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## Book Review

### **Brazzabeni, Micol; Manuela Ivone Cunha, and Martin Fotta (2016) (eds.) Gypsy Economy. Romani Livelihoods and Notions of Worth in the 21st Century. New York, NY: Berghahn Books. 263 pp.**

Distinguished economic anthropologists Keith Hart and John Sharp, the editors of the Human Economy Series, offered to compile Volume 3 of the Series entitled *Gypsy Economy. Romani Livelihoods and Notions of Worth in the 21st Century* by a group of young scholars dedicated to the theme of Romani livelihoods. The volume focuses predominantly on European Roma whose economic practices and ideas Keith Hart in the afterword characterizes as an ‘example of personalized economy’.

Non-European material is represented by contributions about the Calon Gypsies in Brazil. The authors Florencia Ferrari (focusing on the economic strategy of fortune-telling) and Martin Fotta (who discusses the theme of exchange from the perspective of value) complement the bulk of material which focuses on European Roma. ‘Southern’ Europe (Portugal) is represented in the articles of Sara Sama Acedo (about horse dealers), Marco Solimene (about scrap metal collecting in Italy), and Nathalie Manrique (on wealth and identity in Spain). Before going into more detail, particularly about the East European material, basic comments about the editors’ construction of the ‘Gypsy economy’ follow.

The ethnography of economic practices among Gypsy populations has rarely been theoretically conceptualized in anthropology, acknowledge the editors. Embedded within the modern economic system and created in relation to a milieu from which it cannot be dissociated, the notion of the ‘Gypsy economy’ on the one hand illustrates the economic practices and orientations of various Roma people. On the other hand, the term offers an interpretative framework for analyzing ‘how people position themselves in relation to the current economic system and to the changing nature of the roles of states, markets and finance, as well as of interrelationships between these’ (p. 3). The editors use three themes to present and navigate their approach to Roma livelihoods: niches, marginality and personhood.

The interstitial economy is the kind of adaptive niche which specialists such as Roma occupy within the wider economy. This perspective calls for ‘demand’ on the side of the dominant non-Gypsies. The authors of the volume attempt to complement understanding of this ‘demand’ with the ‘supply’ side of Roma economic practices and ideas about economy; i.e., to ‘understand economic activities in Gypsies’ own terms’ (p. 8). The marginal economy, according to the editors, avoids describing the ‘Gypsy economy’ as a product of long-term marginality and looks at this sphere as ‘informed by values and meanings arising from within Gypsy sociality’ (p. 13). The performative view of the economy takes into consideration ‘the way in which social actors enact and represent their lives’ and at the same time treats ‘performance as an “event” and a “process,” showing how people and culture produce their specific and constitutive performances’ (p. 14). This approach to the local economy ‘from inside’ is common of articles that deal with Eastern Europe.

Tomáš Hruštič shows, using a case from Eastern Slovakia, that in the situation of a critical shortage of cash, usury is mutually beneficial for borrowers and lenders. This ‘irrational’ behavior from the perspective of outsiders in fact makes perfect sense if it secures the means of existence in the short term. This very valuable empirical contribution to the Roma settlement economy in Slovakia would be even more valuable if the theoretical conceptualization of the economy of usury – including the role of the state in this economy (or the lack of it), the relations between usury and ‘micro’ credits, and so on – had been developed by the author.

Judit Durst discusses the political side of informal lending in Hungary. Her material convincingly shows the moral underpinnings of moneylending while avoiding the trap of perspectives that employ ‘moral decline’ or an ‘anomic state’ as the primary reference points. As she shows instead, social norms do play a role in poor Romani communities; borrowers can sanction their debtors if they impose debts upon them that go beyond locally accepted norms. Like Hruštič, Durst shows how lending creates a buffer between the state and poor communities and contributes to local peace.

A theoretically and empirically valuable analysis is offered by Jan Grill. In discussing the phenomenon of ‘fixing up money,’ he defines it as complementary income strategy to hard labor. For ‘fixing up money’ various ‘soft’ skills and knowledge of social systems are needed. Unlike the well-known horse dealers and similar types of ‘specialist’ Roma, the East Europeans studied by Grill in the UK and in Slovakia do not speak of a specific type of work to which ‘they would ascribe some kind of ideological significance.’ For these Roma, ‘Gypsy work’ means the same as it does for their Slovak neighbors; i.e. ‘poor-quality work traditionally associated with Gypsies’ (p. 92). The conceptualization of the ‘embeddedness’ of Roma in the formal economy in Slovakia and Europe – the major contribution of Grill’s analysis – might have been even more central to the perspective employed by the editors.

A less clearly conceptualized but still ethnographically rich account by Gergő Pulay presents the case of street traders who balance between undertaking formal and informal activities. In contrast to the dominant media image of the street as a peripheral zone, Pulay approaches the neighborhood as the zone of many local and transnational networks. He sees the street’s entrepreneurialism as ‘acts that create social persons and relationships in which the issues of trust and distrust play a crucial role’ (p. 131). Men – usually the Roma and non-Roma peers who form the basic social units on the street – preserve at least some parts of their ‘madness’; i.e. special qualities of male peers on the street ‘that they keep under control but can potentially burst out if the circumstances or other parties demand it’ (p. 135).

Martin Olivera, using the example of Transylvanian Gabori Roma, convincingly shows how the economy produces ‘Roma’s society’. This ‘making of’ does not take place via production process per se, but also as a form of ethics. As the author argues, this Romani society is seen as socio-economically marginal and politically dominated, but it manages to establish logics of abundance (p. 147) similar to ‘other’ economies for which the concept of *homo economicus* does not hold much value. Even though Roma fully participate in the market society – writes Olivera – their conceptions of

economy use a different logic than that of classical economics; for them, 'money is never anything else but a use value' (p. 157).

The theme of the conspicuous consumption of houses and housing among the Cortorari Roma of Romania is analyzed by Cătălina Tesar. Cortorari consider their houses to be a sign of civility, 'all the more so as houses have traditionally been a central idiom of peasant sociality' (p. 184). The mansions the Roma built from money earned abroad represent their social development and economic advancement. This value of a house vis-à-vis the houses of others somehow questions the exceptionality of the 'Roma economy' thesis at first, but at the same time allows the social reproduction of Roma identity from within domestic groups via marriage rituals.

In the afterword, the series editor Keith Hart relates the study of the Gypsy economy to neoliberalism. As he rightly points out, for many anthropologists 'neoliberalism' has become a convenient tag, like *homo economicus* for an earlier generation, and an excuse for not thinking (p. 146). Hart identifies four themes that connect the papers in the volume: money transfers, economic strategies, performance, and wealth and value. He also raises an important point with regard to the state: 'we no longer pretend that we are studying stateless peoples, but we are studying people with history of statelessness who interact with states, global capitalism and the rest' (p. 247).

The lack of theoretical discussion about the state and formal institutions in the 'Gypsy economy' might therefore be considered a weakness of the volume. Although the Roma economy is very much a unique field, and the authors convincingly show it is worth looking at using Gypsies' own perspectives, it would still help to look at Roma identities as being formed due to the particular functioning or malfunctioning of the state and other formal economic and non-economic institutions of modern times. Although there is no doubt about the ongoing 'informalization of economy' - the Gypsy economy to a large extent fits the definition of an interstitial economy - the state still remains the key actor. Micro credits, 'social enterprises' and cooperatives have already influenced the Roma economy on the ground and we should take into account this development as it relates to making Roma money and identity.

Roma cohabitation with peasants and their economies - or in the cases from Eastern Europe, of the remnants left after socialism - and what makes them different from or similar to Roma should also have been incorporated into the theoretical elaboration. Although some papers touch upon the topic of 'peasants,' these two predominantly rural peoples (Roma and post-peasants) who have been the subjects as well as agents of modern transformation deserve more systematic treatment.

The final hesitation with regard to this volume comes from the concept of the Gypsy economy itself. No doubt there are Roma who have personal livelihoods and an understanding of the material world, and no doubt the term is attractive to readers, but the economy of the Gypsies only makes sense in a relational perspective: with regard to non-Roma, to the state, and comparatively to other groups in various parts of the world who fill the space between the formal and informal, the state and the market, the self-employed and wage laborers. Even some of the articles rightly question the notion of the economy as being 'Gypsy-like'.

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Despite these minor concerns, there is an urgent need to promote this volume! Some of the findings – not least with regard to informal lending and ‘fixing-up money’ – should even find their echoes in policies that allow Roma to live their lives as they like. The volume definitely represents the kick-off of studies of whatever is meant by the ‘Gypsy economy,’ and no work that follows this topic – at least in the East European context – will be able to ignore this collection.

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### *References*

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