

REVIEW

ROMANI COMMUNITIES AND TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE: A NEW SOCIAL EUROPE, EDITED BY ANDREW RYDER, MARIUS TABA AND NIDHI TREHAN, (POLICY PRESS, 2022)

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The idea for this book grew out of a conference in Budapest in 2018 hosted by Corvinus University, the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) and the Roma Education Fund (REF), which assembled a group of well-known Roma experts, activists and intellectuals to speak on diverse issues under the overall framework of “a New Social Europe” and to consider how the latter could bring about transformative change to Romani communities.

It was in the late 1960s that several politicians and intellectuals who belonged to the Social Democratic parties of Europe began to envision a Social Europe and champion the cause of a new, more inclusive Europe. Germany’s Willy Brandt and France’s Jacques Delors, two prominent leaders of the time, effectively coined the phrase and geared the respective government to create a Social Europe under the Social Democratic baton.

However, what the conference at Corvinus did was to cast an analytical light on Roma communities, the most marginalized, yet the most numerous of the ethnic communities in Europe today, and showcased their views from various angles, including those of youth, feminists, activists, anti-authoritarians, etc. thus applying an interdisciplinary approach. The collection of essays includes pieces by eminent Romani intellectuals and their allies such as Sara Cemlyn, Andrew Ryder (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest), Marek Szilvasi, Marius Taba, Bernard Rorke, Anna Daroczi, Nidhi Trehan, Magda Matache (Harvard University), Angela Kocze (Central European University) and a few others, all of whom have sounded sympathetic to the Roma cause and wish to go beyond oft-stated positions about the Roma.

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The book examines some important issues; how can transformative change be achieved? What role can the EU, and civil society play in building a Social Europe? How can anti-Roma racism and authoritarian nationalism be challenged? How can Roma communities achieve agency and self-empowerment? How can diverse marginalized groups be united using an intersectional approach within a new Social Europe?

All these are vital questions; the answers would constitute the sinews of a new Europe. But are they all feasible? The book talks about the challenges faced by the Roma communities “beset by ancient prejudice, neoliberal austerity and now by rising ethno-nationalism...”. Further, cultural erasure and loss of ethnic identities hinder transformative change. This, in fact, is the kernel of truth which the collection of essays wishes to portray.

As the vast majority of Roma experience high levels of exclusion from the labour market and social networks, the imaginative prescriptions which the compendium suggests aim at building an alternative narrative. In effect, the book conceives of the project of a “Social Europe” as a policy vision for planning and implementing a new set of socio-economic instruments designed to significantly ameliorate the position of the Roma.

Ryder is one of the co-contributors to the longest essay in this collection and one of the brains behind the Corvinus Conference. His essay touches upon some key points envisaging a dynamic EU social policy with a bouquet of redistributive and interventionist policies aimed at ameliorating the position of Roma communities. Ryder, along with Thomas Acton, another expert on the Roma, had developed their thesis nearly a decade back. The concept seemed fine in the wake of the formation of social democracies and left-of-centre governments among powerful EU members. However, around the same time as PM Viktor Orban declared that Hungary was an ‘illiberal democracy’ and the premiers of Poland and Slovakia supported him, these leaders formed a virtual triumvirate to challenge the so-called hegemony of the big powers of Europe and refused to fall in line with the agenda dictated by the larger countries’ due to this running counter to their own nationalistic aspirations emanating from their neo-liberal posture. With Brexit and the coming to power of Donald Trump in 2016 in the US, the former’s hyper-nationalistic ambitions got a further fillip. This created an ideological schism within the EU, despite the latter’s threat of sanctions against both Hungary and Poland, a position which has only been aggravated over time.

Trump has long been voted out of power and a democratic administration led by Joe Biden has tried to change the rules of the Trumpian game by establishing a new international rules-based order. However there is still a broad ideological divide in the US between oligarchical capitalists on the one hand and the newly

emboldened Democrats on the other, which may become aggravated with Congress now split down the middle after the recent mid-term elections. The division has been pronounced, with the Democrats baying for Trump's blood, the inquiry into the January 6, 2021 insurrection in the Capitol having come to an end and his tax records for the last six years allowed to be disclosed publicly. The situation in Europe, among frontline states like France, Italy, Spain, Austria and even the Central and Eastern European countries has involved a resurgence of radicalism to the detriment of EU unity.

It is in this context that the idea of a "Social Europe" needs re-evaluation, and particularly the empowerment of the Roma communities in the new Europe. I recall my last few months as India's Ambassador in Budapest when I had already started my doctoral research on the Roma communities of Hungary as part of a comparative study involving a similarly marginalized community in India, the Dalits. I noted certain ethnic, linguistic and behavioural similarities between the two communities, but even more importantly the degree of poverty and marginalization to which both communities were subjected in their respective socio-political contexts. These similarities that have led to acute polarization in society between marginalized minorities and the state have since been further accentuated.

Coincidentally, 2015 saw a significant influx of Syrian immigrants into Hungary from Romania and Serbia seeking entry into developed EU countries, notably Germany. The Orban government steadfastly refused to accept the former, raising wire barricades along its borders in the south and south-east of the country, and defiantly stood up against EU proposal of allocating quotas for refugees per member country, and refused to accept them, even at the cost of being subject to EU strictures.

This was when Orban leveraged space to build his leadership position among his European allies while denying his posture of 'illiberal democracy'. This was also the time when the Roma question came to the fore in the domestic politics of Hungary as well as other Central and Eastern European countries, with the national Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) having reached the half-way mark. In contrast to the goals of NRIS of increasing the integration and well-being of the country, politicians in the latter countries badgered these communities even though the Roma had always been their 'own' nationals and thus citizens in their own right. For example, while some of them were even likened to 'dogs' feeding on their own citizens' rights. That Orban and some other central European leaders, to prove their Christian credentials, showed disdain for the mostly Syrian Muslims was not a matter of conjecture. But putting their own Roma communities who were bona fide citizens in the same category was unwarranted and clearly went against EU regulations.

The compendium of essays, with contributions by prominent Romani activists and writers, elaborated on several aspects of Roma behaviour and patterns of livelihood and is ably put together by Ryder, Taba and Trehan. In addition, several contemporary developments that are dealt in these essays are of relevance, for example, the policies of the ethnic cleansing of the Roma in the garb of ethno-nationalism.

The book advocated a broad-based policy to serve as a “toolkit for reflection, training and mobilization” for Romani communities, but its realization will only be proved over time. Strengthening of political opposition to all Europe’s autocratic rulers could decisively invigorate Roma communities, bringing into being the called for new Social Europe. Transformative change, the other part of the book’s subtitle, is suggested in the form of “deep, structural and cultural change”, and “creating fundamental shifts in discourse and practice based on the principles of social justice”. However, interpreting social justice within the current political framework of Europe is not an easy task. It is no doubt the foundation on which the empowered marginalized communities must be built, even with the institutional backing of the EU which lacks firm ground.

In the aftermath of the collapse of communism, the level-playing field for the employment for Roma was eliminated, as some Central and Eastern European countries chose the neoliberal path, some doing so as a historical correction of course. This hardly left any room for the economic integration of Roma communities. While a good part of Europe consciously moved away from the ‘social welfare model’ in response to continuing crises, starting with the financial crisis of 2007–2008 which got globalized in no time, this was also when the Roma were portrayed as ‘outsiders’ in extreme right-wing politics, ably described by Taba in his essay, with the advent of the phenomenon of ‘anti-Gypsyism’.

Ryder in his essay references a survey undertaken by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) in 11 EU Member States following the 2007–2008 crisis to assess the extent of Roma exclusion. This found that 80% of Roma had an income below the national poverty threshold, only one-third had paid work, unemployment rates were three times higher than those of the general population and 40% of the population suffered from malnutrition and hunger. Moreover, the Roma were pathologized as part of the ‘culture-of-poverty’ narrative. This injected a strong racial dimension as Roma criminality was demonized in the name of securitization. At the same time, nationalism started morphing into unstable authoritarianism, along with a surge in populism.

The impact of COVID-19 further exposed the fragility of Roma vulnerability. Trehan’s essay co-written with Kocze, in this context, refers to excessive

‘governmentality.’ The other concomitant factor was the disconnect of these communities, meaning, indigenous Roma elite grew up, albeit deracinated and delinked from their own identities.

A valuable hypothesis of the study is its focus on human rights and multiculturalism which laid the foundation for the future empowerment of the Roma. Spivak talks about “strategic essentialism” which can be discussed in the context of Amartya Sen’s theory of capabilities originating from his theory of choice. Sen’s postulates about ‘choice’ has led to the theory of capabilities, (the lack of) which deeply divided marginalized groups into elite, sub-elite and poor.

Thus, the book is a compilation of the thoughts of critical scholars and activists who seek to challenge the status quo and to “fuse knowledge production with community mobilization” to promote a transformative agenda “centred on anti-racism and economic justice”. The emphasis on intersectionality and inter-continental solidarity with other marginalized groups, (i.e. learning from their lived experiences of poverty and exclusion) is a valuable contribution and transforms the theme into a universal phenomenon.

The book’s conclusion is that a new Social Europe, based on redistribution and intervention – social tools for achieving social justice – can strengthen the social contract through releasing sufficient resources for transformation, while civil society and the media can provide the platform for agency and critique for marginalized communities. Moreover this approach could be a universal one that is applicable to all developed and developing societies that currently suffer the ravages of socio-economic inequality, notwithstanding their development goals.

