

## ANTI-GIPSY RACISM AND THE SYMBOLISM OF THE FEMALE BODY

The attitudes and discourses of politicians, journalists, people from the street or internet users towards the recent act of violence and crime in Italy perpetrated – seemingly – by a Romanian citizen brings to the fore many (re)sentiments and ideas about “who we are”, or about “our” position in relation to those we think are superior/inferior compared to “us”, or about what we think “others” expect from “us” and what expectations “we” may have regarding “them”. Beyond the crime, these reactions symbolically express processes of cultural (self)positioning of people who are perceived and defined as “Romanians in Europe”. These processes take place after the political blessing of Romania’s accession to EU, and they obviously have material and existential consequences for those concerned. One realizes that the interpretation and explanation of a crime carried out in a given place and at a given time by an individual against another is not accidentally framed in particular terms. This is why we need to wonder what all these recounts, narratives and debates are about, what they do represent while also producing the events due to their interpretive power of attributing them certain meanings.

Below I will show that the all too politicized scandal denotes first of all that social exclusion, underlied/justified by the racialization of the excluded individuals or groups, is responsible for the recent anti-gipsy hysteria from Italy and Romania (which on its turn has well-defined political aims). The events also illustrate the way anti-gipsy racism – in order to legitimate and make more popular its actions or to increase its power for mobilization – appropriates and manipulates the female body, which has become on this stage a symbol of the Italian nation jeopardized by intruders perceived through their supposedly inferior (or even criminal) “race”.

In this case, too, trying to figure out what it is happening people make use of the classification systems they have acquired during their socialization as individuals and collectivities. Among them the ethnicized/racialized and the gendered classifications are prominent. The dichotomy between “Europeans” and “Romanians”, “westerners” and “easterners”, “Romanians” and “Roma”, or between “Italian woman” and “Roma man”,

as any cultural distinction is produced through everyday social relations, but also in the context of particular political and economic interests. This distinction has well-defined social functions that point beyond the organization of the interpersonal relations on which it is used in a direct way and which it tends to interpret here and now. Because it is a distinction that superficially generalizes personal traits and actions attributing them a presumably universal or group-like character. Traits are not only allocated to groups, but the latter are automatically compared and organized in hierarchies (on different value scales ranging from 'good' to 'bad', from 'civilized' to 'primitive' and so on). As a result, certain groups are collectively excluded from the pool of "acceptable" or "normal" people, or even from "humans". From the perspective of those who have the power to control classifications, but also for those who do not have means for self-representation, the stake of these symbolic games is to establish who is the winner and loser in this messy business and implicitly who deserves access to resources, rights or even life.

In a society that favors the individuals and collectivities belonging to one's own ethnic group and in which people try to explain differences and inequalities resorting to biology, we can expect that in critical situations ethnocentrism and racism are going to become more visible and to manifest very intensively. In such cases they will mark social relations as racial by placing all the individuals assumed to belong to a certain category into one (inferior or superior) "race". Moreover, they will initiate reactions against the "inferior races" (solutions similar to that of Hitler's, Mussolini's, or of Antonescu's) borrowed from a past that suddenly becomes relevant for the present. In addition, racism and ethnocentrism racialize traits, activities, phenomena and social problems, consequently anyone who or anything that is seen as inferior, unacceptable, not wanted or outsider, becomes "gipsy" or "gipsy-like".

In our recent case the Italian politicians – helplessly confronting the huge immigration wave –, as actors of the domestic political battlegrounds blame Romanian citizens for the "social disorder" from their country, using them in their internal struggles. Romanians, hurt in their national pride, distancing themselves from Roma people, blame the latter and they hurry to assure the Italian state and society that "true Romanians" are worthy of Europe, or they try hard to make Roma organizations from Romania

accountable for not being able “to educate their own communities”. Hungarians from Romania have a somewhat outsider perspective, feeding their feelings of superiority both regarding Romanians and Roma. Appeals to collectively apologize to another group (for the sake of accumulating political capital or launched by a sense of human solidarity), engender at their turn the ethnic hierarchies (i.e. the relations of ethnic superiority and inferiority). They naturalize attitudes such as: “Romanians have to apologize to Italians”, or “Roma have to apologize to Romanians” or “(tolerant) Italians/Romanians are the ones who are entitled to forgive (or not to forgive) sinner Romanians or Roma”.

Moreover, this flow of ethnic blaming that serves as a frame for interpreting a criminal act of a given individual uses the female body as a symbol that stands for the Italian nation and a border on which various social and political messages are inscribed. In the context of the ethnicized and gendered discourse, the raped woman symbolizes Italy, which appears as a victim of the invading foreign bodies. The masculinity of the latter is illustrated by their aggressive and violent actions, a challenge handled by the Italian state through another masculine practice: counterattacks and merciless revenge initiated by the desire to protect its woman-nation. In the next move – by the means of a racist toolkit – violent masculinity is transferred to Roma, so this mechanism not “only” blames the whole group because of an individual, but it also racializes unacceptable acts such as rape and crime. On another matter, the Romanian-Italian relations are gendered differently: elaborating the list of the most dangerous social categories who are “threatening” Italy, the Romanian prostitutes are perceived as the number one public enemy of the Italian order and morality, which has to be manly defended from the demonic sexuality of Romanian and Roma women.

In the context of these cultural appreciations (or more exactly, devaluations), the majority of opinion leaders (in Italy and Romania) completely forget about the phenomenon of social exclusion (that actually represents a source of profit for many people by, for example, the exploitation of prostitutes, or of the unskilled labor, or the of black labor force). Social exclusion produces and maintains boundaries between Roma and non-Roma: Roma culture is articulated and elaborated (also) as a response to marginalization playing an important role in the broader social context (that of the

outsider or the utter other in contrast to whom the “normality” of the insiders is defined), and “Roma” are ending up to stand for everything that is left outside.

It seems that the leaders (who strike the key note in public debates) do not want to acknowledge the fact that social exclusion produces and maintains (both in Italy and Romania) people in precarious conditions without access to dwelling, jobs, education, health etc. (conditions that in turn promote illicit life strategies and at the extreme theft, violence, crime). Moreover, they do not notice that racism added to social exclusion furthers social exclusion, categorizing as “Roma” all people who live in those conditions. They forget the fact that social exclusion is a social, economic, political and cultural phenomenon, and its elimination requires changing both economic and social relations, and social and political institutions, but also cultural beliefs that are responsible for its production and maintenance.

Under the conditions of which social exclusion is strengthened by anti-gipsy racism, the marginal position and disadvantaged status of Roma is “explained” by their cultural and/or genetic “essence” (the so-called “gipsy blood”). The racist agenda makes living in improvised barracks, lacking formal education, violence, theft, prostitution, etc. a matter of “free will” of Roma in a “tolerant” world that abounds in equal opportunities and lacks any kind of discrimination, and sees the attitudes of the majority as natural reactions or even as strategies for defending themselves from Roma. But in reality, these ways of being and acting are strategies to cope with the challenges of a system built on structural inequalities developed in time. In the case of Roma people, the continuous accumulation of social and economic disadvantages is doubled with confronting a racism that supports institutional discrimination and legitimates a cultural order, within which they are devalued and categorized as inferior, and all what is conceived as unacceptable is defined as Roma.

In today’s Italy and Romania, exactly these mechanisms create the ground on which people are opened to the message according to which „the nations’ women” are jeopardized by “Roma criminality”, therefore Roma have to be expelled. In this case anti-gipsy racism is fed by the most intimate feelings, constructed around the patriarchal idea of the (national) ownership on women’s body and of the imperative of defending ethnic

purity in the face of the invading supreme enemy. In front of these concerns one might ask rhetorically: how much political, social and financial commitment is there – both in Italy and Romania – regarding violence against women and how can we explain that the problem remains at best hidden and at worst accepted if it happens in the confines of the family, be it the nuclear one or the enlarged family of ones “own people”.

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