

**Красимир Асенов, *Антропология на „гетото” – пространство и култура*, Пловдив: СТУДИО 18, 2018, 346 стр. [Krasimir Asenov, *Anthropology of the „Ghetto” – Space and Culture*. Plovdiv: STUDIO 18, 2018, p. 346]**

In 2017 Krasimir Asenov successfully defended his doctoral thesis titled “Emergence, spatial and cultural development of Arman Mahala – Plovdiv” under the academic supervision of Professor Maria Schnitter at the Department of Ethnology in the Paisij Hilendarski University of Plovdiv. By the end of 2018 his study on the ghettoized urban structure – Arman Mahala, located in the North region of Plovdiv, was published under the title: *Антропология на „гетото” – пространство и култура* [Anthropology of the „Ghetto” – Space and Culture].

The book presents his research on the formation of a Roma neighborhood in Plovdiv and its spatial and cultural development – which in itself is one uncharted urban and cultural phenomenon. Krasimir Asenov’s research is related to the so-called „invisible“ geography field, the exploration of urban ghettoized structures – areas with a high concentration of Roma population. Inside these structures he studies cultural matrices, social kinship networks, forms of social control, both in the country and abroad. The fieldwork methodology included remote methods or the so-called aerospace methods for collecting information (ortho-photos) on the location, boundaries, internal structure, horizontal and vertical infrastructure, and street regulation in the „ghettoized urban structure“. These innovative technologies were used for the first time in relation to a study of the space in a Roma neighborhood. Last but not least, the author describes rituals and customs that had not been introduced in the scientific discourse – such as the practice, conventionally called „thrown blindly“<sup>1</sup>, a mechanism for resolving intergroup conflicts.

One of the goals the author puts forward in the book is to challenge, as he calls them „the temporally sustainable deprivation stereotypes against the Roma communities“ (p. 11). Among the Roma related issues that he considers are the following: the lack of equal participation in the socio-political and economic life; unequal

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<sup>1</sup> This ritual is also described and interpreted in an article published by Asenov in the journal Anthropology, see issue 3/ 2016: “Едно послание «Хвърлено на сляпо» (За един неизследван ритуал по материали от Пловдивските махали)”.

treatment; asymmetric integration policies; assimilation aspirations; imposition of Westernization models on the Roma population.

The lack of effective public policies towards the Roma communities, according to Asenov, is primarily due to the insufficient understanding of the cultural diversity of these communities: „The inability of non-Roma to typify, differentiate and decode the cultural matrices of the individual Roma communities on a national and international level predetermines the results of the integration policies” (pp.11–12).

Already in the introduction to the book the author finds that the accepted methodological and theoretical approaches in the research on the Roma are inadequate and incapable of describing in detail aspects of the everyday life, culture and history of the Roma. The large heterogeneity of the Roma groups is a challenge for any researcher. The method he considers the most appropriate for his field site is the so-called “Anthropology at Home” method, namely: “The introduction into the scientific literature of research based on the method of home anthropology would clear some misunderstandings and quasi-scientific theses that are commonly found in the scientific literature published in Bulgaria after 1989, related to the Roma” (p. 12).

„Who are the Roma?” is a fundamental question in Asenov’s work. This is also one of the fundamental questions in the Roma research field; its resolution is crucial for the relationship between the macro-society and the so-called Roma communities. Asenov also draws one main conclusion: the imposition of Roma identity on groups that refuse to identify themselves as such (this is the case in Plovdiv’s ethnically mixed neighborhoods) leads to boundaries that “destroy the surviving common social networks between the Roma and the macro-society” (p.13).

The processes and factors that determine the emergence, spatial and cultural development of the Roma ghettos have remained beyond the general research interest, according to the author. It is this theme that is central to the study of Arman Mahala. The adopted anthropological approach (the method of home anthropology) helps illuminate a space that is most often unavailable and invisible to the „external” researcher. Thus, from the position of an „insider” Krasimir Asenov explores the so-called “millet” group within the ethnically distinguished Arman Mahala. His differentiated approach is a conscious choice in order to avoid the cultural unification of the Roma population and their inclusion into a unified, homogeneous Roma community – a major mistake in the Roma-related research that leads to terminological and classification chaos, according to the author.

The choice of the „local discourse” in the study of Arman Mahala as a locally established Roma „ghetto” is well grounded by Asenov. As a result of the prolonged field study of the neighborhood (more than two decades), he found that “the population of the four Plovdiv neighborhoods form a community that, although localized in different parts of the city, shares one culture, one endonym and a sense of common origin” (p. 22). Thus, the Plovdiv neighborhoods exist as interconnected urban systems, characterized with the internal migration of the population.

In the first chapter the author determines the basic ideas, goals and methods of his study. The main objective is to bring new knowledge about the process of

the emergence, the spatial and cultural development of Arman Mahala. In this first part the main stages and methods of the field study are described: methods for spatial segregation measurement, creation of a geospatial database, direct observation, participant observation, biographical and oral history approach, the combination of visual-anthropological and geographic methods. In the course of the research, a number of documents have been searched and analyzed: urban and cadastral plans, properties schemes, ortho-photo images, civil registers, etc. A material drawn from the periodic press, which illustrates the public attitudes towards the Roma in the early 20th century and today, is also presented.

The second chapter presents the theoretical framework and its related concepts. Different definitions and models of „spatial segregation“ are given on the basis of the American, Eastern European and Western European research practice. The main factor in the formation of these models is the migration of people of foreign origin who settle in the cities and create migrant communities and cultures depending on their class, racial and ethnic background. In Europe and America, these processes take place in a different way at different historical times – for example, from the literature review, we learn that the European cities have lower levels of spatial segregation (compared to the US), and it depends on the social and housing policies towards migrants.

A serious deficiency in the contemporary studies on ethnic minorities in Bulgaria, according to Asenov, is the lack of a specific research problem such as education, health care, housing, access to public services. Thus, the results and analyzes of such studies are general, unrelated to a specific territory. Further, he presents the perspective of urban anthropology as an approach to studying social urban environment. At this point, the author introduces the term „ghettoized urban structure“ and gives the following definition: „*a distinctive ghetto-like settlement – a part of the urban space (area, micro-district or neighborhood) most often with fixed boundaries characterized by poor, missing or unregulated street, building, electric, social and other structure; a population that is defined by predominantly ethnic, racial, social, cultural or other indicators; often the relations within the settlement are regulated by pre-modern social norms; presence of its own subculture*“ (pp. 77–78).

The migrations of the Roma in the Balkans are presented in a historical perspective as a separate topic in the chapter. Here the author quotes studies by other Bulgarian researchers – Alexey Pamporov, Ilona Tomova, Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov. The liquidation of the nomadic way of life among the Roma was also the goal of the Ottoman administration, and it was finally achieved by the communist regime. Two decrees of the Council of Ministers of 1957 and 1958 discontinued „wandering and begging,“ and the nomadic way of life in the country was declared deviant. Against the backdrop of this historical review, the author notes that the forced sedentarization created the conditions for the formation of the present ghettoized urban structures.

Asenov introduces the term *millet*, which has an Arabic root, and was used in the Ottoman Empire to designate the non-Muslim population. The author explains that in Arman Mahala „the population is divided into Turks, who also use the autonym

*millet* as their ethnic marker as a synonym for a *Turk*, and Roma who identify themselves as Roma burgudzhi“ (p. 123). According to his research, the millet group prevails in the Plovdiv neighborhoods, and „the main areas of spatial localization of this group are Plovdiv, Asenovgrad, Pazardzhik, Haskovo, Bourgas, etc.“ (p. 124).

The third chapter of the book is devoted to the emergence and the spatial development of Arman Mahala. The factors influencing this development – natural-geographic, demographic, psychological, cultural, economic, political and institutional – are discussed in detail. Tables and charts with data from a survey conducted in 2016 on the ethnic composition, family structure and household income structure are shown. In this chapter we find cited samples of biographical interviews, in which the respondents tell the story in the settlement of the neighborhood. So we understand that Arman Mahala was formed as a result of migratory flows, as the new settlers came from the surrounding villages and other parts of the city. The natural environment of Karshiaka and Harmanite suburb (in the neighborhood of the Mahala) was similar to the rural environment, familiar to the new inhabitants and they continued to be engaged in agriculture and livestock breeding. The proximity of the Maritza River furthermore separated Arman Mahala from the city.

In the fourth chapter the cultural development in the neighborhood is traced, with particular attention given to the ethno-cultural and confessional characteristics of the population. Photos taken of the civil registers illustrate the practices of the revival process from 1984–1985 when members of the Arman Mahala were renamed. On the ground, Asenov found religious practices influenced by the heterodox Islam, including worshipping of *teke* and *türbe*, in addition to building houses for home spirits. The presence of numerous Islamic sects since 1989 has led to a rivalry between the individual small religious prayers centers called Mesjiddi. Two rituals are described in detail in this chapter – “Martufal”, referred to as an example of profanation and the ritual „Kirlyuk Atmak“, which has the functions of an intra-group regulator to resolve conflicts. The chapter ends with the analysis of the suitcase trade as a cultural practice, which becomes a sustainable economic and viable strategy for survival and accumulation of capital in the neighborhood.<sup>2</sup>

The case of Arman Mahala proves to be an exemplary study, a model by which the other three Roma „ghettos“ in Plovdiv can be explored, and this is one of the valuable contributions of Krasimir Asenov’s work – the development of methodological tools and theoretical basis for the objectives of future research.

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<sup>2</sup> The materials on this topic were published by Asenov in an article that appeared in the journal *Anthropology*, see issue 4 / 2017.