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*Roma Activism: Reimagining Power and Knowledge*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Book review by

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Beck and Ivasiuc's *Roma Activism: Reimagining Power and Knowledge* is a timely addition to the discipline of Romani Studies as the wider Romani movement undergoes a paradigm shift. The book starts powerfully with a violent story about an attack on Roma in the Romanian county of Harghita on March 31, 2017; subsequently, it documents the silence of the academy in the aftermath as well as the information collected by other actors. The book's message is clear from the outset – academia should not detach itself from activism – and the book itself is written in a space between research and activism, thus creating a place for reflexivity in both. Reflexivity is argued here to be a vital means through which “learned and unlearned lessons” in research and activism can be examined both to reveal new forms of being political and to upset assumptions about past, present, and future knowledge production.

Dedicated to Nicolae Gheorghe (1946–2013), the anthology aims to unsettle its readership by challenging norms in data production and assumptions about the positions of Roma within the discipline of Romani Studies and the wider Romani political movement. It argues for future research to focus on reflective ethnographic and participatory methods, positioning the local at its heart and moving beyond dichotomies defining the current debates which construct scholarship and activism as opposing poles, i.e., as other binary understandings of good versus bad activism or NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) versus the state.

## 1. Renewing Methods, Renewing Sites

Section 1 argues that ethnography and anthropo-sociological research are a means of escaping the frequently reductionist and binary image of activism. It is argued that ethnographic research allows for an inquiry into activism and activists' work in relation to and beyond its ambivalences and contradictions which can only be understood in the context of broader histories of political and local activism. According to this argument, the local is the key site through which research must be rooted – alongside national or transnational contexts – while avoiding the local being romanticized as a unique or “authentic place” of mobilization.

Chapter 1 is a telling starting point when Van Baar examines the nexus between research and activism by mapping the development of the Romani social movement in and beyond Europe. In doing so, he draws out three phases of development which also show the emergence of “nongovernmental” as a distinct category of rule and research: (1) the emergence of CSOs (civil society organizations) funded by Western donors and IGOs (international governing organizations); (2) these organizations becoming “professionalized” and adapting to “well-defined funding streams,” while forfeiting their independence in adapting to this new power relationship (known as the emergence of the “Gypsy industry” (e.g., see Rostas 2009); and (3) the emergence of an “ethnic turn” whereby Roma integration strategies became the focus of policymaking. Van Baar opts, as he has done previously (2011), to move beyond the binary “success” or “failure” model of understanding Romani activism while critically sketching out its development.

Van Baar advocates for an ethnographic research on activism and anthropo-sociology (a sociological approach to studying race by anthropological methods) of Roma-related activism which focuses on the life histories of activists and unveils their movement between positions and sites. This is a means to escape the binary lens through which activism often is presented as either a “bottom-up” grass-roots movement

or a “top-down” movement focused on universalizing activism and imposing practices, frames, and vocabularies which are foreign to Roma “culture.”

Chapter 2 displays the type of ethnographic approach called for by Van Baar. Chirițoiu’s chapter makes an in-depth analysis of activists’ reaction to the 1993 Hădăreni conflict, in particular the activism of Nicolae Gheorghe that shaped the agenda surrounding the case. She contextualizes this case as being symptomatic of the post-socialist Romani movement which was characterized by an estrangement from the local due to a push to focus on “universalising human rights vocabularies.” This focus, she argues, is based on international government organizations’ pursuit of political recognition and engagement or political relevance by constructing antagonistic meanings for events. Chirițoiu’s ethnographically informed analysis returns the nuanced “local” site to the forefront and challenges the problematic “victimhood” narrative produced by activists in contrast to “local knowledge.” The events at Hădăreni are presented as a “cautionary tale of [e]arly Romani activism” rather than as an evaluation of policy intervention. It also shows the clear tensions and contradictions between parallel accounts on different levels of the case: local, national, and international (Chirițoiu 2018, 51).

In Chapter 3 Fosztó takes up the local again, this time focusing on two Hungarian cases. First, he discusses two conflicts between local groups in Harghita County in the summer of 2009. Both conflicts involved fighting among local Roma and Hungarians. Based on his own experiences working for an NGO at the time, he argues that the reaction of pro-Roma activists and researchers (to adopt a watchdog-like approach) were not constructed with the nuanced local experience in mind, were misguided, and were not welcomed by locals. The second case that he examines, again from personal experience, focuses on debates over the use of the term *Rom/țigan*. In this section he recounts a contentious debate between activists and researchers from 2009 to 2011 in both intimate and public forums.

The two different cases are linked together by Fosztó’s underlying argument for activism to maintain dialogue with local forms of knowledge. This might have resulted in a less misguided physical reaction of researchers and activists in the first instance, while it would allow for individual self-identification of Roma in the second. Moreover, he examines the complicated nature of activism due to the range of actors, agendas, and power relations at play. This chapter considers the state and NGOs beyond a common binary assumption that sees them in opposition. They are analyzed as actors in continuous interaction and often forced (or not) to work together. Fosztó sees no researcher, activist, or cause as neutral or static, and this chapter argues for more space both for the self-identification of Roma and also for researchers to position themselves on a spectrum between activist and critical observer “from the margins” wherever they see fit. This notion unsettles the idea of a binary understanding of positionality for researchers as observers or activists. Moreover, it ties to Van Baar’s earlier demand for anthropo-sociological analysis to account for the relational role of activists defined by interactions, often bound to situations and “taking positions.”

## 2. Renewing Epistemologies

Three chapters authored by Ryder, Kóczé, and Ivasiuc, respectively, look beyond the literature of Romani Studies as they address wider issues of power relations within knowledge-production institutions, with

the purpose of shifting perspectives and enabling renewal in scholarship “better attuned to activist engagement.” A link between the authors can be drawn through their attempts to capture the importance of understanding the nexus of knowledge and the environment in which it is created.

Andrew Ryder begins this section with an analysis of the ways in which an increasing number of Romani scholars in the academy have challenged established power hierarchies and notions of objective or neutral knowledge production and therefore unsettled hierarchies within Romani studies. He encourages the use of ethnographic methods and anthropology as a discipline which can be used to meet emancipatory goals.

Ryder uses a fictionalized dialogue between two researchers traveling on a flight to demonstrate the division he sees in Romani studies between scientism, traditionally connected to normative assumptions and researchers as “objective” observers, and critical research, representing more reflective approaches which consider data production as occurring within existing power structures. Such a presentation is uncommon in academic writing, but here it works to demonstrate the points being raised by these two camps and exemplifies the inventive approaches he argues must be encouraged in the academy. He believes that academics should appreciate the value of disagreement as an engine of knowledge production and that “paradigm change” comes at the sharpest point of conflict between an old and new conceptual world view; thus Romani Studies may be witnessing a revolution in which more participatory and collaborative relationships with the researched and the rise of Roma intellectuals at the fore of the discipline are to be expected. Thus, he stresses the importance of the relationship and dialogue between the “scientific” or the status quo and more critical research.

Chapter 5 by Angéla Kóczé is also a reaction to institutional debates and aims to challenge ideas that academic research is “objective” and devoid of power relations. Knowledge cannot be detached from the context of its production and is therefore generated in a locus “composed of social fabric rife with power struggles.” Kóczé uses autoethnographic methods to examine her own experience of creating a place for herself in the academy, a place where she should “not exist” (Ivasiuc 2018a, 13) – both as a woman and as Roma. She succeeds in unsettling a readership accustomed to seeing Roma as an object of research by reflecting on her position within knowledge production. Drawing on feminist and critical race theory, with an eloquence typical of her work, Kóczé argues for the need for race rather than ethnicity as a lens through which to analyze how processes of inferiorization are imposed on Roma. Her chapter marks a powerful challenge to mainstream Romani studies, the wider academy’s entrenched power imbalances, and the racist and sexist epistemologies which have been challenged elsewhere by Romani and black feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Angela Y. Davis, and Kimberlé W. Crenshaw (Kóczé 2018, 114).

Co-editor Ana Ivasiuc closes the second section with a personal ethnography drawn from her experiences as a research coordinator for a Romani NGO. Her analysis unpicks the way in which a narrative of victimhood and entrapment is produced through “militant advocacy discourses” and “gray literature.” In this narrative Roma are constructed as passive victims to better fit the expectations and existing narratives within the machinery of international development and therefore to increase the chances of receiving funding. Focusing on why this happens, and by whom it is done, Ivasiuc shows the ways in which the focus on the deficits of Roma is a form of “orientalism sustaining paternalistic policy interventions and feeding the wider discursive needs of the development apparatus” (Ivasiuc 2018a, 15).

### 3. Renewing Activisms

The final section takes the volume's earlier arguments and explores how activism may be renewed in a more practical sense. It thus connects to the question posed by Ivasiuc in Chapter 6: "(how) is it possible, precisely from within the 'anti-politics machine' of development (Ferguson 1994) to maintain political relevance and open up new spaces for a less ambivalent activism?" (Ivasiuc 2018b, 139).

Margaret Greenfields opens this section by arguing that high-quality research and activism for the empowerment of Roma is best placed to produce real change if it engages more specifically with policy recommendations. She argues that scholars with direct expertise in policymaking are hard to come by, despite the high number of academics who act as policy consultants. This argument is built upon her analysis of publication trends and an increase in the number of members of the European Academic Network of Romani Studies. According to this analysis, researchers in disciplines such as sociology and anthropology far outnumber those with expertise in practical policymaking domains. Greenfields argues that scholars and activists who can better "package" their knowledge for policymakers will be more capable of influencing material change in the lives of Roma and avoiding the perpetuation of trends around unnuanced narratives (e.g., victimhood) that portray Roma as a disempowered group. Thus, she argues that policy advice using "models that are familiar to the policy community" (Greenfields 2018, 156) is crucial for opening up the terrain of practical research activism and calls for a collaborative research design that collaborates both with the community and policymakers.

Danielle V. Schoon explores the reliance on universal narratives in Roma activism through her examination of Turkish *Romanlar* who exemplify a stark alternative to European forms of identity politics activism. She places this within the historical Turkish context where Romanlar claimed equality based on a shared belief in Islam rather than ethnic, linguistic, or cultural differences – which are viewed as illegitimate and a threat to nation building in Turkey. Thus, poverty and class are central to the policy claims of *Roman*<sup>[1]</sup> associations rather than cultural differences. This case study shows that there is an alternative to the focus on minority rights and may compel scholars and activists to rethink the categories upon which European Romani activism has been built, including "civil society" which works to reconfigure rather than dissolve existing power relations.

Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka closes the volume with the suggestion that the epitome of renewed activism in the Romani movement can be seen as the Romani Youth movement. Her argument echoes Van Baar in her discussion of the shift from grass-roots level activism (which has lost much of its funding) to the professionalization of organizations that create a dynamic in which existing hierarchies and power relations are either replaced or reinforced rather than diminished. The Romani Youth movement represents a new strand of Romani activism that has unsettled dominant trends in activism around victimhood and subalternity by focusing on empowerment, self-esteem, and ethnic pride. Thus, the

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1 Schoon uses the "Turkish *Roman* (singular or adjective) to refer to urban and politically active Roma in Turkey, as that is the term they use to refer to themselves." *Roma* or *Romani* is used by Schoon to refer to a global Romani movement or Roma living in Europe (Schoon 2018, 190, fn 1).

book ends with a hopeful message about the possibility for a rejuvenation of Roma activism through the emergence of a Roma Youth movement.

Overall, *Romani Activism* does what the best academic work should do: it engages the reader from start to finish while challenging the binaries too often accepted as the status quo. The cohesion among the authors of this volume builds a strong case for the future of Romani Studies and Romani activism. Each chapter embodies the reflective approaches and spirit being proposed by the volume as a whole, leaving little ambiguity for the reader. More conservative positions within this debate over the future of the discipline and movement are alluded to and at times referenced directly, and readers seeking direct exposure to establishment voices will be required to look elsewhere.

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