

Mihai Surdu, *Those Who Count:
Expert Practices of Roma Classification*,
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Book review by

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Introduction: Surdu's Choices and Position

Mihai Surdu's book *Those Who Count. Expert Practices of Roma Classification*, published by the CEU Press in 2016, is, according to the author, "not another book about Gypsies or Roma". Rather, the author claims that it is a book about "the history of their classification and about their classifiers" (1). Surdu aims to uncover various interests – scientific, political, and those of Roma entrepreneurs – in "constituting Roma groupness", a process which is "terribly mundane if one considers money, power, academic, and managerial positions that circulate in political and academic networks" (1). He claims that he "wrote this book from the position of [a] critical reader of Roma-related literature" (2) as he considers himself to be neither a scholar nor an activist (1). However, in his book Surdu clearly demonstrates that he also belongs to the "epistemic community" (14) that has been producing knowledge about Roma. Contrary to his positioning as "a critical reader", he approaches the topic from the specific nominalist and constructivist traditions in the social sciences (32–33).

Who are the Gypsies/Roma^[1] (in an ontological sense)? How are they constituted as an object of scientific and policy research (in an epistemological sense)? These seem to be the central questions of Surdu's book. Surdu approaches these questions by expressing scepticism and disbelief that the concept of ethnicity indicates a distinct social reality. He chooses nominalist and constructivist approaches against realist and essentialist ones, making it clear that Roma are, in fact, "a *fiction*" brought into existence merely by "concepts", "classifications" or "categories" by those who researched or counted them (48).

Moreover, in his view, current Romani ethnicity is a product of classification and categorization or simply – a construction – by those who have had interests in doing so, be they scholars, policy experts or entrepreneurs, among them Roma entrepreneurs. He adds that in the case of Roma, this process has not been "primarily driven by the Roma political community but by external or academic expert and political community" (51). He asserts his position clearly: "I do not affirm that Roma people do not exist, but I assert that the Roma population exists as a negative and oppositional construction made by dominant groups and self-internalized by many of those labelled as Roma" (33).

Surdu selected two case studies based on reports from the World Bank (WB) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in order to illustrate this argument. Linked to the book's main subject, he strongly criticizes both institutions for their methodologies of data gathering and for promoting stigmatizing messages about Romani ethnicity that are associated with poverty and welfare dependency (175–200).

1. I do not reflect on the terminology Surdu is using in his book as that would require a separate essay. It may suffice here to note that national legislators in a number of countries regulated this issue of nomenclature already and they have followed on the demands of Roma representatives and leaders as to how they want to be named according to the law. It therefore renders discussions on terminology rather redundant. Surdu is also using, as do many others, the argument that there are groups who do not identify as Roma, e.g. Ashkalia and Egyptians in the Western Balkans, Boyash in Hungary, etc. He forgets to notice, however, that those who do identify as Roma dominate in Europe. See, for example European Union-Council of Europe, 2009: 11. In this paper, Roma make up 85% of the total estimated number of this population (11).

1. Dealing with Roma Diversity and Sameness

The notion of diversity and its opposite – the sameness of Gypsies/Roma – and how it is approached by academics and policy-makers drives Surdu’s analysis. He assigns diversity to a constructivist approach and sameness to an essentialist one. Arguing for the former and criticizing the latter, Surdu follows the tradition, present among many scholars, of viewing Gypsies/Roma as a predominantly diverse population (Chapter 3 “Disciplinary Traditions in the Study of Roma” is devoted to critics of past and essentialist studies or Gypsologist studies). The selection of authors he refers to or quotes to support his thesis is clear: they are mainly those authors who are critical of essentialist narratives, including the ones on Roma origins in India who share the same culture, language, and traditions (Chapter 3, sub-chapter 2, “Anthropological, Historical, and Linguistic Accounts of Roma”).

Surdu criticizes the opposite approach, that of the essentialists (the title of a sub-chapter is telling: “Ethnicity as a fiction made by science”, 44–49), which has been foundational for collecting and comparing data about Roma in the last two decades. Surdu largely criticizes methodologies of data collection because, according to him, they are often “flawed and untrusted” and “rooted in [an] essentialist approach” (44–49). Surdu accepts, uncritically, that the “mainstream sociological perspective regards ethnicity as a social construct” and argues that this approach dominates present-day social theory (44).

For those of us interested in the topic of ethnicity, especially in the context of ethnic identity in a globalized world, there are many other theories of ethnicity that may better serve to describe the situation of Roma. To make it clear, I am in favour of a more “middle ground” position regarding ethnicity and approaches to it. I associate with Aronoff and Kubik, who observe that, “Although some scholars consider ethnicity to be primordial or at least perennial, it is neither wholly chosen nor assigned. [...] The acquisition of ethnic identity is generally associated with the growing sense of self-consciousness linked with so-called modernity” and in this process, identity is “deliberately politicized, especially, when it is threatened by forces of domination and /or assimilation (like colonialism or globalization)” (Aronoff and Kubik, 2013: 158).

Therefore, there is nothing threatening in “politicizing” ethnicity, in this case, Romani ethnicity, something that Surdu is arguing against and following in the footsteps of Martin Kovats.^[2] Surdu refers to Kovats in

2. It is important to notice that in his *Acknowledgements* Surdu thanks Martin Kovats, among others. In 2003, Kovats suggested that it is a deliberate state action to recognize Roma as an ethnic minority. He argued that “The ‘prohibitive’ costs of improving these people’s living conditions and of returning their labour to ‘profitability’ provides a strong incentive for the state to define ‘Roma’ as a distinct community, thereby allowing policy to focus on the far cheaper promotion of ethnic ‘difference...’” He further adds that, “It conserves the political isolation of ‘Roma’ people and supports the ideology of segregation...” and that, “[A]s a statement of fact, the nationalist claim is the most amazing nonsense” and “Roma nationalism does not represent the emancipation of a suppressed people in the tradition of anti-colonial struggles, but the promotion of an authoritarian nationalist tradition in which a political community is constructed through the manipulation of vulnerable people, to secure the interests of an unaccountable elite.” He concludes: “[T]hus, Roma nationalism is music to the ears of racists who have always believed that the Gypsies are alien to and incompatible with majority society... The reality is that a growing number of Roma people are trying to resist the fate being prepared for them, but the progressive instinct of their politics is being suppressed by the imposition from above of the agenda and institutions of segregation. They are being forced into a nationalist framework that guarantees more frequent and violent conflict. *This road to Hell is paved with good intention*” (Kovats, 2003).

arguing that Roma intellectuals have been “imposing Roma nationalism and, together with it, the term Roma as a political category” and that, “Roma identity is highly politicized by promoters of Roma nationalism” (96).

In Surdu’s view there is an “epistemic community” and a specific type of policy community (i.e. state institutions, such as the state police from the eighteenth century, see the sub-chapter “From police profiling to policy research profiles”, 72–81) and the expertise of both is used in producing knowledge about Roma. He adds, however, that it is predominantly the prevailing political field or type of regime that constitutes Gypsies/Roma as a political entity and creates a “Roma issue which afterwards is objectified by various academic disciplines” (15).

In other words, Surdu is arguing that the academic construction of Roma as an object of study is dependent on the political context or type of regime. Here, knowledge about the Roma is a by-product of political will-power and what is being said about Roma is authoritative because it is associated with those holding the power and thus it afforded an authority of truth (17).

For Surdu, the categorization of Gypsies and later of Roma should be seen in its historic context in order to understand the epistemic claims made by authorities that then led to the social formation of the group (17). He claims that the authorities’ categorization has led to the social formation of the group.^[3]

The literature review on general classificatory practices related to ethnicity or minority identity and those specifically tied to Roma, leads Surdu to the conclusion that, “those labeled as Roma (in the process of the standardization of Roma identity) internalize the scientifically constructed stereotypes”. These stereotypes are mostly negative, though he also adds: “Of course, there are also positive stereotypes in the expert and scientific production of knowledge on Roma, such as those related to artistic abilities and especially music” (6).

Surdu’s key arguments is revealed in Chapter 3, where he elaborates on the title of the publication, *Those Who Count...* He claims that, “In most of the Roma-related studies, Roma ethnicity is set as an independent and categorical variable” (958) and as “explanatory of various social phenomena such as poverty, cultural consumption, educational status, and social mobility” (59). As a result, “ethnicity, instead of being explained as a product of processes of social differentiation, is treated as a cause of such processes: ethnicity is a cause of poverty and not *vice versa*” (59). Further, he adds that, “What is omitted is individual mobility in the social hierarchy, and the fact that when such mobility happens, the poverty label is removed, and in most of the cases the ethnic label is also removed together with it” (59). According to Surdu’s logic here, individuals who, thanks to social mobility, manage to climb up in the social hierarchy and get out of poverty, in fact, cease to be Roma anymore. The reality on the ground, however, falsifies such assertions. There are Roma who are rich and at the same time proud of being Roma just as there Roma activists who climb up in the

3. However, a few pages later Surdu maintains just the opposite: “Under the influence of epistemic communities together with pressure from the Romani movement, the policy-makers bodies, such as governments, international organizations and the bodies of European Union (EU) adopted essentialist classifications of Gypsies/Roma and consequently, developed inappropriate essentialist list of policy answers” (21).

social hierarchy but keep their Roma ethnicity and engagement in Roma issues. Surdu concludes that there is major gap and, in fact, opposition between the constructivist social theory of Roma ethnicity and the essentialist practice of applied sociology or empirical studies collecting data on Roma, which is especially relevant in cases of census or survey data collection on Roma. In fact, research on education and Roma makes it clear that “social status descriptors are used to depict Roma as an ethnic group” (61).

This explains Surdu’s critical reading of census and surveys as a main instrument which results in the “reification”, “racialization” and “stigmatization” of Romani ethnicity (62). Therefore, he postulates, following the study by Ladanyi and Szelenyi, the need to see Romani ethnicity as a dependent variable. Surdu adds “that [Roma identity] is built through the influence of other variables” (61) and that it is not considered as explanatory or taken for granted. Surdu heavily criticizes the World Bank (WB) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) surveys and sampling procedures that are, in his views, “manipulated” and “crafted” in a way to serve “essentialist” assumptions in their research. As a consequence, WB and UNDP reinforce stereotypical images and stigmatize Romani ethnicity as a “poverty-ridden and under-developed and somehow deviant group” (68–72). Surdu holds that the state and its “police science” and later on, “policy research”, were decisive in defining “Gypsies as [a] unitary group that should be targeted in order to change their behavior, making them conform with the state’s logic of economic productivity” (78).

He specifies that the police act towards Gypsies with the “repressive force of the state, whereas, policy research appeals for Roma integration through benevolent action of the same state. Repression and paternalism are carried out by different institutions of the state based on shared understanding of who Gypsies are” (77).

He claims that state institutions used ethnic profiling to “isolate Gypsies as a group that is different from others” (78). He concludes that “police research” about Gypsies “started in eighteenth century in Western Europe gradually incorporated scientific methods and theories of identification, classification, counting, description”, all of which could be seen as a precursor to modern policy research on Roma populations (81). These assertions are nothing new; they uphold the views attributed to the Dutch school of social historians (Lucassen, Willems and Cottard, 1998). In fact, Surdu quotes and relies on their views heavily in the book. However, many scholars do not agree with the Dutch school’s findings and positions (Matras, 2013: 5, see also Van Baar, 2011).

Surdu also follows on Judith Okely’s arguments which scrutinized and challenged many aspects of the “orthodoxy of Gypsy studies” (90), including those related to the Romani language (Okely, 1983). He recalls what she noted in this regard, namely that, “language is a matter of learning and not one of biological descent” (90), meaning that the essentialists’ assertions based on a shared language are scientifically weak. It is significant to notice that in Surdu’s book the sub-chapter on Romani language is only a page and half (91–92). This is contrary to commonly accepted scientific views which consider one’s mother tongue as a key marker of any identity.

How then does Surdu see the Romani movement within the dichotomy of constructivist versus essentialist or difference versus sameness? He stresses that the concept of Roma identity in current meaning – as a political category – emerged as a result of the interaction between the mainstream political establishment

and the Romani movement in the 1970s (161). Referring to findings from Simhandl (2006), Surdu points to the way in which Roma were re-categorized in this process: from “nomads” to “disadvantage group” and “ethnic minority”. He upholds the view of Simhandl when arguing that “coining the term Roma and applying it to the ethnicization of certain segments of Eastern Europe populations by Western institutions is a typical example of orientalizing of the East” (94).

Surdu also recalls Martin Kovats in this context, who emphasizes that although Romani identity is framed by powerful outside institutions, Romani organizations are complacent in imposing an acknowledgement of Romani identity in political circles.

Similarly, Surdu further recalls the work of Peter Vermeersch who stresses the stigmatizing and counter-productive efforts of the Romani movement, for example, by framing Roma as a “unitary transnational group sharing common identity markers (such as a common descent, language, and culture) and having the same problems (poverty, unemployment, etc.)” (97–98).

In this context, Surdu quotes Vermeersch who has argued that, “Roma activists run the risk of reifying, politicizing and perhaps even intensifying the boundary between minority and majority identities” (Vermeersch, 2005: 454 cited in Surdu: 98). Surdu thus asserts that Romani identity is “rather the result of an external construction than a mobilization coming from the grassroots” and that Roma civil society tends to promote and impose “essentialist” Romani ethnicity markers (99).^[4] However, Vermeersch (2006) does not question the existence of a distinct Roma ethnicity and identity, though he is critical of the Romani movement and its strategies of doing politics.

2. Data Collection on Roma – Pitfalls and Advantages

Surdu’s criticism against the *essentialist* approach is most vividly presented in those sections of his book that refer to the Roma census or survey design and implementation. The main question here is to what extent do these practices “create and fix ethnicity by generating ethnic data for the use of discourse and political action” (105)? For Surdu, the census contributes to the *essentialist* assumption by making “ethnicity” objective and measurable.

He holds that the “census is a scientific and administrative practice with the greatest power to objectify ethnicity” and further, that it provides “the ground for action of ethno-political entrepreneurs, who by virtue of ethnic statistics can reclaim themselves as representatives of an ethnic group (...) measured and hence constituted through scientific methodologies” (117).

4. Surdu writes: “The basic conflict in research about Roma is not that the *Roma* category appears as a natural, obvious, self-evident kind of entity for scientists and policy-makers, but that they are using this category in opposition to an even more obscure and abstract one, that of *non-Roma*. If it seems difficult to answer the question ‘Who are the Roma?’, it is even more complicated to define who the non-Roma are, as they are built in contradiction to an elusive and fluctuating socially constructed entity” (38). I would therefore ask: What about Jews in this regard? What about the in-group and out-group notion that seems to be a universal feature to any group? In general, these kinds of statements lack a comparative framework and this can be considered one of the major weaknesses of this book.

Surdu sees this data collection method as having “extreme consequences” for the subjects of the census. He provides examples from Nazi Germany and South Africa, wherein “the ethnic/racial categories created through administrative and scientific exercise” functioned afterwards as criteria for generating state policies of exclusion and discrimination and, ultimately, genocide (106).

Surdu points out that, “In the academic community and policy circles the size and profile of the Roma population are considered as facts, even as scientific” (140). On the contrary, Surdu considers the size and profile of the population as “highly circumstantial and dependent on political interest of those who count” (140). He concludes that “In the long history of Roma enumeration, police and sociologists seem to have been standing side by side as enumerators” (141).

It may appear interesting, indeed, to see what evidence is used and by whom as a “legitimate source” for numbers or estimates in various expert reports (WB, UNDP or that of the Council of Europe). According to Surdu, expert reports mostly use and refer to the data and estimates of the Roma population provided by J. P. Liegeois. He points out (in the reference to Liegeois, 1983) that the numbers “are provided without any reference to a source of data, not indicating the type of source (official or unofficial), neither in the text nor in bibliography” (144). Further, he criticizes surveys because they use unreliable data from a census. Hence, the title of his sub-chapter: “Representative survey samples based on unrepresentative census data” (148–152).

Surdu claims that, “quantitative research on Roma proceeds to the conceptualization of its population of the study from a census considered unreliable, and yet uses this census for asserting representativeness of its sample” (150). He concludes that, “In producing Roma-related numbers, all parts involved (NGOs and representatives of international organizations, activists, politicians, journalists, researchers, etc.) present data about ‘Roma issues’ in accordance to their interests” (152).

Let me also bring here another example of data collection, this time on Roma in Poland. The first and sole available statistical data on Roma there was collected by the police in the 1960s during the communist period (Romano Atmo, 2014). This data is reliable simply because the majority of Roma were easily distinguishable: over 10,000 travelling Roma (with horses and wagons) were registered by the police, accompanied by representatives of local authorities and party members in the 1960s. The other part of the Romani population, the one to which I belong, was settled by visibly marked communities or settlements in villages or outskirts of the cities (Mirga, 1998). The majority, if not everyone, was using the Romani language as a mother tongue. New data was then provided by the census in 2011, based on self-ascription and mother tongue (Ludność, 2011). More insight into the way Surdu approaches data collection can be found in Chapter 6, particularly in his two case studies (out of four) of WB and UNDP reports. I will limit myself here to review the WB case study, referring only to the report from 2005 while also addressing some of Surdu’s interpretations of this report (Ringold, Orenstein and Wilkens, 2005).

Within the constructivist versus essentialist frame, Surdu views the WB’s approach as an essentialist one, asserting that the WB attributes to Roma “a common and reluctant-to-change Roma culture” that is “widely shared by these diverse populations” (181). Further, he critically reviews the assumption that, “Roma culture seems to transcend countries’ boundaries, and it seems to be a monolithic and

autonomous entity detached from local cultural influences and completely deterritorialized from its proximate environment” (181). Surdu claims that instead of addressing “systemic” issues faced by Roma, the WB reports transfer responsibility for those issues onto Roma themselves (186). As a result, Surdu maintains that, “through recycling the statements used in previous reports” (184) the WB reinforces “negative representation of the Roma group by using a poverty frame and ethnic boundary frame” (188).

The issue of Roma culture and diversity seems to be key in what Surdu sees as the WB bias in relation to Roma. However, the WB report is unequivocal about it. To quote:

Efforts to create, define, or represent a single Roma community will similarly founder on the rocks of internal cultural diversity. Roma tend to have distinctive problems of integration and access, but the situation of different communities and individuals varies immensely and cannot be reduced to a single, simple set of answers or policy responses (Ringold, Orenstein and Wilkens, 2005: 11).

Furthermore, the WB recognizes fully the issue of diversity and how it may impact various groups of Roma:

The diversity of Roma impedes generalizations at the regional and country level. In addition to notable ethnic differences, there is significant diversity among Roma settlements – rural and urban, assimilated and non-assimilated, homogenous and heterogeneous – as well as in religious affiliation. Some groups speak variations of the Roma language, while others do not. Given the striking diversity of Roma communities, generalizing about the nature and characteristics of Roma culture is extremely difficult. [...] However, it is clear that aspects of Roma social organization and values affect the interactions of Roma and non-Roma, the dynamics among Roma subgroups, and many aspects of their welfare (Ringold, Orenstein and Wilkens, 2005: 11).

Surdu focuses on two specific parts from this fragment – “aspects of Roma social organization and values” and “aspects of their welfare” – and concludes that, in fact, the WB blames Roma themselves for their poverty and disadvantage.

According to him, the WB is also fully aware that, “Measuring poverty is an inherently subjective task fraught with methodological complexities. There is no correct or scientific method” (WB Report, 2005: 26). In this context, it is important to note that the WB commissioned its first Roma survey in 2000 to the Sociology Department at Yale University (WB Report, 2005: 28). As stated by the WB, “The survey was the first of its kind to address the ethnic dimension of poverty across countries and allows for a comparative quantitative assessment of the living conditions of Roma in the region” (Ringold, Orenstein and Wilkens, 2005: 29). With regards to these findings, the WB states that,

The evidence suggests that the roots of pervasive Roma poverty are closely linked to low education levels, limited employment opportunities, and unfavorable health status [...] With their situation compounded by discrimination and low expectations of employers, Roma have had more difficulty reentering the job market than other groups

and consequently have become caught in a vicious cycle of impoverishment (Ringold, Orenstein and Wilkens, 2005: 53–54).

The key question here is what do we get as outcomes from such surveys – fraudulent and misleading data, as Surdu concludes, or simply imperfect data produced by scientific methods that reflect reality out there? Should we object to data that indicate that a large portion, though not an entire population, is subject to disadvantage due to various reasons and suffers disproportionately, for example, from poverty?^[5] If I learn from a survey that the majority of Roma has no higher education and that there is a problem with those who even manage to finish primary school, then is this an accurate reflection of reality or rather false and stigmatizing data about that reality?^[6] Furthermore, the WB as an organization has been tasked with the responsibility for global poverty-reduction. Its mandate and capacity are dedicated to poverty issues. It is therefore rather fortunate that it does address the aspect of Romani poverty in Europe which is eventually what helped to establish of the Decade of Roma Inclusion (DRI) 2005–2015. Alongside George Soros, the Open Society Foundations and a number of governments of Central and Eastern Europe, the WB was one of the founders of the DRI, which was officially launched in 2005 in Sofia, Bulgaria. And in turn, one of the most visible outcomes of this initiative was the establishment of the Roma Education Fund (REF). REF is currently active in 16 countries (including Russia and Turkey) and its mandate is to support the emergence of an educated Roma class. It was the WB among other organizations advocating for the idea that increasing the number of educated and skilled Roma in the region is of central significance. Most Roma leaders continue to endorse this idea.

3. Relevance of Genetic Studies for Roma Policy Making

I was curious to know how Surdu deals with genetic studies in the context of Romani studies, census and surveys data and analyses. His third case study reveals both his motivation for studying it and the way he approaches it. In essence, genetic studies (medical and population genetics) serve to reinforce Surdu's arguments raised against essentialist approaches to Roma. He uncovers the biases of genetic studies, which are related to circular or tautological reasoning regarding Roma genetics, treatment of Roma as "*population isolate*", unchanged, originating from India, prone to endogamy, etc.

He critically assesses this practice as follows:

5. In particular, the WB report makes clear that data provided illustrate the situation of many Roma groups but there are also those who are not facing poverty issues or are in fact part of the middle class. The 2005 WB report states that, "Poverty rates for Roma in all three countries (Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania) are strikingly high – in all cases several times higher than among non-Roma" (Ringold, Orenstein, and Wilkens, 2005: 29). In the case of Bulgaria, the report says that, "The highest absolute poverty level among Roma households lies in Bulgaria, followed closely by Romania. Even at the lower line, 41 percent of all Roma households in Bulgaria and 38 percent in Romania are found to be poor – a strikingly high proportion" (Ibid., 30).

6. The 2005 WB report states that, "Another unique challenge of research on Roma is the legacy of biased research. Early studies on Roma in the late nineteenth century in Western Europe sought to confirm theories about genetic inferiority (Fraser, 1995). Recent works reviewed in the Czech and Slovak Republics were found to have a social Darwinist slant (ECOHOST [European Centre on Health of Societies in Transition], 2000). More recent scholarship on Roma may suffer from political biases. Roma leaders and activists have an interest in portraying the situation as worse than it may actually be, while government reports may gloss over failings to present a more favorable picture (Bárány, 2000)" (Cited in Ringold, Orenstein and Wilkens, 2005: 26).

In order to choose a genetic isolate as an object of study such a population must be postulated a priori as an isolate (with arguments of endogamy and/or geographical separateness) and then it must be reconfirmed a posteriori through genetic research as a biologically unitary and consistent entity (207).

Above all, however, why are genetic studies, which Surdu discredits in his analysis anyway, considered important by Surdu and in what area? Chapter 5, titled “Influencers of academia and expert discourse about Roma” (153–173), attempts to answer this question. Surdu chooses the Google Scholar search engine as a tool for mapping out the scientific field regarding the most-quoted publications about Roma, and thus, the most influential; all together he reviews 251 publications for the period 1990 until 2013. Genetic studies emerged as relevant in this search (see Table 2 on p. 166). The mentioned table summarizes the scientific and expert interest in Roma as an object of study and ranks them according to number (percentage) of papers per category/discipline and the average number of citations per paper in each category/discipline (165). Elsewhere Surdu adds that, “I have chosen to analyze in depth the representation of the Roma in genetic papers from the sample because I found Genetics to be most efficient field in the construction of Roma-related discourse” (201).

In contrast to Surdu, throughout my own many years of engagement with the Romani movement (since the 1980s), I have never discussed, debated or raised questions pertaining to (Roma) genetics because I have not found these to be relevant considerations for our “political” struggle in the Romani movement.

Conclusions

Mihai Surdu hoped to introduce a new paradigm for studying the Roma people by shedding light on those who “constructed” the Roma through scholarship, expert-type analyses or policy research. What he chose to include in his book is meaningful but not quite as meaningful as that which he left out of his analysis.

First of all, Surdu elaborates on how Gypsy/Roma ethnicity is “fluid”, “contextual”, “diverse” (44) and thus, hard to define. But, he does not mention that many countries have included Roma in their national legislations on minorities, and thus created preconditions for this population to be named and for rights to be conferred to them. It is my opinion that national legislators are more decisive here than experts and scholars (Council of Europe, 2002).

Secondly, any serious study that looks at ethnicity and ethnic identity cannot leave out the views and efforts of the affected groups who actively shape the notions of their own ethnicity and ethnogenesis (Mirga and Gheorghie, 1997). In other words, despite their powerless position, Romani leaders and representatives play an active role in determining who they are and how national legislation should define and address them. This is especially the case in the former CEE countries following the fall of communism in Europe in 1989.

It shall be stressed here that Romani activists have been using the available data for advocacy purposes. There is a significant difference in how data about Roma are collected versus how they are interpreted. I

would argue that although the methodology of collecting data can be always improved, it is its use and integration that distorts the reality (Open Society Foundations, 2010).

Thirdly, Surdu's book is missing a comparative perspective, both regarding ethnicity research and social or ethnic movements. The reader is not always sure whether Surdu's assertions are generally applicable to all ethnic minorities or specifically to the Roma minority. How might the key issues discussed in Surdu's book about Roma be relevant to, for example, the current literature on Black Americans struggling with notions of white supremacy or critical race theories that point to the existence of structural discrimination?

Fourthly, Surdu has failed to engage with the emerging Romani scholarship aiming to become part of the "epistemic community" of knowledge-producers on Roma. This is a noticeable aspiration among a rising number of educated Roma who are engaged in research and part of the academy. They want to contribute to the knowledge about their community and resist being seen only as passive objects of study by others while also committed to questioning existing notions of dominance in research and knowledge about their community (Bogdán *et al.*, 2015; Ryder, 2015; Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2015; Matache, 2016; Kóczé, 2009; Jovanović *et al.*, 2015; Kóczé, 2015).

Finally, although Surdu raises important questions in his book, he does not propose any clear alternatives. Rather, he presents several overused ideas in passing, such as the de-politicization, de-ethnicization, or de-racialization of Roma and the citizenship rights perspective (247–253). It is an unconvincing approach especially since the trends in majority society and among Roma communities in many countries in Europe and in the EU are just the opposite; ethnic cleavages and fragmentations, nationalism and political factionalism are all on the rise today.

I choose to discuss Surdu's book because, as a Romani person, I object to being seen simply as an ethnic subject who is constructed by those in power, be it for reasons of power, interest or prestige. I also oppose the attempt by non-Roma to define the Romani movement and its activists as self-interested ethnic entrepreneurs who are somehow responsible for perpetuating a notion of ethnicity that, according to Surdu, is "stigmatizing" (32). More profoundly, I also object to Surdu's assertions that undermine the existence of Roma as distinct social and ethnic groups wherein ethnic and primordial ties and attachments are reduced to the "mundane" interests of "Roma entrepreneurs". I hope that policy makers and law makers, instead of recognizing what some scholars (or, the "epistemic community") come up with regarding Roma, respond to the requests of *Roma* leaders and representatives about their own legal status as a legitimate minority group (Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, 2002).

It is hard, indeed, to review a book written by someone who used to advocate for the Roma cause and who benefited from being part of the movement (Surdu's writing was supported by the OSF, among others) but who concludes that, in reality, there is no such thing as Romani ethnicity or that, "ethnicity appears as a fictitious object" (48). Who am I, therefore? What should I think about myself, my siblings and parents, all of us born in small a community, different and separated from the surrounding majority and speaking our mother tongue – Romani, the same way the parents of my parents did in the past? What about all of the other social categories, social groups or ethnic minorities, are they also but "fictitious objects" constituted by those who classified them as such?

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