

Marek Jakoubek (ed.): Gypsies and Ethnicity

Triton, 2008, Praha/Kroměříž, 408 pages.

Gypsies and Ethnicity is a collection of translated texts that have been published in renowned (especially anthropological) international magazines and important collections since the 1970s. The authors are certainly some of the most important scholars in the study of Gypsies. The editor Marek Jakoubek has chosen those papers that deal with the construction of ethnic identity in various Gypsy populations. The studies vary significantly in their ethnographic focus and analytical perspective.

The anthology provides both theoretically laden overviews of the ideas and political background of the emergence and dispersion of Roma ethno-revivalist movements in Europe and in the world, and case studies analysing the processes of ethnic identifications of Roma populations in particular political and geographic contexts. Here are some of the topics that are discussed in these studies. *Judith Okely* (*Some political consequences of theories of Gypsy ethnicity. The place of the intellectual*), using particular examples, comments upon the role of texts, intellectuals and social scientists in the creation and dissemination of Roma ethnic identity. *Wim Willems* (*Ethnicity as a Death-Trap: the History of Gypsy Studies*) criticizes dominant conceptions of Roma/Gypsy populations that stem from an idea that there is a single “ethnic group” based on a common (language, blood, and/or historic) origin. He noticed that many assertions in “Gypsy-studies discourse” are have only been rewritten from one text to another without being subjected to any critical scrutiny. *Paloma Gay Y Blasco* (*We don't know our descent: how the Gitanos of Jarana manage the past*) shows the difference in the conceptualisation of the past among Spanish Gitanos and in nationalist/ethnic discourse. He claims that it is improper to understand Gitanos through an ethnic concept of the past and tracks the mechanisms through which the “myth of an origin” of Gitanos is gradually entrenched in surrounding populations in the form of ethnic stereotypes, i.e. that Gitanos are starting to see themselves through the perspective of nationalistic frameworks. *Patrick Willams* (*The Invisibility of the Kalderash of Paris: Some Aspects of the Economic Activity and Settlement Pattern of the Kalderash Rom of the Paris Suburbs*), in his case study on the Kalderash of Paris, focuses on this group's adaptation strategies to the economic conditions of the city, which include strategic silencing of “ethnic identity” which has paradoxically lead not to a weakening of social cohesion but to its reinforcement. Using the category “*Romanipen*” (Gypsiness – to be a Gypsy), *Andrzej Mirga* (*The Category of “Romanipen” and the Ethnic Boundaries of Gypsies*) approaches the core of Gypsy identity. He analyses the role of the category “*Romanipen*” in the creation and maintenance of the boundary between Gypsies and non-Gypsies as well as between various Gypsy groups themselves. *Werner Cohn* (*The Myth of Gypsy Nationalism*) convincingly (and humorously) analyses Ian Hancock's rhetorical strategies and their role in the context of Gypsy identity. *István Pogány* (*Accommodating an Emergent National Identity: The Roma of Central and Eastern Europe*) and *Martin Kovats* (*The Politics of Roma Identity: between nationalism and destitution*) discusses the Roma ethnic movement as an outcome of external social pressures, such as political demands from current states and international organizations. *Matt Salo* (*Gypsy Ethnicity: Implications of Native Categories and Interaction for Ethnic Classification*) points out the empirical inappropriateness or incorrectness in the main statements alleged by the opponents of Roma emancipative movement regarding, mainly, North America's Gypsy populations. A completely different explanation framework is offered by *Beverly Nagel Lauwagie* (*Ethnic Boundaries in Modern States: Romano Lavo-Lil Revisited*), who draws on the ecological model of competitive strategies used by groups to maintain ethnic boundaries. According to this perspective, Gypsies and Travellers are groups that, in the conditions of modern states, use *r-strategies* – i.e. an ability to discern, find and utilize temporary sources and consequently, to move on in order to find new ones. Another alternative to classic theories, based upon the presumption that a shared identity exists, is provided by *Sharon Gmelch* (*Groups That Don't Want In: Gypsies and Other Artisan, Trader, and Entertainer Minorities*). The starting point of her text is neither a common origin, nor the shared identity of all Gypsies, but a hypothesis that certain groups want to remain in deliberate self-isolation from the rest of the society (Gypsies represent one such group.) Therefore, it is possible to analyse their economic strategies, including the ways of making their living, as well as their nomadic life-style. *Carol Silverman* (*Negotiating "Gypsiness": Strategy in Context*) describes the situation of American Gypsies that maintain their ethnic identity and at the same time make an impression that they have been assimilated

into the dominant society. On a general level, she creates a very dynamic conception of the Gypsy ethnic identity.

If we ask what the common feature of these texts is, there are at least two answers. In terms of theory, all the studies take an anti-essentialist standpoint, i.e. conception of identity derived from work by Frederick Barth and his followers. Within this theory, the notion of a Gypsy/Roma ethnic group is not treated as an unquestionable premise but as an issue to be dealt with in relation to various conceptual, social, and geographic contexts. In a political sense, common ground can also be found in the critical reflection of current Roma ethnic elites, emancipative movements and different state and international strategies focused on the support of Gypsies/Roma.

Due to an emphasis on thematic and conceptual orientation, the collection gives the impression of a concise and coherent book. The authors' perspectives as well as their analytic strategies are compatible and complementary. The collection shows a minimal amount of internal epistemological and political contradictions which is rather unusual for publications with such a textbook-like character.

However, it is the editing of this collection that deserves a comment. It is already the sixth book edited by Marek Jakoubek within this edition and therefore it is possible to compare. The first three books (Jakoubek, M. – Poduška, O., eds., *Romské osady v kulturologické perspektivě* [*Roma settlements in culturological perspective*], Brno: Doplněk 2003; Jakoubek, M. – Hirt, T., ed., *Romové: kulturologické etudy. Etnopolitika, příbuzenství a sociální organizace* [*Roma: culturological studies. Ethnopolitics, kinship and social organization*], Plzeň: Aleš Čeněk 2004; Hirt, T. – Jakoubek, M., eds., „Romové“ v osidlech sociálního vyloučení [„Roma“ in the pitfalls of social exclusion], Plzeň: Aleš Čeněk 2006) as well as the one published this year *Rómske osady na východnom Slovensku z hľadiska terénneho antropologického výskumu 1999 – 2005* [*Roma settlements in Eastern Slovakia from the perspective of anthropological field research 1999 – 2005*] (Jakoubek, M. – Hirt, T., eds., Nadácia otvorenej spoločnosti OSF: Bratislava 2008) were – despite their common general gypsylogical framework – characterized by diversity of topics and approaches. Translations were included only very sporadically. Last year, however, Jakoubek together with Lenka Budilová, published *Cikánská rodina a příbuzenství* [*Gypsy family and kinship*] (Budilová, L. – Jakoubek, M., eds., Plzeň: Nakladatelství a vydavatelství Vlasty Králové, 2007) dealing only with the topics stated in the title. That provided the book with a clear thematic profile. It is a thematically focused anthology consisting of translations of a representative collection of texts written by respectable scholars. The collection *Gypsies and Ethnicity* continues the monothematic character of the previous book. It must be said that this “the best of” form was well-chosen. Despite the fact that the gap in theoretical work on nationalism and ethnicity in Czech and Slovak social science discourse is being continuously filled up, there is still a lack of studies that would apply these theoretical concepts on particular ethnographic data or cases. The collection *Gypsies and Ethnicity* provides a great example of how, in Western Europe, North America or in Poland, theory has been connected with empirical research. The study of Gypsy/Roma ethnic groups is a topic that, in spite of its relevance, has usually been approached with no theory whatsoever and in a very positivistic way, although this is seldom conscious or acknowledged.

Another undoubted contribution of this collection, in the context of the Czech and Slovak publications on Gypsy/Roma groups, is that it brings the perspectives of renowned foreign scholars into our local debates. This is important because those scholars provide social scientific interpretations and not the romantic defence or political claims often made by the supposed representatives of Gypsies/Roma. The existing studies of Gypsy/Roma populations in the Czech Republic and Slovakia lack reference to foreign studies and therefore suffer from certain isolation. Moreover, they are often uncritically apologetic in relation to the object of their study – Gypsies/Roma. Another weakness of many Czech and Slovak studies is that they only recycle decades-old thoughts which have been, in the foreign literature, either abandoned or strongly criticized. At the same time, any new conceptualizations, different from the usual modes of explication, are considered eccentric and inadequate, though they may be regarded as standard abroad. Therefore, the collection *Gypsies and Ethnicity* can also be seen as the first major attempt to confront our local environment with the outcomes of foreign research on the collective identifications of Gypsy/Roma populations. And we have been in need of this kind of stimulus for a long time.

Tomáš Hirt