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Review Article

Review of Péter Berta, *Materializing Difference, Consumer Culture, Politics and Ethnicity among Romanian Roma*, University of Toronto Press, 2019

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Péter Berta's *Materializing Difference: Consumer Culture, Politics, and Ethnicity among Romanian Roma* makes an important contribution to the understanding of social life of things and its connection to politics, ethnicity, and social distinction among Romanian (Transylvanian) Roma. The story centers around silver beakers and roofed tankards, prestige objects around which Gabor and Cărhă Roma, two communities that live in

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order to investigate the multifaceted relationship between objects (silver beakers and roofed tankards) and subjects (Romanian Roma). The book's main goal is to investigate how the relationship between these prestige objects and Gabor or Cărhă Roma "contribute to the construction, materialization, and reformulation of social, economic and political identities, boundaries, and differences" (p.4) among Romanian Roma and how post-socialist transformations in Romania affected the Gabor Roma's consumption practices and led to a re-interpretation of what "good life" or/and "average living standards" mean.

Although the book's main chronological framework is post-socialism there are still important references to socialist period which makes it a good resource for grasping collecting and interpersonal economic transactions before 1989 as well. While many authors writing about Roma communities in Transylvania have portrayed them as "backward" and not really possessing cultural products of their own, Berta argues that in fact Gabor Roma do have cultural agency as the frequently performed Hungarian language songs and folklore are purposefully selected and recycled so to meet the community members' political goals. Similarly, Gabor Roma unlike other Roma communities researched in Europe (mainly in Hungary and Spain) do take past (understood as more than three generations) into consideration when building the narrative about their present social and political status within their community or in relation to neighboring Roma communities. For a community that used to be mobile until the 1970s and that relies mostly on oral tradition to recollect the main events, the way Gabor Roma relates to the past and the emphasis they put on the beakers and tankards' historical patina speaks about their cultural complexity. These are just a number of key observations that Péter Berta makes after having spent thirty-three

months among Gabor Roma in Transylvania and having attended various events in their life from funerals to weddings and other family events while using participatory

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community through symbolic arenas (i.e. accumulation of economic capital, marriages, ethics of sociability - behavior and honor), prestige economy through the ownership of antiquated prestige objects (silver beakers and roofed tankard that have passed through the hands of two-three important Roma men), bazar-style trade (only dealings that take place under the rules and prices agreed by the Roma are recognized as legitimate transfer of ownership in the case of prestige silver objects) and popularization of these transactions in Roma popular culture as a way of legitimizing power.

The second part of the book investigates the prestige-object trade between Gabor and Cărhâr Roma, fraud attempts, and the difficulty to define authenticity in the case of silver beaker and roofed tankards. The interest in these objects is not limited to Gabor Roma, but is also shared by the Cărhâr Roma who live in Braşov and Sibiu counties and mostly speak Romanian beyond their Roma dialect (as opposed to Gabors who are Hungarian speakers). Berta argues that the transactions between Gabor and Cărhâr Roma fall under the umbrella of “proprietary contest” paradigm because while the Gabors attempt to retain most of the prestige objects in their community, Cărhars are making efforts to procure them sometimes at skyrocketing prices.

In the last part of the book, Péter Berta delves into the theoretical grounds of the biographical method, which in the last two chapters he applies to the history of one particular silver beaker and, respectively, one roofed tankard and their owners.

Péter Berta's *Materializing Difference* brilliantly blends theory with ethnographical work, and, thus, results a book that could be of interest to anthropologists, but also to historians (like myself), art historians, or sociologists. Researchers of consumption, collecting, Roma studies or simply socialism and post-socialism could all strongly benefit from Berta's book. While studies on consumption in Eastern Europe under

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practices of a so-called peripheral Roma community and showing the complex networks they develop in order to acquire, authenticate, and maintain the prestige goods into their families, Berta places the Gabor Roma at the center of luxury item collecting in Central-Eastern Europe as their grids cover art markets in at least two countries – Romania and Hungary.

Although the aspect of social stratification is less examined in this book (beyond the discussion on prestige), it is clear that the economic elites in both Gabor and Cărhar Roma are mostly involved in this trade. In terms of gender (and this is discussed at length) the prestige objects trade seems to be the monopoly of men in the case of both Gabor and Cărhar Roma. It is worth noting that women are not portrayed as lacking complete agency for they are involved in other types of trade (clothes trade and even begging in Western European cities in the case of Cărhar Roma).

A basic knowledge in anthropological and sociological theories related to consumption, collecting, and identities as well as some familiarity with the Eastern European context are needed to fully grasp this book that I wholeheartedly recommend to both scholars of East Central Europe and Roma studies worldwide.

Additional information

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