

Book Review: Gypsy law: Romani legal traditions and culture

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Postprint / Postprint

Rezension / review

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Papapavlou, M. (2006). Book Review: Gypsy law: Romani legal traditions and culture. [Review of the book *Gypsy law: Romani legal traditions and culture*, by W. O. Weyrauch]. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9(2), 251-253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/136754940600900211>

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Although he claims to have avoided empiricism and essentialism, Willis' emphasis on experience and the material, as opposed to language and the textual, does raise the question of whether he has succeeded on this count. Nonetheless, *The Ethnographic Imagination* constitutes an important and timely plea for ethnographic research in the field of cultural studies.

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Walter O. Weyrauch (ed.), *Gypsy Law: Romani Legal Traditions and Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. 298 pp. (inc. index). ISBN 0-520-22185-0 (hbk); ISBN 0-520-22186-9 (pbk) \$24.95

Gypsy Law: Romani Legal Traditions and Culture, edited by Walter O. Weyrauch, is an authoritative collection of Gypsy and non-Gypsy scholars examining the Romany legal system. By covering a broader spectrum of issues concerned with the Gypsy culture and its relation with the host societies, this book constitutes a valuable contribution in several fields of study. Due to its focus on the procedures of autonomous lawmaking it is an engaging and compelling read for scientists and professionals from different disciplinary and professional areas. Scientists from the fields of cultural and social studies (i.e. political anthropology, anthropology of justice, Romany studies) and professionals such as lawyers, social workers and administrators will find this book, which is based on thorough and reliable research, essential reading for their work.

More specifically, the volume under review brings together 11 essays, whose leitmotiv is the discussion about the autonomous lawmaking of different Gypsy groups, namely the Rom-Vlach Gypsies, Romanichals and Kaale living in Canada, Finland, the UK and US. The discussion is developed around the legal functions of *kris* – a kind of communal court – and the blood feud systems (the latter being popular among the Finnish Gypsies). In order to understand more deeply the Gypsy strategies of autonomous lawmaking, all the contributors contextualize the main issue within its cultural and social reasoning. They describe extensively the relationship between Gypsies and non-Gypsies not only in moments of conflict but also in wider social interference. All the contributions are committed to the alleged Indian origin of Gypsies in Europe and the US. Hence, they often attempt to present cultural practices (religious rituals, etc.) as the heritage of Indian culture (see pp. 98, 151, 209–10, 246, 262). Nevertheless, since they are based on recent research which is often anthropologically oriented, they are less dogmatic in this direction, stressing the historical dimension of the social interaction between Gypsies and host societies in Europe and America.



Basically, all the contributions place their presentation and interpretation of the Gypsy legal system on Gypsies' need to keep their social and cultural identity intact within broader society (which was, and still is, often hostile). As Anne Sutherland illustrates, the question of Gypsy–non-Gypsy relations is centred very clearly in the fundamental differences between fixed and nomadic societies (p. 231). Furthermore, the constitution of the modern state and its centralized formal legal system based on a written tradition of law forms the basic difference to the autonomous lawmaking of the oral Gypsy culture (pp. 11–87, 101–16).

Seen at the legal level, the profile of the relations between Gypsies and non-Gypsies as it is portrayed through history (Fraser's well documented essay, pp. 137–48) and in the present, is characterized through reservations from both sides. The state, administration, state courts and police authorities view Gypsies with prejudice and tend to criminalize their culture and social existence (pp. 6–10, 229). For their part, Gypsies tend to restrict their contact with non-Gypsies through the elaborate *marime* code (a system of ritual pollution or ostracism) that is very well illustrated by all contributors. The *marime* code – in essence an ethical code – stands as the organizing concept of all Gypsy cultural and legal actions. Gypsies resolve internal conflicts within their community (territorial disputes, divorces, economic cases and matters of honour) through the *kris*. The declaration of a person as *marime* (i.e. that they are polluted and can pollute others) is the ultimate judgement of the *kris*, which ostracizes them socially.

Very interesting and stimulating is the theoretical attempt of most of the contributors, with the leading essay 'Autonomous Lawmaking: The Case of "Gypsies"' written by Weyrauch and Bell, to draw parallels between Gypsy legal traditions and the oral legal traditions of host societies. This self-reflexive approach offers challenging insights into our own culture and society, bringing into focus the coexistence of formal justice systems and informal private lawmaking practices (institutions, corporations, families). The benefits of informal social control systems are centred in the empowerment of communities and in the effectiveness of restrictive rules upon community members.

Special reference should be made to the essay 'Gypsy Law and Jewish Law' written by Carmichael, which succeeds in throwing a comparative light on the legal tradition of Gypsies. Jewish law demonstrates commonalities with Gypsy law in many ways (myth of origin, supernatural guidance, legal and ethical equivalents of behavioural norms, etc., pp. 126–36), which are grounded in their social history as outsiders in host cultures. Along the same lines but with added dimension is the essay by Grönfors on the Finnish Roma, based on his ethnographical data collected during anthropological field research in the late 1970s. The main achievement of this essay is to focus on important differences in the legal traditions of the Kaale as a good example of the multiplicity of ways



in which different gypsy groups manage to deal with the host society. This essay stands as a methodological opposite to the researches applied by Acton and Weyrauch/Bell. Acton, Caffrey and Mundy's essay argues for a fragmentation of ethnographical material collected by field researchers failing to locate 'their' group in a broader historical and structural context (p. 89). Weyrauch and Bell employ the same method of synthesis of existing data (p. 27) although they are criticized by Acton, Caffrey and Mundy that they fail to present a whole analysis of Romany social controls. They are charged with restricting their examination to the *kris* of the Vlach Rom and not presenting other types of social control, such as the blood feud systems (which their essay attempts to undertake). The productive results of these controversies enable the reader of this volume to obtain a rich description of Romany legal traditions. Finally, the valuable contribution of the essay written by Hancock should be mentioned, which offers a glossary of Romany terms, many of them used throughout this volume.

In sum, this book offers a compelling and resourceful read for a wide range of scientists and professionals involved with matters of minorities culturally differentiated from broader society.

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Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod and Brian Larkin (eds), *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002. 413 pp. ISBN 0-5202-2448-5 (hbk) £40.00; ISBN 0-5202-3231-3 (pbk) £17.95

This work is a collection of articles exhibiting new research in the area of media anthropology. With these essays, mostly new for this volume, the editors propose new ground for the ethnographic study of media and showcase the possibilities of thick description as a method of enquiry into the role and location of media within cultures, an approach of which the editors have long been vocal proponents. In pursuit of this aim, the volume's contributors trace the enmeshment of media consumption and production in other cultural practices, ethnic and national identities and discourses in an attempt to formulate accounts of media practice and understandings situated 'beyond the living room and studio'.

The framework that the editors have selected for this review is a political problematic which examines media as contested space in the formulation of identities, and it is this problematic which will doubtless make this volume of interest to readers of this journal. The essays themselves address five key areas in relation to this central problematic: cultural activism, representation, social engagement with media technologies,