CHAPTER 3

Post-Socialist Europe and Its "Constitutive Outside": Ethnographic Resemblances for a Comparative Research Agenda

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Introduction

The "post-Socialist Europe" label has been criticized for not being able to fully capture post-1989–91 social and cultural processes in Central and Eastern Europe and Russia; not only for simplifying and lumping together rather different political, economic and social experiences but also for supporting "allochronism" (Fabian 1983), denying contemporaneousness and agency to the people of the region(s) (cfr. Buchowski 2012: 77–78). In approaching post-Socialist Europe from an internal and diachronic perspective, i.e. focusing only on Central and Eastern Europe and Russia and only on temporality, this line of criticism claims that present-day social conditions cannot be seen exclusively as a result of the past. By contrast, in this chapter I propose to reflect critically on the "post-Socialist Europe" label from an external and comparative synchronic perspective: rather than from its inside, I want to discuss post-Socialist Europe in relation to its outside. Rather than asking, What is post-Socialist Europe in relation to Socialist Europe?, my question is, What is suppressed, when it comes to post-Socialist Europe? – in other words, What is, exactly, *non*-post-Socialist Europe?

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Derrida's concept of the "constitutive outside" is a useful reference here: "[t]he elements of signification function not through the compact force of their nuclei but rather through the *networks of oppositions* that distinguish them and then relate them one to another" (Derrida 1991: 63; emphasis added). The concept has then been rearticulated by Stuart Hall (1991) who saw in "the rest" the pivotal constitutive element of "the West". Shifting from critical theory to located historical, political and cultural contexts, the theoretical question becomes, "What kind of "networks of oppositions" does post-Socialist Europe entail?" One set of these "networks" has been established with Socialist Europe, and the subject has received quite a large attention (e.g. Verdery 1996; Burawoy and Verdery 1999). A second set of networks has been established with Post-Socialist *non*-Europe – this has provided a meaningful register for a comparative critique primarily of Latin American socio-economic and political dynamics (e.g. Lijphart and Waisman 1996; Gerskovits 1998; Terry 1992). To date, however, there has strikingly been no effort in questioning synchronic "networks of oppositions" with what can be called *non*-post-Socialist Europe.

In order to contribute to filling this gap, I start by asking a simple, perhaps naive question – Why are post-Socialist Portugal, post-Socialist Sweden, or post-Socialist Luxemburg, among others, never an issue? The answer may be rather straightforward: by "Post-Socialist Europe," one can easily say, what is actually meant is post-*State*-Socialist-Europe. Adding one more hyphen and the fundamental "State" would probably make the expression historically and philosophically more correct. Indeed, Socialism as such was and is primarily a *social philosophy* which imagines itself to be universal in nature and international in project (Engels 1970[1882]). However, my interest lies beyond striving for nominal accuracy; rather, I am inspired by two main research streams – the first can be summarized by what Melegh called "East-West slope" (2006), namely, a documented orientalist public discourse, emerging in the early 1990s, of an alleged moral, political and "civic" superiority of Western Europe vis-à-vis Eastern Europe (see also Wolf 1994; Todorova 1997); the second source of inspiration is a growing sense in anthropology that the production of knowledge on Eastern Europe should not only come from its Western counterpart, but rather from "merg[ing] perspectives from the 'East' and 'West' in order to create a truly equal and innovative anthropology in Central and Eastern Europe" (Buchowski 2012: 82).

Moving from these standpoints, this chapter examines, from a historical-ethnographic and comparative perspective, present-day fragmented resemblances and disjunctures between post-socialist Eastern and *post-socialist Western* Europe, in view of proposing a comparative ethnographic perspective. By focusing on the governance of socially marginalized Romani people in Cluj-Napoca (Romania) and Florence (Italy), I will show that in both temporal units (i.e. pre- and post-1989) the two cities display ethnographic resemblances, and that if one desperately wants to look for hierarchies between the two, the Romanian city might well earn a superior position. However, rather than creating disparities and hierarchies, which may serve less to explain social processes than to perpetuate Manichean representations typical of orientalist knowledge, my conclusion will point at the importance of engaging ethnographic comparisons of “West” and “East” in order to demythologize, de-dichotomize and ultimately refine knowledge on (Post-) socialism.

From Forced Inclusion to Forced Exclusion across the East-West Divide

Post-Socialism in Western Europe is a real condition. It speaks of a fading-away utopia, a massively powerful cosmology which had once grounded sociality, inspired masses and workers’ households, provided hope, meaning-making, intellectual and emotional strength, and ultimately produced fundamental social change which people in Western Europe have enjoyed for many years even after 1989. For instance, Left-wing class politics fighting for the interests of the working classes against the exploitative capitalist elite substantially shaped the lives of the working poor in many Italian, Spanish and French regions (e.g. Shore 1990; Pratt 2003; Però 2007). Furthermore, feminist politics supported primarily by Communist and Socialist parties engendered social dynamics including the successful referendum for adopting abortion and divorce laws that are still part of many women and men’s collective memories in a number of countries (Papadogiannis and Gehrig 2015). For many Western European citizens who benefited from, and enjoyed, Left-wing politics, 1989 represented a shocking turning point after which their structured cultural and political references vanished more or less rapidly. Moreover, the early 1990s’ global emergence of neoliberal ideologies and their supporters, including increasingly powerful institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, have been shaping the socio-economic opportunities of the marginalized in

both parts of Europe, and surely beyond. Therefore, looking ethnographically across (post-)State-Socialist Europe and (post-)-non-State-Socialist-Europe can illuminate qualitative resemblances which may be neglected if the attention is exclusively put on the macro impact of the vanishing iron curtain on Eastern European economy and society.

Stemming from these considerations, ethnographically comparing instances of local governance of marginalized Romani families can shed light on similarities and differences between modes of governing deemed "others within" in both Socialist and today's (post-Socialist) Europe. Since the late Middle Ages, Romani people have come to constitute the largest minority in Europe (Liegeois 1994). As a number of authors have documented (e.g. Crowe 2003; Lucassen et al. 1998), for the majority of their history Romani people have been refused participation in local and national polities, largely due to the stigmatization they have continually faced. Since the early fifteenth century, both state policy and everyday expressions of exclusion have contributed to the marginalization of Romani people, pushing them either towards rural areas – typically in Eastern Europe, or urban peripheries – typically in Western Europe (Plésiat 2010). In this context, efforts towards forced inclusion, i.e. assimilation, have continued in both parts of Europe since Empress Maria Teresa's measures of forcibly sedentarizing Romani collectives in the eighteenth century. WWII saw the apogee of nationalist and genocidal policy across the East and the West; from 1945 to 1989 both Eastern and Western European states carried out important measures addressing Romani people, and continued the politics *forced inclusion*, steered by the official idiom of "social integration" in the West, and "assimilation in the working masses" in the East. Past 1989, and most prominently since the early 2000s, across the East-West divide a converging path towards a *forced exclusion* became explicit: public agendas and state rhetoric gradually but steadfastly enacted disciplining and repressive public actions, often making headlines in Europe and beyond (Picker 2010; Van Baar 2011; Stewart 2012). Against this historical background, Cluj (Romania) and Florence (Italy) seem to display particularly explicit ethnographic resemblances

Post-Socialist Cluj, Romania

Until the early 2000s the history of Roma governance in Cluj is rather straightforward. In the 1960s Ceausescu's sedentarization policies lead

almost inevitably several Roma families to move from the countryside to the urban area, in particular to Iris, the main industrial neighbourhood. Since then, the neighbourhood acquired the "Gypsy stigma", becoming the "Gypsy neighbourhood" of Cluj, namely, a dangerous place, in which social abandonment, moral decay and crime were discursively lumped together in a suspicious alchemy informing several urban legends. Those legends maintained, and still largely maintain, that *Ţigani* (literally "Gypsies") are the major cause of all the problems (see Picker 2013). Territorial stigmatization was still prominent when in 2008 I started my fieldwork in and around the neighbourhood. While spending long afternoons in the local pub with workers going home from their shifts, I became acquainted with the idiom with which Irisians, i.e. the neighbourhood's inhabitants or simply those who worked there but nonetheless imagine some sort of belonging to the neighbourhood, experienced their social environment and the "Gypsy stigma" they acknowledged as being rooted in the urban imaginary.

The early 2000s and 2010 mark the beginning of a new trend in governing marginalized urban Romani households in Romania. Between 2000 and 2003 for the first time the city council designed and implemented an ad hoc policy for about 50 people of Romani background living in vulnerable conditions in various parts of the city centre. They were relocated to an ad hoc settlement of containers very close to the railway in the peripheral zone of the regional landfill, which is called Pata Rât. Due to the proximity to the railways, the relocated families could not obtain the certificate of dwelling, called *extras de carte funciara*, which would have allowed them to get a lawful residence certificate, and thus access local public services (Rat 2013). In December 2010 the municipality ordered another, far larger, eviction, relocating 56 Romani families, i.e. 270 people, from the city centre, Coastei street, to an ad hoc settlement right close to Pata Rât, far beyond the urban perimeter. Carrying out evictions and relocations is a rather common governance practice in Romania and in other European countries (both East and West) when it comes to Romani families, as if they were legitimately eligible of differential treatment by local public authorities (Vincze and Rat 2013). My ethnography of the conditions within which the 2010 eviction took place accounted for civil servants' tacit knowledge about, and representations of, Romani households in Cluj (Picker 2013). One small instance of these representations is the

definition of the situation by the senior civil servant who designed and ordered the eviction:

> The problem of Romani citizens in Coastei street is an old one. First there were four flats, which were owned by the municipality and rented out to some families – there were Romanian and Romani families. We relocated 40 families, of whom 18 had already regularly paid to the municipality part of the rent in advance for a certain period of time, while 22 were abusively occupying the municipal property. (. . .)
>
> But you should consider that those flats were insalubrious and inadequate to a decent life in Cluj-Napoca municipality, with regards to general public health laws. It was a potential risk for public health. Moreover, with the passing of time, the number of the flats swelled and those families started developing major prejudices vis-à-vis other Clujeans (. . .) What happened? We have granted a land, we built up modular housing units, and in the moment when this housing were completed, we asked the Roma living in Coastei to apply for those new housing.

And later on, a more explicit view of Romani people:

> You should also see who are the people targeted by this policy. I wonder, what is their mentality? That's because a public policy can be very good, but if it's not applicable, meaning that the people for whom it is designed to be implemented see reality in a completely differently way . . . then everything becomes complicated.

This excerpt provides a sense of common representations of marginalized urban Romani households. Instantiating the deep-rooted discourse of an alleged unchangeable "mentality", as the civil servant did, speaks more of state approaches than of Romani people's alleged characteristics; it accounts for the difficulty of improving the institutional approach to marginalized fractions of the urban population in Eastern Europe. The "mentality" referred to by the civil servant, moreover, is deemed different from the majority's as well as the main reason why a "good" public policy cannot be applicable; therefore, that "difference" is not neutral or void of value judgement, but squarely inscribed within the production of socio-economic, symbolic and spatial hierarchies, ultimately contributing to keep Romani people at the bottom of the urban class structure and outside the spatial boundaries of the city.

In addition to those fundamental representations, the urban economic context of the 2010 eviction included three essential issues: (a) increased cutbacks in social service spending and the reliance on more repressive forms of social control, (b) urban restructuring following a clear neoliberal agenda constituted by development projects aiming to create real estate and corporation profit without paying attention to social costs and (c) the national increase of class inequalities alongside ethnic and racial lines. (a) Between 2010 and 2011 the number of Clujean families on social benefits dropped from 170 to 110. The government of the poor, at the same time, has not been reduced, but possibly intensified by increasing the number of police branches in major Romanian cities, aiming in this way to control the potential petty-criminal marginalized, and to more directly respond to the majority's sense of insecurity. Interestingly, at times Western European institutions have chiefly been involved in this process of governing the poor - for example in Bacău (Eastern Romania) as the chief police officer explained to me, this process has been managed by the Swiss state police. (b) From clearing the city centre of worker households (Petrovici 2007) to public-private partnerships for large development projects in Iris (Picker 2014), since 2004 the urban political economy has followed a clear and rather steadfast neoliberal direction, attracting foreign direct investments especially by corporations seeking cheap labour. (c) Within a larger, national context, Romania is one of the most unequal Eastern European countries with regard to income per capita – from 1987/1990 to 2007/2008 the income inequality index increased from 23 to 31 (Hirt 2012: 42); moreover, in 2002 the UNDP (2002) reported that in Romania 80% of interviewed Romani people stated that they believed their living conditions were better in the past. Against this background the relocation to Pata Rât provoked the fall of the families' average income by 30%, and 28% of adult men lost their jobs (ERRC 2012).

The 2010 eviction, therefore, can be viewed as one of the signs of the wider process of socio-economic neoliberal restructuring. The two main official reasons for carrying out the eviction were the continuous complains by their neighbourhoods and the bad hygienic conditions of Romani families' housing in the city centre. (Municipal Directive 127/2010). As for the first one, when in summer 2011, helped by two police officers, I looked in the local police database for official complaints in the area, over the last 4 years, I found four complaints only: one of them was about a car burning, and only the other three were mentioning *Ţigani*. As for the second official reason behind the eviction, i.e. bad hygienic conditions, its

validity remains profoundly questioned by the decision itself of relocating those Romani families to a landfill (see Picker, 2017, for a more detailed discussion of hygiene).

In conclusion, the 2010 eviction is a clear expression of forced exclusion. While Socialism set out to include, in its own assimilationist way, Romani people in the urban working classes, post-Socialism seems to increasingly participate in another, unprecedented in this part of Europe, form of policy – pushing them to extreme urban peripheries and rural areas, even near landfills.

Post-Socialist Florence, Italy

Yugoslav Romani adult men began travelling to Florence in the 1970s, trying to establish business, particularly in second-hand car trading. By the mid-1980s a number of poor Romani families from Kosovo and Bosnia, the two most affected countries of Yogoslavia's collapse, were living in trailers and improvised housing in the outskirts of Florence. In 1988, as neighbours' protests mounted, the Left-wing regional council passed a law ordering the construction of camps. The law was entitled *Interventions to protect the Romani ethnicity* and it was the first law exclusively addressing Romani people in the region. It was based on the false assumption that Romani people are all nomadic people and therefore those who just arrived from Kosovo and Macedonia need a place to stop their wandering life, in order to both become socially integrated and keep their vagrant traditions – what better choice than providing them with equipped camps? Accordingly, the 1988 law put a strong accent of sedentarization: only those who would choose camps as their permanent, sedentary housing solution, were entitled to various social services. This example shows that the pre-1989 forced inclusion of Romani people occurred in both regions of Europe, not only in the East.

Together with Bologna, Florence is Italy's most prominent Left-wing city (and Tuscany, along with Emilia Romagna, the most leftist Italian region). Since 1945 the city has almost constantly been governed by leftist and centre-leftist mayors and the 1988 law was proposed and unanimously accepted by a Left-wing regional council. This deeply rooted tradition should not be seen as a mere political expression of the majority, but rather as a strong social force able to shape individual, family and group lives (Kertzer 1996). The communist party's sections, unions and neighbourhoods activism has been able to mobilize and provide solid cultural and

intellectual references to hundreds of thousands of Florentine as Tuscan workers for the most part of the twentieth century. It is interesting to view the forced inclusion of Romani people from this angle – camp sas the spatial refractions of Left-wing ideas of diversity and integration: indeed, much of the expert knowledge on "nomadism" upon which the 1988 law was based, came from Left-wing NGOs (Picker 2011). Therefore, there also was the civil society, not only the state, behind the forced inclusion of Romani people in Florence in the late 1980s – a Left-wing civil society, which considered camps as the best solution for dispossessed and homeless Yugoslav citizens. What neither the state nor the civil society understood was that in Yugoslavia, those Romani families used to live in block of flats, have regular jobs and even organize in Romani associations and groups according to Tito's politics of cultural recognition which started in the mid-1970s. Since the mid-1990s, the Florentine civil society has been promoting the politics of "going beyond the nomad camp!" ("*al di là dei campi nomadi*!"), by criticizing the camp as degrading and segregating devices.

In 2007–08, when I have done fieldwork in Florence, local associations and NGOs fighting against the segregation of Romani people were still deeply rooted in the grassroots tradition of pre-1989 communist party's activism. The most Leftist Italian national NGO is ARCI, which was founded in Florence in 1957 as an anti-fascist organization, and which still frames its militant action as embedded within the communist tradition of class struggle. The legacy of this tradition is palpable in the ARCI Florence headquarter, in continuous dialogue with present-day syncretic forms and expressions of political affiliations. At the entrance of the building, you are welcomed by a series of Che Guevara posters, rainbow-like peace flags and reggae music – not too loud, in the background. Through the corridor and up the stairs, you're constantly greeted by Malcom X, Martin Luther King and Gramsci, who does not seem to be aware of the latest Bandabardò concert – a popular Florentine SKA and folk music group – which is advertised right on the forefront of the organic intellectual. This Left-wing patrimony is palpable not only in grassroots associations, but also in the city council social inclusion department: civil servants all embrace values of solidarity, social inclusion and equality. Therefore, the whole governance apparatus – private (NGOs) and public actors, are largely leaning to Left-wing values.

In 1988 the first camp was constructed in the north-west periphery of Florence, and was named Olmatello, after the street where it was built.

Surrounded by a 2-meter concrete wall, the Olmatello camp was initially equipped with very basic facilities such as modular housing and one toilet. At the beginning the handful of inhabitants found there a useful shelter, although extremely far from any service, including grocery shops. Little by little, the number of people swelled, primarily following the early 1990s' growing conflicts in Yugoslavia. This brought to an unbearable situation of very precarious material conditions, provoking serious hygienic issues. The municipality responded by installing a couple of other toilets and showers, but since 1992 it adopted a politics of forced evictions which went on for 3 years. Meanwhile, another camp appeared, called Poderaccio, at the opposite end of the urban periphery. The 1988 Law was then amended twice, and the second time, in 2000, the new law was still using the misnomer "nomads", perpetuating in this way the false assumption behind the initial idea of building camps. In 2007, when I first visited Olmatello, there were about 140 people living in very precarious economic and hygienic conditions, and many of them had been living there since 1988.

In 2007 Florence was governed by the Democratic Party (PD), the leading national Left-wing party, and district presidents were, as a rule, the direct emanation of the local political majority. One of the issues that during my fieldwork I was investigating was the ways in which district council was governing Olmatello. Civil servants at that time were planning to demolish the camp and relocate all Romani families to "proper" (*normale*) housing. My interest increased as I found out about the ways in which civil servants conceived the process towards proper housing:

> *Since 1999, our priority has always been the dismantling of the camp. Since it could not be done immediately, we proceeded in three directions: we bought new mobile homes, we formed a community center with a mosque, and have secured the electrical and water. Our priority has always been to strive for the dignity of the people who inhabit the area. Collaborating with associations and cooperatives has proved particularly successful, for example, in finding jobs for Romani people. The collaboration with the police has also been invaluable for the control of illegal actions and in general for keeping the camp within legal regulations; for example, if a family builds a shed without permission, I send a technician in the neighborhood, and if the family does not follow the technician's advice to demolish the shed, I will then send a municipal ordinance, but if they do not obey, I call the police who go immediately to the camp and demolish everything. This tug of war is particularly recurrent, but we also realized that if we threaten them [i.e. Romani people], then the last day before the deadline we*

set up, they do what the were asked for. It is a work of patience and weaving relationships, intimation and threats.

This type of management, which included temporary choices (the three strategies for dismantling the supposed shed) and a particular type of social bargaining (through tugs of war and threats) had a very significant impact on camp residents, who were living in a perpetual state of emergency. At the beginning of June 2007, a family in the camp told me about a letter which had just arrived from the district administration – an eviction notice, which applied to all families who had not complied with the camp regulations, namely, not leaving the camp for more than 3 months. Aiming to understand the conditions of camp residents, I got to know Beli (34 years old), married to Lada (35 years old), both of Pristina, with whom I talked about the letter and their family history. They had been living in the camp since 1996, and when we talked they were staying in a trailer with three children: Ana (6 years), Lesa (4 years) and Kiko (2 months). When Lesa was born the city council sent them to live at the council's expenses by a landlord, but after 8 months, the money ran out. They were then placed just outside the camp, in a trailer, but when Lada discovered her pregnancy of Kiko, the domestic space became insufficient. There was a larger trailer parked inside the camp, empty, and they occupied it. Neither Beli nor Lada had a job, and Beli was only doing on a few occasional collaborations. He had received a residence permit, which he could renew from then to 3 months, but Lada had arrived in Italy as a refugee and had never had a residence permit. Holding the eviction notice in his hands, Beli told me he did not know what to do, had no alternative but to stay where he was and at the same time feared daily the imminent expulsion.

This little snapshot of the ways in which "nomad camps", as they are usually called, are governed is just one instance of power dynamics which I very often came across during fieldwork in Florence. Against this background of existential precarity and tensions with the district administration, one may wonder where the legacy of Gramsci, Martin Luther King and Malcom X have gone, in the life and professions of post-Socialist Florence's civil servants. In addition, and perhaps more strikingly, one wonders where those intellectual and cultural references were, when in the 1980s Romani families were forcibly "welcomed" into the Olmatello camp. In conclusion, by looking at the ways in which dispossessed

stigmatized "nomads" were and are being governed in post-Socialist Florence we can make sense of post-Socialist transformations in *non*-post Socialist Europe, i.e. Western Europe; that is – how a city in which Socialist and Communist ideologies informed masses of workers, intellectuals and civil servants, by providing collective meanings, inspirations and identities, has been changing its attitudes towards the dispossessed and the marginalized, from forced inclusion to forced exclusion.

Conclusion: Towards a Comparative Ethnography

Taking distance from notions of "Post-socialism" as exclusively pertaining to Eastern Europe, in this chapter I have proposed to include Post-socialist Europe's "constitutive outside," i.e. Western Europe, and to see (post-) Socialism as a wide process across Europe. The two brief discussions of Cluj and Florence shed light on fundamentally common social transformations across both the East-West and the pre-post 1989 divides: the governance of largely dispossessed Romani people has followed clear paths of forced sedentarization and inclusion before 1989 ("social integration" in the West and "assimilation in the working class" in the East) and urban policy of segregation and degradation after 1989, and especially after 2000. These common transformations show in both cases the links with pre-1989 Socialist ideologies, which in the East informed state narratives and economic organization, and in the West shaped Left-wing politics and by extension the lives of millions of workers. The slow evaporation of Socialism as a mobilizing social force is palpable in the post-2000 dominant doctrine of urban governance of social marginality, which in both parts of Europe has increasingly prioritized disciplining and repressive approaches, centred around the issue of security and anti-social behaviour.

While the public discourse has been relying on an orientalist understanding of Eastern Europe for about six centuries, the challenge here is to stop producing Manichean visions opposing East and West. Rather, it should be clear, as the ethnographic snapshots have shown, that a lot can be done for considering the two socio-historical trajectories as similar, and largely converging. Hence, alongside underlining economic and political differences between East and West it is as heuristic to understand the common development of state capitalism in both parts of the old continent since 1989 (and earlier).

As I have shown, post-Socialist Europe's "constitutive outside," i.e. non-post-Socialist Europe, can be seen not as entirely different from its

counterpart, nor, undoubtedly, as “better” or “more civilized”. However, Western Europe functions in the East-West slope rhetoric as the “good” half, and this looks as a clear result of a Manichean reasoning squarely embedded in the history of Orientalism and Balkanism. When it comes to the governance of Romani people, Italy has nothing positive or “civilized” to teach to Romania. “Socialist” forced inclusion and post-Socialist forced exclusion seem to have gained and still gain a certain popularity among civil servants in both countries. The “East-West slope” (Melegh 2006) if ever, in the case of Roma governance, should probably be inverted. However, rather than inverting the “slope”, it would probably be more useful to acknowledge that Europe, both East and West, is increasingly following the path of neoliberal socio-spatial restructuring which is proper to late state-capitalist transformations, politics and inertias. Florence nomad camps account for the 1980s local politics of segregating Romani households in the urban peripheries in the name of social integration. Notwithstanding the often-celebrated process of transition to democracy, in Post-Socialist Cluj, similarly to post-Socialist Florence, things do not seem to have evolved towards a more “democratic” and “tolerant” governance. Perhaps no other research approach than ethnography can grasp subtle nuances which reveal how limited public discourses are, and – through comparison – how short of explanation dichotomic thinking is likely to fall.

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