

BOOK REVIEW

THE MINORITY OF MINORITES: THE HUMAN AND POLITICAL RIGHTS OF GYPSIES IN HUNGARY

[Kisebbségek kisebbsége: A magyarországi cigányok emberi és politikai jogai].

Neményi Mária and Szalai Júlia, editors, 2005.

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A few years ago, while working as a volunteer at a Roma NGO operating in Budapest, Hungary I developed a keen sense of a paradox that stifled the enthusiasm of my Roma and non-Roma coworkers. Regardless of how many illustrious sponsors our NGO managed to convince of the worthiness of our cause (to create and run an office that would circulate information about funding opportunities available to Roma communities) we felt entirely convinced that our efforts are not likely to put a dent in the massive social disadvantage of those we were serving. Our feeling of collective insecurity was not an isolated phenomenon but a common experience among Roma activists who I came into contact with in the course of my work.

The sixteen studies in this hefty volume, edited by two of Hungary's most influential sociologists, help readers fathom the social, institutional and political dynamics that perpetuate the disadvantage of Hungarian Roma and discourage activism that seeks to serve their emancipation. But the volume is designed to do more than describe the social relations creating disadvantage. The authors share a dual political commitment. On the one hand, they characterize the social relations they are describing as a relationship between oppressors and oppressed. A strong critical voice characterizes this book from the first pages of the introductory essay written by a leading Roma radical, Zsigó Jenő, a political figure who has been a seminal actor in the Roma radical movement since its inception during the last years of Hungarian state socialism. The title of Zsigó's essay sets the agenda of *Minority of Minorities*: "to unearth and identify the direct system of oppressions" (p. 7). On the other hand, most contributors seem to endorse the argument that another principal political aim of critical social research ought to be to provide Roma intellectuals with a vocabulary that will allow them to voice the collective concerns of the Roma in Hungary. This twofold political commitment lends this volume its uniqueness among the wealth of Hungarian

sociological and anthropological scholarship on the Roma and their plight.

Cultural anthropologists may take an interest in *Minority of Minorities* because the contributors provide fine-grained sociological analyses of structural properties of Hungarian society that impede the realization of the human and political rights of the Roma and effective Roma representation in general. The volume is organized into three parts. The six studies in the first part discuss the interaction of Hungarian Roma and state institutions. Szalai Júlia examines the Hungarian welfare system that enables local self-governments to use the system as a disciplinary device against impoverished Roma. By creating a distinction between those in need due to 'external circumstance' and 'irresponsible' subjects the bureaucratic system of self-governments favor the non-Roma who can provide paperwork of previous employment and lost possessions, whereas the chronically unemployed and dispossessed Roma are unable to impress bureaucrats and thus receive either minimal benefits or fall out of the welfare system entirely. In two separate studies, Lukács György Róbert and Tardos Katalin show how employment programs sponsored by the Hungarian state, international NGOs and the EU fail to benefit unemployed Roma by not providing them with the means for upward mobility. Neményi Mária engages the discrimination against Hungarian Roma in the healthcare system and finds that whereas healthcare professionals treat the non-Roma as individual cases they perceive the Roma in an ethnic frame and thus relate to them in a more critical and often insulting manner. Zolnay János exposes the contradiction at the heart of the Hungarian liberal education policy: a decentralized educational system cannot accommodate the directives of the Ministry of Education that call for the desegregation of Hungarian classrooms and the unconditional inclusion of Roma students. Coauthored by Kende Anna and Neményi Mária, the final study in the first part of the book explores how Roma students end up in special education classes in spite of standardized

testing. Although Roma students do well on these tests, educational consultants often advise Roma parents to send them to special education classes where the majority of the students are already Roma because of the perception that Roma children cannot do well in classes where the majority of the students are non-Roma, and Roma parents don't have the means to support their children well enough to keep up with non-Roma peers.

Part two of the volume discusses representations of Roma across a variety of public discourses. Dupcsik Csaba establishes a typology of Hungarian academic approaches to the Roma based on past studies' political and methodological dimensions. Terestyéni Tamás surveys high school history and social studies textbooks and concludes that Roma related content reinforces anti-Roma sentiments instead of dismantling them. In the study that contains the most praise for the status quo, Messing Vera commends Hungarian media for their recent tendency toward providing a balanced view of political controversies that play out between Roma and non-Roma. Erős Ferenc argues for the reformulation of the basic assumptions of social psychological research on prejudice in order to gauge anti-Roma and anti-semitic attitudes that hide behind the façade of political correctness. Kende Anna's study analyzes Roma university students' career narratives and concludes that students' career choices are shaped by their families' attitudes toward Roma identity and education.

The last part of this volume examines the relationship between the Roma and Hungarian political establishment. Majtényi Balázs and Majtényi György claim it is up to the Hungarian government whether the Roma will identify against the majority population in the light of past atrocities or with it as a minority population of equal rights. Wizner Balázs proffers a sobering overview of Hungarian fiscal policy that instead of channeling money to Roma initiatives spends billions of forints on misconceived government programs. Molnár Emília introduces the reader to the history of Roma mobilization in the town of Békés and shows how the lively Roma public sphere of the town is dominated by Roma political figures socialized within the assimilationist discourse of state socialism. Burka Viktória, Vida Judith and Wizner Balázs examine another heritage of state socialism that survived the 1989 regime change, a tendency among the Roma of Szalakóta, Hungary to use external funding for the benefit of small interest groups and not to build stronger communal political alliances. Finally, Vajda Róza notes a positive shift in the political discourse of Hungarian Roma and non-Roma decision-makers from integrationist political ideals toward the

recognition of and a need for autonomous Roma political voices.

The strength of *Minority of Minorities*, the detailed analyses of the structural disadvantage of the Roma, also becomes its weakness. The image of the Roma as social agents presented by the authors is a static one, a portrait of Hungarian Roma locked in the reluctant but stifling embrace of the state and the majority society. In this portrait, human behavior appears to be pre-determined to the degree that any sense of Roma agency suddenly seems an illusion to the reader. The authors address only a few instances of local manifestations of Roma agency and when they do they never fail to point out that these isolated efforts for emancipation mainly feed into existing structures. While being aware that the volume's express intention is to unearth oppressive structures I was hoping that this politically committed volume would also inform its audience about successful strategies of penetrating and subverting existing structures of power. It is true that the volume marks a significant departure from academic discourses of Roma otherness and it does provide glimpses of Roma using existing structures to their own benefit. Nevertheless, the volume left me with a desire for scholarly accounts of Roma agency, and especially the type of agency built on what Vermeersch (2005) calls the cognitive turn in Roma activism, a turn away from essentialist views of Roma cultural identity toward the strategic, situational use of Roma identity for the political purpose of Roma emancipation.

The excellent scholarship in *Minority of Minorities* sets the stage for anthropological studies of Roma agency by showing what activists who strive for the emancipation of the Roma are up against.

Reference

- Vermeersch, Peter. 2005. Marginality, advocacy, and the ambiguities of multiculturalism: Notes on Romani activism in Central Europe. *Global Studies in Culture and Power* 12, 451-478.