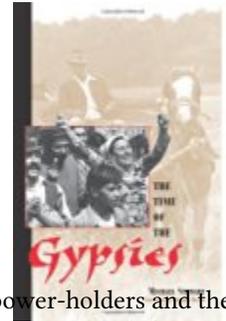


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Stewart. *The Time of the Gypsies*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997. xviii + 302 pp. \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8133-3199-7.

Reviewed by Tone-Kristin Lone (University of Bergen)
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Though he received a Ph.D. in anthropology from the London School of Economics, Michael Stewart reaches out to a wider audience in this noteworthy contribution to the literature on gypsies. *The Time of the Gypsies* is an anthropological study of Gypsies in Hungary which demonstrates their failed assimilation during the Communist Regime. Stewart shows how they preserved their identity as a minority group in spite of official Communist policy until 1989 in Eastern Europe to absorb Gypsies into the “ruling” working class. Although most Gypsies in Eastern Europe don’t travel (less than one per cent) and almost all these Gypsies work for wages, they manage to distinguish themselves as a group within wider society.

Stewart bases the book on fifteen months of fieldwork in a Gypsy settlement called “The Third Class” in the town of Harangos. The book’s great strength lies in the convincing portrait of a Gypsy point of view. The author shows us how the Gypsies “take objects, representations and practices - in Hungary, horses, cleanliness beliefs, market trading - that exist in the outside world, and invert or subvert their meanings to their own ends” (p. 13).

Much of the book is devoted to description and analysis of how the Gypsies, or Rom, maintain their social order. Stewart makes it clear that although most of the Gypsies in Hungary were engaged in wage labor, this did not mean that they lost their identity as Gypsies. “[T]he experience of work provided little reason for the Gypsies to adopt the socialist ideology of labor” (p. 111). Instead the Rom stressed to Stewart that by their wit, their speech and their ability to hustle they were able to survive on the basis of their “Gypsy work,” although in most cases this was not so. Their way of talking of “Gypsy work” was in certain contexts, according to Stewart, a way for them to

sustain a picture of themselves as power-holders and the Magyars as dominated.

In the last part of the book Stewart explains how the “Rom define themselves in opposition to the gazos (the non-Gypsies), who were seen as less fully human than the Rom” (p. 232). This way of establishing a separation between the Rom and “others” is not a unique feature for the Gypsies in Harangos. See, for example, Okely 1996, 1994, 1981 and Gamella 1996, for similar studies in other local contexts. The ways the Rom establish this boundary nevertheless varies from place to place, and Stewart gives us good insight into how the Gypsies of Harangos maintain this ethnic boundary. For example, he explores how horse-trading, celebrations, songs and the shame of the body (pollution-beliefs) act as a means for maintaining this separation between “outsiders” and “insiders.”

The marked contrast between male and female roles, which is a known feature of Gypsy society in many countries, is also treated in this book. Stewart tries to account for what women say and think by using, for example, Judit Szeg’s (his wife’s) data gathered in a series of interviews with women about the Rom sense of shame (p. 214). But, unfortunately we never get “under the skin” of women. A great deal of the book is about how men look at work, trade, singing, their “brothers” and the maintenance of the Gypsies as a group. For a more convincing presentation of Gypsy women (although in a different social setting) see Judith Okely (1996).

The biggest shortcoming of Stewart’s book is that it is dated, based as it is upon data collected in 1984-1985. As we are well aware Hungary has undergone a profound transformation since then –politically, economically and socially. We are forced to ask what is the situation of Gypsies in Hungary today. Nevertheless as a well writ-

ten ethnography of the way Gypsies think and feel about themselves and "others," and how they order their lives in relation to these beliefs, *The Time of the Gypsies* is a very positive contribution to our understanding of the Rom in Hungary, and the book could be used well in undergraduate teaching.

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