

Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka. 2022. *Mobilizing Romani Ethnicity: Romani Political Activism in Argentina, Colombia, and Spain*. Budapest: CEU Press.

Book review by

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Aidan McGarry's research focuses on social movements, protest, democracy, voice, identity, and Roma. He is the author of several books including: *Who Speaks for Roma? Political Representation of a Transnational Minority Community* (Continuum 2010); *Romaphobia: The Last Acceptable Form of Racism* (Zed 2017); and the forthcoming *Political Voice: Protest, Democracy and Marginalized Groups* (Oxford University Press 2024).



Mobilizing Romani Ethnicity: Romani Political Activism in Argentina, Colombia, and Spain uncovers an under-researched topic, Romani activism in South America, and compares this to Romani political activism in Spain. The transcontinental nature of the comparison is welcome as it reveals processes, institutions, and agency in diverse contexts and how these contexts create opportunities for Romani activism. Almost all studies about Romani communities focus on Europe, for obvious reasons, as this is where the largest Romani populations are to be found. Through its novel epistemology and methodology, it challenges the Eurocentrism inherent in Romani Studies, forcing us to look beyond our immediate surroundings.

The book is structured around six chapters bookended with an introduction and a conclusion. The *Introduction* discusses the motivations for writing the book as Mirga-Kruszelnicka reflects on her, and Romani researchers', positionality, knowledge, and critical engagement with the situation of Roma. It sets out the main research questions including: how is Romani ethnicity mobilized for political action? Who are the people and structures behind Romani political activism? What discourses, narratives, and symbols are used to communicate with Romani communities and majority societies? It also justifies the empirical focus and establishes the main arguments. *Chapter One* defines the core concept of ethnic mobilization which subsequently is pulled through the empirical chapters to provide critical analysis and insights and ensures that the book speaks beyond the sometimes narrower confines of Romani Studies. This chapter draws on ideas from social movement studies deploying frame theory and political opportunity structures, thus providing the theoretical framework for the book. *Chapter Two* situates the background context to minority rights struggles in Latin America and Europe before focusing on Romani political subjectivity, a topic which has been explored before but usually in Europe (McGarry 2010; Rostas 2019). It is good to see that this chapter has a section on 'Romani voices' but it understandably tends to focus on more institutionalised formations, that is, civil society and interaction with international organisations. It is important to expand our notion of voice for Romani communities and incorporate other voices, especially those that are more grassroots and those which emerge through public and collective protest action (see McGarry 2024). This chapter presents some fascinating insights on the important topic of visibility or hypervisibility of Romani communities in Europe comparing it to the relative invisibility of Roma in Latin America. *Chapter Three* provides the reader with some needed socio-cultural and historical context. While those of us working on Romani-related research will be largely familiar with the situation of Roma in Spain, their presence in Argentina and Colombia is relatively unknown. This chapter explores the presence of Roma in these contexts and explains how Romani communities have been buffeted by prevailing political winds including democratic transition (Spain) and violence (Colombia). *Chapter Four* details the anatomy of the Romani movement in each country and explains the typology and topography of the various actors who shape activism and advocacy. Whilst the focus in this book is on civil society, this chapter discusses the interaction of Romani communities with formal party politics and addresses issues of fragmentation, leadership, and 'representativeness'. The salience of Romani women and youth is an important intervention challenging the dominant role of Romani men and has led to increasing 'pluralizing patterns of Romani ethnic mobilization and leadership' (171). *Chapter Five* advances an understanding of frame theory and frame alignment. In the context of Romani agency, it elaborates a tension between exogenous frames (including homogeneity) and endogenous frames (including narratives of shared identity). Here Mirga-Kruszelnicka demonstrates how frames of collective identity become 'not only a "public expression of self" but also a political one, in which the

group transforms into a politically relevant subject' (181). The tension between internal mobilization and external expression is the constant dilemma with which minority actors must reckon. *Chapter Six* expands upon some of the insights related to Romani ethnicity and collective action. It addresses the need to build public support as well as internal mobilization necessitating the building of trust and legitimacy in, as well as among, various actors. The *Conclusion* presents the Romani issue as a global issue, not just confined to Europe but also draws links and parallels with other communities and struggles including indigenous and First Nation communities. It closes with insights relating to Romani agency and the minority scholar perspective.

Mobilizing Romani Ethnicity applies new ideas to theoretical concepts from social movements' studies such as frames and political opportunity structures, so as to develop our understanding of these concepts in relation to ethnic mobilization. The book foregrounds these concepts, rather than the case studies of Argentina, Colombia, and Spain, by weaving empirical cases and evidence into the analysis. The author provides a detailed account of cases covering the socio-cultural and historical context in each. In Romani-related research, we should welcome more comparison in order to better understand the multifaceted issues facing Romani communities and where we can learn from other communities' experiences.

The positionality of the author is placed front and centre and is critically embedded within the discussion. It clearly motivates and shapes the arguments being made. I think this is a real strength of the book because it challenges notions of knowledge production, reflexivity, and the role of the researcher vis-a-vis activism and representation. Mirga-Kruszelnicka rightly asserts that a heterogeneity of positions ensures a dialogue, an underpinning logic of contestation and interaction which ensures that important questions are asked (and hopefully answered). She draws comparison with other subaltern communities and movements crucial to ensuring diverse lenses and experiences are reflected upon and that common assumptions can be challenged.

The writing is authoritative, clear, focused, and innovative. Mirga-Kruszelnicka dexterously negotiates complex socio-political phenomenon while engaging in academic debates on representation, visibility, and agency. I would have liked to see some more discussion on the importance of visibility and how different this is in South America (low visibility) compared to Spain (high visibility). Visibility is a double-edged sword whereby being visible and raising awareness is crucial for any movement but, for Roma, can lead to further stigma and persecution. Marginalised communities must negotiate this tightrope at all times as meaningful agency is only possible through visibility.

The book is rigorous, well-written, and convincingly argued. It is clearly based on years of activism and research and deep engagement with a range of participants. Overall, it is ambitious because it is doing something new; presenting a cross-national transcontinental comparison and making the case for the relevance of local/national contexts in informing opportunities for Romani activism, as well as the impact of these on identity and interest formation.

The role of the evangelical movement for Romani mobilization is interesting. There are some arguments to be developed here around the church as a network. Aldon Morris' research (1984) on the role of the black churches as a way to build community and develop common identities and interests for the

civil rights movement in the 1950s in the Deep South of the United States is instructive. I wonder if the same could be said of Roma and evangelical churches, specifically that they are a network, which enables ethnic mobilization to take place. In the context of twenty-first century activism, it would also be interesting to know more about social media and digital technologies as a means to develop Romani agency, representation, and visibility (and the resultant drawbacks inherent in engaging such platforms).

This book will be of interest to range of scholars. It will be a key resource for those working on Roma issues, meaning a broad range of scholars working in Romani Studies (including media, politics, sociology, anthropology, arts and humanities, ethnomusicology). The book makes a contribution to social movement studies and protest movements both historically and in more contemporary contexts. Research focused on migration and diaspora groups will find this book relevant as will researchers working on issues of decolonisation and subaltern studies, especially those that work on Spain and Latin America. I imagine this book will be of great interest to Latin American specialists as it draws attention to an under-researched community. I believe scholars working on policymaking, especially public policy and issues of inclusion, integration and participation will benefit from the discussion presented here. The book will be of relevance to those working on activism and community-building as there are important lessons to be learned. Finally, policymakers working in local, regional (especially European), and international organisations will find this book offers useful insights in terms of how minority groups mobilize, forge identity and articulate shared interests.

References

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