

From Victimhood to Citizenship: The Path of Roma Integration, András Bíró, Nicolae Gheorghe, Martin Kovats et al.

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A Review Essay by Angéla Kóczé

This book is an unusual intellectual project that is meant to provoke discussion and critical reflection on the state of Roma identity politics in Europe. As its subtitle indicates, the publication intends to serve as a foundation for an open-ended and perhaps permanent debate on the future of Roma integration among various Roma and pro-Roma activists, scholars and policy-makers. The book begins with three essays, written by András Bíró, Nicolae Gheorghe and Martin Kovats, that provide the conceptual basis for the next section, which summarizes several workshop debates. It ends with a final reflection by Željko Jovanović. The main contributors in this book are Roma and pro-Roma men of distinguished, influential and privileged position. There is a very limited contribution by women in the debate, reflecting the contemporary asymmetrical gender dynamics of Roma identity politics. This book represents a collective effort to find and articulate common ground. It is also an important historical resource on contemporary engagements with Roma identity politics and contains critical reflections on a wide range of issues that shape Roma integration.

The first provocative essay is written by András Bíró, who seeks to highlight some aspects of Roma experience that “might be the stumbling blocks on their side in the integration process” (p. 12). He claims that explaining the situation of Roma solely based on the discrimination and prejudice of the majority population creates a one-sided narrative that overlooks the “Roma’s own weaknesses” (p. 12). Bíró argues that ignoring those weaknesses has led to the perpetuation of their victimhood. He suggests that exposing the limitations of the Roma movement with regard to reflection on sensitive issues might change the discourse of victimization. However, confronting internal weaknesses should not blind us from recognizing the degree of external power and oppression that has been imposed on the Roma movement.

Bíró bravely focuses on issues that are rarely discussed in the debate on Roma integration. These issues include, inter alia, the connection between the

Roma and nomadism, their connection to territoriality, and their exploitative relationship with the “actual as well as the symbolic *gadjo*” (non-Roma). These issues have never been a focus of the Roma movement or political activism. Instead, these topics were conceptualized or dealt with in cultural discourses that describe Roma as an “exotic Other” and as being different from the white European population.

Bíró acknowledges at the very beginning that his conclusions are simple hypotheses based on his own “empirical experience with no claim of being objective or scientific” (p. 11). However, he fails to reflect critically on his position of power as a pro-Roma activist, donor and former influential decision-maker. Bíró ambitiously aims to provide some narratives, based on his experience, about the mentality of Roma, revealing some collective psychological characteristics, such as behavioural and moral group norms. He is perhaps aware of the risky and inevitably essentializing nature of this undertaking, but in order to provoke a debate he nevertheless decides to talk about issues that are usually raised only in racist or racialized discourses about Roma. He deliberately aims to generate a discussion and candidly reflects on various “touchy” or “risky” issues – “taboos” in the words of Nicolae Gheorghe – that are usually used by various groups and individuals to justify the subordination of Roma or racism against them. In this first chapter, Bíró covers a wide range of controversial issues and topics to explain the complexities and challenges of Roma integration from his specific, privileged point of view.

Instead of discussing all the topics covered by the author, I will focus on one of the most controversial issues he raises, namely the “code of conduct” among Roma, also known as *shmekeria*. This concept, which originates from a Turkish word meaning cunning, deceit or cheating, is used to refer to the behaviour of Roma in relation to the *gadjo* (non-Roma). The concept becomes a recurring theme in the book and is raised by Gheorghe as well as by other contributors to the debate. Bíró explains persuasively: “The relationship to the actual as well as to the symbolic *gadjo*, who represented the fundamental source of income but simultaneously the barrier impeding free access to needed goods, led Roma to adopt a submissive demeanour where cajolery and deception became a technique of survival” (p. 18). So, *shmekeria*, as Bíró describes it, is a set of specific rules deployed by Roma to gain advantages. Gheorghe presents the same argument, although in a different way, in the second chapter. He relies on the same underlying concept but suggests that the Roma, who are caught up in an ambiguous hierarchical power relationship, need to cheat and exploit the *gadjo* in order to succeed. While Bíró conceptualizes *shmekeria* as a kind of innate and universal characteristic of Roma, Gheorghe at least attempts to underline its multiple applications as a survival technique by other subordinated