymaking. By analysing sectorial data, she highlights the low number of studies focused on practice-oriented research. She quotes as an example of good praxis a case in the UK involving Gypsy and traveller activists, trained together with policy makers and academics in a mutual sharing of experiences and knowledge – a model of network-building that can be exported to other contexts.

The absence of Romanlar (Turkish Roma) from the mass protest movement of Gezi Park in May 2013, is the starting point for Danielle V. Schoon, whose chapter follows the lines of Foszto’s and Chiritouiu’s contributions. Within the specific national framework of contemporary Turkey, for the Romanlar group Republican conceptions of difference and citizenship, and the common belonging to Islam, override ethnic, linguistic or cultural diversities, marking a lack of interest or sometimes antagonism towards the international pressures to recognise minority rights. This case confirms the urgency for a critical redefining of categories upon which European Romani activism has built its identity politics, particularly the category of “civic society” functional to redefine the existing power relations, demonstrating the importance of ethnographic fieldwork to understand lived experiences in local contexts.

The book is closed by Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka, who discusses the new approaches and strategies of young Roma activists. These remark as, to date, the Roma-focused political agendas of national and supranational institutions and nongovernmental actors have not changed the existing power imbalance. The analysis of identity discourses and practices by activist associations once again indicates the urgent need for a paradigm shift, starting from a refusal of elements of stigmatisation such as victimhood and subalternity, and the investment in the development of a

positive cultural identity. Such path of emancipation and self-confidence presuppose a community engagement, with incisive grassroots action bridging the gap with the other stakeholders.

On the whole, the chapters are uneven. If in some cases the ethnographic insights based on the observation of specific situations permit the reader to grasp the significant elements of the debate, in others the arguments proposed seem to refer to internal discussions among experts in the field, those possessing the background knowledge necessary to decode the interaction among the stakeholders and to fully appreciate the specific issues at stake. In addition, the choice to focus on processes related mainly to the interaction among European institutions and Eastern European states does not allow for an evaluation of the impact of institutional policies in the broader European framework. It should also be remarked that the critical bibliography is almost exclusively in English, with the exclusion of significant contributions from scholars writing in other languages.

Nevertheless, the book offers meaningful insights and opens new methodological and epistemological pathways, especially with regard to the key issue of the agency of Roma communities, to be understood not as passive subjects at the mercy of external institutions and non-governmental organizations, but as independent actors able to act on the political scene.

Massimo ARESU

University of Leeds

m.aresu@leeds.ac.uk