VERA MESSING[1]

RESEARCHING ROMANIAN URBAN GHETTOS
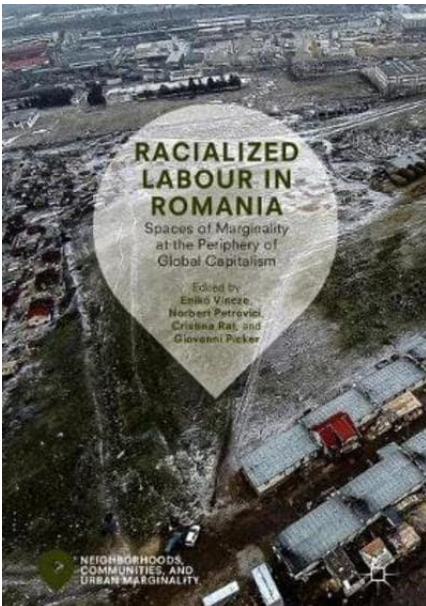
ABOUT THE VOLUME. THEORETICAL BASIS

The volume "*Racialized labour in Romania. Spaces of marginality at the periphery of global capitalism*" emerged from a large-scale research project titled *"Spatialization and racialization of social exclusion. The social and cultural formation of 'Gypsy ghettos' in Romania in a European context*" conducted through the collaboration of a wide range of researchers in Romania and beyond and utilising sources of multiple funding. It is a challenging task to edit a book consisting of chapters all coming from the same research source and still make it relevant for the general audience. I believe that this book has achieved this goal, as it gives an account of a complex, multifaceted research project, while the lessons learnt as an outcome of the research can be and are expanded beyond the specific project. The research investigates the processes of racialised spatial and social marginalisation in urban settings in Romania, but they are present not only there and in the wider Central-East European region of post-communist countries but in most societies that experience rapid social changes. The political and economic transformations that occurred in the countries of Central and East Europe triggered sharp shifts in political power relations at the macro level and transformed the economic and social status of individuals, whose abilities and resources to resist or accommodate the major macro-level transformations varied to a great extent. However, the mechanisms described in this book are not exclusive to post-communist states; they are present in societies characterised by deep social inequalities, economic volatility and political fluctuation in the global North and South, East and West. The introductory and the concluding chapters elo-

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quently describe this global embeddedness of the Romanian 'case' of the racialisation of social exclusion. The former, authored by Norbert Petrovici, Christina Rat, Giovanni Pickert and Enikő Vincze, positions the book (and the research) in a multidisciplinary theoretical framework and the latter embeds it in the international research arena. The concluding chapter, authored by Giovanni Pickert, does the job of zooming out from the Romanian localities and putting them in global context, connecting the cases to cities across the global urban North and South. This zooming-out exercise then shows the embeddedness of the Romanian case within the global processes of labour organisation, class formation and racial domination.

The theoretical basis of the book is complex and "*at the intersection of dependency theories, de-proletarization debates, postcolonial and decolonial studies, global anthropologies of labour, theories of post-socialism and Romani studies...*" (p26) To be honest, I felt a bit at loss when reading the overwhelming offer of theoretical backgrounds; however, what becomes evident from the introduction is that the volume is rooted in an anthropological school and is highly ideological, both in its use of terms and discursive strategies. It describes neoliberalism as a threat and uses the language of neo-Marxist social sciences in most of its parts. Its core concepts are de/proletarization, global capitalism, class and is "*addressing the political construction of Roma as part of colonization*". Despite the (overly) rich theoretical framing offered in the introductory chapter, I personally find that the book adds more to the empirical knowledge of the processes and mechanisms of racialized spatial and socio-economic exclusion and contributes greatly to it from a region and sites modestly covered by modern social sciences, and to a lesser extent does it add to the development of a new theoretical framework.

The research

Now let us get back to the basics and introduce the multifaceted, multi-method and multi-locality research, which served as the foundation of this volume. The research, as far as I can tell, is unique in the study of ghettoisation and processes of marginalisation in urban areas in many ways. To start with, it took place in five cities in Romania (Călărași, Cluj-Napoca, Miercurea-Cius, Ploiești, Târgu-Mureș), more specifically the twenty marginalised 'Roma ghettos" in these urban areas. It is exceptional, in terms of research design, management and theoretical coherence, that one single piece of research embraces so many sites, each of which is extremely hard to research and which represent diverse social and economic histories, stages of urbanisation, and, of course, political and social realities. The five cities differ in terms of their ethnic compositions, and the diversity of the local Roma groups on various levels: their social inclusion (traditional vs. assimilated Roma), subgroups of Roma (such as Kalderash, Gábor etc.) or ethnic identity (such as Romanian, Hungarian or Turkish Roma) and thus language use. The sole similarity between the sites of the research is the pattern of marginalization and impoverishment of mostly- but not exclusively – Roma dwellers who could not afford any other housing than that available in these marginalized areas. All the sites share being extremely difficult to research; they are marginalised peripheries of urban areas, representative of "*the processes of capitalist development in Romania that led to the precarization of the working class and the formation of marginal severely impoverished residential spaces with inadequate infrastructure and unclear legal status*". (p21) These areas are hardly suitable as residential areas due to severe pollution and the immediate proximity of waste dumps, wastewater plants, defunct refineries and other environmentally polluted industrial areas. They are characterised by different scales of exclusion and

poverty but are not homogeneously inhabited by Roma or by unemployed people. "*It is important to emphasize that we neither investigated 'Roma settlements' nor the 'concentration of unemployed population' but urban areas that had been considered by majority populations as being deprived and inhabited by 'Tsiganes'*". (p21)

And here comes a very important characteristic of the research as well as the volume: it is not Roma research, neither a research on Roma marginalisation nor their social exclusion. It is research that tries to describe the causes, realities and consequences of social exclusion of those who live in marginalised urban spaces and uses ethnicity as one explanatory factor among several others. It looks at the ways, in which people living in these areas are part of local and global processes that render their work, habitat and existence invisible. The research design departs from providing a mere description of how spatial and social segregation are intertwined and places these sites into the wider historical, social and economic processes of post-communist transition. The research and the book resulting from it aimed to give agency to people living in these areas, who either stayed invisible or were frequently denied humanity by the mainstream society. This agency is given both through the methodological and ethical considerations the research follows and by showing how their activities and (informal) work are an integral cog in the gears of local economies.

The next special – though not unique – feature of the research constituting the source of this volume is the multi-method approach it took. Although the bulk of the chapters use in-depth ethnographic data collected on the above described sites, the first chapter (by Norbert Petrovci) uses census data to analyse socio-demographic and labour market characteristics of the twenty sites over the past decade. Another chapter investigates the discursive construction of segregation in the news and applied yet another method, that of content analysis. Nevertheless, most of the research, as well as the volume, relies on an in-depth ethnographic methodology. Unfortunately, the source of data, as well as the actual methodological strategy of the research does not become evident by reading the introduction or the first chapters. On page 65, one can read a few references to the methodology applied: '*we mapped the deprived territories from the perspective of several local actors placed in different positions (the inhabitants of these areas, staff of public institutions and non-governmental institutions, journalists)*' but a thorough and structured overview of the methodology applied, the scope and extent of the research in terms of the number and types of interviews conducted or any additional techniques or materials applied during the qualitative ethnographic research is painfully missing.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The volume includes two larger parts, which address the processes of racialised distinction-making on different levels. The first part entails chapters that describe various dimensions of the construction of racial hierarchies in everyday life: in work, housing, access to services and citizenship. The second part consists of chapters that investigate the more abstract (though similarly real) processes of making and reproducing racial exclusion; the imaginaries, representations and typologisation of stakeholders that feed the actual process of marginalisation and racialised exclusion in a local setting.

The second chapter authored by Norbert Petrovici, entitled "*Working status in Deprived Urban Areas and Their Greater Economic Role*" and using data from the 2011 census, gives an overview of the social and

economic processes of the five cities and the smaller marginalised areas that served as sites of the research. It analyses the demographic, ethnic and occupational composition of these areas and shows, through statistical data, that the formation of these areas was linked to the history of deindustrialisation after the collapse of socialist industry, trapping those workers who could not escape the city. The chapter aims to show the link between the internal migration of the Roma and the wider trends of internal labour migration in Romania related to key economic transformations in the country and the bigger European and global contexts. He argues that although many speak about the failure of inhabitants of these marginalized areas to integrate and suggest that they are cut-off from the city and function as enclaves, this is far from the truth: they are in reality well-integrated in the economy and serve as an important resource for the production facilities of global enterprises as unskilled workers, paid minimum wage or as day labourers in the construction sector and cheap, unskilled, mostly informal labour in recycling and sanitation. He concludes "*[t]hey are the primary faction of the workers employed in (…) the worst-paid jobs in towns and cities that are increasingly oriented towards*" the global economy.

The third chapter, authored by Enikő Vincze, "*Ghettoization: The Production of Marginal Spaces of Housing and the Reproduction of Racialized Labour*" depicts four major patterns of the formation of housing areas that are marginalised, physically and symbolically, from the core of the city and where poverty and destitution are attached to exclusion along ethnic lines. The first type of ghettoization indicates a pattern when families and / or larger communities are displaced without being provided with alternative homes. The evictions were administered by local public authorities and the families/communities were not offered adequate alternatives and thus they retreated to informal shelters on the periphery of the city, most typically in areas unsuitable for human habitation. (This process, in most cases, took place in several sequential steps.) The second type denotes the dislocation of families or larger groups of families by the authorities with the provision of some alternative accommodation, but these offer precarious and deprived circumstances on the margins of the city, usually on industrial lands or wastelands. The third type includes colonies that have mostly been inhabited by vulnerable working-class Roma for decades. These are situated in peri-urban areas and represent deep destitution. Homes in these areas are refused legalisation as they are not fit for habitation and the resources for basic infrastructural development have never been provided in the past or present. The fourth category includes areas of selective development or underdevelopment of peri-urban zones inhabited by Roma families since pre-socialist times. Vincze analyses how local authorities and urban development deliberately forced poor Roma into spatially and socially marginalised ghettos and show this process through the case of Dallas Pata Rat in Cluj Napoca, which could serve as an example of all the possible failures of policy-making that result in the construction of racialised exclusion; the creation of one of the largest ethnic urban ghettos in Romania. "*At the end of the day, local public administration acquired a piece of land in Pata Rat and defined it as a housing area in the larger sea of industrial lands, where it forcibly relocated the families evicted from Coastei Street. Altogether, the formation of the marginalized residential space called Pata Rat as we know it today is the story of a long dispossession*".(p77) Vincze shows how inhabitants of these deprived, spatially and socially marginalized areas are seen as "redundant' "unworthy" or not "civilized", although they occupy the most vulnerable, unprotected positions on the labour market for wages much lower than the cost of their families' basic needs

as, for example, landfill workers, unskilled workers at the local sanitation companies or on maintenance. "*Racialized labour is precarious, that is unsecure, underpaid and dehumanizing and most importantly is conceived as expropriable*." They are seen as less valuable or of no value as labour at all. "*By ghettoization, people are not only pushed in and enclosed in underdeveloped territories as an undesirable population but they are also controlled … and abused if needed as a cheap informal labour force …*" Vincze shows eloquently how processes of spatial exclusion and labour exploitation go hand in hand and how people living in these ghetto-like areas are a major source of a cheap and completely unprotected workforce that the growing economy needs so much, but who still remain completely invisible to the majority society as contributing members of the local (and global) economy.

The fourth chapter, authored by Christina Rat, discusses social and welfare policies and the ways they affect the inhabitants of impoverished areas such as those studied in the research. In the first section she provides an overview of the legislative and policy framework and its changes, targeting deprived segments of the population, since the mid-1990s. She describes how shrinking rights, increasing levels of conditionality and narrowed eligibility resulted in an intensifying workfare regime where vulnerable Roma living in spatial and social marginalisation are concerned. Even progressive initiatives, such as the introduction of a Guaranteed Minimum Income in 2002 brought about a restrictive approach by setting the eligibility threshold low and imposing conditions, such as participation in activation schemes. This meant either involvement in some – second chance- education scheme or participation in community work. Racialized spatial exclusion processes for Roma are not unknown to countries in the Central-East European region; the fourth chapter of the book sounds very familiar to anyone acquainted with how post-communist states try to deal with (a better expression would perhaps be: to discipline) their Roma populations through social and employment policies. In various countries, the scope, the name and actual conditions of policy measures aiming at activating economically inactive poor and marginalized Roma differ, but even so we find that these kinds of schemes – activation in Slovakia, public work in Hungary, GMI in Romania etc. – result in extreme dependence, are highly racialised and become the core of workfare regimes. They all include an element of stigmatization of and dependency among socially deprived people. Stigmatization in Hungary is achieved through wearing compulsory visible clothing and working on sites in clear view of the majority society; in Romania it is achieved through listing "*Allegedly to demise corruption accusations, but actually with a strong stigmatizing effects on beneficiaries, the list of GMI recipients was obligatorily posted at visible location in the municipality building*" (p.102). Another common feature is that these schemes construct a secondary labour market with significantly lower levels of income (50% of the minimum net wage in Hungary, and 20% of the minimum wage in Romania). It is also noteworthy that the activities within these schemes include dirty, labour intensive and sometimes dangerous work. Finally, and most importantly, these schemes produced high political gains for the ruling parties in all countries: they were welcomed by the local majorities, as many perceived these schemes as a suitable way of forcing undeserving Roma to work. Activation schemes were welcomed by marginalised, poor Roma too, as most of them "*perceived it as labour performed in order to earn a benefit' and thought 'it is normal to work for money you get*". (p 102) Accounts in Hungary even say that many of them felt that they regained their dignity by being able to work (irrespective of the earnings that came with the job). In her chapter, Rat demonstrates – at the

level of legislation and practice - how social inclusion policies "*obscure the adverse forms in which precarious workers from segregated and severely deprived urban peripheries participate in productive labour and relate to a strictly conditional and disciplinary social assistance framework, which is nonetheless obstructed by local-level discretion, at times in favour of those rendered impoverished for generations, at times blaming them as undeserving, but most often racializing them as Tsiganes*" (p 115) This sentence represents so much of what is going on with Roma/Gypsy populations in the entire region and how the state is contributing to perpetuating racialized marginality on the one hand and white privilege, on the other.

The second part of the book deals with the discursive (re)production of marginalisation and racialised exclusion of Roma living on urban segregated peripheries. Anca Simionca's chapter analyses how the marginalization of Roma living in spatial exclusion is maintained through the narratives of the stakeholders of the city's urban development and economy. The chapter analyses the imaginaries guiding the development of the city in the discourses of co-workers in the institutions that produce city level policies. It describes the ways in which discourse on urban and economic development constitutes the symbolic context in which the pre-existing marginalised situation of the Roma is legitimised and becomes a starting point for further exclusion from the positive vision of local society. The research constituting the core of the chapter analyses interviews conducted with stakeholders of urban development: politicians, representatives of local authorities and social workers, as well as representatives of institutions that have an important role in shaping the economy and societies of the cities, such as labour agencies, commerce and industrial chambers. It found that policy actors' imaginaries are centred on the idea of the flexible economy and outsourcing risks and responsibilities to individuals. In their narratives, foreign investors are seen as the rational actors and as the solution for development. They are the ones to decide who is worthy and who is undeserving to participate in the economic and social development of the locality. The chapter concludes: "*The positive visions of city growth, development and integration that these institutions operate with only occasionally and marginally discuss poverty itself and are not explicitly formulated in ethnic and racial terms. Yet, they have an immense impact on the spaces and possibilities opened and closed for the disadvantaged through the fact that they are the very setting of the limits between desirability and non-desirability, normality and abnormality, worthiness and unworthiness*" (p. 142)

Hanna Orsolya Vincze studied another key area of the discursive (re)production of marginality, namely the news. It is based on a content analysis of the news coverage of segregated areas of five Romanian cities (Călărași, Cluj-Napoca, Miercurea-Cius, Ploiești, Târgu-Mureș in a three year period between 2011 and 2013. However, there is little explanation of the type of news sources (newspaper or other types of news) analysed, nor of the criteria for selecting them. The chapter looks at the media representation of these segregated localities and describes how the news media articulate the issue of segregation and what its role in the construction of the image of distant, unproductive enclaves is. Being physically segregated from the ethnic majority population of the local society, the presence of these people in the media and their images, as well as the discourses, are crucial in terms of how people will see them. In the analysis, researchers coded content into three major themes: eviction, living conditions and social interventions. They coded actors appearing in the news, as well as actors' voices. They found that evictions were emphatically framed as a Roma issue, thus contributing to the notion of housing problems and evictions as an ethicised conflict. The second theme – living conditions in seg-

regated areas –was as emphatic in the news coverage as evictions (altogether 83 articles dealt with this topic). The coverage was highly emotional(iced) and depicted a feeling of fear and sense of danger, helplessness and anger. Although news coverage emphasising empathy with inhabitants of segregated peripheries may support a humanised image of marginalised Roma, folkloristic descriptions of extreme poverty can also have an effect of creating distance between Roma living on the margins of urban spaces and others. Such representations may contribute to the construction of poverty as extreme and out of the ordinary. News of social interventions was much less emphatic and focused on one notorious area, Pata Rat in Cluj (out of the 21 news items 16 discussed this one ghetto). Interestingly, social interventions were emphatically framed as an international issue, as most actors, such as UNDP and the EU, were international organisations. This suggests a shift in responsibility for solving extreme marginalisation and poverty from the local or national to the international level in the news coverage *"... by situating the issue either at a European level (...) or at a level of individual charity, a sphere of individual morality, news on social interventions distances the issue from the local levels or from the sphere of economy and politics in general."* (p171)

All in all, the book is a great though difficult read for anyone who is engaged in the study of the mechanisms of marginalisation, racialised exclusion, spatial segregation and their role in urban development. Although the book takes an explicit ideological stance of anti-neo-liberalism, still its value lies in the underlying research and analysis, which is very rich and important, in my view. In my very private opinion, a somewhat less theoretical and ideological embedding and more detailed explanation of the type of data and methods of analysis would have been useful, though. But this might just be a sociologist's quibble.