BOOK REVIEW

Racial Cities: Governance and the segregation of Romani people in urban Europe, by Giovanni Picker, London and New York, Routledge, 2017, 174 pp., £110.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-138-80878-2

In Europe today, a large number of Roma are still living in deplorable conditions below the minimum standard of decent housing, which is a key factor contributing to the exclusion the Roma endure. Moreover, the ongoing privatization of municipal dwellings mostly affects people of Roma origin, who are unlikely to rent long-term accommodation from private owners, while long-term tenancy is often a prerequisite for employment and access to other social, economic and cultural rights (Tomicic & Kupka, 2017). This historical discrimination is in particular motivated by the stereotypes that prevail in our societies where residential and social alienation has been increasingly articulated by the 'slumification' of middle-class neighborhoods, affecting property prices and resulting in concentrated disadvantage. It is important to underscore that this concentration does not stem from some primordial desire for a common life among 'themselves'. It is not the result of ethnic instincts, as it is some- times presented. It is the result of external circumstances, structural conditions that the Roma can hardly resist.

In his book, Racial Cities, Giovanni Picker (Marie- Skłodowska Curie Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham School of Social Policy, UK) sets out to expound on the history and persistence of stigmatized and segregated 'Gypsy urban areas' in both Eastern and Western Europe. With substantial reference lists for each of the chapters of this well documented, ethnographically sound, multi-sited work, Picker contributes to the field and understanding of this issue with a solid and informed critique of existing literature – a critique which he justifiably bases on the lack of understanding of colonial origins and class formation as bases of the 'process of racialization' (Picker, 2017, p. 3). To avoid race, a word that is too nauseating, we admit that the 'Roma question' is a matter of culture. Referring to the trend of academic political correctness when substituting race with ethnicity, French sociol- ogist Eric Fassin rightly notes in the foreword to this book that European academia is only concealing its racism, that we have only moved from measuring bodily features for racial mappings to that of racial ascriptions of urban spaces, of 'cities as organisms' (Picker, 2017, p. 10). Fassin suggests '[a]cademic color- blindness [. . .] makes it very difficult to analyze the politics of race in Europe today' (p. x), a trend Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek (TMR Podcast, 2012) would contrast with what he refers to as 'Progressive racism' – a strategy of calling a spade a spade to counter racism through the acknowledgement of its existence.

Despite the lengthy critique of ethnic, racial or national essentialisms conducted by the social sciences, they continue to nourish multiple forms of discrimination and violence. On the basis of this observation, this book invites us to go beyond the approaches that underline the historical and/or situational nature of cultural identities to make them, more fundamen- tally, a form of ordinary social typification, capable of taking on a different 'cultural depth,' depending on the contexts of interaction.

The central question animating Picker's book, which positions itself as a bridge 'between race critical theories and urban studies' (Picker, 2017, p. i), is that of how to trace back the roots of such racism to the colonial capitalist exploitation of mainly labor and land. The author's main argument is that race is a politically charged social force that regulates social arrangements.

The answer to the question is interesting, but for some readers the dialectical methodol- ogy used may be equally compelling. Through a reflexive and critical multi-sited comparative ethnography, Picker leads us to undcover the historical, colonial but also systemic origins of race. Chapter 1 is centered on the various and variable circulations and borrowings linking colony, metropole and contemporary Europe leading to spatial segregation. Picker dedicates chapters 2 through 6 to the empirical and theoretical analysis of various segregating mechanisms, linking them to the three-fold scheme of colonial segregation rationales in Romania, Italy, France and the UK. Picker's ethnography is set in four modern-day sites: Cluj-Napoca, Pescara, Montreuil, Florence and Salford. By contrasting various mechanisms of discrimination, and juxtaposing them with former colonial cities (Rabat, Addis Ababa, and New Delhi), the author points to the multiple similarities in the mechanisms of segregation against the historically and contemporary others, not perceived as a community based on culture or origin but as a minority characterized by the experience of discrimination. The mechanisms identified by the author are displacement (Chapter 2), omission (Chapter 3), containment (Chapter 4) and cohesion (Chapter 5).

Racial Cities is a solid primer of a critical perspective on racism, oriented towards a denunciation of the institutional conditions that support anti-Roma racism. However, Picker attempts to respond to the object of its denunciation as well, by reintroducing a political dimension to a question often relegated to an issue of management and security. The author openly 'engages with neoliberalism and its connections with colonialism, race and urban governance' (Picker, 2017, p. 13). From Picker's perspective, neoliberalism can be said to be an evolution towards a paradoxical type of governmentality: the apparent withdrawal of the state marks in reality an even stronger but displaced interventionism. Neoliberalism, therefore, will not be placed under the sign of laissez-faire, but on the contrary, under the sign of vigilance, activity, and permanent intervention. Well inspired by Goldberg's 'Racial State' (2002),, Goldberg defines the role of the modern (Western) state as the production and reproduction of a political, social and cultural homogeneity and of an identity which guarantees the replication of a community characterized by sameness in the face of increasing global heterogeneity. In order to achieve its ends, the State makes use of its power to exclude (Fortress Europe) and, by extension, to include, however on racial terms (with the means at its disposal within the law and politics as well as by a bureaucratic apparatus), inventing stories and traditions, ceremonies and a cultural imaginary.

This is even more necessary when growing individualism combined with a globalized culture that threatens national identity leads states to organize a public debate on national identity. The recent debates in Europe on multiculturalism (Germany and Great Britain), the place of Islam (The Netherlands), the veil in France and the integration of second-generation migrants point to the persistent practice of considering 'the other as a threat' against social cohesion. In this process, the class contradiction is transcended in order to protect a growing inequality in the distribution of wealth in favor of the rich by creating, through constructed and reconstructed identity, the categories of 'us' and 'others'. With regard to 'the others', they are

summoned to integrate, to renounce the attributes of their identity, to repudiate their 'community' and their religion and to become invisible. They are confined in ghettos, populate prisons and form a new category of second-class citizens. This goes hand in hand with the spotlight on the few individuals who emerge from 'diversity,' in politics and in other areas of the public sphere (media, fashion, sport, etc.). These are, after all, liberal democracies and the illusion of equal rights must be maintained.

Despite the lengthy critique of ethnic, racial or national essentialisms conducted by the social sciences, they continue to nourish multiple forms of discrimination and violence. On the basis of this observation, this book invites us to go beyond approaches that emphasize the historical and/or situational nature of cultural identities to make them, more fundamen- tally, a form of ordinary social typification, capable of taking on a different 'cultural depth.' Nevertheless, certain arguments are recalled on several occasions, such as the lack of innate 'taste' of slum-dwellers for the practice of nomadism. A more critical outlook on the author's writing could indeed point to some redundancies: each chapter recounting similar facts, namely slum evictions, and attempting to demonstrate the vacuity of clichés relating to migrant Roma. In addition, and without risking spoiling the fluidity of the text by more cumbersome factual details, the author's empirical contribution would probably have been reinforced by the provision and comparison of more quantitative data.

In summary, Racial Cities points to an angle of analysis which is part of a broader ambition of disciplinary and theoretical decompartmentalization, thus offering interesting ways to understand the resilience of cultural identifications. It is an essential book for thinking about the spatial dimension of the racial question and articulating the Romani question through colonial history. A book aware of its originality, of its strengths and of its weak- nesses. A book that opens our eyes to urban displays of inequality we often overlook.

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