

Felix B. Chang and Sunnie T. Rucker-Chang. 2020. *Roma Rights and Civil Rights: A Transatlantic Comparison*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Book review by

Eddie Bruce-Jones

eb55@soas.ac.uk

Professor of Law, SOAS, University of London

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6653-1750>

Eddie Bruce-Jones is Dean of the College of Law at SOAS, University of London. He is author of *Race in the Shadow of Law: State Violence in Contemporary Europe* (Routledge) and has published in the areas of racial equality, migration law, and law and humanities. Bruce-Jones is a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Law* and advisory board of the *European Law Open*.



Felix Chang and Sunnie Rucker-Chang's *Roma Rights and Civil Rights: A Transatlantic Comparison* delivers a carefully framed and well-researched examination of the resonances between the U.S. Civil Rights movement and the mobilisations for increased recognition and protection of Roma in Europe. The book illustrates why, precisely in our present times and despite the risk of oversimplification, we must not shy away from difficult comparisons. Connecting the dots across time and context bears the fruit of deep introspection and sets the stage for mapping out globally-oriented anti-racist strategic thinking. Concise but erudite, *Roma Rights and Civil Rights* makes many points, but most central and, for me, most revelatory is: the comparison *itself* makes a great deal of sense.

The book is structured in a way that, across its chapters, builds a solid knowledge base for the reader to then fully engage with the more interdisciplinary latter chapters. Chapter 1 engages in pre-Second World War comparisons of the two contexts while Chapter 2 examines the period from the U.S. Civil Rights Movement onwards, including the political and social transformations in Central and Southeast Europe over the second half of the twentieth century. Chapter 3 engages with the question of otherness in the context of the constructs of minorities vis-à-vis a sense of European and American identity, respectively. Chapter 4 compares the constitutional protections afforded African-Americans and Romani people, while Chapter 5 examines more acutely the role of federalism in both the European Union and the United States of America. Chapter 6 then makes a bold but convincing methodological departure from the previous chapters and analyses film to “track the social perceptions of Roma in CSEE since 2004” (17).

The authors illustrate in the book's introductory chapter what the central comparison of Roma and Civil Rights movements could reveal about state violence, rights movements for racial justice, and the role of federalism. It draws parallels between the emergence of new legislative competencies in the European Union and the United States' federal government, which undergirded the expansion and promulgation of anti-discrimination provisions and other rights-based measures. It also suggests elements of a trajectory of global conversations on race and racism as providing important context for understanding part of the reason states opted to try and legislate anti-discrimination federally or in a top-down manner. Chang and Rucker-Chang write that in “the fifty years separating Civil rights and eastern enlargement, colonization and apartheid fell, and an international consensus emerged against state-sanctioned exclusion of conationals” (5). They posit that, at least prior to recent financial crises, countries in Central and Southeast Europe (CSEE) were incentivised to find non-racial justifications for de-facto segregation. This certainly resonates with the context of civil rights laws, whereby debates still take place about how explicitly race can or cannot be legally deployed even in the service of addressing the impacts of racism. Historical lessons regarding movements for racial justice, then, still have contemporary relevance that we can use in real time, despite differences in language and context, as we navigate familiar analytic, political, and legal dimensions of our current instantiations of those movements.

The authors make a good case for theorising scholarship on Roma, given it is currently underexamined. They contend that the U.S. Civil Rights context serves as a useful counterpart, as there is extensive and robust scholarship on this movement. Additionally, given overlapping frames of analysis such as racialization, “dominant constructs of the nation, their experiences, histories and cultures” being excluded from the mainstream, and given certain resonances in the legal and political context around federalism, the co-examination of Romani rights context alongside Civil Rights is useful. Equally, examining the

Romani context may help identify strategic and conceptual shortcomings of civil rights in the U.S., past and present.

Chang and Rucker-Chang are also careful to specify they are not interested in advocating for a U.S. model of civil rights to be imported on CSEE countries and that the political shift to the right is a shared European and American phenomenon in contemporary times (116). This is important, given the cross-application of ideas from the hegemonic narrative of racial state-making in the United States but also given the consistent and often justified claim that the way one narrates racial violence in the United States tends to overshadow and profoundly influence discourses on race, racism, and state violence in other locations around the world. In fact, an important feature of the text is that it strives for conceptual clarity in lifting the stories of Roma out of the shadow of more dominant histories of (racial) repression. Part of this is a contextualisation of the persecution of Roma in European history, including acknowledgment of the Romani name for the killing of up to 1.5 million Roma during the Holocaust – *Porrajmos* (the Devouring) (16).

The authors refreshingly do not opt for a simple direct comparison of the experiences of Roma and Black Americans. They identify common ground in a considered way – examining the processes of racialization that Roma and Black Americans have encountered in their respective contexts, including the different ways in which class, nationality, and culture are layered on top of the already complex concepts of whiteness, Americanness, and Europeanness. They provide analytical tools for a more critical understanding of the comparison of the Civil Rights and Roma Rights movements as well – namely, interest conversion, a concept coined by critical race theorist Derrick Bell in 1980. The authors reference Bell's assertion that, in the U.S. context, "desegregation was spurred by a convergence of interests among whites and blacks, especially the U.S. government's interests in containing Communism abroad and black radicalism at home". The concept is well placed in this book, as it gives the reader a way to advance a more sophisticated understanding of social progress than one that simply moves the dial of inclusion and equality in a linear fashion towards social equity; instead, it lays bare that, in both civil rights and Romani rights contexts, states were interested in maintaining a degree of moral legitimacy and credibility in their own systems of governance, striking a balance between national and federal or supranational initiatives, and effectively managing ethnic conflict (52). In a way, the book, demonstrates how interest conversion, as a mode of theorising states' management of racial progress, can serve a useful if only partial lens for understanding how social movements in different contexts relate and diverge from one another.

The final chapter of the book, on filmic representations of Roma and Black Americans, provides an important coda to the focus of law in the rest of the book. It returns the reader to the social dimension of ascription and reminds the reader why race plays such a central role as an organising concept in the social movement for Romani rights. Most of the chapter focuses on films made after 2004, which correspond with timeframes on EU expansion and its articulation of goals for inclusion. For example, the 2018 film *Genesis*, by Arpad Bogdan, is examined as a film that indicates an important move from "outside representation" to "Romani representation" (164). The chapter contends that the world of cultural production, social movements for justice, and legal and political shifts are all connected, and that they must be understood together as a point of intellectual rigour but also as a point of strategy. For those interested in racial justice, we certainly need to take seriously the analytic and strategic connections made

in this book, including those across law and the humanities, if we are to have real hope at achieving the type of social change we envision.

Finally, it is important to stress the importance of examining these two movements, though they are geographically, temporally, and culturally distinct. It is not self-evident that a comparison between the Civil Rights movement in mid-twentieth-century United States and contemporary struggles for social and political progress for Roma in Central and Southeast Europe would be an appropriate terrain of legal and historical analysis. One is compelled to make the case, with a high level of clarity and distinction, or run the risk of oversimplification. In conventional legal scholarship, and even in historical scholarship, this comparison has been kept at arm's length, and this is no surprise. The social and cultural contexts are vastly different. The central political and legal challenges are complex. The bulk of the two struggles, as social and legal movements, take place half a century apart. Conceptions of nation, race and identity – crucially important in both contexts – are very different. Transnational comparisons are difficult by their nature, and to do them poorly compounds the double-headed Hydra of essentialism: the flattening of groups and their struggles into stereotypes on one hand, and the reduction of the respective legal and political debates that frame and help constitute struggle on the other. A poor comparison can be worse than nothing at all; but the careful and rigorous one found in this book are well worth intellectual investment and should be included in curricula on contemporary rights movements.