

Marx, Tobias: Zigeunkulturen im Wandel. Über Roma-/Zigeunereliten in Bulgarien und Mazedonien. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2014. 386 pp. ISBN 978-3-8376-2937-8. Preis: € 44.99

Only a tiny note indicates that this voluminous work had its origin in a doctoral dissertation defended at Leipzig University in 2012. It is unclear whether the manuscript had been revised prior to publication, but judging from the numerous references throughout the text to “this dissertation,” it had not. That perhaps explains the length, which could – and should – have been reduced by more careful editing. It takes too many pages of literature reviews and explanations before we get to Marx’s original contribution. That consists of a “thick description” à la Clifford Geertz of the actors involved in the construction of Romani political elites in Bulgaria and Macedonia.

The work begins with the author’s description of the methods and goals pursued in his fieldwork that took place between 2008 and 2010 in a number of Bulgarian and Macedonian communities known for the presence of influential Romani leaders. Early on, Marx mentions a leitmotiv that pops up repeatedly throughout the book, namely the question of the leaders’ legitimacy. He indicates that since they differ from the constituents they claim to represent in being better educated, wealthier, and, above all, assimilated to the point of barely understanding the Romani language, “the question of the legitimacy of their leadership is, therefore, virulent” (36). A historical overview of Romani leadership emphasizes the role of various representatives appointed by state authorities to act as middlemen for the purposes of tax collection and maintenance of “law and order,” justifying the question whether things have changed since Ottoman, post-Ottoman, and communist times.

Marx tackles this central question in chapters 5 and 6 where he presents most of the empirical material gathered in Bulgaria and Macedonia. We learn here some interesting facts, such as that there are 28 Roma parties in Bulgaria, most of them being personal creations of rich Kalderash businessmen who use these political entities to further their own influence. The author interviewed one such *Rom baro* who maintained that Kalderash leaders’ foremost goals are to make money and maintain traditions. By contrast, young leaders representing other Romani communities emphasized education as a significant value for the emerging elite but also bemoaned the waning support from the West for local NGOs and the educated Romani professionals staffing them.

The bulk of Marx’s observations and conclusions comes from Macedonia, a country that is clearly at the centre of his attention. Unlike Bulgaria which is represented by two communities – Sofia and Lom – and twelve activists, the situation in Macedonia is sketched in a more nuanced manner. The author reproduces interviews with seventeen Romani leaders living in Skopje, Kumanovo, Tetovo, and Šutka whereby the last location is presented with particular interest and attention to detail. In the aftermath of the devastating 1963 earthquake, Šutka, a suburb of Skopje, became a resettlement site for Roma from destroyed neighbourhoods, and it grew into a cosmopoli-

tan centre where Romani leaders gathered popular support for their political ambitions. It was here that Abdi Farik became the first Romani member of Macedonian parliament in 1971, and it was largely thanks to his efforts that Roma were entrenched in the Macedonian constitution as an official minority that qualified for all kinds of protective measures, including Romani-language radio and television programs. On the eve of Macedonia’s independence, Abdi Farik founded here the first Roma party, and Šutka rose to further prominence as a city governed by Roma. Marx recounts the events of the 2009 mayoral election which brought to power Elvis Bajram, the son of a prominent businessman and financier of Farik’s party. The previous mayor had escaped to the United States together with the city’s coffers, and Bajram’s election was accompanied by many scandals and accusations of fraud that were never properly investigated. These conditions led one of the more prominent politicians to suggest that Macedonian Romani leaders are “merchants and criminals ... who do business with the misfortune and the votes of the people. And the result is always the same” (217).

Marx pays attention not only to prominent figures like the likes of Farik and the father-son Bajram team, but also to more grassroots representatives who lack the financial resources of the “businessmen” and, therefore, pursue different strategies. What is remarkable in this respect is the sheer number of highly educated and multilingual political activists who all seem to have spent some time abroad honing their skills and gaining valuable international experience. But while the acquisition of higher education is indispensable for rising above the local level (except in the case of the affluent businessmen-politicians), this step also contributes to a considerable degree of alienation from the home community and its members. Hence Marx asks the important question whether contemporary leaders differ significantly from their predecessors. Are they still mere middlemen, conveying the needs of the state rather than those of their own constituents? Instead of a stark Roma vs. *gadje* dualism, Marx prefers the concept of “transculturalism” which underlines the hybridity of contemporary Romani leaders and their political goals.

Marx’s book is valuable for the wealth of empirical data it provides about a topic of growing importance. The interviews with an impressive number of political figures certainly enrich the field of Romani politics. But what is sorely missing is the voice of the ordinary rank-and-file people supposed to be represented by these leaders. Without conveying that voice, Marx cannot effectively answer the question of legitimacy that has such a prominent place in this work.

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Matthews, Peter J.: On the Trail of Taro. An Exploration of Natural and Cultural History. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2014. 429 pp. ISBN 978-4-906962-17-4. (Senri Ethnological Studies, 88)

Themes of research are commonly chosen on the basis of what we encounter during our studies, sometimes rooted in things that caught our imagination during our formative years. By recounting how his father and grandfa-