

Antiziganism and Class Racism in Europe

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The Roma have a long history of migrations that repeatedly brought repression to their people over the centuries. European countries began introducing laws against migrating peoples (i.e. nomads, travelers) in the mid-fifteenth century.¹ Migrants were perceived as an unsettling factor, even as threatening and invading groups that jeopardized the safety of the majority populations. Without a registered identity, many Roma remain completely isolated as citizens in the societies on whose territories they live. Being constantly relocated and repopulated, many have been migrants over the centuries; even within the boundaries of the countries whose citizenship they hold. Apart from accusations, disappointments and misunderstandings in their relations with the majority population, we are still facing deep discrimination against Roma, which has its roots not only in ethnic and cultural racism or anti-Roma sentiment, but poverty and nomadism are threatening factors for all of those who live in social systems based on the system of ownership, accumulation of goods and territorialism. Western policies have tried for centuries to include the poor in the system of social protection, or to get rid of them: to banish or eliminate them. Roma are, for the most part, an ethnic class characterized by extreme poverty that can present an obstacle to national or European integration. It appears that the relation between Roma and non-Roma is, first and foremost, defined by the borderline between wealth and extreme poverty.

The situation of Roma in EU member states and in countries populated to a greater extent by Roma, such as Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria and the former Yugoslav republics (especially Macedonia and Serbia) is precarious. One of the basic problems facing a Roma man or a woman is the issue of belonging to a marginalized social class that is exposed to drastic pauperization, in addition to the problem of the national identity itself –the fact of being Roma.

Various forms of ethnic and class racism against Roma are appearing throughout Europe. In May 2008 in Naples, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's government implemented a state of emergency regarding nomad settlements and communities on the territory of several regions in order to legitimize the fingerprinting of the Roma population. This law is very reminiscent of anti-Roma laws dating from the Middle Ages, and of the darkest periods of European history in the 20th century. The general situation of migrants in Italy is difficult and the violent activities undertaken by the fascist right targeting Roma have reached a peak in the burning of entire settlements, the destruction of property, and the forceful eviction of Roma communities to locations outside certain metropolitan areas in Italy. The most drastic examples of this kind have happened in Livorno, Rome, Naples and Milan since 2006 to today.²

Similarly in Finland, a settlement built by Roma emigrating from Romania to Helsinki in search of a better future was destroyed. During our visit to Helsinki in March 2009, we took part in a public discussion³ organized on the occasion of an exhibition held in the Helsinki City Museum about the history and culture of Roma, titled *Watch out Gypsies: The History of a Misunderstanding*⁴. This visit further convinced us that impoverished Roma are being actively prevented in their attempts to migrate.

Strict EU laws prevent Roma from living or working in alternative ways and thus they are not seen as "fitting in" with the EU reality. The most harrowing images, however, come from Hungary, where an actual hunt on Roma communities has been ongoing since the end of 2008. The killing of Roma families by neo-Nazi groups is an example of the worst kind of racist persecution of people in the middle of Europe.⁵ Whether they live in EU or non-EU countries, Roma are subject to a deep and unexamined Europe-wide hatred. It is symptomatic that direct violence against Roma is most intense in places where a great gap exists between those profiting from neoliberal reforms and a local population on the verge of poverty.

¹ Robert Jütte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

² Security a la Italiana: Fingerprinting, Extreme Violence and Harassment of Roma in Italy, Report, European Roma Rights Centre and others; 2008, Source: www.soros.org/initiatives/roma/articles_publications/publications

³ Source: <http://www.hiap.fi/index.php?page=304&abr=0&event=137>

⁴ Source: www.hel.fi/wps/portal/Kaupunginmuseo_en/Artikkeli_en?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/Museo/en/museum+news/news+and+events/leave+your+roma+prejudices+behind

⁵ Source: www.dur.org.rs/cms/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=83:umadarskoj-rome-ubijaju-po-metodologiji-slinoj-taktici-amerikog-kju-kluks-klana&catid=34:vesti&Itemid=56

European Slums

UN-Habitat's Global Report⁶ distinguishes six different "cities" with specified class actors and economic functions: there is the luxury city, the gentrified city with advanced services, the suburban city of direct production, the city of unskilled workers, and finally the city of permanently unemployed "underclass" or "ghetto poor" with income based on marginal or illegal activity and direct street-level exploitation. This last city is the informal city or city of illegality. The poorest Roma settlements in Serbia and throughout Europe can be qualified as slum cities typically associated with the global South. The UN-Habitat's Global Report on Human Settlements from 2003 defines slums as settlements with poor access to drinking water, sanitation and other infrastructure; with poor housing quality, over crowding and inhabitants with uncertain residential status. These characteristics provided by UN-Habitat can be applied to more than a hundred Roma settlements in Belgrade. The composition of the population and their status in Belgrade's slums are diverse. There are cases of Roma who have managed to secure registered residences in Belgrade or who are indigenous. There are also the Roma refugees from Kosovo who may represent between 20-40% of the population in a given settlement in Belgrade. A number of inhabitants are economic migrants from southern Serbia, from places where no economic existence is possible. A large number of inhabitants are Roma asylum seekers from Western European countries and the EU, who were deported back to Serbia by the Readmission Agreement. A number of inhabitants in these settlements are not of Roma descent, just the poorest of the poor, refugees or the socially excluded.⁷

The current stratification of European societies which is particularly evident in the countries of the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia, may cause social unrest in which Roma might play an important role as a trans-national ethnic group. Non-controlled Roma migration to countries of Western Europe is not desirable, even though the borders are open. It is not surprising that there is a strategy to "solve the Roma issue" in these countries. The *Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015* gathers together the countries of Central and South Eastern Europe, international and non-governmental organizations (like the World Bank, the Open Society Institute, United Nations Development Program, the Council of Europe, Council of Europe Development Bank)⁸ and Roma civic associations. The objective is to improve the status of Roma and "close unacceptable gaps between Roma and the rest of society." In addition to areas of major concern (housing, education, employment, and health), special attention is given to the elimination of discrimination, the reduction of poverty and the improvement of the position of Roma women. Including representatives of Roma communities in all processes is the basic principle. The policy of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to lend money to countries which meet the requirement to privatize territory, real estate and resources brought devastation to local economies in Asia, Africa and Latin America in the 1980s, and it led to the elimination of the middle classes and "slumization" of entire regions. The Decade of Roma Inclusion is intended to lead to the nominal equality of Roma communities in the countries participating in the Decade, in order to legitimize their deportation from EU countries back into to their "native countries." At the same time, the elite that carried out the inclusion by controlling financial and other aid is being supported. This is counterproductive to the development of Roma communities as self-organized political subjects.

⁶ The challenge of slums- Global report on human settlements 2003, UN Habitat; Source: <http://www.unhabitat.org/downloads/docs/GRHS.2003.3.pdf> (website is currently not in function)

⁷ Some estimates put the number of Roma in Serbia at 600,000 although the 2002 census only registered 102,193 people as Roma. The number and condition of Roma children and young people can be best understood from the following data: "According to the UNICEF report on the condition of Roma children in the Republic of Serbia (2006), almost 70% of Roma children are poor and over 60% of Roma households with children live below poverty line. Children are the most imperiled, living outside of cities in households with several children. Over 4/5 of indigent Roma children live in families in which adult members do not have basic education." Cf. Government of Serbia, "Strategy for the Improvement of Roma Status in the Republic of Serbia" Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 55/05, 71/05 - Correction, 101/07 and 65/08, Belgrade, April 9, 2009; Source: www.humanrights.gov.yu/dokumenti/roma/strategija_april_09.pdf

⁸ Source: www.romadecade.org/

Under the Bridge - Belgrade: Participatory Happening

While traveling through Belgrade, driving along the E-75 international highway and crossing the Gazela bridge that connects central Belgrade with New Belgrade, we came across the poverty-stricken Roma settlement in the area of Staro Sajmište. The first time we met people living under the Gazela bridge was during the gathering of artists and activists working on the project *Under the Bridge Belgrade*, which we organized together with our colleague Alexander Nikolić in December 2004. This gathering turned into a great happening that lasted eight hours, during which the settlement's residents, both Roma and other refugees, invited all those present to light a fire and stay with them at the settlement.

One of the project's participants, David Rych, wrote a piece about our gathering under the Gazela bridge and stated that: "The 'artist like Mother Teresa' can only be a misconception, unless the quest for relevant support will necessarily lead to approved models of inclusive community work, something that would require time and commitment with regard to every single case. There are a number of issues that have been clearly addressed by representatives of the Roma community mentioned above. An additional objective of entering unfamiliar hardship for the sake of cultural work could be to translate these transitions into a more comprehensible image of the 'real.' Clearly, we'll have to acknowledge the incompatibility of reality lived by individuals and groups on opposite synapses of our societies, nations or other categories of distinction and dissolve the reality of 'the Other' as one more component of a mutually shared entity and investigate and visualize the mechanisms of exclusion the dominate system applies with regard to marginalized positions only. Some of the visitors might have been introduced to a local situation in order to initiate contributions to that very common reality. A few others might continue similar work in different locations. And, of course, some might never come back. Not there, not elsewhere where the most 'subaltern' live. Sometimes the frontier is your doorstep..."⁹ During the following few years, several artists continued their activism with the community under the Gazela bridge, contributing either reports or artistic interventions.¹⁰ Several Vienna-based artists are currently publishing a tourist guide for the Gazela settlement.¹¹

Belgrade authorities have been trying to evict the inhabitants of Gazela and several other Roma settlements for some time now. Deportation and relocation is, however, not triggered by the community's miserable living conditions or the settlements' or the Roma's class status, but allegedly by planned infrastructure works and the current reconstruction of Gazela Bridge. In 2005, Belgrade City Hall proposed an idea to relocate the Roma living in the Gazela settlements and to move them to the Dr. Ivan Ribar neighborhood in New Belgrade, which triggered protests by the locals. Although this protest represented open hostility toward Roma, New Belgrade residents claimed that the issue was not racism, but fear of filth and a decrease in real estate prices: "We have nothing against Roma, but we fear that their customs and culture will not fit in the city environment," said one of the residents. "There will be problems with hygiene. How will any of us sell their apartment if there is such a settlement right next to us?"¹² A similar protest happened in September 2008, when the residents of the Belgrade suburban neighborhood of Ovča tried to block initial work on a new Roma settlement there. "We have nothing against Roma, we would react the same way if some other ethnic minority were to inhabit Ovča. The problem is the fact that the relocation of 130 Roma families would significantly alter the national structure of this population. This will have a catastrophic effect on our tradition and way of life" – explained one of the Organization Committee members who is a member of the Romanian ethnic minority.¹³

⁹ David Rych, "Under the Bridge – A derivé to a topos of social relevance or... 'a visit to the zoo'?", *Under the Bridge Beograd*, Biro for Culture and Communication, Novi Sad, 2005, p. 34-37.

¹⁰ Tanja Ostojčić, *Open Studio of New Belgrade Chronicle*, 2007; Source: www.tanjaostojcic.blogspot.com

¹¹ Lorenz Aggermann, Eduard Freudmann, Can Gülcü, *Beograd Gazela-Reiseführer in eine Elendssiedlung*, Drava Verlag, Klagenfurt, 2008

¹² Večernje novosti, July 11, 2005, Source: www.novosti.rs/code/navigate.php?ld=14&status=jedna&vest=77610&datum

¹³ Source: www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2008&mm=09&dd=24&nav_id=320375&nav_category=12

New Belgrade's Belville: From Participation to Direct Action

Belville is the name of a new residential complex in New Belgrade, built by "Blok 67 Associates Ltd" –a company founded by Delta Real Estate (owned by Miroslav Mišković, Serbia's richest tycoon) and Hypo-Alpe Adria Bank.¹⁴ Their aim was to build business offices and apartments for athletes taking part in the Summer University Games in June 2009 in Belgrade, while after the Games, the apartments are going to be handed to new, predefined owners.

On April the 3rd 2009, in a sudden action with mechanical-diggers, forty houses were demolished in a Roma settlement that had begun taking shape during the last five years in a location near Belville. The decision to demolish the Roma houses was made by Belgrade's Secretariat for Inspections. City Mayor, Dragan Đilas, said on this issue: "Whoever is illegally occupying a part of city land in places planned for infrastructure facilities cannot stay there. It has nothing to do with the fact that the people in question are Roma or some other ethnicity. A few hundred people cannot stop the development of Belgrade, and two million people living in Belgrade certainly won't be hostages to anyone. This practice will continue to be implemented by the City Authority in the future. Simply, there are no other solutions."¹⁵

The police assisted in the demolition of the settlement by securing the diggers, without giving residents the time to rescue their belongings. Several inhabitants had to be practically drawn out of the ruins at the very moment when one digger was clearing the area. As we were close by, we joined our neighbors from the very beginning of this action in Block 67. As an act of protest against the demolition of homes, Jurija Gagarina Street was blocked around noon that day. The settlement's inhabitants then organized another protest in front of the Belgrade City Hall. No one addressed the displaced Roma residents from Block 67 who gathered in front of the Belgrade City Hall that evening. The protest continued the following day. The citizens' protests were soon joined by several NGOs. Pushed by UNHCR, the WHO and the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, the Belgrade city authorities tried to calm the issue. The "solution" was to set up residential containers in the suburban neighborhood Boljevci that very night. The bureaucratic apparatus that was set in motion to "solve" this issue in the field soon proved to be non-functional. We learned that a Roma teenage boy had been killed several years ago in Boljevci. So there is a logical question: why was it decided that the containers should be placed in this very village? Boljevci residents blocked roads demanding the removal of residential containers for Roma: "If you don't remove them, we will burn down both the containers and those trying to move in them," one person from Boljevci said. The protests by Boljevci residents had violent moments: attempts were made to set fire to the residential containers and thus to prevent Roma from moving into these temporary facilities. The incident resembled an open racist revolt. Mayor Đilas said: "I can understand the fear of people from Boljevci, because they were to have as neighbors people who, in part, do not even have personal ID cards. It is not known who they are," and added "all those who do not have a residence in Belgrade must go back to the places they came from. It is legally right, it is the basis for everything, and there will be no negotiations with the OEBS, UNHCR, or NGOs on this issue."¹⁶ So, as far as Đilas was concerned, the Roma issue was "solved" by placing three Roma mothers with children into containers in Mirijevo, near the old Roma settlement. The majority of the people still have no alternative solution. Although Serbia is currently presiding over the "Roma Decade" in 2009, city authorities didn't have a plan for alternative housing at the moment the houses were demolished. It took three protests and pressure from international organizations to stop the media lynch of the Roma and to try to find a solution for alternative housing.

Our documentary *Belville* was filmed during the ten days when these events happened, and we took part in them directly as active participants fighting for the rights of our neighbors. The film

¹⁴ Source: www.belville.rs/kosmomi.jsp

¹⁵ Borba, April 3, 2009; Source: www.borba.rs/content/view/4472/

¹⁶ YUCOM, Regards from Šaban Bajramović, Peščanik; Source: www.pescanik.net/content/view/2970/61

was recorded spontaneously while things were evolving over a period of several days and nights. In the evenings we would review the material together; people could see themselves and things they hadn't been part of during the day; we would listen again to the statements of politicians and UN-officials; a raw cut would immediately be on the internet. It was an immense motivation for the people that there was a camera documenting what was going on. Through the montage the density of the events was reduced and brought into a shape that allowed for an understanding and analysis of the events. The video was first publicly viewed in the Belville settlement. The process of recording was a process of witnessing, self-reflection and learning with the community. The video *Belville* is conceived as a didactic tool. It is screened in educational workshops, conferences dealing with the issues of Roma rights and European fascism, in campaigns for Roma refugees' rights to stay in their country of asylum and, last but not least, at art exhibitions. The documentary was premiered in the Cultural Centre of Serbia in Paris where it was included at the last moment in our exhibition previously called *Psychogeographic Research*. On 27th of May 2009, the film was shown at the settlement in Blok 67.

In our view, political art has to communicate its message at various levels. Its activity and reception cannot be confined to the privileged aesthetic gaze and the exclusive context of contemporary art. Formalism and references to aesthetic norms reassure the viewers in their self-perception and turn the artwork into just another lollypop in the candy store. Art is more than that; it can develop methods for putting theory into practice. The specific potential of art is based on the fact that it can simultaneously practice, analyze and criticize a method or concept. But, art does not take place in a laboratory situation. The artist must be conscious of the consequences, implications and circumstances of production and consumption. Needless to say, the production of art is subjected to the same relations of exploitation as other forms of production in capitalist society. But this doesn't mean that we are condemned to reproduce the existing conditions in our society. Our task is to use artistic production against the matrix of exploitation and in this way to turn the situation upside down.

The text *Antiziganism and Class Racism in Europe* was originally published in Slovenian language in the journal *Borec*, LXI/2009, št.657-661, edited by Tanja Velagić and Lev Kreft and issued by Društvo za proučevanje zgodovine, antropologije in književnosti – Publicistično društvo ZAK in 2009, pp. 440-449 and in English in the exhibition catalogue *Psychogeographical Research*, issued by The Museum of Contemporary Art Vojvodina in Novi Sad, 2009 (ed: Vladan Jeremić), pp.135-142.

This version of the text is stemming from two resources: text *Antiziganism and Class Racism in Europe* and text *Power Relations in a Nutshell: On the Video Works Belville and Gazela* written by Vladan Jeremić and Rena Rädle and published in the notebook of the seminar *To Think (Film) Politically: Art and Activism Between Representation and Direct Action*, edited by Jelena Vesić and published by DeLVe/Institute for Duration, Location and Variables in Zagreb in 2010, pp. 50-67. The updated version of the text is edited by Jelena Vesić in collaboration with the writers Vladan Jeremić and Rena Rädle.