

Balázs Majtényi, György Majtényi. *A Contemporary History of Exclusion: The Roma Issue in Hungary from 1945 to 2015.* Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016. 244 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-963-386-122-6.



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Published on H-Nationalism (March, 2017)

Commissioned by Cristian Cercel (Centre for Advanced Study)

A Contemporary History of Exclusion delivers a rich historical account on the position of the Gypsy/Roma minority in Hungary after the Second World War. The strength and uniqueness of this book stems from its ambition to reiterate Hungarian national history from the perspective of disenfranchised and persecuted communities. Following in the footsteps of Michel Foucault, the authors strive to construct a 'counter-history' of Hungary, alert to persistent power asymmetries, coercive measures, and pernicious exploitation of the antagonized Roma minority. The authors' critical and reflexive reading of sources derived entirely from state institutions reveals implicit biases and deconstructs nationalistic narratives. By shaking dominant discourse from its position, the authors expose how the Hungarian state, irrespective of the regime in place, has labeled Gypsy/Roma as a deviant group and pushed entire communities to the periphery.

The book comes at a time when right-wing populist movements and related political parties are gaining ground in many member states of the European Union. In Hungary, populism has taken the form of a nationalist quest invested in cultivating identity of a 'true Hungarian.' The resulting construction of cultural distinctiveness and ethnic boundaries has propagated and legit-

imized racist and xenophobic sentiments toward Roma. Amid reignited identity struggles the book serves as a needed antidote to the essentialist and antagonizing public discourse that not only distorts the concept of a nation but also threatens the very rights and well-being of the Hungarian Roma minority. It is hence a useful tool for all those engaged in the field of human rights and Romani studies, but also serves as a helpful guide to anyone interested in modern Hungary and its exciting history.

The well-established Hungarian scholars, Balázs Majtényi and György Majtényi, combine their extensive legal and historical expertise to examine the formation, interpretation, and implementation of inclusion policies and the management of minorities in the country. Through comprehensive examination of legislation and policies, the authors elucidate the meaning of the terms 'Gypsy' and 'Roma' as constructed inside the official discourse and eloquently describe the repressive and assimilative practices that have been used against Roma minority by the Hungarian state. What sets this book apart from the majority of historical accounts of the Hungarian Roma is the acknowledgment of the lasting effect of Communist assimilation policies on the integration measures introduced after 1989. The authors not only highlight parallels between seemingly differ-

ent sociopolitical agendas but also show how both the totalitarian and democratic regimes strived to control and subjugate Roma grassroots representation and self-determination, albeit through different means.

The first part of the book supplies a detailed account of the state socialist period characterized by rampant nationalization and centralization. In this rich context, the authors examine the regime's efforts at total assimilation of the Roma minority. They provide rich insights into state policies aimed at the dispersal of compact Romani communities: criminalization of traditional professions, mandatory education, and compulsory wage labor. The authors remind us that these assimilation strategies were designed and implemented entirely without the participation of Roma, save for the few token party officials of Roma lineage. They not only unveil the sheer ineffectiveness of these efforts but also demonstrate how they served to reproduce social inequalities. In many ways, Majtényi and Majtényi locate a point in modern history when Roma culture became equated with poverty and exclusion, a view cultivated to this day.

The second part of the book presents the period of transition and consolidation of democracy in Hungary. It is here that the book loses some of its momentum as the narrative becomes overly stretched and inconsistent. The authors strive to account for all the major developments of the period, but at the expense of an in-depth critical and nuanced inquiry. The descriptive coverage of assorted issues ranging from ethnic politics and school segregation to the rise of civil society and unemployment lacks analytical rigor and fails to bring forward Romani perspectives. In many ways, the reader gets only a glimpse at the buried truths pervading this volatile period. However, what does come across is the exclusionary dynamic embedded in the seemingly all-inclusive public programs, a definite strength of this section.

Picking up pace again, the final chapter takes account

of the most current developments and the shift toward illiberal democracy unleashed by the right-wing government. It is here that the authors bring back the critical lens and scrutinize the anti-egalitarian vision of majoritarian democracy, which they argue builds an increasing number of obstacles to the integration of the Roma minority. Their analysis of legislative changes reveals the colonial character of the new system, where social and cultural differences between the majority and minority are organized in a hierarchical system and citizens are divided into those who are unworthy of state support and those who are not. The reader is left in no doubt that the Roma problem is a political construct, and a tool used to reinvigorate nationalistic sentiments and consolidate the skewed image of the Hungarian nation.

The book's detailed examination of the unequal treatment of Roma minorities by various regimes is not in itself a pioneering quest. In the last two decades, we have seen an explosion of research describing discriminatory practices, exclusionary processes, and violence inflicted on Roma in Hungary. However, in contrast to the majority of these accounts, Majtényi and Majtényi bring to light the strength of Roma resistance, the efforts at self-organization, and the resilience to hostile policies. Rather than constructing an image of passive victims, the authors focus on emancipatory undercurrents and instances of insubordination. They show how the Roma people's sheer determination to be recognized as rightful citizens has had a destabilizing effect on the regime's egalitarian claims, a side of history fully obscured in national history books.

Shortcomings aside, the erudition and depth of understanding of this book make it worth reading. Written with flair, Majtényi and Majtényi's counter-history is full of fresh insights into past and current events. For those interested in a reliable and critical introduction to the topic, this is now a good place to start.

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Citation: Joanna Kostka. Review of Majtényi, Balázs; Majtényi, György, *A Contemporary History of Exclusion: The Roma Issue in Hungary from 1945 to 2015*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. March, 2017.

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