

Andrew Ryder. 2017. *Sites of Resistance. Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in School, Community and the Academy*. London: UCL IOE Press.

Book review by

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A first glance at Andrew Ryder's book might make you think it would appeal only to those interested in the Romani communities of Britain. But don't be mistaken. This book has far more in store for its readers: first, with the tools of self-reflexive research methods, the author reviews his decades of activity as a community development worker and activist in marginalized Romani and Traveller communities in the United Kingdom, whose residents frequently face eviction due to a lack of caravan sites and stopping places (typically a consequence of racism and hostility toward this group). Second, equipped with firm theoretical knowledge, the author has much to say about the practical and theoretical dilemmas of social policy and pedagogy. Third, he also undertakes the challenge of analyzing European Romani Studies by charting new developments in this field, exploring the contestation between critical research and forms of positivism, and also appealing for a form of academic dissensus.

By reading the book backwards and devoting a few minutes to the scrutiny with which its index was created, the reader can gauge the book's thematic orientation and theoretical embeddedness, which are centered on critical thinking, empowerment, and social justice. Ryder presents the communities about which he writes primarily in terms of identity-related problems, that is, he stresses the gender, ethnic, and subcultural dimensions of Romani marginalization while also placing emphasis on how the neoliberal turn has had ominous consequences for this population. The two most frequent keywords in the index are "inclusive community development" and "eviction." The author's approach is informed mainly by four authors, each of which is outstanding by universal standards: Pierre Bourdieu, Paulo Freire, Antonio Gramsci, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak – without an easily definable ranking among them. For insiders of academia, in particular those interested in critical and emancipatory research, it must be obvious from these references that the author is engaging his subject with categories such as: the different forms of "capital" and "field theory" as elaborated by the French sociologist, Bourdieu; the "pedagogy of hope" by the Brazilian sociologist and educator, Freire; the concepts of "organic intellectual" and "hegemony" as worked out by the Albanian-Italian Marxist philosopher, Gramsci; and the terms "strategic essentialism" and "subaltern" as used by the Bengali-American feminist philosopher, Spivak. Without going too deep into the details of these eminent authors' work, I can safely state that there is a kind of congruence between their various ways of thinking and that they complement one another very well. Specifically, they are all leftists, their cognitive horizons include solidarity with the oppressed, and all their endeavors point towards desirable social transformations. It is thus obvious that Ryder's work also fits into this broader context, especially from the 1960s onwards, as it aims to produce a scholarly discourse on solidarity from the perspective of the oppressed.

Chapter 1, "A Pedagogy of Hope for Gypsies, Roma and Travellers," clarifies the main references and key concepts used in the book, and in addition to the above-mentioned authors, also emphasizes the importance of approaches such as "critical whiteness" and paradigms like "feminist standpoint theory." Ryder, a white male author, deliberately tries to de-hegemonize himself, stressing at the same time that – similar to various forms of otherness – whiteness should also be seen as part of a heterogeneous identity that intersects with other diverse categories, such as gender, class, social position, and so on. An appealing aspect of this chapter is the author's brief attempt to "objectify" himself as he sketches his own social position, political experience, and career path. **Chapter 2**, "Hegemony and Life Strategy," places the policy landscape of the UK in a historical context, giving an overview of British postwar public policies concerning the Roma from the Second World War to the Third-Way Labour period (early 1970s).

The keywords of this chapter – and also the headings of subchapters – are statism, localism, austerity, paternalism, and assimilation. Ryder cites with sympathy the typology of Thomas Acton, an unavoidable figure of British Romani Studies, which details the strategies of the British Romani community in response to policy regimes and marginalization. These strategies are: conservatism (the Romani community “clings tenaciously to tradition”); cultural adaptation (openness toward other cultures); and cultural disintegration (loss of self-respect, disorientation). Ryder draws primarily on Acton’s strategy of cultural adaptation and expands on it to also include the centrality of activism and intersectionality.

The next three chapters discuss events in an English urban venue, South Forest, and are mainly descriptive. **Chapter 3**, “Cultural Trauma, Marginalization and Resistance,” focuses on the identity of those people living in South Forest, with emphasis on the forms of convertible capital (economic, cultural, social, symbolic) at their disposal. Ryder also adds mention of the role of emotional capital, the value of human support and solidarity – but it’s a pity he does not dig deeper into this exciting subsidiary topic in order to give deeper insights into aspects of Romani life, such as resilience. Ryder then explains how in-group relations bear on residents’ attitudes toward later-arriving “rival groups” that arrive later: in this regard, the conflict with non-Roma refugees from Kosovo is particularly intriguing. (This similar problem is tackled brilliantly by Norbert Elias in his classic 1965 study, *The Established and the Outsiders*.) This part may be read as an illustration of the relevance of Acton’s above-mentioned strategies. **Chapter 4**, “School: Resistance and Conflicts,” guides the reader into the realm of the school system. This is a setting that, in condensed form, displays all the problems connected to the integration of peripheral social groups – despite all the possible goodwill of authorities and other official actors – that may actually end up segregating some of these groups instead. Using a case study of a school, the chapter demonstrates that crisis management techniques used by school leaders end up blaming on Roma for their “failure” to integrate. Ryder’s conceptual framework reveals that the particular Romani community under analysis here, organized on the basis of prestige, pride, and honor, sees and presents itself as a sort of challenge and resistance to the mainstream/dominant culture in which it lives. **Chapter 5**, “Identity, Exclusion and Change,” concentrates on the young community members’ peer conflicts at school, which often manifest in interethnic form. Of particular note in this chapter, is the section on the tensions and clashes between young Romanies and the Somali community, which, much like the Romani community, also predominantly defines itself on the basis of prestige and pride. The author traces these relations to the structural similarity of the two communities and to the similar cultural traumas both have had to experience. Said otherwise, the (macro) structural positioning of and the relations within each of these marginalized communities enhance the risk of conflicts with one another.

In the next two chapters, the vantage point changes again. **Chapter 6**, “Critical Pedagogy,” is actually an analysis of the feasibility of Freire’s program. Namely, Ryder focuses on the patriarchal attitude of the external helping organizations – state-led institutions, social workers, civil activists – toward the marginalized groups they are helping to integrate. Ryder outlines a few options by which the representatives of inclusive community development – most of whom work on a basis of trust – may invest members of the peripheral group with power. He also touches on the tensions between (and inside) the helping organizations that may easily counteract the achievements they are aiming for. **Chapter 7**, “Gypsies and Travellers on the Front Line: Organic Intellectuals and Strategic Ties,” outlines the dramatic conflicts that may arise during evictions against caravan sites, an emotive and traumatic experience in the Romani

community under analysis. It also raises the specific question: What can a so-called “organic intellectual” do about unauthorized encampments? The book considers the strategic alliances that can be created with different outsiders to the community in such situations, taking into account the advantages and risks for the helper and the helped, and exploring in particular the pressures community members may experience when seeking to develop forms of social capital from within a traditional community.

The horizon of analysis expands in **Chapter 8**, “Academic Cage Fighting, Position Taking and Awakenings within Romani Studies.” Here, Ryder looks at the unfolding context of Romani Studies in which the civil representatives of the Roma community, the activists working for them, and the members of academia interact with one another. One of the most evident crystallizations of such conflicts, suggests Ryder, is the tension between the “purely scientific” position of academics and the “critically committed” cognitive and action-oriented position of Roma activists. On page 118, the author includes a table charting the scope of Romani Studies in which he outlines eight ideal-typical dispositions, stratagems, and grievances. In this chapter, one senses the author’s attempted objectivity as he aims to distribute critique in equal measure to the differing factions. This is something worth marveling at; what he has discussed so far clearly shows that we are faced with a subject area that is laden with conflicts that are hard to comprehend from the present perspective, thereby justifying the distance that Ryder tries to set between himself and the object of study.

The book ends with a short and succinct subjective conclusion in which the author sums up his main statements about his own experiences with Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers, and gives an account of how his activity and motivation have changed throughout the course of the fieldwork he has conducted over several decades.

In sum, this is a unique book on several counts. First, the descriptive analyses and case studies are sensitive and accurate. Second, the chosen references and paradigms fit and complement each other well. Third, the sociological, socio-political, and anthropological explanations constitute an organic whole with self-reflection, and thus satisfy the epistemological requirements set forth by Bourdieu’s sociology of knowledge and by self-reflexive research methods.

It is a taciturn precondition of contemporary anthropology that authors should position themselves in the context of the studied subject as they also have been involved in it; Andrew Ryder is loyal to this convention. (Although, I would have liked to see even more of this kind of self-reflexive analysis throughout this book. Perhaps the author has done it right because much more of such analyses might have burst the cover of the book.) Self-reflection is not only interwoven in the introduction of the book and in some later descriptive sections (where Ryder gives an account of the impressions and experiences he gained during fieldwork, and at which point he also shares personal memories with the reader). The self-reflection Ryder uses has a broader – epistemological–phenomenological – dimension in that the thematic structure of the book itself can be viewed as the conscious reconstruction of the researcher’s life-world, which is presented in expanding concentric circles. In other words, Ryder contextualizes the themes that have been decisive in the course of his former and present work as related to the Roma population. He does this partly according to a sort of temporal logic in which he outlines his career from his early social and activist work to his later embeddedness in the university milieu. At the same time, the

book's themes and its structure aptly represent the expansion of this life-world through adaptation and development, and hence the increasing complexity of the author's evolving experiences and continuously reinterpreted relations, shaped in part by a sequence of roles from teacher to activist to academic. In this way, the reader may follow the author from the micro-universe of a particular person into the perspective of a reflexively thinking scholar. In addition, we encounter another consciously reconstructed epistemological dimension: the position of the responsible, committed leftist organic intellectual possessing the will to transform society; this, in particular, gives the book a strong ethical dimension.

The general conclusion of the book is also significant. The field of European Romani Studies, steadily on its way to being institutionalized within the academy, displays all of the typical conflicts that have been experienced by any number of oppressed groups trying to establish their own critical position on an institutional level, for instance, Aboriginal or First Nation Studies. (Just recall the conflicts that characterized the field of Gender Studies in the 1970s: almost exclusively white feminists from middle- or upper-class groups on the one hand and the black feminists of working-class background on the other. Not to speak of the forms of opposition between LGBTQ feminism versus the mainstream heteronormative feminism of today. And so on and so forth....) There is no doubt that the fields of study from new epistemological positions must come to grips not only with the actors and paradigms of mainstream academia (and the national and international institutions supporting them), but also with the critical representatives from within, who may have divergent positions and strategies. Ryder's book provides valuable insight into what could be described as a state of academic flux regarding the directions Romani Studies should take next. In sum, Andrew Ryder has written an important book by doing more than just reliably combining self-reflection with scientific analysis; following Michel Foucault, Ryder has also succeeded at transforming the discursive space created by the "experts" into an object of study.

References

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This journal is a product of Central European University's Roma in European Societies Initiative. The initiative, launched in 2016, is an interdisciplinary effort to support existing work to improve the situation of Roma in all sectors through teaching and research, leadership development, and community outreach. The VELUX Foundations, the Open Society Foundations' Roma Initiatives Office, and the Roma Education Fund are funding this initiative.

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