

Book Review: Those Who Count: Expert Practices of Roma Classification

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Review of: Those Who Count: Expert Practices of Roma Classification, by Mihai Surdu.
Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016, 267 pp., ISBN 978-963-386-114-1.

Surdu's book focuses on classificatory practices in Europe regarding Roma minority, and dissects topics critical for many scientific fields of research: the power of naming, discipline through categorization, domination over society, and scientific practices defining characteristics and the social status of groups. Roma ethnicity, Surdu maintains, is the result of deeply rooted scientific practices that have made the ethnic group a measurable and objective entity. The book, in a sense, is a careful examination of the process of essentialization – a phenomena widely criticized with a clear need of further conceptualization. It is particularly important that the book examines the historical roots as well as modern practices of scientific categorization, illustrating how vulnerable some groups are to the interests of certain actors, such as slave owners, historically, and later state institutions interested in taxation, manageability of the population or gathering data for census.

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Social differentiation by categorizing groups in advanced societies – a practice that was described as “political reduction of social complexity” by Starr (1992) – must be examined not only by looking at state institutions, but also elsewhere. Surdu makes a comparison that no doubt would make many scholars of Romani Studies and beyond uneasy: “for the police, Gypsies are the usual suspects for criminal behavior, whereas for policy research, they are the subjects of policy measures for social integration. While the police acts towards Gypsies with the repressive force of the state, policy research appeals for Roma integration through the benevolent action of the same state” (p. 67). Repressive and paternalistic practices are thus present as much in academia as in the state institutions that are at times criticized by academia. The two institutions, importantly, are legitimized and empowered to stigmatize populations – one with the power of law, the other with symbolic power – and both have a propensity to codify, quantify and categorize groups (p. 68).

The book is an important reminder of the role scientists and policy-related actors can play in (re)producing the marginalization of Roma. The static categories, rigid data collecting methods, damaging visual representation of Roma, and overall fixed characteristics of an entire group do not reflect the complex reality, but rather create a falsely homogenous and, in this case, destructive image of Roma that conforms to negative stereotypes. As Surdu writes, “The sampling strategies in the poorest Roma neighborhoods, as well as considering Roma ethnicity as a categorical and independent variable, may transform an academic researcher into a contributor to the reification, racialization and stigmatization of the Roma group” (p. 52). Similarly, the public Roma image shaped through policy studies also echo a uniform, homogenous image of Roma that “continuously fuels and refuels the (mostly negative) social representations of Roma” (p. 194).

Surdu also scrutinizes the methodologies used in order to study and collect data about Roma. Random sampling, which is key for a representative study, is often unattainable: selection of localities is rather a function of the criteria of availability and existing NGOs active in the locale. Moreover, Surdu continues, “in the case of Roma it is conceptually impossible to have randomness for a population which has not been previously defined, or which is haphazardly amalgamated for instrumental reasons” (p.

57). In addition, self-reference and the incorporation of existing (often misleading) data has replaced critical, grounded research and contestation of the validity of published research: “scientific and expert discourse about Roma after 1990 becomes self-referential and isomorphic to a large extent [, …] advanced mainly through scientific papers, which rely on previous scientific work rather than scrutinizing empirical reality” (p. 190). And yet such studies often claim to be timely and representative of regional, national, or even European Roma.

Another key contribution of the book is regarding the relationship between research subject and researcher. This is another perennial debate among scholars, which strives to unpack the role of the researcher during the data-gathering phase to produce the most accurate data in ethical ways. The researcher, for instance, should reflect on their status as an in- or out-group member and consider their power in relation to the group.¹ Some critical researchers, however, have already noted what Surdu alludes to: there is a need for “inclusive research which *goes beyond* the academy and promotes participatory and community-based research as a tool for furthering social justice” (Ryder 2015).² More precisely, Surdu’s criticism centers on the inability of Roma (as subjects of research) to co-define the definition of their ethnicity, and they are left to merely “ratify an external definition advanced by the social researcher” (p. 55). The externally defined group-characteristics, thus, also lead to the performativity of Roma ethnicity, rather than inhering this ethnicity (p. 80). In short, cultural determinism may have replaced biological determinism (*ibid.*).

Finally, scientific research is contextualized in, and perhaps informed by, political realities: “I claim that scientific discourse about Gypsies/Roma is secondary to the political discourse, or co-constructed with it, and that Roma are constituted as a scientific object in dialectic interplay with Roma as a political object” (p. 67). Moreover, activists, NGOs and other pro-Roma organizations “are bounded to represent Roma identity in very stigmatic terms, in order to gain attention of the political actors and donors” (p. 85). Consequently, the negative, stereotypical representation, Surdu convincingly shows, is present in many policy briefs, studies and the overall discourse, which often adopts unitary identity markers and uniform problems, such as poverty, inadequate housing, lack of employment, and similar (p. 85). The actors involved (institutions of the state,

academics, ethno-political entrepreneurs) all have an interest in the categorization and differentiation of Roma, thus transforming an ethnic category into a social and fiscal one (p. 105). However, Surdu eloquently shows that academics and the general public may challenge state scientific practices, practicing and reinforcing their agency over top-down categorization, arguing for a continuum of ethnic categories, rather than defined groups, or simply defying categorization efforts (e.g. Jedi religion phenomena).

Overall, through Surdu's book the reader gains a new insight into the perennial exclusion and marginalization of Roma. The book also leaves some critical questions unanswered, especially regarding the transformation of the debunked system of scientific practices. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that removing negative stigma is vital for ending the marginalization of Roma, which would require a more critical look and (self-) assessment of all the actors involved in the process: state institutions, non-state actors and academics alike. Furthermore, data collection by scholars and researchers needs to incorporate a new dimension, beyond scientific accuracy: understanding a group must not be a top-down study of the group, but needs to be reconsidered as a mutual project where the "researched" and the "researcher" form a team to achieve a mutual goal of understanding and making themselves understood. For this constructive process, Surdu's book is a milestone.

¹ On self-reflexivity see the edited volume by Yanow and Schwartz-Shea.

² Outside of Romani Studies, there has also been a resurgence of interest among scholars in participatory research strategies in the recent years.

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