FROM DUMPSTERS TO INFORMAL MARKETS:

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF ROMANI TRASH PICKERS IN BELGRADE

By

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Abstract

This thesis represents an ethnographic excursion into the world of Romani trash pickers in Belgrade, shedding light on their practices, values and challenges in navigating the urban, informal economy. This study delves into the motivations and strategies of informal Romani trash pickers as they and their work is being valued and revalued by themselves and by others. By situating the experiences of Romani trash pickers in Belgrade within a global context of waste management and informal economies, the thesis uncovers the intricacies of trash picking as a form of survival, but also as racialized labour Roma are being pushed into. Finally, the thesis looks at some of the policies related to circular economy and recycling and how they get translated by the Romani non-profit sector as a chance for Romani trash pickers to climb the social ladder.

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Introduction

The only memory I have of my great-grandfather is of him gifting me a blue toy car when I was four or five and being confused by my mother's reaction. She took the toy and washed it thoroughly before allowing me to play with it. When I grew older, my mother explained the toy came from trash. Apparently, my great-grandfather was subsidizing his income by occasionally collecting discarded items and selling them at an informal market in Belgrade. The generations after my great-grandparents completely abandoned this practice. Years later, I was involved in a research project (see Saethre, 2020) that focused on people who made their living by trash picking. Having completely forgotten about the history of trash picking in my own family, learning about these practices meant rediscovering survival strategies and observing the class differences in my own community. It also made me face and acknowledge the privileges I was born with – despite belonging to a severely segregated and marginalized Romani community.

In urban settings around the world, it is not uncommon to see people going through trash, either looking for specific items or just seeing what they can find. The common saying one man's trash is another man's treasure becomes embodied by the act of trash picking. Discarded electronics, furniture, clothes, kitchen appliances, plumbing elements and even food items get evaluated by the skilled hands of trash pickers and either get left in the trash or returned to the realm of commodities. These items can then be utilized in many different ways: they can be sold to junkyards or recycling companies, they can be used to construct or repair dwellings, they can be used as decorations or even consumed as sustenance. Trash picking sometimes provides additional income or it can be

the main source of income for a person or a family. This thesis is an ethnography of one such community: informal Romani trash pickers of Belgrade.

According to some assessment (Perisic, 2024), there are around 60.000 trash pickers in Serbia, of which a great majority are Roma. Trash picking, while certainly recognized as important for Serbian economy (Kasumovic & Momcilovic, 2020), is a highly racialized and stigmatized job – to the extent that it is not even recognized as a real job. People who undertake trash picking are mostly people who have no other option. Roma are one of the most difficult-to-employ categories in Serbia. There are around 28.000 Roma on the National Employment Service register. However, the unofficial assessments are that this number is much higher. Due to discrimination, Roma are forced toward informal employment and frequently trash picking. Trash picking, therefore, is a highly racialized work.

Belgrade, Serbia's capital and its biggest city, represents the national center of commerce, providing more job opportunities than any other place in Serbia and, therefore, is a destination for many. This is true for formal job seekers as well as for the informal job market, which certainly includes Romani trash pickers. It is very common for people with permanent residencies in other parts of the country to spend a bigger part of the year in Belgrade trash picking, only going back for seasonal work or family emergencies. Thus, choosing Belgrade as my field site was a logical choice.

In this thesis I draw on six weeks of field work I conducted between March and May 2024, my experience working in the Romani non-profit organizations, as well as my previous experience as a research assistant on a project conducted in Belgrade between September 2013 and September 2015 (see Saethre, 2020). During my field work, I employed participant observation as my primary research method. As participant observation is mainly used to explore a particular social

phenomenon and explore a small number of cases (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998), it fit perfectly with the aims of this project. I conducted participant observation by accompanying my informants on their trash-picking runs, their activities at informal markets and during social interactions. In this thesis, a big focus is put on ethnography, as I believe these stories are worth telling.

As for my theoretical framework, I rely on the principles of discard studies (Liboiron & Lepawsky, 2022). Discard studies utilize a broad and systematic approach in an attempt to show the interplay of valuation and devaluation of people, regions, materials, and practices. While waste is the central object of study, discard studies go beyond its materiality – for example, some lives may be wasted compared to others that are not. Therefore, discard studies also explore things that are discarded but are not necessarily waste (Liboiron & Lepawsky, 2022). Apart from discard studies, I lean on Marxist authors (Fraiser, 2014, 2016; Moore, 2015), colonial ecology scholarship (Ferdinand, 2022), anthropology of value (Graeber, 2001) and critical Romani studies (Hancock, 1987; Kapralski, 2022; Matache, 2017).

This thesis is divided into 3 chapters. The first chapter talks about trash picking practices of informal Romani trash pickers in Belgrade. This chapter provides an insight into trash picking practices of Roma in Belgrade, shows the possibilities of social mobility through trash picking and puts trash picking in Belgrade into a conversation with trash picking practices in some other parts of the world, contributing to the wider discussion on trash picking. Finally, in the first chapter, I argue that Roma become trash pickers not by choice, but rather as a consequence of exclusion and marginalization. The second chapter takes us to the informal markets of Belgrade, where trash pickers sell the items gathered from trash. This chapter looks into the changing value of reclaimed items, what influences these changes and offers a detailed ethnography of 3 informal markets in Belgrade. The third chapter focuses on the narratives of ecology, the EU's Green Deal policies,

and the circular economy in the context of trash picking in Serbia. It particularly examines the role of the Romani non-profit sector as translators of these narratives.

Who are Roma?

As a first step, let me make some clarity on the terminology I am using. To start off, it is important to explain what I mean by the term Roma. The prevailing theory on the origin of Roma is that we emigrated from India, somewhere around early 11th century. Most of the evidence pointing to an Indian origin comes from linguistic research (Anwar, 2021; Courthiade, 2021; Hancock, 1987). It is important to note that not all the groups of Roma today speak the Romani language. For example, the Bayash Roma lost the language during a five-century long slavery in what is today Romania (Annemarie, 2011; Hancock, 1987; Sikimic, 2005). Similarly, the Roma of Spain lost the language during the Spanish inquisition.

The term Roma is most frequently used as an umbrella term. In 1971, the first World Roma Congress was held in England, where representatives of Roma from 14 different European countries met and discussed on some of the most important issues the international Romani community was facing. The most important outcomes of this meeting, in my opinion, are the decisions on our national flag and anthem, and to officially proclaim that the name we chose for ourselves is Roma. This helped strengthen the Romani national identity and unify the Romani movement further, leading to a more coherent political action. The etymology of the word Roma comes from the Romani word for a man – "Rom," and the word for a woman is "Romnji" (the spelling may vary in different dialects). These two words relate specifically to Romani men and

women, as in the Romani language there are other words for people of non-Romani descent – Gadjo for men and Gadji for women. Not everyone, however, agrees on the use of the term Roma.

For centuries, the origin of Roma has been capturing the imagination of Europeans. For example, until the end of the 18th century, there was a firm belief that the people we today identify as Roma are, in fact, Egyptians (Mayall, 2004). Mayall further postulates that this notion came from the Roma themselves "… who exploited the mystical, magical and exotic impressions associated with Egypt to their own advantage" (Mayall, 2004, page 127). This is where the word "Gypsy" comes from. Considered a racial slur by many (myself included) and based on this misconception of the origin of Roma, the term continues to be in use to this day – even in academic settings. On the other side, there are some groups of Roma in the United Kingdom that will proudly refer to themselves as *Gypsies*, while not denying their belonging to the wider Romani community. Similarly, the Roma of Spain will, when speaking Spanish, refer to themselves as *Gitanos* – while comfortably using the term Roma when speaking English.

There are two reasons I have decided, and continually decide, to use the term Roma. Firstly, the term Roma is the only name we chose for ourselves. At the aforementioned World Roma Congress, the political leadership and prominent Romani activists of the time reached a decision that has been most widely accepted. By using the name we chose for ourselves, we reclaim the right all the other peoples have – to be called by the name we chose for ourselves. Secondly, most of the exonyms have a negative connotation and are frequently used as insults and racial slurs – *Cigani* in many of the Balkan languages, *Tiganii* in Romanian, *Cigányok* in Hungarian, *Zigeuner* in German etc. These words come from the Greek *tsingános*, which translates to "untouchables". While the absolute consensus among Romani scholarship on this does not exist, majority of Romani scholars would agree with me (see Matache, 2017).

What are Informal Romani Settlements?

Considering all of my informants live in spaces often identified as the Informal Romani Settlements (SRSs), I deem it useful to clarify what these are from the beginning. The Serbian Government relies on the United Nations' definition of substandard settlements. For example, Djordjevic argues in a 2017 study that substandard settlements are characterized by at least one of the following: inadequate access to running water, communal services (such as sewer systems, water networks and electric grid), poor quality dwellings (e.g., inadequate building materials, rundown buildings, health hazards), high population density and unregulated legal status of the land and structures (Djordjevic, 2017). On top of these criteria, Jovanovic adds inadequate access to public services, such as schools, hospitals and public transport (Jovanovic, 2014).

The dwellings in SRSs are constructed from discarded materials such as cardboard, plywood, and wooden boards. These settlements are continuously threatened by forced removals (Schwab, 2013, 2015). SRSs are generally located near urban areas in Belgrade, where the residents mostly rely on scavenged resources for house furnishing and repairs, source of income, sustenance etc. These resources include metal, paper, glass and plastic, as well as other discarded items such as clothes, shoes, furniture, food, home appliances and similar. These are either used personally or sold at informal markets in Belgrade. Although some settlements have sturdy material dwellings, most people construct their houses from waste materials, as investing in more permanent solutions is impractical due to the precarious nature of life in SRSs.

According to Jaksic and Basic, their research identified 593 Romani settlements in Serbia at that time. These settlements varied in age from 15-20 years to approximately 120 years (Jaksic & Basic, 2005). Notably, 47.3% of these settlements were established in the early 20th century. 52.7% of

these settlements are located in urban areas, while the rest are in rural regions, with population sizes ranging from 100 to over 5000 individuals. Among the 593 settlements, 43.5% are classified as substandard (Jaksic & Basic, 2005). Between March and September 2020, the Serbian Government, in collaboration with the UN Human Rights Unit, conducted a mapping project and discovered 702 SRSs with a total of 167,975 residents (SIPRU, 2020). This data indicates a notable increase in the number of SRSs over 15 years. As anticipated, Belgrade has the highest number of SRSs, with 122 settlements housing 43,944 residents. Other significant cities in Serbia include Leskovac with 14 settlements and 11,830 residents; Nis with 13 settlements and 8,409 residents; and Novi Sad with 6 settlements and 3,783 residents. This trend suggests an approximate 18% increase in SRSs over the last two decades.

The Serbian Government is well aware of the challenges associated with life in SRSs. The Poznan Declaration from 2019, which the Serbian Government signed, outlines housing goals: “To legalise all settlements where Roma live wherever possible; To provide permanent, decent, affordable and desegregated housing for Roma living in substandard settlements that cannot be legalized for justified reasons” (RCC, 2019, page 1). Additionally, the Government's Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma in the Republic of Serbia 2022–2030, adopted in February 2022, notes in the Housing section that: “There is a significant difference between the housing conditions of Roma and the general population.” (The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2022, page 49). The same document reveals that 32% of SRSs lack access to the power grid, 38% have no running water, and 65% are not connected to a sewage network (The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2022). The 2020 mapping project demonstrated a significant increase in SRSs compared to the previous iteration of the Strategy for 2016–2025, which mapped 583 SRSs (OSCE, 2015 as cited in The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2016). Despite minor differences in the figures

provided by Jaksic and Basic, both sets of statistics reflect an upward trend in the number of settlements. Furthermore, both iterations of the Strategy display similar objectives, indicating that the strategies have not yet been fully implemented into policies.

The term "substandard" came into use to refer to Romani settlements fairly recently, some 7 or 8 years ago. Previously, the neighborhoods where Roma were the majority were labeled as *unhygienic*, *illegal,* or *wild* settlements. This labeling of Roma as unhygienic, illegal, and wild (or uncivilized) was part of the system of marginalization and discrimination that has been in place since Roma arrived in Europe (Kapralski, 2022). In Belgrade, there are several "well known" Romani neighborhoods. One such example is the neighborhood called "Marinkova Bara" (Marinko's Pond). This neighborhood has become so famous that it entered in everyday, colloquial language: the Rom from a joke comes from Marinkova Bara; when something needs to be described as backwards, poor or of low quality, it "comes" from Marinkova Bara; and if the address in your national ID says Djakona Avakuma street, you are less likely to get a job.

Even though a step forward from previous terms, the label "substandard" is certainly not ideal, nor does everyone agree on it. The *substandard* label is in fact depoliticizing. Firstly, it allows the Romani settlements to become subjects of technical or expert interventions. Secondly, it may obscure the relational inequalities and oppression that lead to these settlements having such conditions and reduce or hide state responsibility in creating these pockets of informality (Roy, 2005). Thirdly, it puts the lack of access to services to the forefront, rather than the core issue; racial segregation.

Picker proposes instead to use the term *Gypsy urban areas* (GUAs); "At times existing as entire neighborhoods, but elsewhere as blocks of flats, improvised settlements, or camps, segregated and stigmatized 'Gypsy urban areas' (GUAs) are either partially or entirely populated by Romani

households (Picker, 2017, page 2). He makes a further claim that these GUAs are characterized by high rates of unemployment (especially compared to the other parts of a city), the lack of public services, poor infrastructure, inadequate housing, and strong stigma. These kinds of Romani settlements can be observed all over Europe, especially in its central and eastern parts.

While Picker's study is extremely valuable and represents a deep dive into the racial segregation of Roma in the urban areas of Europe, I strongly disagree with the term *Gypsy urban areas*. First of all, as I stated above, I loathe the use of the word *Gypsy*, unless we are talking about specific groups or individuals that chose this word. If we are talking about an entire city, a country, or the entirety of Europe, using the umbrella term *Roma*, I believe, is far more beneficial. Picker does explain that he is using the word *Gypsy* to "… emphasize the power of stigma" (Picker, 2017, page 18). I, however, believe that we need to limit the use of such words in order to combat stigma. Secondly, *urban* is limiting the scope of racial segregation to cities only. While I understand that Picker's books focuses on cities, using this terminology excludes all the Romani settlements located in semi-urban or rural settings. And finally, while these settlements may be substandard, illegal, unhygienic, or wild – they are exactly that – settlements or neighborhoods, spaces where people live. In my opinion, *urban area* is too vague of a term, as a park or a public square can be an urban area, while Romani settlements are places where people are born, where people live and where they die. Of course, the residents of such settlements are absolutely aware that their living conditions are far less than ideal, however, they still take great care of their homes and improve them as much as possible.

Who are the trash pickers?

The third term I would like to explain further is trash pickers. According to Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), the term" waste picker" was adopted during the First World Conference of Waste Pickers in 2008 in Colombia (*Waste Pickers | WIEGO*, n.d.). The term waste picker was adopted, according to WIEGO, to prevent the use of pejorative terms, such as scavenger. The Conference also recognizes other terms used in other countries such as "reclaimers" in South Africa or "canners" in United States (*Waste Pickers | WIEGO*, n.d.). In Serbia, for example the most commonly used term is "sakupljači" which is frequently translated as "collectors". In the book "A Paper Life", Simpson-Herbert et al. use this term, while admitting that in English, the word "collector" is most commonly associated with someone who has a collection (e.g. an art collector) (Simpson-Hebert et al., 2005). In this case, I believe "gatherers" would serve as a better translation. I, however, choose to use the term "trash pickers". While I do not think there is anything wrong with the term "waste pickers," on the contrary, I believe that the term "trash pickers" better relays the reality of this kind of work; that it can be intrinsically abject, vomit-inducing, and back-breaking. In the context of Belgrade and the informal Romani trash pickers, it is grueling, dirty, hard work – and as such, should not be romanticized through the use of words that neutralize these meanings. In the literature on trash picking and waste management, terms such as "solid waste" or "municipal waste" can be found when referring to the matter discarded in public trash cans, dumpsters, or dump sites. Here, I will simply use the word "trash," as that is the word my informants use.

Chapter 1. Trash picking practices among Romani trash pickers of Belgrade

In this chapter, I look at the trash-picking practices among the Romani trash pickers in Belgrade. Some differences among trash pickers can be observed based on: the type of transportation used (motor vehicles, bicycles, horses), the focus on certain materials (metal, paper, plastic), the intended purpose of gathering (personal use, selling at a market, or selling the items as scrap materials) and if trash picking is a primary or secondary source of income. A separate section of the chapter is dedicated to trash picking for food, as based on my observations, the narrative around this has changed in the past decade. The following section seeks to situate the informal Romani trash pickers of Belgrade in a wider conversation on trash picking around the Globe. Finally, the last section explores the possibility of climbing the socio-economic ladder through trash picking and the changes it entails regarding encounters with state institutions.

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"There's something good here," Dardan[1] remarked, as soon as he picked up a plastic bag from the dumpster. "How do you know, you haven't even opened it yet?" I enquired. "Because it's heavy and I could hear the clinking sound. Maybe it's coffee cups!" Upon inspecting the contents of the plastic bag in question, we found empty perfume bottles. I expressed my disappointment and was surprised by noticing that Dardan's enthusiasm had not died down. "These sell at the market, people buy these." I asked him why people would buy empty perfume bottles, but he just shrugged away. This was just one of the many instances where Dardan's expertise in trash-picking proved

[1] All the names have been changed in order to protect my informants' identities.

invaluable during our runs. On one of them, we found a couple of broken mid-sized, flat-screen TVs. To an untrained eye, these two items would seem worthless, when, in fact, they contain about one kilogram of copper. Copper sells for anywhere between 500 and 600 dinars per kilogram (4.27 to 5.12 euros).

Dardan, now 34 years old, has had around 20 years of experience in trash picking. Up until about 6 years ago, this was the primary source of income for Dardan, his wife Drita, and their children. When I first met Dardan about 10 years ago, he specialized mostly in paper. Back then, he had a *trokolica* - a bicycle outfitted with a rectangle-shaped, metal basket on the front, roughly 1.5 x 1.2 x 1 meter in size. For one kilogram of paper, at the time, he could get 3.5 dinars (0.03 euros). The company that was buying from everyone in Dardan's settlement was actually paying 4.5 dinars if the seller was able to receive a bank transfer. Knowing the settlement residents do not hold a national ID card, and are thus unable to open a bank account, the company was creating surplus value and increasing its profits by dispossessing the residents of their livelihood. Nancy Fraser describes this phenomenon as follows:

> "Semi-proletarianization is even more pronounced in neoliberalism, which has built an entire accumulation strategy by expelling billions of people from the official economy into informal grey zones, from which capital siphons off value… this sort of 'primitive accumulation' is an ongoing process from which capital profits and on which it relies." (Fraiser, 2014, page 59)

Settlement residents were acutely aware of this, but completely powerless to do anything about it. While the difference of 1 RSD per kilogram may not seem like a significant amount, each person would sell several tons of paper each month, resulting in a significant loss for a family's already low income.

Now, Dardan has a bicycle with a basket fastened to its back that he uses to store the items he finds. He also has a different job, working for a construction company, and trash picking serves as a secondary source of income. Dardan works six days a week for the construction firm and goes through trash or sells his haul at one of the informal markets on Sundays. “I am used to working all the time, I can’t just sit, I have to go” he told me. Nowadays, Dardan completely ignores paper – with the exception of books that can be sold directly at a market – as it requires a huge time and space commitment. Instead, Dardan aims for clothes, shoes, books, dishes, pans, pots and - empty perfume bottles, among other things.

On one occasion, Dardan found a plastic bag hanging from the side of a dumpster, containing two brand-new sweaters inside. Moments later, a man approached him and asked for a price for both sweaters. Dardan liked the sweaters and did not really want to sell them, so he asked for 5 000 dinars (around 43 euros), to which the man agreed. When recounting the event, Dardan complained, as he believed he could have asked for more money. “Who knows how much they’re actually worth,” he said. This shows both the strengths and the limitations of Dardan’s expertise – on one side he can see value that only a trash picker can, on the other, he is missing the knowledge about things that people usually learn while socializing in schools, such as famous brands and popular culture. This is true for most of the Roma living segregated lives in SRSs.

Items that have a higher value if they retain their original purpose (if they are not stripped for scrap materials) can be sold at informal markets. While this often does bring a higher profit, additional work and skill need to be taken into account, as well. First, the trash picker needs to be able to appraise the items and determine which ones are worth putting in the extra work for. Also, the trash picker needs to be able to accurately assess how much each individual item is worth and how much people would be willing to pay for it. Secondly, the trash pickers need to possess trading skills that

allow them to extract the most profit out of the items, as the time invested has to bring higher profits compared to what it would bring by simply selling the items as scrap

Marko, a friend of Dardan's still living in the old settlement, focuses solely on recyclable materials. Marko owns a horse and a horse cart, which allows him to travel to nearby villages and negotiate the price of scrap metal with villagers. "It was much easier before, when the Serbs didn't know the real worth of metal, but now, they are also struggling and they are asking for more." Lamenting the passing of "the good old days" was a common topic of conversation with many of my informants. According to Marko, the prices of scrap metal had dropped quite a bit in the past few years: the price of aluminum dropped from 100 to 80 dinars per kilogram; iron from 23-27 to 17-20; brass from 300 to 250. It is, however, difficult to compare these prices to the prices on the global market due to regional differences and differences in prices for various classes of scrap metals.

Going on trash-picking runs with Jovan was a completely different story. Jovan (38) lives with his wife Jovana (30) and three of their children in one of the SRSs in the municipality of Čukarica. Jovan is a full-time trash picker and he frequents many informal markets in the wider area of Belgrade. What enables Jovan such mobility is the fact that he has a driver's license and owns a van. After a mandatory cup of coffee at Jovan's and Jovana's house, Jovan and I would start driving around the area, looking for items that could be sold at a market. Having a car allows Jovan to cover a bigger area, to do it faster and to be able to haul bulkier items. Whenever he finds something that is too heavy for him alone to haul, he calls friends or relatives to help. For example, one time Jovan and I found two empty gasoline canisters, each weighing around 20 kilograms, an old washing machine and a refrigerator.

Other than selling items at a market, Jovan also deals with metal, as metal brings the most profit compared to other recyclable materials – paper, plastic or glass. Jovan is very well connected, as well, so he also trades with other trash pickers. Occasionally, he would get a call from people who work as basement cleaners and buy various items and scrap metal from them. More often than not, the basement cleaners will sell Jovan books. Jovan buys the books from them in bulk, claiming he is selling them to the paper recycling company, as that way he can get a better price. However, books can fetch a good price at informal markets. One time, Jovan told me, he sold around 50 books for 17 000 dinars (around 145 euros) to a reseller.

1.1. Eating from a trash can

The one aspect of trash picking connecting these various modes is obtaining sustenance from the dumpsters. The most significant shift in narratives, between now and 10 years ago, surrounding trash picking can be observed in how people talk about getting food from dumpsters. When I first met Dardan and Drita, in the old settlement, people did not talk about getting food from dumpsters. Eating from a dumpster meant one is unable to provide for their family through work and pay for food, implying laziness or poor household fund management skills. As a contrast, my informants today spoke of obtaining discarded food openly. “In this settlement, we all eat from the dumpster, there’s no shame in that, we must survive” Jovan remarked. Jovan then recollected seeing a white person eating straight from the trash can once. Not hiding his bewilderment, Jovan said: “At least we clean the food first, Serbs eat straight from the (trash) cans. And they call us dirty *Cigani*!”

Dardan regularly went to the famous Kvantaš market, one of the biggest green markets in Belgrade, where he would receive fruits and vegetables the vendors could no longer sell, as they were about

to go bad. Dardan's family still had to buy food weekly, though. Dardan's and Drita's household consisted of 8 members, with occasional family members staying with them for months at a time. This meant, based on Dardan's assessment, that they spend around 50 000 dinars (427 euros) each week on food, due to the increase of food prices in Serbia over the past few years. The apparent increase in the Romani and non-Romani population getting fed from dumpsters, paired with the increased food prices and thriving informal economy, could lead to a conclusion that Serbian economy has declined over the past decade.

1.2. Exclusion and marginalization of trash pickers

In conversations with my informants, I learned that trash picking is not a choice for them, rather a necessary survival strategy, as they have no other opportunities for employment. Social exclusion is, frequently, what drives people into trash picking – and not only in Belgrade. For example, a research project conducted in Vancouver, claims that informal recyclers in that city are among the most excluded groups with the least amount of power for two reasons; their low socio-economic status and their work with solid waste (Wittmer & Parizeau, 2016). Informal trash pickers and the neighborhoods they live in Vancouver are extremely marginalized and framed as "public disorder", according to Wittmer and Parizeau. Based on this research project, many of the urban poor in Vancouver depend on public solid waste to make a living, some even rely on trash when it comes to meals – yet the local government marks these activities as disorderly. This is reminiscent of the situation in Belgrade, with most Romani trash pickers living in SRSs discussed previously.

According to Wittmer and Parizeau (2016), laws and regulations have been introduced in order to prevent and punish such disorderly behavior. The provincial government brought the BC Safe

Streets Act and amendments to the municipal Trespass Act, with the intention to regulate and police informal trash picking and panhandling, all to reduce public disorder (Wittmer & Parizeau, 2016). Following that, in 2006, the then mayor of Vancouver brought Project Civil Society, with a specific goal of targeting informal trash picking and recycling. Next, a bylaw was introduced that prescribed a 100$ fine for a person caught removing materials that are refundable from recycling bins. There have been talks in the late 2000s and early 2010s about implementing something similar in Belgrade, as local governments were supposed to take ownership of publicly disposed trash – however, this never happened. None of these rules and regulations in Vancouver were brought in consultation with the informal trash pickers themselves. Similarly, whenever there were talks about regulating trash picking in Belgrade or Serbia, the trash pickers themselves were not involved.

According to the International Labour Organization, the most common reasons people turn to trash picking are social inequality, economic constraints, diminishing job opportunities in formal employment and general poverty. This is true both for developing and developed countries – while there may be more job opportunities in developed countries, the access to those opportunities are frequently denied to more marginalized groups, such as migrants. For example, in the countries of the European Union there are 3 groups of people most commonly associated with trash piking:

> "(1) persons of ethnic minorities (mainly Roma), who have very low educational levels and are the targets of a range of social exclusion measures; (2) internal and cross-border migrants and refugees without legal status or lacking formal identity documentation; and (3) different types of people who are excluded from the labour market, such as young people, the elderly, women heads-of-household, homeless people, and others" (Porras Bulla et al., 2021, page 1302)

This is the case in non-European Union countries as well – and this is especially true when it comes to Roma in Eastern Europe and more specifically - Belgrade (Jaksic & Basic, 2005; Saethre, 2020)

According to Porras Bulla et al, in recent years conflicts surrounding trash picking have been on the rise globally. Increased migration and the economic crisis produced by the neoliberal system have contributed to more social and political visibility of trash picking. On top of that, the contemporary waste management systems are struggling to meet the recycling quotas, which opens a space for another actor to step in with an alternative solution (Porras Bulla et al., 2021). Contemporary waste management policies come as a response to the environmental crisis of the 1970s and these new policies did not include the populations that traditionally dealt with solid waste (Barles, 2014).

While trash picking is more common for the global South, in recent years, it has become an increasing phenomenon in the Global North, as well (Porras Bulla et al., 2021). Characteristic of global North waste management systems include centralized waste management, high income cities and high rates of waste production (Porras Bulla et al., 2021) – which all provides a good basis for a thriving informal trash picking activity. Centralized waste management, while not limited to the cities of the global North, certainly is a dominant way of public waste disposal in developed countries. What this means for trash pickers is that they can count on a steady stream of waste and predictability of when it gets picked up and taken to a dump site or a treatment facility. This allows trash pickers to plan and execute their gathering activities. High income cities or even high income neighborhoods can mean better quality waste. While recyclable materials are usually the most sought after, many people living off trash picking will also collect other waste - clothes, electronic or electrical devices, artwork and similar – for personal use or sale. Higher income

neighborhoods increase the chance of better quality of the discarded materials, thus bringing a higher profit to the trash pickers..

According to Porras Bulla et al. (2021), there is a difference between Eastern and Western Europe when it comes to trash picking. In Western Europe, the number of informal trash pickers has been on a decline as a consequence of selective collection of waste. This has affected scrap metal gatherers less compared to others. In Eastern Europe, however, informal trash picking seems to be booming, and it is due to lower income and an almost obsolete waste management system. The situation in Belgrade certainly confirms this. With the democratic transition of the early 2000s that played out in Serbia and the changes it brought to the job market, many people lost their jobs. In times of crises, the most vulnerable populations (poor, racially segregated, uneducated etc.) are usually the ones hit the hardest. Trash picking is a well-known, tried and tested survival strategy, used by Roma for a long time. As the economic crisis continued in Serbia, more people picked up trash picking. While, in the public narrative, sympathy for the losers of the transition could be noted, Roma were still profiled as lazy and unwilling to get a real job instead of trash picking.

A similar process has been noted by scholar in South Africa as well, where trash picking is also a survival strategy. According to Simatele et al, many South Africans have found themselves pushed to the margins due to, in part, the process of quick urbanization and the lack of economic growth – as is the case in many developing countries of the Global South (Simatele et al., 2017). On top of that, the degradation of solid waste infrastructure and the lack of funds has made it more difficult for city managers to deal with these issues – and this is found to be the case in most sub-Saharan African countries. Simatele et al. (2017) conducted their research project in Johannesburg and have concluded that trash pickers contribute significantly to recycling and solid waste management in the city. According to the research, up to 53% of all recycled glass and 64% of all recycled scrap

metal comes from trash pickers. Further, the authors argue that the trash pickers are adapting to new circumstances and are actively engaged in making sure their income is not negatively affected. The authorities recognize informal trash pickers' role in the solid waste management system, yet in spite of this nothing is being done to provide assistance to trash pickers – their working and living conditions continue to be extremely hazardous.

There have been some attempts to formalize trash picking. According to Rava Zolnikov, there are two types of trash pickers in Brazil: individual trash pickers who are out on the streets, picking trash and selling it to recycling centers; and the second type are the people who work in a triage center, that is organized into a co-op (Rava Zolnikov, 2023). The second type of trash pickers in Brazil work in a large industrial complex at a conveyer belt, hand picking and sorting recyclable materials as they pass. Both of these types of trash picking are informal and carry significant health and safety risks for the workers. While the move to the triage centers was seen as an improvement in the life of Brazil's trash pickers, the informality not being addressed has been heavily criticized. Issues surrounding trash picking moved from the streets to the triage centers: poor working conditions, wages lower than the minimum wage, no private health insurance and no labour rights. People working in this sector are said to do it not by choice, rather because there are no other opportunities (Rava Zolnikov, 2023).

In spite of the obstacles trash pickers around the Globe face, trash picking remains one of the most dominant survival strategies for the urban poor. This poses the question: can one get ahead through trash and climb the social ladder?

1.3. Getting ahead through trash

In this section, I am going back to Dardan's and Drita's story in order to shed light on struggles they (and many other) settlement dwellers face when attempting to climb the social ladder. Through their story, I attempt to show: the complexities of their intersectional identity as Roma, Ashakli, settlement dwellers, trash picker, internally displaced persons; their attempts to climb the socio-economic ladder; and what does moving up entail.

I first met Dardan and Drita 11 years ago. At the time, they lived in a plywood shack in one of the substandard Romani settlements on the territory of the municipality of New Belgrade. Dardan was born in 1990 in Kosovo and fled the war of 1998/99 with his family when he was only 8. Similarly, Drita, being two years younger than Dardan, escaped the war with her family when she was only six. Eventually, the two met and got married in spite of Drita's family opposing to the union. When I first met them in 2013, they had 3 children: two boys aged 6 and 5 and a girl aged 2. Only months before we met, they lost a newborn due to illness.

Because Serbia never recognized Kosovo's independence, all the refugees were labeled as *internally displaced persons* or IDPs (*Internally Displaced Persons | Commissariat for Refugees and Migration*, n.d.). As IDPs from Kosovo, they did not get much support from the state. In fact, as many other Ashkali (Albanian-speaking Roma from Kosovo, see Saethre, 2020) refugees, Dardan and Drita did not possess a Serbian ID card, birth certificate or even the proof of citizenship. That meant they were unable to (or it was nearly impossible for them) to access public health services, attend schools, get a job contract, buy property, get legally married or have a bank account. This pushed many into SRSs: "Legal and economic exclusion facilitated spatial segregation. Having no place to settle, many Ashkali constructed their own housing in illegal

settlements. Ashkali were so marginalized that they have been labeled the most vulnerable community in Serbia" (Saethre, 2020, page 11).

Neither Dardan's nor Drita's families were trash pickers before the Kosovo war. The Kosovo Roma were caught in the crossfire of the war that broke out between ethnic Serbs and ethnic Albanians. Fleeing for their lives, Dardan's and Drita's families lost not only their material possessions, but also their identities. In Belgrade, they have become settlement dwellers, trash pickers, IDPs and – dirty "Cigani."

Not having seen Dardan in six or seven years, I was excited to meet and catch up with an old friend. Over the phone, he had told me that they moved to Zemun and that they bought a house there. To my surprise, Dardan now wore clean clothes that fit, which was rarely the case when they lived in the old settlement. His new house, Dardan told me, had legal electricity and a real bathroom with running water. "Now, I don't have to think about it, I can just take a shower," he told me proudly. Previously, getting clean water was difficult for Dardan's family and the other settlement residents and using it sparingly was part of the everyday survival strategies.

Dardan spoke about the resettlement program for IDPs from Kosovo back in 2013. According to his contact in Commissariat for Refugees and Migration Republic of Serbia, if he had ownership of a plot of land in Kosovo, he could get a house built, as part of the repatriation programme (OSCE, 2007). Dardan and Drita would have moved to Kosovo if it meant they could raise their children in a real house. While it is true they would have to move back and forth between Belgrade and Kosovo for work, having that kind of stability is what they wanted in life. The issue was, they did not own any land – in Kosovo or anywhere else.

In 2018, Dardan started a job as a construction site worker for a prominent Austrian construction company operating in Serbia. While the work is hard and backbreaking, it is nothing Dardan is not used to already and the security of regular weekly payments meant he could plan ahead and even put some money aside. After six years of working for the same company, Dardan is still working without a contract or benefits. He works six days a week, anywhere between 6 and 12 hours and gets paid 30 euros per workday.

Dardan tried to climb the socio-economic ladder before. In 2014, he tried switching to scrap metal instead of paper, as metal was bringing in more profits. However, in order to be able to effectively work with metal, Dardan needed a horse, so that he could travel farther and cover a greater area. Other than having a horse, there were other requirements in order to successfully gather metal from surrounding villages; knowing the locations, negotiating tactics and having cash on hand to buy scrap metal. While Dardan had none of those, he tried making friends with other Roma in the settlement who did this work for decades, all as an effort to learn the metal trade. After months of trying, Dardan had lost his horse to loan sharks and was forced to go back to what he knew – paper.

In 2022, Dardan and Drita were able to save up enough money by combining Dardan's construction job and trash picking to be able to, with the help of Dardan's uncles, buy a plot of land in Kosovo. In 2023 their house was built. They, however, quickly found out that their lives were in Belgrade. Both Dardan and Drita were forced to leave Kosovo as children and their children, some of them teenagers now, have lived in Belgrade all their lives. After a few months, they decided to sell their property in Kosovo and look for a house in Belgrade. Several rounds of negotiations later, they bought a 3-bedroom home for 16 000 euros in a Romani settlement hidden away from the main road, tucked away behind a predominantly non-Romani neighborhood. They were, however, very

happy, as now they had electricity and running water – and more importantly – legal ownership of the land and the object.

As Saethre aptly noticed, Ashkali "… interacted with the state only by suffering a medical emergency or by being arrested and imprisoned" (Saethre, 2020, page 11). For Dardan and Drita, this changed with homeownership, as they met with another part of the state's repressive apparatus – social services. In February 2024, their youngest son, two years of age, wandered off from their front yard into the street. After noticing that he was missing, the family, with the help of relatives began the search and also reported the incident to the police. After a few hours, the child was found by a police patrol and brough home, accompanied by social workers from the municipal center for social work.

Accused of negligence, the parents were tasked with bringing the family home up to standards – which included repairs to the interior, as well as safety features for their front yard. The repairs were started immediately, consuming the entirety of savings that the family had accrued over the years, which was around 2000 euros. At the time I was conducting fieldwork, the family was expecting an unannounced visit from the social workers, who were to assess if the adaptations were up to standards. In spite of the fact that the living conditions in a SRSs are far worse than what Dardan's and Drita's family had now, centers for social work do not get involved there. Having climbed the proverbial social ladder, the family had crossed the socio-economic threshold and become a subject of the state.

Now, being in the crosshairs of the social services, Dardan's and Drita's children going to school were eligible to apply for free schoolbooks. However, Dardan harbored distrust towards state institutions. "I just want them gone. Out of my life," he said after I asked why he would not take

the offer. Dardan knew that accepting help from the centers for social work meant they would be subject to surveillance – and schoolbooks were not worth it.

Getting ahead depends on luck, but also skills unique to seasoned trash pickers. In this chapter I have looked at trash picking practices among Roma in Belgrade, stigmatization and marginalization of trash pickers and the possibilities of climbing the social ladder through trash. In the next, we direct our attention to informal markets, where trash picker's ability to discern value is put to the test.

Chapter 2. Informal markets of Belgrade

Belgrade's informal markets are places where discarded commodities regain value by being put back onto the market. Trash pickers take the items previously reclaimed from public dumpster and private basements and breathe a new life into them. In today's industrialized world, the rapid acceleration of production and consumption has led to a significant increase in the variety and volume of waste. The categories of waste are socially constructed, with value systems and social structures mutually constituting processes of devaluation (Ta, 2017). The value of a reclaimed good depends on the intertwined factors such as ethnicity, space, negotiation skills, condition and quality of the item and similar. In the previous chapter, I have shown in what ways Romani trash pickers reclaim commodities, and in this chapter I will demonstrate how they extract value from them. Further, in this chapter, I discuss what influences value of an item and the precarious nature of this type of informal work.

According to Thompson, most objects can be put into one of the 3 categories: rubbish, transient and durable (Thompson, 2017). Simply put, most consumer goods such as clothes, electronics or toys start of as transient goods and transition to rubbish through time. Some items, however, become durable with time: works of art or antique furniture, for example. Transient objects lose their value with time, while durable objects can grow in value indefinitely. Once an object is stripped of value and discarded, it becomes rubbish. The work trash pickers and informal market vendors do can be observed as transitioning rubbish (or trash) to transient, and extremely rarely – durable objects. As I am discussing value, here it is worth pointing out that I am talking about the value of an object expressed in money, or as Graeber defined it: "Value in the economic sense: the

degree to which objects are desired, particularly, as measured by how much others are willing to give up to get them" (Graeber, 2001, page 1).

The three informal markets I visited in Belgrade are all in the immediate proximity to a formal market. In all three the vendors are putting up their merchandise on tarps along the sidewalk. And in all three a great majority of the vendors are Roma. In fact, I only encountered non-Romani vendors at one of the three markets – the Čukarica market. The other two markets are located in the municipalities of Novi Beograd and Zemun.

2.1. The Čukarica market

The biggest of the three was the Čukarica market. When I arrived to the market, it was already busy with vendors setting up their merchandise since around 5 AM. The line of vendors stretched for around 300 meters on both sides of the sidewalk. The neighborhood where this market is located is considered to be one of the most elite neighborhoods in old Belgrade. The buyers started showing up soon after. The items on sale ranged from various pieces of clothing (mostly women clothing), shoes, sneakers, boots, handbags of various sizes and colors, hats, paintings, tea pots, mugs, cups, plates, pots, pans, toys, small kitchen appliances, CDs, creams and even medicine.

I met with Jovan and Jovana around 6 AM. They had already started laying out their merchandise at the time on a tarp roughly 3 x 4 meters, laid out with a few small trinkets being placed on it by Jovana and their son. The heavier pieces were handled by Jovan and me. Jovan's and Jovana's items did not differ much from other people's: clothes, shoes, a set of coffee cups, handbags, three empty metal gas canisters, a doll with its head detached, a printer and similar. One thing that stood out were the books. Jovan had three boxes full of books – around 60-70 of them. The topics of the

books varied greatly: there were academic books on political science published by the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Belgrade, there were several academic books in English on climate change, there was a tv guide for "Dr House" in Serbian, books on European Union, NATO and similar.

As more people were arriving at the market, many approached Jovan to greet him and crack a few jokes. Jovan claimed everybody knew him and respected him for his honesty. An elderly white man was pulling a cart and yelling out: "Coffee, plum, apricot." Plum and apricot refers to *rakija*, traditional Balkan alcoholic drink. The man stopped and asked Jovan and Jovana if they wanted a coffee, to which Jovan said yes and the man responded with *ava kari*, which is Romani for come here. Then he asked Jovan what kind of coffee he wants and to which Jovan retorted annoyingly: "Do I really have to tell you every time? Can't you memorize what kind of coffee I drink?" To my surprise, the man proceeded with making a coffee for Jovan and Jovana without another word.

As Jovan was talking to his fellow vendors, Jovana was laying down another smaller tarp on which she put some clothes. By this time, the market was really busy and a stream of buyers was moving up and down the street. Next to us, Miki (17) had his own assortment of rescued discard: some tupperware, a plant pot, 5 pairs of women shoes, a few pots and a pan. Miki told me he enjoys selling at the market, as he can make a couple of thousands of dinars (17 – 20 euros) in a few hours, which is better than working from 5 AM until 7 PM. Listening in on our conversation Jovan and Jovana jumped in, claiming the opposite. "A steady job beats the market every time," Jovan said. Jovana added that she would never work at the market if she could get a steady job. They both argued that the security that a steady job brings in terms of regular payments is incremental for a family. Miki was quick to change his opinion, too: "I spend all the money the same day anyway", he said.

Most of the early customers were, I was told, resellers. A great majority of the merchandise found in the market was found in trash – by Roma – although not exclusively. Roughly 80 to 90% of vendors were Roma, but there were also *Serbs*, as Jovan referred to the non-Roma vendors. However, all the resellers were Serbs. One woman in particular stood out. She came to Jovan's and Jovana's area and asked for fake jewelry. Not trying to hide his hostility, Jovan said "I don't have anything for you, just go." The women, clearly annoyed by Jovan's attitude stated that she deserves respect as a businesswoman who has a university degree in economics and owns two businesses. "If I owned two businesses, I would not be working here," Jovan replied. "I do this job because I enjoy it, don't undervalue this work," she replied to which Jovan retorted: "You're doing this because you have *hungry eyes*." Having *hungry eyes* is a common saying in some parts of the Balkans meaning the person is greedy. Later through a conversation with Jovan and several other vendors, I was told that this woman comes to the market, buys items (such as fake jewelry) for as little as possible and then sells it on the regular market for several times the original price.

This short altercation and the conversation that followed led me to draw a couple of conclusions. Firstly, the same item changes value based on the location it is being sold at. Compared to the informal markets, formal markets require an initial monetary investment, but provide a proper stall and an expectation that the items sold there are new. The informal market is a place where reclaimed and secondhand items are sold, while the formal markets are supposed to be reserved for brand-new commodities. To use Thompson's terminology, putting up reclaimed and secondhand items for sale in formal markets makes the transition from rubbish to transient items quite a bit easier. Secondly, white vendors could get better prices compared to Romani vendors. As was discussed in the last chapter, trash picking is highly racialized in Belgrade and generally thought of as a kind of work done almost exclusively by Roma. Here, the assumption is that if an

item is sold at an informal market and by a Romani person, it must have come from trash – while a white person is more likely to sell secondhand items that were not soiled by trash.

Haggling is a common theme at the informal markets – the buyers were always trying to lower the price, no matter what the original price was. Miki was approached by an elderly woman that was interested in his tupperware. He offered two pieces of tupperware for 200 dinars (1.7 euros) and the woman's counteroffer was 50 (0.45 euros). Miki declined and the woman, revolted, said that she can buy new ones for 75 dinars in a Chinese store. After the woman left, Miki turned to me and said "What can I do with 50 dinars? If she can buy new for 75 in a Chinese store, why didn't she just go there?"

Around 8:30, the police showed up and told everyone to pack and go. Jovan told me this happens every single time, although today it happened earlier than usual. The police rarely gives anyone a ticket, but they make everyone leave. "It's partially our fault, too. Nobody cleans up after themselves." In the two hours, Jovan and Jovana made 1750 dinars (15 euros) by selling a pair of boots for 850 dinars (original price was 1000), a hand blender for 300, and a dress for 600 dinars. The two hours at the market, however, are not the only work put into for these 15 euros; the time it took to gather the items needs to be taken into account as well.

2.2. The New Belgrade market

The smallest of the three markets I visited was the one in New Belgrade. Dardan told me it usually starts around 10 or 11 AM, and the vendors come and go all day, depending on the police, as they are usually chased away several times a day. Dardan and I met with Dule, who was a man in his early 60s and a regular vendor at the New Belgrade Market. Dule's assortment was significantly

less diverse compared to vendors at the Čukarica market – he had two piles of various clothes and ten bottles of perfume. For that day, Dule has not sold a single item: "People come, rummage through, and leave. Nobody is buying."

This testifies to the precarious nature of informal labour. As Han notes: "For some scholars, precarity signals the loss of stable, regular jobs, which had allowed people to project themselves in terms of upward social mobility" (Han, 2018, p. 335). This is also reflected in the conversation Jovan and Jovana had with their young colleague Miki about having a full time, stable job. As seen in the previous chapter, the stability of a full time job (albeit, still without a labour contract) is what allowed Dardan and Drita to leave their shack and move up.

The New Belgrade market is located along one of the major roads in this part of the city and in close proximity to a big green market. No more than 10 vendors were present, all of them Roma from a couple of SRSs close by. As the rain soon started, the three of us retreated to a nearby overhang, discussing the precarious nature of the informal markets. Dule said: "People want stuff for free. I am selling the clothes for 100 or 200 dinars a piece, even that is too much for them!" The perfumes, however, go for a good price, he said. "You gotta have the good merchandise," Dardan concluded.

What counts as *the good merchandise*? Usually, vendors shout, offering and praising their merchandise, hoping this will attract customers. In his research of a Lisbon's open-air market soundscapes Brazzabeni notes:

> "Noise and hubbub, in other words, the shouts that characterize Portuguese cigano commercial practices in open- air markets are the first things noticed by people passing by: customers, political and technical local agents, and anthropologists" (Brazzabeni, 2015, page 77).

This was not the case in Belgrade. As customers walked by, the vendors would mostly have a disinterested look on their faces, even becoming slightly agitated when customers rummage through the items without buying anything. Here, the good merchandise sold itself – primarily by being cheap and functional – or, very rarely, by being a durable or rare item. You gotta have the good merchandise.

2.3. The Zemun market

The Zemun market was a bit different compared to the other two. This one was located in a remote part of Zemun, near and around the Zemun Flea market and a Romani neighborhood. The Flea market was a space local residents referred to as "The Blue Cage," as it was delimited by an iron fence, painted – blue. The inside of the Cage resembled a parking lot, where people would pay 2000 (17 euros) dinars a month for a spot and park their vehicles, packed with their merchandise. Most of the vendors, however, chose to put out their items on surrounding sidewalks. Similarly to the Čukarica market, the range of items on sale was vast: clothes, shoes, toys, small kitchen appliances, books, badges etc.

It was extremely rare for the police to come and shut down the Zemun market. The market would start early in the morning and continue well into the afternoon. While there are no official documents to testify to my assumption, nor would any of the police talk to me, I believe the disinterest of the authorities in this part of the city lies in the fact that it is inhabited predominantly by Roma. The Romani neighborhood in the proximity of the market is characterized by: sturdy

material houses, most with an unfinished façade; narrow, winding streets in disrepair; clear lack of communal service, such as trash disposal.

In the following chapter, I shift the focus from trash pickers and rather discuss policies surrounding trash picking in Serbia. I primarily focus on policies coming from the European Union in regard to circular economy and sustainable development, as well as the role of Romani non-profit sector in translating these narratives.

Chapter 3. European Union's Green Deal and Romani Trash Pickers in Serbia

This chapter explores the intersection of capitalist structures, circular economy, and sustainable development within the context of the European Union's Green Deal (EGD) and its implications for Romani trash pickers in Serbia. Here, I try to show how neoliberal and neocolonial ideologies inherent in the EGD are translated and perpetuated through the non-profit sector, ultimately resulting in the racialized labor of Romani communities. This chapter reveals the systemic exploitation embedded within initiatives ostensibly aimed at promoting environmental sustainability and social integration. Despite the discourse surrounding circular economy and sustainable development, this chapter argues that these frameworks fail to address the structural inequalities perpetuated by capitalism, instead exacerbating the subjugated position of Periphery and Semi-periphery to the Core countries.

The contemporary global economy, deeply entrenched in capitalist structures, faces profound challenges posed by finite resources and the looming threat of climate change. In response to these pressing issues, concepts such as the circular economy and sustainable development have emerged as potential mechanisms to navigate the complexities of reconciling growth imperatives with environmental constraints. However, the efficacy of these concepts within the framework of capitalism is subject to debate, as they grapple with deeply rooted systemic issues and historical legacies of exploitation. While the European Union is promoting its newest "green" policies, it does not ask the question of who will carry the burden of transition. These narratives then get translated by the non-profit sector and shown through their activities in service of the neoliberal

system. Racialized labour of Romani trash pickers in Serbia is expected to be fully utilized in these efforts.

3.1. Circular economy and sustainable development

The contemporary capitalist economy is intrinsically predicated on mass production and consumption of new commodities to satisfy the constant need for growth. This need, however, is made increasingly more difficult as we live on a planet where finite resources and the looming threat of climate change are a reality. In response to these existential challenges, capitalism develops concepts such as circular *economy* and *sustainable development* as mechanisms to navigate the conundrum of reconciling growth imperatives with these constraints. The circular economy paradigm advocates for the minimization of waste and the maximization of resource efficiency through the continual reuse, refurbishment, and recycling of materials within a closed-loop system. Circular economy steps in the traditional, linear model of production (extraction, production, consumption and disposal), creating a loop, where the disposed materials get put back into production through reuse, repair and similar. Likewise, the concept of sustainable development attempts to create a holistic approach to economic growth that tries to reconcile some of the innate contradictions of capitalism, focusing on social, environmental, and economic factors. This creates a paradox and relates to the paradoxical position of a trash picker in the capitalist system of production: instead of mass-producing new products, trash pickers take what has been discarded and put it back onto the commodity market (as shown in chapter 2).

The latest attempt of the European Union to implement the principles of circular economy and sustainable development is embodied in a set of policies called European Green Deal (EDG). As part of the EDG's waste management policy, the five-step *waste hierarchy* was developed: prevention, preparing for re-use, recycling, recovery, and disposal (Directive 2008/98/EC, 2024; *Waste Framework Directive - European Commission*, 2023). The EDG calls for more responsibility from waste producers in term of treatment, transport and storage and encourages member states to "…encourage, inter alia, the development, production and marketing of products that are suitable for multiple use, that are technically durable and that are, after having become waste, suitable for proper and safe recovery and environmentally compatible disposal" (Directive 2008/98/EC, 2024, page 11). While Serbia only has a candidate status, EU policies certainly affect development of Serbian laws and policies (Lepotić Kovačević & Kuzman, 2022). This is especially true for environmental policies, as climate change does not recognize human borders. Serbia's dependence on coal and oil, especially for production of electricity and heating (Dobrojevic, 2021), significantly contributes to Europe's carbon output.

And it can, indeed, be argued that the EU's Green Deal represents a paradigm shift in European economic and environmental policies. Schunz (2022) argues that the EDG represents a significant break from earlier environmental policies. Comparing EDG to its predecessors (the Lisbon Strategy of 2000, Europe 2020 from 2010), Schunz claims a significant change in meta-discourse. In essence, he suggests that the EGD has catalyzed a paradigm shift towards prioritizing sustainability in policy making, creating a more conducive environment for pro-environmental action within the EU.

Both circular economy and sustainable development are heavily criticized. For example, Martínez-Alier challenges the concept of sustainable development, particularly as championed by the United

Nations (Martínez-Alier, 2023). He argues that sustainable development, introduced in 1987, is essentially a form of greenwashing designed to maintain the status quo of economic growth. The UN's promotion of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Martínez-Alier argues, including the endorsement of economic growth within these goals, is overlooking the inherent contradiction of pursuing endless growth on a finite planet. Furthermore, he highlights the UN's failure to acknowledge the environmental impacts of continued economic growth, particularly in the context of resource extraction and climate change. In his argument, he suggests that instead of perpetuating growth-oriented policies, a more environmentally sustainable approach would involve curbing economic growth in wealthy nations, addressing ecological debt, and supporting environmental justice initiatives.

From the above, it can be argued that the ecological debt wealthy nations owe to developing countries or regions come from a long history of colonialism. One such example can be found in Malcom Ferdinand's book "Decolonial Ecology". Ferdinand says that European rulers have used their colonies to offset the environmental price capitalist production requires:

> "These 'unequal ecological exchanges' have allowed empires and colonizing nations to externalize their environmental burdens outside of their continental territories, transforming their peripheries into plantations, into material and human extensions designed to satisfy the desires of the center" (Ferdinand, 2022, page 44).

As an example, Ferdinand talks about the farming of sugar cane. For more than a century, cultivation of sugar cane in the Caribbean was done without the use of manure, meaning that all the nutrients of the soil were transported on ships to Europe. These colonial practices endure even today, although they have taken different forms.

Dunlap and Laratte put forward an even more interesting claim; that European Green Deal is a celebration of "…necropolitics wrapped in 'green' clothes" (Dunlap & Laratte, 2022, page 15). They claim that through energy infrastructural development colonial relationships are not only continued but also intensified based on enduring exploitative geopolitical histories, which in turn require complex extractive processes across interconnected supply networks. As examples of these expressions of necropolitics, the authors talk about Moroccan people who have been displaced from their lands, have lost their jobs and suffer sever violence and death when protesting against these energy projects. Similar situations can be observed throughout Western Sahara – all in order to satisfy the "green" energy needs of a few European countries.

3.2. Is circular economy the solution?

Can the circular economy be the solution to our environmental problems? According to the Circularity Gap Report 2023, currently, the global economy is only 7.2% circular and it increasingly relies on freshly extracted materials (Africa 21, 2023). According to the same report, in 2018 the global economy was 9.1% circular, in 2020 8.6% and the "virgin" materials extracted in the past 6 years are higher than the amount extracted in the entire 20th century. The report finds the reason for this in the increase of material input into stocks (roads, homes and durable goods) that cannot be recycled. In addition, many scholars dealing with colonial ecology argue that the solution to the global ecological crisis is not technological or technocratic, rather it lies in dismantling the current configuration of racialized capital and colonial inhabitation.

According to Haas et al. (2020), the global biophysical economy underwent significant changes over the last century, particularly in three key aspects relevant to circularity. Firstly, there was a tenfold increase in the scale of inputs and outputs of the socioeconomic metabolism. Processed materials rose from 7.6 Gt per year in 1900 to 95.0 Gt per year by 2015, with interim outputs increasing from 7.1 to 63.8 Gt per year Secondly, there was a shift in the composition of flows, with biomass's share decreasing from 70% in 1900 to 24% in 2015, while consumption of fossil materials, metals, and minerals surged. Despite this, biomass extraction quadrupled to 23 Gt per year by 2015. Lastly, the global economy transitioned from a throughput to a stockpiling economy, with only 65% of processed materials returned to the environment in 2015 compared to 94% in 1900. This was due to a significant increase in material stocks, which grew 27-fold to nearly 1000 Gt by 2015, accumulating in infrastructure, buildings, and durable goods.

Parenti outlines the concepts of mitigation and adaptation in the context of addressing climate change (Parenti, 2011). Mitigation involves reducing the production of greenhouse gases by transitioning to clean energy sources, closing coal-fired power plants, and investing in carbon capture technologies. Adaptation, on the other hand, involves preparing for the effects of climate change by both technical and political means. Technical adaptation includes measures such as building seawalls, restoring natural habitats, and developing sustainable agriculture. Political adaptation involves transforming societal relationships and addressing issues such as economic redistribution, development, and peace building to effectively respond to the challenges of climate change.

The above shows that the trends lasting for centuries now, only continue in spite of the attempts made by circular economy proponents. Capitalism has found more creative ways to extract more value from the planet. According to Martínez-Alier (2023), there are two mechanisms capitalism

has achieved this: commodity-widening and commodity deepening. Commodity widening refers to spatial expansion, where extractive industries are looking for new areas to exploit, thus attempting to dispossess and displace people. A good example of this are colonial and neocolonial practices discussed above. Commodity deepening refers to the use of new technologies (fracking, for example) to squeeze out even more from the existing mines, plantations or oil fields. Circular economy can also be understood as commodity deepening, as it aims to reuse additional capital from discarded matter. These two processes are frequent cause of ecological conflicts, as they are more often than not even more damaging to the environment than the previous methods.

3.3. Racialized labour and EU's Green Deal

Policies of the European Union regarding circular economy get adopted and translated through the non-profit sector. For example, Osman Balic, who has been an activist in the Romani movement in Serbia for more than 20 years, argues that Romani trash pickers in Serbia need to be supported by the state and local governments in order to increase their role recycling economy of Serbia (Balic, 2008). He claims that this can be done through microloans, providing equipment (such as protective gear) and forming of trash picking cooperatives. Similarly, Zeljko Jovanovic claims that the funding coming from the Green Deal policies represent a chance for Romani trash pickers in Serbia (Jovanovic, 2020). He claims that investing in the Romani community is not only a matter of human rights, rather it represents sound economic and political policies as well. However, given the informal nature of trash picking, Jovanovic points out to the possibility that the funding coming from the Green Deal policies will favor recycling companies, resulting in a revenue loss for many Romani trash pickers. I believe this is a legitimate concern: big companies and small business

owners might benefit from such policies, however, people like Dardan and Jovan will be left behind. To reiterate, Jovanovic believes that these policies can be used as a tool to correct historical injustices Roma have suffered; he is, however, vary of the possibility that EU and national leaders do not share this vision.

In 2021, I worked for a Romani NGO that was based in Serbia and did most of its work there. The NGO was part of (and to some extent, funded by) an international network of NGOs working on Roma issues in the European Union and the region of Western Balkans and Turkey. Some of the projects the NGO was working on at the time included engaging the Romani community in Serbia in order to achieve higher political participation among Roma, monitoring local government's budgets and helping local NGOs engage with their local governments and – European Union's Green Deal policies as a chance for Romani trash pickers in Serbia.

The newly formed three-member team, of which I was a part of, was called the Research team. We were tasked with collecting data on the position of Roma on the labour market, what skills Roma have and what skills Roma need – all with a focus on circular economy. The team had no background in research – the BA in social work and my experience as a survey enumerator made me the most qualified. The research was supposed to include 10 towns or municipalities in Serbia, although, in the end, we got data from 7. Our international partners had a long list of information they needed – and they needed it fast – so we were asked to skip a few steps of a standard research process and go straight to making a questionnaire. Each consequent draft of the questionary contained more and more questions, as the partners' "appetite" for information on Roma and labour grew ever bigger. In the end, there were two separate questionnaires: one for small business ran by Roma and one for Roma workers. This resulted in an unclear focus and a poor research design.

Apart from being severely unqualified to conduct research on such a scale, we were also given a budget of exactly 0 euros. The survey itself was conducted, for free, by local NGOs in selected towns and municipalities. In fact, the Research team was paid below the minimum wage at the time without any type of contract. Ironically, one of the most conclusive findings of the survey was that Romani workers employed legally are in a much better position compared to those working in the informal economy. Some of the other findings pointed out to general disinterest of both small business owners and workers for circular economy: out of 15 business owners only 1 was engaged in circular economy, motivated solely by profit; Roma workers showed no interest in getting equipment or training for trash picking. As this did not fit into the NGOs network plans, the research was dismissed.

The narrative of Roma as trash pickers is so pervasive in Serbia (and probably other Balkan countries as well) that even the organizations whose alleged purpose is to improve their position in society are attempting to push them into it. The case discussed above is only one of many initiatives to utilize Romani trash pickers' *unique skills* when it comes to trash picking in order to improve their situation – but also contribute to country's economy to a greater extent compared to now. These examples can show us yet another contradiction of Capitalism. While Capitalism requires *cheap labor* (Moore, 2015), it does very little to support social reproduction for everyone (Fraiser, 2016). Instead, in the case of Romani trash pickers, their labour gets racialized and employed in order to provide cheap workforce for EUs Green Deal policies.

Conclusions

With a sense of our friendship renewed, Dardan and I spend the last couple of hours of our last meeting reminiscing about the past, summarizing the work we have done in the last four weeks, but also sharing our plans for the future. I was going to go back to Vienna to work on this thesis and Dardan was thinking about finding an appropriate match for his second son, 16 years of age. His eldest son, who is 17, told him he does not want to get married yet and would rather experience life first. Dardan and Drita got married as teenagers, before completing elementary education, as did their parents before them. However, the next generation seems to be doing things differently. Both of Dardan's sons work in construction and have no plans to become trash pickers, and his younger children are attending school.

Given another option, Dardan's and Drita's sons rejected trash picking as a career. During my fieldwork, this was a constant theme: trash picking was a necessity, born out of lack of other opportunities. Many others from the old settlement completely abandoned trash picking as soon as they could, as the informality and precarity of trash picking hinders one's attempts at climbing the social ladder. I am not claiming it is impossible to get ahead through trash picking, rather that it is more of a survival strategy that could eventually lead to a better life.

Another conclusion that can be drawn is that the value of an item that has been reclaimed from trash is influenced by several factors. The obvious factors include the physical properties of the item in question: whether it still works; is it clean, broken or torn; what the market price of this item is; is it rare or unique and similar. Other factors, that may not be as obvious, include the location where the item is sold and who the vendor is. As trash picking is highly racialized in

Belgrade and tightly connected with Roma, Romani vendors at an informal market will get a lower price compared to their non-Romani counterparts. This is especially true if the locations of the transaction is a formal market. The buyers are looking for the cheapest price possible and the fact that trash picking is racialized and mostly connected with Roma allows them to get a better price – as reclaimed items have a lower monetary value.

The intersection of narratives surrounding European Green Deal, circular economy and trash picking gets translated by the non-profit sector as a chance for the informal Romani trash pickers. These non-profits seek to incorporate their own narrative of *skilled* Romani trash pickers as valuable and worthy of EU funding reserved for implementing these policies, without taking into account the motivations of the trash pickers themselves. Some see it as a historical opportunity for Romani trash pickers to climb out of poverty. This study has shown, however, that given an opportunity, many informal Romani trash pickers chose to leave trash picking behind or only rely on it as additional income.

Ultimately, this thesis' focus is on the ethnography of informal Romani trash pickers of Belgrade. I believe that telling people's stories is extremely important, especially stories that come from marginalized communities whose voices are seldom heard. The Romani community has been mostly studied by the others in the past and had rarely had the chance to have their voices heard. This thesis is a small contribution to the voices of the Romani communities.

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