

Book Review: Gypsies and Travellers: Empowerment and Inclusion in British Society

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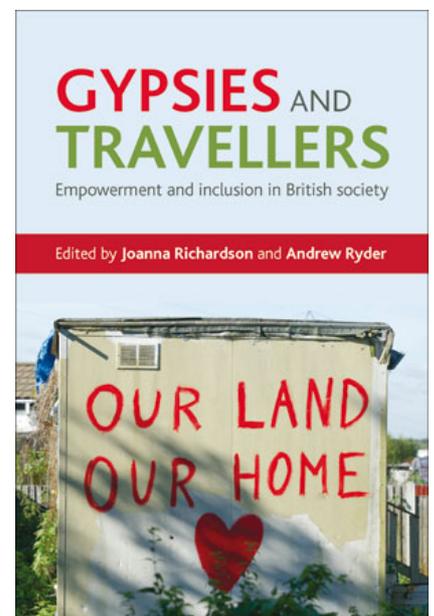
*The eviction at Dale Farm in the UK in 2011 brought the conflicting issues relating to Gypsy and Traveller accommodation to the attention of the world's media. However, as the furore surrounding the eviction has died down, the very pressing issues of accommodation need, inequality of access to education, healthcare and employment, and exclusion from British (and European) society is still very much evident, which this book sets out to address. **Philip Brown** finds this book is a useful primer for those with little to no knowledge of the issue of Gypsies and Travellers but it may leave readers more familiar with the topic yearning for more original analysis.*



Gypsies and Travellers: Empowerment and Inclusion in British Society. Joanna Richardson and Andrew Ryder (eds.). Policy Press. September 2012.

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After spending the last eight years as a researcher looking at the social exclusion of Gypsy, Traveller and Roma populations, the arrival of new texts which help to better understand the complex issues encountered by these groups are always welcomed. These communities are complex. Their encounters with public policy have, on balance, been more often than not exclusive. It is not until you spend time with families, talk about their daily lives and examine their interaction with the polity that you realise how much effort has been expended by individuals, activists and agencies for very little social advancement. It is clear what is needed is either a critical mass of people who understand the range of ways in which Gypsy and Traveller populations in the UK are excluded who can then be facilitated to act and/or new ways of thinking about these issues. As a reader this is what I was hoping for.



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This recent text is the product of a mixed authorship of academics and activists which, encouragingly, include members of Gypsy-Traveller communities. It is an edited collection which seeks to examine and debate a range of themes encountered and played out in the daily lives of Gypsies and Travellers in Britain. Most of the authors in the text will be familiar to those with an interest in this topic. The book is comprised of twelve chapters divided into two parts. Part one focuses on context and part two on the notion of 'empowering' Gypsies and Travellers.

There are several stand-out chapters. Chapter Two, by Joanna Richardson and Maggie Bendell-Smith, revisits the pressing issues around accommodation and planning for Gypsy-Traveller communities, although the chapter does devote a disproportionate amount of attention to now redundant policy processes. However, the authors do provide an up to date overview of the controversial planning policies of the coalition government. Within Chapter Three Patrice Van Cleemput reflects on the policy framework with regard to health and persuasively argues that stigma and racialisation are key to understanding health inequalities experienced by minority groups such as Gypsy and Traveller communities. Here Van Cleemput describes how the poor experience of health care and lack of access to healthcare creates an inverse relationship between health needs and use of health and related services. She goes on to highlight some of the everyday coping strategies adopted by community members when dealing with healthcare services.

In Chapter Four Brian Foster and Sarah Cemlyn provide an account of education policies in the context of barriers and issues presented by Traveller education. It would be hard not to agree with their central thesis that the ongoing state retrenchment of the coalition government from specialist educational support of Gypsy and Traveller children will no doubt have significant impacts on the social inclusion of the community in years to come. In Chapter Five, Dan Allen provides an excellent analysis of the accounts of Gypsy-Traveller children in care grounded in empirical qualitative data which allows the voices of Gypsies and Travellers in describing their experience of care to shine through the text. In this chapter Allen engages with power relations and also the complexities around group identities.

Some of the remaining chapters, however, leave more to be desired. Chapter Six by Margaret Greenfields, Andrew Ryder and David Smith looks at economic practices of the communities drawing on the concept of social capital as a framework. The chapter finishes by reviewing the opportunities provided by the (pretty redundant) concept of the 'Big Society'. In Chapter Nine Greenfields and Ryder draw almost entirely on their own research in presenting the benefits of a participatory approach to research (PAR). This is perhaps the most frustrating chapter as the authors claim their approach to be innovative when in reality such an approach has been developed for work with marginalised communities over decades. More frustrating is the lack of any critique of PAR which would be a far more interesting angle to pursue.

For readers with little to no knowledge of the issue of Gypsies and Travellers and their inclusion in British Society this book is a useful primer. However, for those of us who are more familiar with the topic I suspect the text will serve as a disappointment. A number of chapters serve as re-workings of the authors' previous scholarly (journal) publications. Although bringing together previous writing can be useful in order to highlight previous research and practice to a new audience, this does unfortunately make some of the chapters feel familiar. One exception to this appears to be Allen's chapter on children in care which serves as the stand-out contribution to the text.

Similarly, the analysis in the text is largely uncritical and often utilises theoretical frameworks which have seen better days (e.g. social capital). The text hangs on the notion of "empowerment" but never really grapples with what this means or provides a critique of the concept. There is also a tendency for certain authors to over self-cite and also, talk to a small, familiar audience. Where is the disruptive innovation needed in order to provide a step-change in the status quo?

Taken as a whole, the text feels insular and lacking in original and innovative analysis. All of this said, for an audience unfamiliar with the topic I am sure the text will provide a good deal of new information. But if readers are looking for a new perspective on the inclusion of Gypsies and Travellers in contemporary Britain they would be better off looking elsewhere. Critical commentators such as [Ryan Powell](#) and [Robert Vanderbeck](#) have less comprehensive texts on the subject but offer new insights which serve as a good start.

Philip Brown is Deputy Director of the Salford and Housing and Urban Studies Unit at the University of Salford. Prior to joining the Unit, Philip worked as a residential social worker with Leeds City Council working on the asylum seeker and refugee resettlement projects, a freelance research consultant and a lecturer in psychology for the University of Huddersfield. [Read more reviews by Philip.](#)

