

Louise Morley, Andrzej Mirga, and Nadir Redzepi, eds. 2020.  
*The Roma in European Higher Education: Recasting Identities,  
Re-Imagining Futures*. London: Bloomsbury.

Book review by

**Marko Pecak**

mpecak@romaeducationfund.org

Research Officer, Roma Education Fund

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3062-8726>

Marko Pecak is a research officer at the Roma Education Fund. His research is focused on topics related to educational inclusion and outcomes. Marko's research incorporates intersectional approaches from behavioral science, sociology, critical race theory, and social psychology. His background is in public policy (Masters of Public Policy from the University of California, Berkeley).



# Introduction

Throughout reading *The Roma in European Higher Education: Recasting Identities, Re-Imagining Futures*, one thought kept reoccurring: this book is a warning – a warning directed at institutions that have influence over Roma higher education (HE) participation and knowledge production to tread carefully, with care, and expert understanding of their tangible and implicit impacts on Romani individuals and communities. The message is that the goal of HE as a means for the social mobility, internationalization, and social inclusion of Roma is not equally shared throughout policies and among institutions. Additionally, the authors warn that the goal of increased social justice cannot be achieved through supporting HE alone. Between discussions in the book, I reflect on and evaluate the need for academia and NGOs to focus their efforts on the agency of Romani students in their HE aspirations and development of an HE identity. These dynamics should be the driving force behind how these institutions operate. Additionally, this focus and re-evaluation is needed to better understand the larger racial and economic structural mechanisms that influence the pressures of responsibility, individuality, and personal mobility within these institutions. Ultimately, agency is needed in order to identify the paradoxes that tug at the psyche and soul of the individual and awaken the desire to challenge the exclusionary forces, first within their HE experiences and then within their communities.

*The Roma in European Higher Education* consists of two parts: “Theories, Resources, Policy and Professional Interventions for Challenging Roma Exclusion from Higher Education,” and “Focus on Europe Examples of What Is Going on in Greece, the Nordic Countries, Serbia and Spain.” However, I suggest a reading that divides the content along the following themes: context and information on Romani students’ participation in HE, neoliberal influences in HE identity and responsibility, the importance and challenges of knowledge production, and national policy analysis and community experiences.

## 1. Context and Information

The first two chapters, by Louise Morley, Andrzej Mirga, and Nadir Redzepi, provide information and perspectives on Roma participation in HE that frame the following chapters. Morley’s analysis in the first chapter is that HE is perceived as a luxury for Roma due to a social cognition dominated by a racialized and objectified perception of the community. In turn, higher education institutions and policy exclude Roma participation in HE and knowledge production. Mirga and Redzepi are established scholars and organizers of Roma participation in HE through their former roles as chair of the board and executive director of the Roma Education Fund, respectively. Their chapter provides detailed information and data on Roma participation in HE and contextualizes it through James S. Coleman’s concept of social capital. The authors examine racialized social exclusion and deep-seated antigypsyism in the distancing of Romani students from resources and social networks, and point out racialized disbelief in the ability of Romani students to seek and obtain HE.

## 2. Neoliberalism Influences in HE Identity and Responsibility

In chapters 3 and 4, the authors critique neoliberalism and its role in the individualization of access to and motivation for HE, in turn shifting the responsibility to resolve Romani exclusion and injustice from state institutions and placing it on Romani HE graduates. Daniel Leyton uses Foucault's concepts of governmentality and biopolitics as a lens through which to discuss neoliberal influences on the valuation and management of Romani lives by governments, universities, and NGOs, as well as the racialization and problematization of Romani communities. The chapter further develops the concept of the "responsibilization" of the Romani community's own exclusion from accessing higher education, through "tropes of the exceptional self: aspirations, motivation, interior strength and empowerment." Leyton ties concepts in the chapter to the pressure placed on Romani HE graduates to solve Romani exclusion and social injustice instead of institutions addressing structural and institutional racism. Spyros Themelis adds to the discussion from the perspective of evaluating globalization as an "intrinsic function of neoliberalism" that has thereby indoctrinated institutions of HE through the concepts of competition and individualization. With acumen, the author illuminates the collective view that HE is a "win-win," leading to both economic competitiveness and the enhancement of social inclusion. Themelis scrutinizes the concept by arguing that the economic incentives of competition and individualism undermine contributions to inclusion and justice.

## 3. Importance and Challenges in Knowledge Production

In his chapter, Paul Roberts discusses the meritocratic principles embodied in HE systems as being rooted in neoliberalism. Generating a knowledge production culture of competition, narcissism, and individualism instigates the exclusion of Romani students and researchers under the concealment of equal opportunity. Through interviews with early-stage researchers who participated as secondments to the EU Horizon 2020 Higher Education Internationalisation and Mobility (HEIM) project, Roberts exposes a hidden cost to upward mobility through HE. Romani HE students and researchers are burdened, internally and externally, with the responsibility for their community's social improvement. Simultaneously, they have to manage stress, identity, mental well-being, and striving for individual success and mobility. Iulius Rostas and Simona Torotcoi, in chapter 6, delineate the historical and contemporary role of academia in manufacturing prejudicial and stereotypical representations of Roma via knowledge production. The authors argue that knowledge production of Roma is dominated by bias, oversimplifications, and stereotypification, along with the silencing and exclusion of researchers of Roma ethnicity from academia. Through their analysis of the body of research on Roma in HE, the authors expose knowledge production related to Roma culture and identity as being rooted in and dominated by societal stereotypes and misconceptions. Further, the authors critique the failures in the literature to consider the root causes of educational aspirations.

## 4. National Policy Analysis and Community Experiences

The last chapters provide concrete evidence contributing to the discussions found in the previous chapters. In chapter 7, Teresa Padilla-Carmona, José González-Monteagudo, and Sandra Heredia-Fernández evaluate Spanish HE policies, while the authors of chapter 8 use Carol Bacchi's poststructural concepts on policy discourse in evaluating the political and social discourses related to Roma participation in HE in Nordic countries. Overall, the two chapters confirm the broad absence of Roma-specific HE policies. When Roma are mentioned, they are problematized through discourses suggesting that Roma lack academic capacities and expectations, and promoting expectations of post-primary education at merely the vocational level. Tanja Jovanovic, in chapter 9, specifies the internalized racism that Serbian Romani HE students experience. The main finding of the chapter points to Romani-specific racism among faculty members and peers, and Romani students' apprehensions in confronting the racism based on fear of retaliation. In chapter 10, Panagiota Gkofa uses Bourdieu's concepts of social capital and habitus in an analysis of the factors of educational success. Gkofa conducts 20 interviews with Greek Roma who have completed HE, presenting five key factors of students' educational trajectories: family and home, teachers, community, locality, and individual qualities and circumstances.

## 5. Recasting Identities

The book title suggests a contribution to discussions about identity in HE. However, the discussions of identity are not focused on the individual. Instead, the book outlines the identities of academia, NGOs, and political and economic structures, and their influence in the promotion of Roma HE participation, individual mobility, and responsibility to resolve social exclusion and injustice.

A common link among the authors is how the structural economic and social environments have developed an individual rationality in the decision to enter or aspire for higher education. This individualization places the burden and blame on the individual and on Romani communities if Romani students do not achieve HE. The argument which resonates throughout the book is that while HE is depicted as a miraculous cure to Romani exclusion, HE students are entrenched in a cycle of the neoliberal mechanisms of individualization, competition, and elitism, which reinforce social and economic exclusion. Additionally, their newly found HE identities are grounded in the neoliberal identity.

The authors further highlight that organizations promoting Romani inclusion and HE attainment fall into the same neoliberal mechanism of exclusion. The book outlines how intergovernmental, international and local NGOs, and universities follow a biopolitics and governmentality of neoliberalism through a performative veil engrained in the concepts of inclusion, empowerment, and equality. The salience of a HE identity facilitates the formation of a Romani political elite promoting an ideology of effecting change over Romani communities, which mirrors in its very structures and institutions the problematization and exclusion of Roma.

The book's argument appears to me to be the continuation of racialized definitions of social citizenship. The state has responsibilities to citizens in supporting their social welfare, HE, and inclusion, based on

cultural and national membership. Racial and ethnic boundaries of who has the right to national and social citizenship have declined (Bloemraad et al. 2019). However, the book's findings present HE institutions as being ingrained with racialized social attitudes that have distanced Roma from social membership and state responsibility. Discussions on responsibility and the burden to succeed in their individual mobility, coupled with a desire to be active in community emancipation, highlight the multiplicity of identities, and salience of – at times – conflicting identities. The promotion of individualism and elitism by both neoliberalism and NGOs creates a “minority space sustaining its identity and structural solidarity on class-patterned reproduction, shared interests and spaces, no matter how multifarious it may be inside.” The HE identity is a marker of status, and its salience creates a divide across educational categories (Spruyt 2020). Consequently, the highly educated have access and a willingness to participate in the political sphere, while those without HE feel that political participation is a space reserved for the highly educated elite.

## Concluding Remarks

The reader of the book will gain an understanding of how structural and institutional environments form incentives for elite formation, individualization, and competition of success, while placing the burden of the social exclusion and community injustices on the shoulders of the individual, all while levying Romani individuals with immense pressure in a pursuit for mobility through HE. The individual will have to sacrifice, overwork, internalize the gravity of their identities, and face racialized experiences.

A common issue throughout the chapters is a heavy focus on presenting secondary information and theoretical discussion, which stands in the way of producing more concrete arguments. The critical analysis within the chapters is short and at times disconnected from the theoretical frameworks. This leads to the individual sections of the chapters feeling dislocated from a coherent point of inquiry. The focal point that brings the chapters together is the critique of neoliberalism and its influences in HE and its goal of aiding social inclusion. Consequently, the theoretical and analytical approach is unimodal. This is a missed opportunity to incorporate a multi-perspective approach by including concepts that bridge the analysis for more encompassing insights that would create applicable knowledge on HE participation, HE identity, and the relationship between HE and social inclusion.

In all, *The Roma in European Higher Education* is not only relevant to academic and applied knowledge on Roma HE participation; it is also a good initial starting point for the future body of knowledge on Roma in HE. Scholars and practitioners across many fields will find that the discussions in the book challenge the status quo and their perceptions. Future knowledge producers will be able to build upon these discussions from alternative or complementary perspectives.