

## Gypsy Economy: Romani Livelihoods and Notions of Worth in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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*Gypsy Economy* is undoubtedly a strong contribution to the anthropology of economy outside the formal sector. This edited volume builds on a rich literature concerned with the specificities of the economic practices of various Roma and Gypsy populations over the past three decades. It examines an impressive array of contemporary economic activities of Roma and Gypsies from Eastern European countries as well as from the Iberian world broadly conceived of Portugal, Spain, and Brazil. The authors not only describe different ways of making money, but they also highlight Gypsies' frames of reference and motivations for their income generating activities, which are carefully contextualized in the recent transformations of market societies. Based on extensive fieldwork each of the 11 chapters of the volume affords the reader an incisive analysis embedded in rich ethnographic details.

"Gypsy economy" is the core concept of the book and is used in two ways. Firstly, the term covers moneymaking practices and orientations of various Roma and Gypsy groups. Secondly, it is an analytical term which allows for an examination of how people who create certain modes of living position themselves in relation to the current economic system, to the states, markets, finance and the interrelations between these. Though the volume elucidates Roma and Gypsy economic activities, its contribution goes beyond these groups. It sheds light on the situation and strategies of an increasing population currently facing various aspects of neo-liberalism, such as free markets, informal employment, privatization, and scarcity.

Three main themes reoccur throughout the volume: niche, marginality, and personhood. 1) Older conceptualizations of the term "niche" focused on the 'demand' side, i.e., on non-Gypsies. The contributors of this volume address the 'supply' side drawing on Guyer's (1997) understanding of the economic niche as a 'specialist production.' This entails an understanding of the economic activities from Gypsies' standpoints while acknowledging that these might be different from those of non-Gypsies. 2) Marginality and marginal economy are also used creatively. The authors recognize the marginal positions of the Roma and Gypsy populations, especially pertaining to Central European countries, but they insist on the importance of individual ethnographic assessment without giving definite conclusions. The nature of current economies, the authors posit, characterized by blurred boundaries between formality and informality and the increasing replacement of regular employment with precarious practices calls for a re-conceptualization of the standards of organizing societies. As such, the authors focus on forms of social action to which these groups subscribe and avoid discussing the economic activities of the Roma and Gypsies as inexorable effects of long centuries of discrimination. Such approaches, particularly prominent in expert

policy assessments, limit the political potential of anthropology (Turner 1979). The authors' response is to oppose the various strands of anti-Gypsism, which dehumanize these populations by bringing to the fore their own forms of self-ascriptions as well as their capacity for economic and cultural actions. 3) Personhood is examined through the lens of performance. On the one hand, this allows for an understanding of the way social actors enact and represent their lives. On the other, performances can be seen as events or processes through which Gypsy personhood is constructed.

Though the book is not organized thematically, the editors suggest that the chapters fall into four major themes: monetary flows, economic strategies and market interactions, performance, and wealth and value. The two opening chapters deal with usury among Roma in Slovakia and Hungary. In Chapter 1, Tomáš Hrustič demonstrates how usury, which pervades the entire *taboris* local economic system, can be advantageous to both lenders and borrowers. For the former, this practice is a form of investment, which brings them social and economic power. For the latter, while this practice leads to increased poverty it remains the only way to secure subsistence in the short run. In Chapter 2, Judit Durst aptly demonstrates the economic logic of usury as well as various moral reasoning for sanctioning certain types of lending, while rejecting others and their consequences for the social relations of involved economic actors.

In Chapter 3, Sara Sama Acedo argues that economic practices of horse-trading Ciganos in Portugal are best understood as 'interstitial.' Two sets of relationships— intra-ethnic spatialities and forms of territorial exclusiveness among various Ciganos groups and the relationship between the Ciganos and the state, which classifies the Ciganos as 'nomads'—are crucial to understanding economic interstices and the creation of new economic practices within new locales. In Chapter 4, Jan Grill examines the oscillation between menial and unstable physical labor and activities of 'fixing up money' among Slovak Roma migrants in the United Kingdom and Slovakia, from the socialist period to current times. This oscillation, Grill argues, sheds light on coexisting formal wage labor and other informal economic activities, which helped the Roma manage their livelihood during austere socio-economic times.

In Chapter 5, Marco Solimene examines the practical and symbolic implications of scrap-metal collection among Bosnian Xoraxané Romá in Rome. This economic activity, Solimene argues, allows the Romá to negotiate their group identity in relation to both Italians as well as Romanian Roma. Being embedded in the Romani symbolic system, the scrap-metal collection helps the Roma evade the Italian bio-politics, which reduces them to what philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998) called the *homo sacer*. In Chapter 6, Gergő Pulay addresses the norms and principles behind economic activities of Romanian Spoitori Roma in the Ferentari neighborhood in Bucharest. The Roma take advantage of the street economy of this mixed area. Their aim is to become 'businessmen,' and as such avoid becoming 'fools,' through economic practices they call 'collaborations' and 'combinations.'

In Chapter 7, Martin Olivera discusses the economy of Gabori Roma in Transylvania and the ways they create material and symbolic independence from the non-Roma. To this end, he argues that the economy is not only part of the reproduction of social order, but also part and parcel of the production of Roma's society. Such an analysis moves beyond the image of Roma as economically deprived and politically dominated to highlight Gabori's logic of abundance and possession of the world.

In Chapter 8, Florencia Ferrari makes the only contribution to the volume that focuses on female moneymaking by analyzing palm-reading among Calon Gypsy women in São Paulo, Brazil. She carefully describes the intensely affective interaction between a

*Cigana* and a non-Gypsy Brazilian during the palm-reading process to show how different meanings and understandings of this activity are part of diverse 'cosmologies.'

In Chapter 9, Cătălina Tesâr analyses the meanings and representations of extravagant consumption behavior, materialized in the construction of houses, among Romanian Cortorari Gypsies. She argues that the ongoing construction of their houses is linked to both the presentist as well as the future orientation of Corturari life-cycles, which is specific to Corturari understandings of the person and relatedness. In Chapter 10, Martin Fotta examines moneymaking among the Calon of Bahia, Brazil. Unlike the usurious practices of Slovak and Hungarian Roma, the Calon lend money to non-Gypsies. Fotta draws on an anthropological theory of value to argue that there are two core sources of value—*vergonha* (shame, honor) and *força* (strength)—driving this economic practice. Though expected to work together as embedded in social persons, these values are oftentimes contradictory and contested. In Chapter 11, Nathalie Manrique gives a fascinating account of wealth, hierarchy and identity among Gitanos in Andalusia, Spain. The Gitano society is underlined by the logic of gift, which generates a hierarchy of living beings with the most generous to be the closest to a 'Gypsy for real.' She demonstrates how the Gitanos's identity is mainly constructed through the refusal to accumulate goods. Wealth is not wanted by the Gitanos as it may generate imbalances in the named hierarchy, which allows them to maintain their Gypsiness.

The book ends with an *Afterword* by renowned anthropologist Keith Hart who points to the theme of statelessness, as a core element in the study of Gypsy societies everywhere. *Gypsy Economy* and studies of Roma in general have for Hart the potential to generate explorations of a crucial question for our times, i.e., how to organize society without states. Beyond inviting such important intellectual quests, the book is also a model for scholars eager to undertake comparative projects aligned with anthropology's aspiration to generalizations about the human condition. It will appeal to students of Romani Studies as well as to a broader readership interested in economic practices outside formal economies.

## **Bibliography**

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