Uglyville: A Contention of Anti-Romaism in Europe
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The term Universiade is composed of University and Olympiad. It designates a biennial multi-sport event, the second largest in the world besides the Olympic Games. The 25th Universiade took place in Belgrade, in July 2009. At the same time, Serbia held the presidency of the Decade of Roma Inclusion, an international initiative which aims at improving the socioeconomic status and social inclusion of Roma. The Decade of Roma Inclusion consists of European integration organizations, global financial players, NGOs and national governments.

At the temporal conjunction of the Decade and the Universiade, certain phenomena come to the fore, which define reality in Serbia and Europe and can be understood as a paradigmatic example of the discrimination that Roma face today – discrimination that has to be defined as structural and institutionalized as it traverses the social fabric and its institutions so deeply and systematically.

Before we can reflect on these events, we have to make ourselves aware that we cannot refer to human rights that are regulated by international conventions or national constitutions, because there is no such thing as universal human rights guaranteed by the present world order. There is only the power of capital, and related to it, the power of sovereignty that determines who does and who does not have the right to be human and therefore have human rights.

Sport is one of the key elements of national cohesion and national pride in Serbia. Athletes are considered to be international ambassadors of Serbian superiority. Roma, on the other hand, are constructed as a threat to the Serbian national body, and the visibility of their discriminated position endangers the international image of the nation.

From July 2008 to July 2009, Serbia held the Roma Decade’s presidency. During this year, one would expect Serbia to make serious efforts towards improving the discriminated position of Roma and decreasing the effects of a policy of anti-Romaism that has lasted for centuries in the region. The opposite was the case. What we witnessed was the total disregard of the Decade’s objectives and even an intensification of discrimination by Belgrade authorities, citizens and media. At the same time, all public attention was drawn to the international sports event Universiade.

Because of the lack of infrastructure for accommodating the eight thousand international athletes and officials of the Universiade, the city of Belgrade made a deal with a private investor, the multinational consortium Blok 67 Associates. The consortium consists of two companies. The first is Delta Real Estate which is owned by Miroslav Mišković, Serbia’s biggest tycoon, who owes his wealth to his closeness to the former regime of Slobodan Milošević and its war politics. The second is the Hypo Alpe-Adria-Bank, one of the numerous Austrian banks exploiting Eastern European markets. The city provided public land on which the private investors erected a building ensemble called Belville, which is French for “beautiful city.” The buildings were used to accommodate the international guests during the Universiade and its flats, shops and offices were ready to be purchased from the consortium after the end of the event. Belville was

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1 This text is the script of the film with the same title, based on the text “Contention of Anti-Romaism as a Part of the Process of the Decoloniality of Europe” by Ivana Marjanović, published in: Reartikulacija 7, http://www.reartikulacija.org/?p=647. For the need of the film, that was produced in 2010, the text was extended, edited and adapted by Eduard Freudmann and Ivana Marjanović. The images presented in this text are taken from the same film (“Uglyville. A Contention of Anti-Romaism in Europe“, Serbia/Austria 2010, 58 min., English).
strategically located next to the largest shopping mall in the Balkans, Delta City, which is also owned by Miroslav Mišković. This proximity brought in extra profit as the international guests of the Universiade mostly spent their leisure time shopping there.

Having lived in Europe for centuries, Roma must be considered as a constitutive part of it. They settled long before the concept of nations was constructed, thus we could ask on which basis they are regarded as something exterior which must be “included.” Therefore, the concept of inclusion, pushed by the Decade of Roma Inclusion, seems paradoxical. But if we take a look at how power functions and to which extent coloniality (Quijano 2007) is embedded in capitalism, we realize that it is not a paradox at all.

Hundreds of thousands of Belgrade citizens reside in so-called “informal settlements,” settlements that are not part of the regulated framework of the government. It is said that they cover 43% of Belgrade’s residential area. Although their legal status is equal, there is a tremendous qualitative difference between informal settlements inhabited by non-Roma and most of informal settlements inhabited by Roma: the Roma settlements are in constant danger of being demolished and have no chance of becoming formalized. These facts, and the poverty level of the inhabitants, turn most informal Roma settlements into slums.

Whenever a slum is about to be demolished, the authorities as well as the media, conceal the history of racism and discrimination. They do not ask why Roma are forced to live in miserable conditions and why the segregation within the social fabric is so extreme. They do not mention how deeply the reasoning of the so-called “majority population” is rooted in racism and how this racism makes it impossible for most Roma to access regular education, have legal jobs, social insurance or proper housing. They do not pose the questions why the average Roma are seven times poorer than the average non-Roma citizens and their life expectancy is half as high, why Roma are forced to dig in garbage bins in order to survive and are dying of diseases that are regarded as eradicated in Europe. They do not mention that Roma in Serbia live in perpetual fear of being exposed to attacks by fascist groups or police violence, that they get beaten to death and their houses are set on fire; nor do they mention that Roma are illegalized by being deprived of basic legal documents and are thereby completely invisibilized when it comes to citizenship and civil rights.

Exploring contemporary racism in Europe, Manuela Bojadžijev explains: “Like anti-Semitism, neoracism is an ideological practice, in which its specific object is constituted and constructed. This presumption implies a crucial challenge: something that does not exist, such as race, is coming into being through different forms of praxis by individuals, groups, institutions, or states and therefore a reality, a social relation and a policy. The fiction of race is produced by a vast number of narrations: gestures, rituals, images, texts. […] Ethnicity and race – to take up a metaphor of Adorno – is a rumour, once it is the rumour about the Jews, the other time the rumour about the migrant or the refugee” (Bojadžijev 2006).

To understand the events around the Roma Decade and the Universiade, we must return to the core of capitalist exploitation, because its mechanisms still define human relations. The core of capitalist exploitation is the colonial history of Europe and slavery that was conducted for the sake of capitalist progress and the development of western Europeans. For centuries, colonial history has been and is normalized by European knowledge production, such as schools and university books, encyclopedias, artworks, etc. Colonialism is thus trivialized, and thereby justified, as the modernization of so called backward areas, as spice trade, geographical discoveries or Christianization missions, and not named as cruel exploitation, mass murder, enslavement and expropriation in the name of European progress and modernity.
The history of the construction of the Delta City shopping mall and the athlete’s village Belville began with destruction. Both complexes of buildings were erected onto the ruins of Roma settlements, which had to be erased before starting the construction. First, the inhabitants were expelled from their homes, prior to the construction of the shopping mall. Several of them settled a few hundred meters away. Then, two years later, prior to the construction of Belville, they were expelled from that location as well. Both expulsions did not cause any public attention, nor did anyone protest. Finally, in order to accomplish the total cleansing of the territory around Belville, before the beginning of the Universiade, the authorities decided to erase the last remaining parts of the Roma settlement in spring 2009.

Roma in Serbia are caught in a net of state politics that is spun by the interests of capital and should be termed necropolitics (Mbembe 2003). Its authorities and businessmen acquired their governing knowledge in the 1990s within Milošević’s turbo-fascism (Papić 2002). The remnants of the ideology that ethnic cleansing and genocide was immanent still determine present Serbian politics and its propagators are still represented in the Serbian parliament and government. We have to bear this continuity in mind when we contemplate the conjuction of two governmental initiatives prior to the Universiade. One was a public campaign launched by the Ministry for Environment and Spatial Planning. It depicted a popular Serbian sportsman, the notorious nationalist Novak Đoković, swinging a broom like his tennis racket and calling out to his fellow countrymen, “Let’s Clean Serbia!” The other governmental initiative is the necropolitical spatial plan to erase the Roma settlement next to Belville.

While the government plastered Belgrade with the campaign’s giant billboards, the media and politicians prepared the field for the eviction of the settlement by addressing the broad anti-Romaist consensus in Serbia through typical racist propaganda.

The media focused on constructing the contrasting image of a kind of “Uglyville” that allegedly popped up overnight and was growing out of control. It was reported that the organizer of Universiade, the International University Sports Federation, insisted on the removal of the eyesore before the beginning of the event. One thing was made perfectly clear: Roma would not be allowed to pollute the beautiful image of Belgrade and Belville that was supposed to be presented to the world.

Colonial history determines the present. Normalized, it is perpetually maintained in the First capitalist World and outside of it through migration politics, globalization, debt slavery, ongoing confiscation of natural resources and contemporary wars and invasions. The colonial matrix of power and racism, as its main technology, is not only functional outside of Europe but also within it. It subjugates all those who do not fit into the category of so-called “white Christians,” the ones who are constructed as the most worthy.

After the public opinion had been prepared, the operation could start. One early morning in April, several bulldozers guarded by the police began the eviction of the inhabitants of the settlement and destroyed around 40 houses. The demolition came like a bolt out of the blue for the inhabitants. Most of them were even prevented from rescuing their personal belongings from their homes before they were destroyed.

Being constructed as people of color, and assumed to be pagans, Roma were targeted by the colonial matrix of power beginning with the time of European modernity and enlightenment. For centuries, kingdoms, holy empires, totalitarian regimes and democracies of Europe issued great many decrees and laws to torture, banish, enslave, expel and exterminate them. Examples are numerous from the 16th century on, from England, Romania and Nazi Germany to contemporary Europe. Roma were slaves of Christian monasteries and other feudal rulers; they were banished from many countries; they were marked with branding irons; they were forbidden to use their language or marry among each other; children were abducted from their parents to be brought up in Catholic families in the Habsburg Empire; they were massively exterminated by the Nazis.
throughout Europe; Roma women were coercively sterilized until the 1980s in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Sweden, Norway, with recent cases having been made public in the Czech Republic. In collaboration with EU candidates, as part of their application process, Germany has been expelling Roma and deporting them to their countries of origin. In Italy, a state of exception was proclaimed in order to fingerprint entire Roma communities, including minors (Jeremic/Radle 2009; Rights Groups Demand European Commission Clarify Its Position on Fingerprinting Roma in Italy 2008). Roma have recently been exposed to pogroms, murder and expulsion all over Europe: in Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Serbia, Slovenia and Slovakia, as well as in other countries (Petrova 2004; UN Presses Czech Republic on Coercive Sterilisation of Romani Women 2006; Rakić-Vodinelić/Gajin 2009; Ostojić 2006; Snapshots from around Europe. Report reveals that Romani women were sterilized against their will in Sweden 1997).

As a reaction to the demolition of the settlement, something exceptional happened. A series of public protests were organized in the streets of Belgrade. They were initiated by the inhabitants and joined by Roma representatives, NGOs, activists, students, independent cultural workers, artists and other citizens in solidarity.

One has to bear in mind that Roma living in slums are extremely deceived, blackmailed, silenced and frightened by authorities, and thus they hardly ever formulate their demands publicly. Being at the very bottom of society, what is just something for others, is everything for them. They have the most to lose and – as personal and historical experience has taught them – the least to win. The protests against the demolition have shown that this is not the ultimate rule. They mark one of the important moments when Roma resisted and gained something.

The protests attracted the attention of international humanitarian organizations and put public pressure on the city decision-makers to an extent that they had to momentarily interrupt what they had started: the total erasure of the settlement. Nevertheless, the mayor insisted on the demolition of the settlement, because he said it would endanger the growth of Belgrade. As a concession to the protests, the city authorities offered what they called a “temporary alternative accommodation” to some of the now homeless Roma by installing a few modified freight containers in a village near Belgrade. This village is well-known, because a Roma teenager was killed there two years ago. As soon as the news spread, the villagers started to protest against their potential new neighbors; a reaction that is a common practice in Belgrade whenever it is rumored that Roma should be relocated to a certain neighborhood. The villagers burnt down one of the containers and announced that they would burn down more with the Roma inhabitants inside, in case they dare move in.

The mayor expressed his understanding of the behavior of the villagers and announced that all inhabitants who do not hold a residential registration in Belgrade have to return to their home towns; the city would pay for their one-way tickets. Finally, in order to stop the protests, one of the organizers was arrested. He was accused of having rented houses in the settlement; a “delinquency” that no one had ever heard of before.

The constellation of the Roma Decade consists of proactive and reactive players. The proactive ones are the main powers of contemporary capitalism and those that maintain its status quo: the World Bank, the Council of Europe and its Development Bank, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Open Society Institute and the United Nations Development Program as well as other UN sub-organizations. These agencies’ engagement in globalization processes and in the European colonial project of the past and the present, warn us against being naïve and believing that the Decade is about the elimination of discrimination and poverty of Roma (Bello 2005). It rather gives us information about the functionality of the colonial matrix of power in the context of the European Union and global capitalism.
The events at the conjunction of the Roma Decade and the Universiade show that it is not discrimination that is unacceptable. On the contrary, it is needed, because it sustains the capitalist system. What is unacceptable is the visibility of discrimination, because it disturbs those who are supposed to believe in the justness of the system and bears the potential to make them realize that Belgrade’s slums result from inequality and exploitation and not from difference as the widespread racist stereotype of Roma, who are poor because it “suits their nature,” wants to make them believe. The visibility of discrimination decreases the value of the investors’ real estate, and it decreases the value that Belgrade gains by organizing the Universiade. It obstructs the pleasant panoramic view and reminds one too much of the Third World rather than of Western Europe, which is the object of fixation of every Serbian citizen. The visibility of discrimination interferes with the athlete’s quality of life and that of the white Serbian-Orthodox family who bought the appealing flat from a Serbian war profiteer and his Austrian capitalist partners. All in all, it is that very visibility that endangers Belgrade’s growth.

The reactive players of the Decade are Eastern European countries that either recently joined the EU or are about to join in the near future. One could think that the absence of Western European countries results from the fact that Roma are not discriminated there, and thus no need for such a program exists. As we know that this is not the case it becomes clear that the Decade is in fact about the inclusion of the new and future EU countries and serves as a tool that enables Europe to ensure Roma’s position in the colonial matrix of power. The ideology behind it is a neoliberal capitalist ideology rooted in its colonial past, which uses racism as a tool for exploitation. Its goal is not to bring pluriversality of human relations, but to enforce the inclusion of Roma in the capitalist system of exploitation. Inclusion, thus, does not mean that Roma will have equal rights, but it means that they will be exploited in a more subtle and low-key way as is the case in Western EU countries.

As the Universiade approached, it turned out that the total eradication of the settlement would not be possible due to the protests, so the sovereign power reorganized its strategy. Two weeks before the opening of the Universiade, a metal fence was erected around the settlement, justified by referring to the security measures for the event. In order to invisibilize the settlement, a banner was installed onto the fence, which was guarded by security staff and police. The inhabitants were blocked from leaving the settlement and were threatened with arrest if they were to be seen in the streets around Belville, particularly if caught searching for secondary materials in trash cans. Therefore, not only was their freedom of movement withdrawn, but they were deprived of their existential basis by being prevented from carrying out regular daily work in the streets of Belgrade. Surprisingly, the Delta City shopping mall was not fenced in for security reasons, commodities were in circulation and profit was accumulated without any barriers.

Giorgio Agamben refers to the camp as the biopolitical paradigm of modernity. He claims: “To an order without localization (which is the state of exception, in which law is suspended) there now corresponds a localization without order (the camp as permanent space of exception). The political system no longer orders forms of life and juridical rules in a determinate space, but instead contains at its very center a dislocating localization that exceeds it and into which every form of life and every rule can be virtually taken. The camp as dislocating localization is the hidden matrix of the politics in which we are still living, and it is this structure of the camp that we must learn to recognize in all its metamorphoses into the zones d’attentes of our airports and certain outskirts of our cities” (Agamben 1998).

This situation caused actions by citizens in solidarity, publicly demanding that the fence had to be removed. An international petition and a web campaign were launched, unofficial and official gatherings, workshops and food preparations were organized in the settlement and activities were initiated that aimed to inform the athletes, international delegations and journalists that what was going on behind the so-called “security fence” was not a film set, as the Universiade’s
organizers wanted to make them believe. A press conference that was organized in the settlement pressured the authorities so they removed the banner and thereby re-visibilized the settlement. The solidarity actions form a crucial element of the process of the decolonization of knowledge that the activists started to undergo, which represents the dismantling of internalized colonialism, as well as detecting one’s own position in the colonial matrix of power. Only when their knowledge is decolonized, can subjects delink from the colonial matrix of power.

The living conditions of Roma in slums, their reduced life expectancy, their constant historical and contemporary exposure to violence and death, their illegalization through deprivation of citizenship, the fact that they can be expelled from their homes at any moment, have to be understood in relation to the concept of necropolitics: exposed to the power of death and made invisible when it is about civil rights, while on the other hand, visible when it is about exploitation and the need for the cheapest labor force.

Achille Mbembe argues that the notion of biopower is insufficient in accounting for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death. Therefore, he introduced the notion of necropolitics and necropower to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death worlds. “Those are new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of the living dead” (Mbembe, 2003).

To understand in which continuity the recent concept of inclusion, proposed by the Roma Decade, is embedded, we have to take into consideration that Roma are confronted with two categories of strategies that were conceived for dealing with them as the othered: incorporation and excorporation. Incorporation has to be understood in the literal sense of including an exterior element in an already conceptualized corpus. Excorporation refers to the exclusion of an element that is considered to be interior to that corpus, respectively one that is really or assumedly in the process of incorporation. At first, incorporation and excorporation may appear antagonistic, but in fact they relate to one another in continuity and complementation.

Excorporative strategies have been practiced since the first day Roma have lived in Europe to this very day and range from expulsion to existential extermination. Incorporative strategies can be traced back to the era of enlightenment when forced assimilation was first imposed. However, their emergence cannot be understood as a paradigmatic shift. First of all, both strategies are coexistent, those who rejected incorporation through assimilation were excorporated through expulsion or extermination. Secondly, assimilation itself has to be considered as both, an incorporative as well as an excorporative strategy, because its mechanism of incorporation requires the excorporative act of exterminating all differences of the subjected individual. Finally, as the Nuremberg Laws and Shoah evidenced, assimilation does not protect the subjected individual from existential extermination.

Marina Gržinič proposes to think about necropolitics as the re-politicization of biopolitics and its genealogy. She claims that necropolitics, primarily envisioned for Africa and the Third World, develops a different biopolitics and that is taking place in the First capitalist World more and more. “With this proposed ‘transformation’ of biopolitics into necropolitics,” she states, “I am NOT asking to de-link biopolitics from necropolitics, but to understand that the maximization of exploitation and expropriation of life, labour, and ‘humanity’ is put forward here and now by capital asks for the reformulation, or, better to say, re-politicization of biopolitics!” (Gržinič 2009).

Although assimilation is still the most practiced strategy the othered are subjected to, additional incorporative strategies have meanwhile been conceived, such as integration or inclusion. Contrary to assimilation, integration does not require the total abandonment of all differences...
and accepts a certain extent of heterogeneity of a social group. At the same time, it demands the structural, cultural, social and identity incorporation of the othered. The strategy of inclusion departs from the assumption that a certain heterogeneity marks normality. It does not denominate the othered as an other, but pretends to include it in a participatory manner. The fact that both, integration as well as inclusion, are found in the pedagogical concepts of integrative pedagogy and inclusive pedagogy is symptomatic for the way the othered are perceived by dominant society: As an emotional infantilized object that is not able to speak rationally for itself, but has to be domesticated, civilized and educated by the rational constant of the dominant society.

Describing assimilation through the internalization of coloniality, Jelena Savić explains that in order to be part of society one has to be “normal” – meaning, having white skin and being rich. Those who cannot color their skin have no other choice than “to become invisible in the mass, to look as white and rich as possible, to be educated, employed . . . not to be exposed in any way . . . not to declare yourself as Rom or Romni, to insist as little as possible on your difference. . . not to look as a Rom or Romni, not to speak Romani language in public space, not to walk with a group of greater number of ‘evident’ Roma,” but instead “to be silent and laugh at jokes about stupid Roma men and venal Roma women, to pretend that you don’t see poor Roma in the streets nor the rude treatment of female Roma beggars with babies, to agree on the proposition that everybody can succeed only due to his/her own work, that Roma like to live like that, on the street, and that you have nothing to do with this Roma. . . .” (Savić 2009).

Unlike assimilation that exterminates any difference, the strategy of inclusion accepts difference to a certain extent: as long as it can be regulated and controlled to prevent the obstruction and endangerment of the growth of capital. Exoticized Roma music is welcome, because it fertilizes consumerism. Roma women are coercively sterilized, because their children demographically endanger the body of the nation and the capitalist order.

The Decade of Roma Inclusion must be seen in relation to EU security politics: Roma should be prevented from migrating from poorer Eastern European countries to richer Western European countries. Thus, the participating countries are required to improve the living conditions of Roma, thereby securing that Roma stay where they are. The recent case of hundred Roma migrating from Romania caused immense panic in Germany. After being expelled from a park in Berlin, they were paid money to return to Romania (Fuchs/Marschall 2009)! This panic actually results from the fear that a growing number of Roma could reveal anti-Romaism in Germany, the country in which anti-Romaism had been exercised in its most extreme form. After Porajmos, the genocide of Roma people conducted in the Third Reich, it had been switched to a kind of slumber mode, due to the lack of its target objects. The re-visibilization of Germany’s latent anti-Romaism would disprove the Western European cultural-racist conviction of being less racist and thereby more civilized than Eastern Europeans.

In the end, we can conclude that the concept of incorporation and its strategy of inclusion are ideological concepts targeting the production, reproduction and maintenance of hierarchies and relations of domination, because they do not depart from the equality of people, but from their inequality. This means that they take an ideological division that was invented and maintained by capitalism for granted. Based on this, however, a setting where one is part of the corpus “per se” or by “nature,” whereas the other has to be incorporated, cannot lead to any promising anti-discriminatory politics. The only way to eliminate discrimination is to eliminate the system that produces it.
References


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