

**Oponentský posudek na disertační práci**  
**Reviewer's Report on Doctoral Thesis**

**Mgr. Edit Szénássy: Reproduction on the Margins: The Moral  
Economies of Romani Fertility**

**Institut doktorských studií, Fakulta humanitních studií  
Univerzity Karlovy**

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**Oponent / Reviewer: doc. PhDr. Iva Šmídová, Ph.D.**

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Struktura posudku / Structure of the report:

1. Komentář ke struktuře práce / Commentary on structure of the thesis
2. Připomínky k obsahu / Commentary on content
3. Jazyková a grafická úroveň / Language and graphical quality
4. Otázky k obhajobě / Questions for the defence
5. Závěry / Conclusions

1. Commentary on structure of the thesis

The dissertation covers the studied and analysed problem in five chapters plus introduction and a short conclusion. Each thematic chapter includes its own summary and conclusions providing easy orientation in each phase of the dissertation text. Towards the close, the dissertation also includes an astonishing list of relevant topical literature demonstrating the author's in-depth and intense involvement in the field of study. (An author index – which I did not find - would be a useful tool to match the references with the relevant passages in the dissertation text itself.)

The text as such is dense and concise, and despite its brevity (122 actual content pages) it provides a solid presentation of the intersectional problem under study: lived experience with ethnicity and reproduction in the perspective of moral economies.

2. Commentary on content

The introduction explores a widely medialised case of Czech quintuplets and by this example the author situates cultural racism and stereotypes towards the Roma, and also discloses the

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V odpovědi, prosím, uvádějte naše číslo jednací.

author's cultural socialisation into attitudes toward the Roma people as being "too many and too much". Then she moves on to describing her fieldwork, including its multiplicity and formulates the original goal of the research: "This dissertation began as a quest to understand the ways extreme marginality situated in a relatively peripheral but comparatively affluent setting coincides with social aspiration for a high number of offspring". Then she moves on to conceptually frame her field of research interest (marginalisation, reproduction and reproductive rights, governance etc.).

The summary of content-rich analytical chapters and the logic of presentation of research findings is provided then (pp. 22 – 24, three of which are grounded in an ethnographical research in a Slovak "osada" and the latter two in a Czech maternity-ward). These chapters are not just presentations of descriptive accounts gathered as ethnographic data, Edit Szénássy provides rich reflection and contextualisation of the studied environment and context by relevant conceptual literature, population and demographic trends as well as the country contexts. And she summarises the theoretical implications of her experience and fieldwork in respective conclusions of these chapters. The first chapter wraps the messiness of the entanglements of reproductive agency (fertility decisions) of these reproductive citizens (p. 46-47).

The same careful and reflexive approach is more or less present in the following chapters as well. Chapter on the value of children for the Roma people in the light of "responsible reproduction" and modes of governance (also lived experience with sterilisation) does so on the backdrop of demographic anxiety (in certain international) and historical contexts at first, then moves to ethnographic accounts and then thematically shifts to the issue of sterilisation – as reproductive agency. Then, the author contextualises individual choices of the Romani women by broader social and cultural values adopted or present in the majority population. (Here the sequence or order of the subchapters loses its analytical logic a bit in the narrative thread – these do not seem to be as well interconnected, tied together, in my reading, as other chapters.) Yet, economic constraints and the passive vs. heroic agency divide provided a fruitful base for an analysis of agency of Romani women in labour (when giving birth, third analytical chapter).

The chapter on birth (and the rest of the dissertation text on maternity-ward practices) is close to my own expertise. Here, the author presents relevant issues of medical interventions, autonomy and control, and control over fear and alienated environment of the hospital. Belongings and marginalisation come out as very strong analytical moments of "fraught locations of intersection between Romani women and the state" (p. 91). The acceptance of the biomedicalised (interventionist) medical model of birth (delivery in medical terms) by the Romani women presents analytically rich and textured picture of cultural differences in assessment of birth among various serial collectives of women, marginalised and others.

Chapters four and five deal with patient-hood and stereotypisation in maternity wards. Frictions between the hospital personnel and Romani women giving birth form and provide a vivid mirror reflecting the processes of "othering" (in room segregation) as well as of inclusion as good (obedient) patient-hood. The way ethnicity is/gets essentialised in the interactions and cultural

stereotypes reproduced - is reflected and presented with careful critical scrutiny as rooms “between cultural sensitivity and human rights abuse” (p. 116).

Overall, the analytical chapters build one on another neatly and bring – step by step - novel understandings to the topic under research inquiry. I would perhaps suggest to place the (concluding) methodological note on the author’s positionality within the field - as a “relatively privileged” actor - and her expression of social solidarity/responsibility, into the opening chapters of the thesis.

Conclusions of the research study are nevertheless convincing and well grounded. I find the dissertation thesis of Edit Szénássy a solid example of well managed and clearly presented ethnographic study into an intersectional problem so far on the outer of social science empirical research focus. It is laudable that the author picked the topic up and delivered a profound and novel study.

### 3. Language and graphical quality

The text meets all requirements of an academic text. It is very fluent and smooth to read – the research is presented with personal attention to details and care to parties involved in the research process as well as to potential readers unfamiliar with the fieldwork.

### 4. Questions for the defence

- The second analytical chapter (value of children) presents – in length - international practices of reproductive agency/governance (population politics). Based on the cases (countries) presented – what would be the authors’ conclusions when comparing these diverse cultural contexts to the one under her study?
- I wonder, would you have any methodological reflection on (restoring) the “good patient-hood” (p. 102) of Romani women as their performance and as assessed by the maternity-ward personnel and grasped in your interviews? Do you think issues of political correctness and self-presentation for the researcher might have played any role in the medical staff accounts?
- Several years have passed since your first topical ethnographic encounters, would you reflect on recent local developments in the field under study?
- I find the text as well as the (multi-sited) ethnography well conducted and concluded. Yet, if you were to return to the topical fieldwork again, what would be your moves this time, what themes would you dwell on? Or are there topics and sites you would prefer not to re-enter perhaps, and why?

## 5. Conclusions

It was a joy to read Edit Szénássy's dissertation thesis. I find the text ripe and well structured, the author took her time and presents the research findings well nuanced and grounded in relevant conceptual as well as historical, cultural and social contexts. Her approach is methodologically reflexive, she demonstrates ability to combine descriptive as well as theoretically rich approaches to the problem under study. Her thesis brings novel understanding of the topic of reproductive agency in marginalised populations and settings, and does so convincingly on rich fieldwork data and utilising broad spectrum of relevant conceptual literature.

**The student has demonstrated her creative abilities in the relevant research area.**

**I recommend the thesis for defence.**

Datum a podpis oponenta / Date and signature of the reviewer:

Brno, February 5th, 2023



Iva Šmídová