

Informal economies as a site of contradiction: The case of Albanian Roma community in Greece in the 1990s

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Abstract

This thesis examines the experiences of Albanian Roma migrants from Morava, Berat in Greece's informal labor market during the 1990s–2000s. It argues that their migration and labor practices were shaped by racial capitalism, antigypsyism, and neoliberal exclusion. Using qualitative interviews and auto-ethnography, the study reveals how Roma migrants navigated precarious work, identity concealment, and systemic marginalization. Framed through critical race theory, postcolonialism, and Gramscian hegemony, the thesis shows that informality functioned both as a site of exploitation and survival. The findings challenge dominant migration narratives and highlight the structural racism embedded in European labor regimes.

Key words: undocumented migration, Albanian Roma, Greece, postcolonialism, neoliberalism, race, survival, exploitation

AUTHOR’S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, Donald Myrteli, candidate for the MA degree in International Relations, declare herewith that the present thesis titled *“Informal economies as a site of contradiction: The case of Albanian Roma community in Greece”* is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person’s or institution’s copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 23 May 2025

Donald Myrteli

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Introduction

In this thesis, I argue that the experiences of Roma migrants in Greece's informal economy are not merely the result of economic necessity or individual choices but are also shaped by racial capitalism (Ralph M. & Singhal M., 2019) – firstly presented by Cedric Robinson (1983) in his book text “Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition” and neoliberal governance – which on its basis has capitalism – was first presented by Alexander Rustow in 1938 (Boas C. T., Gans-Morse J., 2009).

Racial capitalism refers to the interconnection between capitalism and racial thinking, where systems of exploitation are utilized to generate profit. Scholars argue that economic growth in capitalist systems has always depended on racialized violence – such as slavery and forced labour – as foundational forms of wealth accumulation. This concept emphasizes that capitalism is not neutral, but always structured through racial hierarchies, where racial identity itself becomes a tool for exploitation and economic gain (Ralph M. & Singhal M., 2019). On the other hand, the term neoliberalism was first introduced by the Freiburg School of German economists in the 1930s. They envisioned it as a “new liberalism” that sought a middle path between classical laissez-faire liberalism and collectivist socialism. This approach, also known as ordoliberalism, emphasized the importance of a strong state to ensure fair competition and prevent monopolies, thereby promoting both economic efficiency and social welfare (Boas C. T., Gans-Morse J., 2009). Over time, particularly during the late 20th century, the term neoliberalism underwent a significant shift in meaning. It became associated with policies advocating for deregulation, privatization, and a reduced role for the state in economic affairs (ibid.). I apply these two concepts in my thesis as interchangeable as even

though they not the same thing, they are closely connected with racial capitalism which relies on economic systems that tend to exploit people based on their race, and neoliberal governance making it worse by cutting the support towards vulnerable people, thus pushing them into unstable, informal and exploitative jobs. Hence, the concept of neoliberalism and racial capitalism helps in understanding migration and gives an answer to the existence of informal jobs and certain groups of people who end up in such structures upon migration.

Migration has long been a survival strategy for marginalized communities worldwide. Often, the experiences of certain groups, such as Roma - the largest minority group in Europe, have been framed through lenses of victimhood, exclusion, or criminality, overlooking the complex interplay of agency, structural constraints, and systemic racism that shape their mobility. In this research, I explore these dynamics through the case of the Albanian Roma community from Morava, Berat, who migrated to Greece during the 1990s and 2000s.

I situate this research within broader debates of racial capitalism and neoliberalism by engaging critically the global capitalist structures that have produced and continue to reproduce inequalities that push marginalized communities into precarious forms of labor in the hosting countries (Castells & Portes, 1989; Rajaram, 2015; Toksöz, 2020).

Through the lens of the Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic 2017), Postcolonialism (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Bhabra, 2014), and Gramscian theory of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), this study aims to analyse the experiences of Albanian Roma as undocumented migrants in Greece's informal labour market. These theoretical frameworks are essential to understand the intersecting systems of power that have historically marginalised Roma populations in Europe. Critical race theory offers a foundational lens to explore how race and racism

are embedded within institutional and societal structures rather than being only individual or cultural phenomena. Originating in the work of scholars like Bell (1992), Crenshaw (1991), and Delgado & Stefancic (2017), critical race theory allows for an analysis of how Roma migrants are racialised in Europe, where their legal status, ethnicity and class intersect to produce systemic exclusion and vulnerability. In addition, during my analysis of the data I bring in postcolonial theory and hegemony which serve as tools of this thesis to understand and analyse the enduring legacy of colonial hierarchies that continue to shape European self-perceptions and the racialised construction of Roma as the internal “other” (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Bhambra, 2014). On the other hand, hegemony theory – the Gramscian thought – is used to analyse and understand how dominant ideologies legitimise and sustain exploitative labour structures which echo traces of colonialism and neoliberal capitalism. Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony explains how the economic dependence on undocumented, racialized labor is normalized through societal consent rather than coercion (Gramsci, 1971). This research allows to unpack how neoliberal capitalism obscures its reliance on precarious migrant labor by framing it as both inevitable and undesirable – a contradiction that is ideologically sustained according to Gramsci(1971).

The post-socialist transitions of the 1990s in Albania exacerbated existing socio-economic vulnerabilities among Roma community, particularly those in rural and peripheral areas like Morava. As the collapse of the state-controlled economy dismantled previously secured, though limited, livelihoods, many Roma found themselves forced to migrate under irregular conditions to neighboring Greece (Carletto et al., 2006; Vullnetari & King, 2016). For these migrants, the informal labor market emerged as both a necessary site of income generation and a space where their labor was systematically devalued, racialized, and exploited (Castells & Portes, 1989; Anthias & Lazaridis,

2000). As one interlocutor shared, survival often meant "*compromising one's identity, name, and pride*," reflecting the deeply racialized dimensions of their migration and labor experiences. Together, these frameworks allow for a critical, intersectional analysis of the Albanian Roma migration experience in Greece. Rather than treating informality, migration, and exclusion as isolated socio-economic processes, they are approached as historically rooted and ideologically sustained phenomena, shaped by racial capitalism (Robinson, 1983; Melamed, 2015), postcolonial legacies, and hegemonic narratives of productivity and legality.

Analysing my case through these theoretical lenses, I aim to explore (1) *how have the Albanian Roma migrants experienced and navigated informal labour markets in Greece?* (2) *In what ways do race, legal status, and neoliberal policies intersect to shape their labour experiences and informality?* And lastly, (3) I aim to explore *how these experiences can be understood within broader systems of racial capitalism and postcolonial exclusion?* In this study I adopt a qualitative research approach, which is best suited for capturing the depth, complexity, and lived realities of migration, race, and systemic exclusion as experienced by Roma communities - which I organise thematically in the following chapters, by using the theories as analytical tools to direct the analysis. Given the nature of the question, centred on marginalization, resistance, informal labor, and racialization, qualitative methods offer the necessary flexibility and depth to analyze the subjective and structural dimensions of Roma mobility.

In this thesis, each chapter traces a different dimension of the Albanian Roma migration experience to Greece, thematically structured to reveal undocumented migration and identity shaped Roma's experiences within the Greek society and informal labor market. Chapter 1 provides an overview of Roma during the transition from socialism to democracy, with a focus on migratory

flows toward Greece. Chapter 2 outlines the methodology, followed by Chapter 3, which presents the theoretical framework. Chapter 4 explores the structural and systemic exclusion of Roma communities across Europe, emphasizing how racialized ideologies and neoliberal governance perpetuate antigypsyism. Chapter 5 examines how Roma have navigated the informal labor market and the strategies they employed to integrate into it. Chapter 6 analyzes how Albanian Roma migrants are positioned as surplus populations within neoliberal capitalism, illustrating how historical legacies and contemporary policies intersect to normalize exploitation and marginalization in informal labor markets.

Chapter 1 | Literature Review

1.1 Roma in Transitional Albania

The migration of Albanians to Greece, and particularly the experience of minority groups such as Roma, sits at the intersection of economic necessity, systemic exclusion, and national anxieties. Scholars have explored these dynamics from multiple angles, revealing how security discourses, labor market structures, and migration policies reinforce exclusionary conditions for migrants, especially those who are racialized and undocumented. Ullah et al. (2020) argue that migration is increasingly treated as a “security dilemma,” particularly when it involves racialized or minority groups. They write that “minority migrants are frequently perceived as cultural threats and economic burdens,” which feeds into hostile policy frameworks (p. 140). This securitization logic not only criminalizes movement but legitimizes restrictive state responses that disproportionately target vulnerable populations. For Roma migrants from Albania, such racialized suspicion intersects with long-standing societal prejudices, compounding their exclusion.

The post-communist collapse in Albania triggered a massive wave of migration, especially in the 1990s. Carletto et al. (2006) provide an empirical overview of these dynamics, noting that “migration became a fundamental survival strategy for many households” in a country undergoing deep economic and social dislocation (p. 769). They emphasize that this mobility was not only economically driven but also a reflection of the state’s weakened capacity to provide for its citizens. Many of these migrants, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds such as Roma, were pushed across borders by desperation rather than opportunity.

Parkins (2010) frames migration in terms of classic push and pull factors, such as economic disparity, political instability, and perceived opportunity abroad. While this model provides a

foundational understanding, it overlooks the racialized and informal nature of the labor markets migrants enter. Nonetheless, Parkins rightly observes that “the perception of opportunity in host countries may be shaped more by imagined futures than actual conditions” (p. 5), pointing to the disjuncture between expectations and realities that many Albanian migrants, including Roma families, encounter.

Lazaridis and Koumandraki (2007) focus specifically on the Greek labor market and the contradictory positioning of Albanian migrants. They show how Albanians were “simultaneously welcomed as workers and rejected as foreigners” (p. 101), a duality that is central to understanding their exploitation. This paradox is further sharpened when considering Roma migrants, who not only face discrimination as Albanians but also carry the stigma of being Roma, often seen as “unassimilable” within Greek society. In her earlier work, Lazaridis (1996) critiques the Greek state’s handling of migration, arguing that it was “characterized by ad hoc responses, lacking a coherent long-term vision” (p. 336). She connects this policy vacuum to the rise of informal labor markets and the normalization of undocumented work. Her analysis helps to explain how Roma migrants, already marginalized in Albania, were pushed into insecure, low-paid, and unprotected labor sectors in Greece.

The Greek state did attempt to address irregular migration through regularization programs, as explored by Fakiolas (2003). He notes, however, that these programs were often limited in scope and failed to offer long-term security: “The regularization schemes have not led to the social inclusion of migrants, but rather institutionalized their temporary and precarious status” (Fakiolas, 2003, p. 12). This critique is particularly salient when applied to Roma migrants, who often lacked the documentation, literacy, or community support needed to benefit from such schemes. Social

capital, as discussed by Iosifides et al. (2007), can mediate some of the difficulties faced by migrants, facilitating access to work, housing, and legal status. However, they also acknowledge that access to such networks is uneven: “Not all Albanians can draw on the same resources - ethnic identity, local contacts, or kinship ties affect outcomes” (p. 1350). Roma migrants, who often face exclusion even within Albanian communities, may find themselves doubly marginalized in this regard.

1.2 Roma Migration and Post-Socialist Uncertainty

Migration has historically been a mechanism for survival, particularly for communities marginalized by ethnic, racial, and class hierarchies. The 1990s marked a significant turning point for populations in Southeastern Europe, as the collapse of socialist regimes dismantled state-supported economies and prompted a wave of out-migration. In Albania, this transformation disproportionately affected Roma communities, whose already-precarious socio-economic conditions were worsened by the transition to neoliberal capitalism. While Carletto et al. (2006) and Vullnetari and King (2016) document this migration surge, they often treat “Albanian migrants” as a homogenous group, overlooking how Roma migrants faced compounded discrimination - both as Albanians and as Roma.

Roma - Europe’s largest and most disadvantaged minority - have historically been excluded from formal labor markets and social protections in both their countries of origin and destination. As Yıldız and De Genova (2017) assert, Roma mobility is not merely an economic response but shaped by “regimes of racial governance” that perpetually mark Roma as the “non-citizen,” legally and socially. In the Greek context, Albanian Roma migrants were doubly marginalized: first, through anti-Albanian xenophobia, and second, through antigypsyism and cultural racism that is

present not only in the EU, but also in Albania and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe (Triandafyllidou & Veikou, 2002).

While some literature addresses Roma migration from a victimization or poverty perspective, there is limited engagement with Roma navigating racialized systems of labor and migration. Even gendered analyses, such as Vullnetari and King's (2016) work on domestic and care work, often ignore how ethnicity, rurality, and class interact with gender. Furthermore, EU discourses on Roma "integration" tend to depoliticize their movement, reducing it to socio-economic deficits rather than engaging with the structural racism embedded in state and EU institutions.

By centering the experiences of Roma migrants from Morava, Berat, this thesis intervenes in both Albanian migration literature and EU Roma discourse. It draws from post-socialist studies, migration research, and critical race theory to examine how displacement is racialized and how informal labor becomes a mechanism for managing racialized surplus populations under neoliberal capitalism.

1.3 Informal Labor, Migration, and Exploitation

Castells and Portes (1989, p. 12) describe the informality in the labor market as a system of income generation that operates outside the formal legal and institutional frameworks that govern similar regulated activities. Moreover, they point out that the informal sector has grown worldwide - even in countries with strong institutional systems - largely as a way for employers to avoid labor laws and union involvement. However, as many scholars have noted, when migration gets included in the picture, the informal labour market is shaped and transformed into an opportunity for

undocumented migrants to secure financial income - thus serving as a survival mechanism (Anderson, 2010; Sassen 1998; Samers, 2005; De Genova, 2002; Hess, 2012).

The existence of undocumented migrant labour in informal sectors is not accidental, but rather a product of neoliberal economic policies that reduce labour protections while demanding constant economic productivity. Thus, neoliberal capitalism with its emphasis on deregulation, privatisation and labour market flexibilisation, has created certain structural conditions where the informal labour market becomes not only tolerated, but economically essential. In addition, the influx of undocumented migrants into this informal economy does not appear as an unintended consequence, but rather as a mechanism that became central for ensuring cheap and exploitative labor that fuels neoliberal productivity, but at the meantime - fuels inequalities (Harvey, 2005; De Genova, 2002; Anderson, 2010). Hence, Castles & Mark (2009) state that neoliberal economies and changes towards a more capitalistic approach rely structurally on migrant labour, especially informal and undocumented.

Hence, the informal labor market has long served as both a survival mechanism and a trap for the Albanian Roma migrants in Greece during the 1990s and 2000s. For Roma migrants, informality was imposed by structural barriers both in Albania because of the regime, and in Greece because of their status. The collapse of the Albanian economy and the neoliberal turn in Albania left Roma with little access to stable employment or formal social support (Carletto et al., 2006; Vullnetari & King, 2016). Toksöz (2020) notes that irregular migration often arises from “state failure” to provide economic stability, leading people to cross borders in search of survival. Yet once in Greece, Roma migrants were pushed into informal sectors - mainly agriculture - where labor exploitation was routine.

Bangasser (2000) and Tokman (1992) describe informal economies as sites of both opportunities and exploitation. Agron, one of the interlocutors, captured this contradiction when he said that survival meant “*compromising one’s identity, name, and pride.*” Such testimonies reveal the personal and structural costs of informal labor. Migrants accepted jobs without contracts, protections, or recognition, relying on precarious networks and risking constant displacement.

This ambiguity - where states criminalize migrants yet depend on their labor - is central to neoliberal migration regimes. As Castles et al. (2012) argue, states often sustain informal labor markets to meet economic demands while restricting migrants’ rights. Delgado Wise et al. (2013) further emphasize that capitalist globalization pushes migrants into informality while extracting maximum value from their unprotected labor.

Rajaram’s (2015) concept of “surplus populations” is crucial here. Roma migrants, as racialized and undocumented, were rendered necessary yet disposable - tolerated only for the economic function they served. This was not incidental, but a core feature of neoliberal capitalism: managing populations whose labor can be exploited without being protected. Roma experience in Greece demonstrates how informality becomes both a coping strategy and a mechanism of racialized exploitation.

1.4 Research Significance

This research addresses a critical gap in the intersection of migration studies, labor informality, and ethnic marginalization by focusing on the case of Albanian Roma migrants, particularly during the post-socialist transition period. Despite the extensive literature on migration, neoliberalism, and informality, there is limited research that centers Roma community from the

Western Balkans within this broader framework and that looks deeply into how their experiences as undocumented migrants are shaped by different external factors. Roma continue to be largely rendered invisible in both academic and policy discourses, often subsumed under generalized narratives of Balkan migration or treated solely through a domestic lens that fails to capture the complexity of transnational migration processes and racialized exclusion. By examining the lived experiences of Roma migrants from Albania in Greece, this research contributes to multiple bodies of literature such as migration and Romani studies where I offer a focused lens on undocumented and informal migration within the EU, highlighting the national and supranational social and political regimes that interact with ethnic hierarchies and racialized borders.

Another reason why this research is important and relevant is because it contributes to the scope of Roma scholarship, which has traditionally focused on Central and Eastern Europe, by exploring the diasporic realities of Roma in Southeastern Europe and the Western Balkans. It provides an empirical contribution that links broader theoretical debates on racial capitalism and postcolonial legacies with the underexplored narratives of Roma mobility and exclusion. In doing so, the research not only fills an academic gap but also responds to a broader ethical and political imperative: to center the voices and experiences of communities that have historically been silenced or misrepresented. Through this focus, the research seeks to challenge dominant migration paradigms that homogenize migrant experiences and ignore the intersecting dynamics of race, class, and geography. Ultimately, this research aims to produce knowledge that is not only academically valuable but also socially relevant - one that invites a rethinking of how mobility, labor, and marginality are governed in an increasingly unequal and securitized Europe.

Chapter 2 | Methodology

To fully understand the dynamics at play in the case of Albanian Roma migrants to Greece in the 1990s, in this study I draw upon a combination of secondary data, critical theoretical frameworks, and firsthand accounts through semi-structured interviews which I organise thematically in the body of this research. A key method in this research is the use of semi-structured interviews, which offer both structure and flexibility, allowing participants to speak freely about their migration journeys, work experiences, and interactions with legal systems and state institutions. These interviews place a strong emphasis on storytelling - not just as a form of data collection, but as a powerful epistemological tool that centers Roma voices and disrupts dominant narratives about their lives. Storytelling allows for the transmission of lived knowledge in its emotional, cultural, and political context, offering insights that quantitative data or policy analysis alone cannot capture.

In total, 10 interviews were conducted with Roma individuals and families who migrated from Morava to Greece during the early 1990s & 2000s. Participants were primarily chosen through snowball sampling, which is particularly effective when working with marginalized communities whose experiences - especially with undocumented migration - often remain hidden or undocumented. Interviews were conducted in Albanian and Romani language. First contact points were my grandparents in Albania and family relatives who reside in Greece who then suggested other Roma from the village and in Greece who shared similar experiences regarding migration and labour.

Crucially, I adopt an auto-ethnographic perspective. As a Roma migrant myself who experienced this very migration process - crossing borders with my own family under undocumented circumstances - I bring not only academic interest but lived knowledge to this research. The story of my family is part of this analysis while examining the mechanisms of exclusion and survival, and it

informs the empathy, ethical commitment, and responsibility I bring to representing the experiences of others in my community. Far from compromising the research's objectivity, my positionality enhances its critical depth and authenticity, allowing for a reflexive and accountable engagement with both theory and experience. Throughout the research process, I remain reflexively aware of my position as both insider and researcher. This dual position enables deeper trust and cultural understanding, but it also requires constant self-examination to ensure that I do not project my own narrative onto others. I addressed this by ensuring my interview questions were open-ended and non-directive, allowing participants to share their unfiltered experiences. During interviews, I was conscious of my reactions, avoided leading responses, and reflected afterward on moments where my own assumptions might have influenced the dialogue. This reflexive approach ensured the integrity of participants' voices remained intact throughout the research process.

Ethically, all interviews were conducted with informed consent, and participants' identities have been anonymized for privacy and protection. The decision to share their stories was made voluntarily and with full awareness of the purpose and scope of this research. In a context where Roma are often spoken about but rarely listened to, this study strives to reverse that dynamic by honoring the agency, resilience, and perspectives of those directly impacted.

Finally, this methodology reflects a decolonial and justice-oriented research ethic. Rather than portraying Roma migrants as passive victims of historical forces, I seek to highlight how their movement, labor, and storytelling represent acts of resistance, adaptability, and strategic agency. By combining theoretical rigor, secondary data, storytelling, and lived experience, this methodology enables a layered and intimate understanding of Roma migration as both a structural issue and a deeply personal, human experience.

Chapter 3 | Theoretical Framework

Understanding the migration of Albanian Roma to Greece requires a multi-layered theoretical approach that captures the complexities of racialization, economic exploitation, historical legacies, and state governance. This chapter outlines the five key theoretical frameworks that inform this

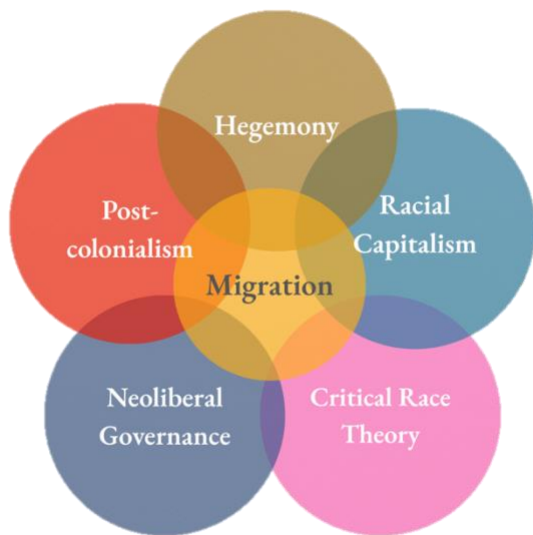


Figure 1. *Conceptual interconnections of theories in relation to migration. Created by the author using Canva.*

thesis: Critical Race Theory, Racial Capitalism, Postcolonialism, Neoliberal Governance, and Gramscian Hegemony. As visualized in **Figure 1**, these frameworks are not separate silos but overlapping and mutually reinforcing lenses that together illuminate how migration is shaped by power, ideology, and resistance. By drawing on this constellation of theories, the chapter establishes a critical foundation for analyzing how Albanian Roma migrants have been positioned within Greek society - as racialized laborers, postcolonial subjects, and targets of neoliberal and hegemonic structures.

3.1 Critical Race Theory & Migration

Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic 2017) reveals how race, racism and power shape migration systems and experiences. This theory helps to challenge the ideas that migration movements are purely legal and neutral towards classifications, by arguing that it is instead deeply embedded in racial hierarchies and historical injustices. When racism started to institutionalise, it started to manifest itself in forms of power that would define how certain communities would be treated.

Rather than viewing racism as an anomaly, critical race theory argues that it is a normal and everyday experience for people of color to be rendered invisible to those in positions of power

(Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). One of its central concepts, interest convergence, suggests that progress for racial justice typically occurs only when it aligns with the interests of the white majority. Additionally, CRT emphasizes that race is not a biological reality but a **social construct** used to reinforce hierarchies, and it recognizes that different minority groups are racialized in varying ways depending on societal needs. CRT values the experiential knowledge of people of color, asserting that their perspectives are essential for understanding and challenging racial oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Critical race theory (CRT) offers a powerful analytical framework to understand how racialised power structures are embedded within legal and institutional systems, a perspective that is particularly illuminating when applied to the marginalisation of Roma communities in Europe. This theory reflects and mirrors antigypsyism as a movement and as a powerful tool to combat racism which by becoming structural and institutionalised, has created power dynamics and hierarchies which has put Roma in a subordinate position. Applying Critical Race Theory to the migration context of the Albanian Roma, it allows me to critically question how and why migrants are treated differently based on race, and how it further justifies exclusion and exploitation in the host countries.

3.2 Racial Capitalism & Migration

In understanding the complex realities of contemporary migration, this thesis draws on the concept of racial capitalism by Cedric J. Robinson (1983) which helps to examine how capitalism has been built and shaped through racial hierarchies which goes hand in hand with exploitation. In the context of Roma migrants, racial capitalism serves as a tool to explain how migrant labour is extracted and devalued.

Building on this, Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018) extends the analysis by interrogating how racial capitalism is sustained through the everyday reproduction of life under precarious conditions, particularly for racialized and migrant populations. Bhattacharyya's focus on survival, gendered

labor, and systemic disposability frames the migrant not simply as a worker, but as a subject through which neoliberal economies outsource the costs of social reproduction.

For Albanian Roma migrants, their racialized and ethnic status was not incidental but central to their positioning within Greek labor markets. Treated as both foreign and inferior, they were absorbed into highly exploitative informal sectors structured by racial hierarchies and state neglect. Bhattacharyya (2018) extends this analysis by framing the informal economy as a space of “reproductive survival,” where racialized groups sustain themselves outside formal protections. For Roma migrants, this meant surviving through informal economic strategies while being denied legal recognition, healthcare, housing, and labor rights - conditions that were not accidental, but structurally imposed under racial capitalism.

This conceptual lens is further sharpened by Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s (2007) analysis of carceral capitalism in *Golden Gulag*, where she introduces the notion of “**surplus life**” to describe how racialized populations are rendered unnecessary to production yet essential to state power via their containment and criminalization. Migrants are simultaneously needed and negated, positioned as exploitable labor and as threats to national identity. Harsha Walia (2021) builds on these insights, where she links the global border regime to histories of **colonial violence** and **present-day neoliberalism**, where the border is not just a line on a map but a regime of racial control, operating inside the host country to regulate who belongs and under what terms. Together, these perspectives allow for a critical understanding of how Roma migrants’ exclusion from the formal economy was not merely a result of economic misfortune or cultural difference, but a racialized strategy of neoliberal governance aimed at sustaining a disposable labor force under exploitative and extra-legal conditions.

3.3 Post Colonialism & Migration

This thesis draws on postcolonial theory to explore how the migratory experiences of Albanian Roma in Greece are shaped by historical and contemporary structures of racial and

colonial domination. Postcolonialism challenges the assumption that the colonial era is simply a historical phase, but rather, it asserts that colonial logics of racial hierarchy, labour control, and geopolitical domination continue to structure global migration flows and border regimes today (Bhambra, 2023). The migration of Albanian Roma is not simply the outcome of regional economic crises, but part of a broader postcolonial migration economy, where marginalized populations from the peripheries are systematically racialized, rendered surplus, and incorporated into informal labor markets. As Abdelmalek Sayad (1999) argues, migration is not merely a demographic phenomenon but a deeply political and epistemic one, marked by the misrecognition and silencing of migrants, particularly those marked by racial and ethnic difference. Spivak's (1988) notion of the subaltern is useful here: Roma migrants, like many racialized postcolonial subjects, are often spoken about but rarely given space to speak for themselves in national or academic discourse.

The colonality of power (Quijano, 2000) continues to structure how mobility is policed and valued, where migrants from historically colonized or racialized regions – Albanian Roma – are subject to racialised surveillance, exclusionary policies, and exploitative labor conditions. In the Greek context, Roma migrants have historically been framed through orientalist and antigypsyist tropes – as culturally deficient, economically burdensome, or criminal – thus justifying their relegation to the informal economy and their exclusion from state protections. As Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) argue, borders today function not simply to keep people out, but to sort, manage, and extract value from migrant populations based on racialized and economic criteria. The postcolonial framework is thus critical not only for understanding how colonial histories continue to shape contemporary migration, but also for emphasizing the agency and resistance of migrants who navigate, subvert, and survive within these systems (El-Tayeb, 2011). This perspective moves beyond victimization to highlight how diasporic networks, informal economies, and cultural expressions form part of a broader politics of survival and resistance under racialized neoliberalism.

3.4 Neoliberal Governance & Migration

When analysing migration through the lens of neoliberal governance, it reveals how states manage mobility not just to control borders, but to further serve their economic agendas while shifting social responsibility. Neoliberal governance concept assists to describe and understand the political and economic logic that reshaped state functions globally from the late 20th century onward, emphasizing market deregulation, privatization, and individual responsibility over collective welfare (Brown, 2015). In this framework, the state does not retreat entirely, but is reconfigured as a manager of economic efficiency, delegating welfare provision to private actors, NGOs, or civil society (Ong, 2006). When applied to migration, this mode of governance treats mobility as an economic utility: "desirable" migrants are incorporated based on their labor value, while others are excluded, criminalized, or relegated to precarious legal statuses that facilitate control without offering rights (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). Migrant "illegality" is not a natural state, but a legal condition deliberately produced to make certain populations exploitable and disposable (De Genova, 2002). These dynamics enable what Ong (2006) calls "graduated sovereignty," where migrants exist in zones of differential rights and protections depending on their market value.

This is especially evident in the Greek state's treatment of Albanian Roma migrants in the 1990s-2000s. As Greece and Albania, alongside many other countries globally, underwent neoliberal restructuring, Roma migrants were absorbed into informal labor markets without access to formal employment protections or residency rights. Their racialized status, combined with their economic role as a "flexible" and low-cost workforce, made them ideal subjects of neoliberal governance, where the benefits of their labor were reaped without granting them citizenship or legal stability (Sharma, 2020). Simultaneously, the state outsourced welfare provision to NGOs and humanitarian organizations, effectively absolving itself of responsibility for migrant well-being - that Brown (2015) describes as the "hollowing out of democratic accountability." This thesis uses the concept of neoliberal governance to argue that the Albanian Roma were not simply victims of

bureaucratic neglect, but targeted participants in a system that strategically manages racialized labor while denying the very social support systems their work sustained.

3.5 Hegemony & Migration

Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony is instrumental in analyzing how systems of racialized labor and exclusion are not only imposed through coercion but maintained through cultural and ideological consent. Hegemony, in Gramsci's terms, refers to the ability of the dominant class to project its worldview in such a way that it becomes accepted as "common sense" by subordinate groups (Gramsci, 1971). In the context of Albanian Roma migration to Greece, hegemonic narratives construct Roma as inherently marginal, culturally deviant, economically unproductive, and socially undesirable. Adding to these narratives, the undocumented aspect of their migration, it makes it easier for the states to justify their exclusion from formal labor protections while normalizing their relegation to precarious, informal sectors.

Thus, Gramsci's theory of hegemony allows for a dynamic understanding of how power operates not only through exclusion but also through the production of consent and the potential for resistance.

Conclusions

In my thesis, I chose to integrate Critical Race Theory, Racial Capitalism, Postcolonialism, Neoliberal Governance, and Gramscian Hegemony as interconnected theoretical frameworks to capture the full complexity of Albanian Roma migration to Greece. These frameworks are not isolated but mutually reinforcing: Critical Race Theory exposes how race and institutional racism shape migrant experiences and exclusions, while Racial Capitalism explains how such racialization is economically exploited through precarious labor and denied rights. Postcolonialism situates these patterns within enduring colonial logics that continue to structure mobility and labor hierarchies, particularly for historically marginalized groups. Neoliberal Governance, in turn, shows how states strategically manage and exploit these racialized migrants by outsourcing social

responsibility while extracting labor under the guise of economic rationality. Gramsci's notion of hegemony ties these together by illuminating how such exploitation is normalized through cultural narratives and ideological consent. Together, these theories form an analytical constellation that enables a deeper, systemic understanding of how Albanian Roma migrants are racialized, exploited, and yet resilient within broader structures of power.

Chapter 4 | Informality as Survival: Roma Labor, Identity Erasure, Racism and Neoliberal Exclusion

This chapter explores the structural and systemic exclusion of Roma communities across Europe, highlighting how racialized ideologies and neoliberal governance frameworks perpetuate antigypsyism. Drawing on Romani scholarship, critical theories, and testimonies from Roma individuals, it reveals how everyday racism, institutional neglect, and hegemonic narratives work together to marginalize Roma populations in areas such as employment, housing, education, and healthcare.

4.1 Racialised Exclusion of Roma

Roma in Europe have experienced racism and exclusion from mainstream society in all areas of life such as education, employment, housing and healthcare. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights Report (FRA, 2016) highlights the widespread and systemic discrimination against Roma populations across Europe. Romani scholar Angela Kóczé (2017) argues that such exclusion is not incidental but embedded within neoliberal governance structures that racialize Roma bodies and portray them as deviant or undeserving of state support.

Similarly, Vera Messing (2013) shows how Roma are structurally excluded from the labor market and educational opportunities, with policy failures reinforcing rather than alleviating their marginalization. Ethel Brooks (2009) critiques the precarious, gendered labor conditions that Roma face, revealing how their exploitation is normalized in informal economies. These insights align with the FRA's findings that 80% of Roma are at risk of poverty, and nearly half live without basic

amenities such as running water or indoor toilets. As Mihai Surdu (2016) reminds us, the very act of classifying and "counting" Roma populations often obscures structural injustices behind bureaucratic categories.

Therefore, any policy response must be rooted in both quantitative data and the lived realities that Romani scholars bring to the forefront as these sad realities have not changed much in 2025, as Roma continue to experience racism and as a consequence - they find themselves often excluded and in the margins of the society. The widespread antigypsyism is one of the largest issues that many international organisations are trying to properly address, in order to achieve meaningful change in the lives of many Roma. Most of the time, Roma have been perceived as a problem in the EU (Anca, P., 2010), often blamed as the ones at fault for the situation they are in. This is also a statement that came up often in the interviews with my interlocutors where **James** e.g. said:

"All my life, when I was in Albania more explicitly, I have had to deal with white gadje who tell me that it is not their fault that we do not do anything to make our lives better, as if we are parasites, and as a result deserving of the poverty we have been in..."

Similarly, **Mira** said:

"It was always hard to feel welcomed in our own society, because we would always be seen as gypsies...we are different from them, we have accepted that now, but why in healthcare, in employment. We are in need of support, not because we cannot work, but because they never accepted us."

These quotes reflect the persistence of antigypsyism as a structural and ideological phenomenon, which can be critically understood through Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Critical Race Theory (CRT). Gramsci (1971) theorized that dominant groups maintain power not merely through coercion, but through the production of cultural and ideological consent.

In this context, the widespread perception of Roma as "a problem" in the EU (Anca, 2010) is an example of hegemonic discourse - a dominant narrative internalized by institutions, the media, and the general society that normalizes Roma exclusion. Consequently, such framing renders Roma communities as pathologically dysfunctional, thus legitimizing their marginalization and the failure of states to intervene meaningfully. This hegemonic construction is echoed in James's account, where he reflects on the way "white gadje" blame Roma for their own poverty, portraying them as "parasites." This discourse, according to Gramsci, functions as common sense, a seemingly natural way of interpreting social relations that obscures the historical and political roots of inequality (Gramsci, 1971). It operates by deflecting responsibility from state structures and dominant groups, reinforcing Roma subordination while appearing apolitical.

From a Critical Race Theory standpoint, this dynamic exemplifies systemic racism, where power operates not solely through visible discrimination, but also through ideologies and institutions that perpetuate racial hierarchies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). For instance, Mira brings the question of "why in the healthcare systems and in employment?" - clearly stating that the acceptance from the society was never a question of inclusion, the discrimination and framing as dysfunctional was just in the ideologies and minds of people around, until everything becomes institutionalised, and all those exclusionary policies are moved forward by the people who perpetuate the inequalities and ensure the continuation of exclusionary and unequal treatment.

CRT emphasizes the importance of counter narratives - stories from marginalized voices that expose and challenge dominant ideologies. James's testimony serves as a counter-hegemonic voice, one that disrupts the dominant assumption that Roma poverty is self-inflicted and instead reveals the racialized logic of exclusion that structures Roma lives across Europe. By placing blame

on Roma individuals, society evades scrutiny of its own complicity in perpetuating poverty, disenfranchisement, and structural neglect. Therefore, both Gramsci's theory of hegemony and CRT help us understand how antigypsyism is not simply about prejudice or misunderstanding, but part of a broader ideological apparatus that maintains racial and class hierarchies through the naturalization of oppression.

In this thesis I did not want to overlook the fact that antigypsyism Roma in Europe experience in their everyday life, cannot be analysed separately, but it requires an intersectional lens, because their marginalization and discrimination is often complex comprehend as it is shaped not only by their ethnic identity but also by overlapping factors such as class, gender, legal status, and geographic location, all of which intensify their social exclusion and vulnerability (Kóczé, A. 2009; Verdin, O'Reilly, and McDonnell 2023).

4.2 Antigypsyism: A push factor

These devastating experiences of antigypsyism have compelled many Roma to continuously move across borders in search of better living conditions and more inclusive policies that might help them overcome the systemic socio-economic and political exclusion they face (Trehan, 2009; Sigona & Vermeersch, 2012). This mobility, often mischaracterized as voluntary migration, is deeply rooted in persistent racial discrimination, structural inequality, and exclusion from citizenship rights (Matache & Bhabha, 2016; van Baar, 2011), making displacement a survival strategy rather than a choice.

While discussing with Agron - one of my interlocutors - about the discrimination and migration as a survival strategy, I got curious to know more about the racism and how they were perceived in the greek society. He said:

“I never said to the Greeks that I am Roma. If I ever introduced myself as such, I would be discriminated against, and not sure if I would also be able to stay there at all.”

Then he reflected upon something I had told him months ago, that I am proud and happy to say that I am Roma everywhere I find myself. He then continued:

“We had a favor that we could hide our identity by saying that we are white Albanians, so a white race. But there was a tiny difference, since no matter white or black Albanian, we would still be different from the Greeks.”

Then, I continued by asking what the benefits of hiding the identity to the Greek employers were.

Agron replied:

“There were quite a few. Firstly, as I mentioned earlier, I tried to avoid the discrimination that could lead to physical and psychological violence towards me. I would be oppressed, and I could not allow this to happen in front of my wife and children. Secondly, by behaving like a native Albanian, I could be given proper food and utensils by the Greek employer.”

From his response, he added that the decision of hiding their Romani side was taken not only by him but by all Romani migrants from Morava. Given that this paper consists of an autoethnography as well, where I tend to provide insights from my own family, I also try to get answers to my questions. Hence, I asked how hiding his identity made him feel.

“I felt very bad. Moreover, a man from my neighborhood in Albania once told to the Greek employer that I am Roma. I felt extremely angry and afraid at the same time. Luckily, due to my hard work in agriculture, I managed to maintain the job. The one who would spy would have a privilege by staying closer to the Greeks.”

My interlocutors offer compelling insights through these quotes into how antigypsyism compels Roma individuals to engage in strategic identity concealment as a means of survival within

racialized and exclusionary systems. As Trehan (2009) and Sigona and Vermeersch (2012) argue, the continuous cross-border mobility of Roma populations is not a matter of voluntary migration but a “forced” response to entrenched socio-economic marginalization and systemic racism. This form of displacement, as Matache and Bhabha (2016) contend, emerges from exclusionary citizenship regimes that deny Roma individuals recognition and rights, rendering their mobility a necessity rather than a choice.

Agron’s narrative exemplifies the everyday manifestations of this structural violence, where passing as “white Albanian” in Greece becomes a protective mechanism to avoid discrimination and access basic dignity in the Greek labor market. His ability to receive food or retain employment is contingent upon the erasure of his Romani identity - what van Baar (2011) might describe as the racial governance of mobility under neoliberal capitalism. The emotional toll of such concealment - accompanied by shame, fear, and anger when his identity is revealed - resonates with Frantz Fanon’s (1952) exploration of internalized racism and the psychological violence of masking one’s racial identity to navigate oppressive systems. Moreover, the dynamics of intra-community surveillance, where another Albanian migrant exposes Agron’s identity for potential favor with Greek employers, illustrate Foucault’s (1977) notion of disciplinary power, where subjects are coerced into regulating one another under hierarchical pressure. This racialized labor structure reflects what Achille Mbembe (2003) conceptualizes as necropolitics - the state’s ability to dictate the terms of life and death - not through direct violence, but through conditional access to survival based on racial conformity. As Ahmed (2004) notes, the politics of passing involves not only fear and protection but a deep entanglement with shame and belonging. In this context, identity concealment emerges not as an act of deception, but as a survival strategy enforced by a racialized system that renders Roma

existence incompatible with social inclusion and dignity. The racialized concealment strategies described in Agron's narrative are not only responses to everyday antigypsyism but also exemplify broader contradictions at the heart of the European project.

Conclusions: To sum, this chapter shows that the exclusion of Roma communities across Europe is not just about individual prejudice, but part of a much deeper structural and ideological problem. Using Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Critical Race Theory, I tried to show how antigypsyism operates as common sense - where Roma are blamed for their own poverty, while the real causes rooted in racism and state neglect are overlooked. The stories shared by my interlocutors, like James and Mira, are important counter-narratives that challenge this dominant view and make visible the emotional and material consequences of being constantly pushed to the margins. What also becomes clear is that this exclusion cannot be understood through ethnicity alone - it's shaped by class, gender, geography, and legal status, all intersecting to make everyday life even more difficult. Despite years of policy discussions, the situation has not changed much, and antigypsyism remains deeply embedded in how institutions and societies treat Roma people today.

4.3 Post-Socialist Collapse, Neoliberal Restructuring, and the Migration of Albanians to Greece

For Roma community in Albania, the decision to leave their country of origin has often emerged as a last resort - taken only when all other means of securing a viable future have been exhausted - and that by irregular means (Vathi, Z., King, R., & Gëdeshi, I., 2022). The collapse of communism and the transition to a market economy brought profound socio-economic instability across Albania, and these disruptions were particularly devastating for Roma community (Carletto,

C, Davis, B., Stampini, M. & Zezza, A., 2006). Historically marginalized and excluded from mainstream society, Roma faced unique challenges during this period of upheaval. As Albania entered a phase often described as one of constant movement, migration emerged as a seemingly vital opportunity - a potential escape from poverty and insecurity.

“Migrating was vital because democracy found us in extreme poverty. My family was made of 6 members, and there was nothing to eat at home. As long as my children could have a meal, I could do everything, and Greece (in need of a working force) was the only option.” Agron

For many Roma, this period of transition was not simply a change in political or economic structures but it demanded from them a fundamental rethinking of how to survive and rebuild their lives independently, without the limited protections once offered by the state or the communist regime.

4.4 The interplay of antigypsyism with neoliberal capitalism

In the 21st century, contemporary migration flows have been increasingly driven by the consequences of neoliberal globalization¹, where global capitalism² has systematically undermined individuals' ability to meet their basic needs and sustain a dignified life, which as the result pushed many of them to migrate (Gülay Toksöz, 2020; Castles, 2015; Delgado Wise, Covarrubias, & Puentes, 2013). For communities already struggling to meet their basic needs, emphasising the Roma minority - the biggest in Europe, particularly those in rural areas of developing countries, such as those in Western Balkans, neoliberalism and global capitalism have only deepened existing hardships, exacerbating socioeconomic vulnerabilities and limiting access to sustainable livelihoods. Adding to

¹ Neoliberalism is contemporarily used to refer to market-oriented reform policies such as "eliminating price controls, deregulating capital markets, lowering trade barriers" and reducing, especially through privatization and austerity, state influence in the economy.

² Global capitalism refers to the concept of a global economy dominated by globalizing corporations and those who own and control them, operating beyond national boundaries and interests.

these challenges are the restrictive migration policies imposed by various states, which severely limit mobility.

Critical approaches in Romani Studies challenge traditional, pathologizing narratives about Roma communities. Trehan and Kóczé (2009) critically analyze how racism and colonialism structure the ongoing marginalization of Roma, even after the fall of socialism in Eastern Europe. Fejzula (2019) critiques urban governance models that "discipline" Roma bodies, arguing that neoliberal urban reforms are often racialized. Themelis (2016) contextualizes Roma marginalization within the broader failures of European neoliberal capitalism, pointing out that Roma are among the first to experience the consequences of economic crises.

Listening to their story, after all the sacrifices, hiding the Romani identity was the least he could do in Greece. He also presents an agency of resistance towards racism, which is hiding the identity and mimicking that of the white Albanians. He later jumped into a crucial part of identity politics in regard to labor when I asked him how he got to find a job.

"In the beginning, in 1992, I found a place to work in a neighborhood of Ioannina. When they (a Greek couple) heard my name, they started to laugh and throw hateful looks at me. Never felt worse. I inherited the name of my late grandfather and was so proud of it. But I had to compromise. Hiding my Romani side was not enough, and I had to change my Albanian-Turkish Muslim name as well. All that just to not be treated as an inhuman in their eyes. Could you imagine what this did to my pride? On the way to Patra, I came up with a Greek name, Lefteris, which in Greek means to be free. Hence, the new identity created helped me navigate through the informal labor market. I had to give up my ethnicity, name, and religion."

From my interlocutors what I understood is that migration on itself was a strategy to escape from the poverty in Albania, but to highlight - it was the neoliberal ideology accompanied with racist stances from the society that further exacerbated their position in the country - making not only migration a necessity, but as stated from my Roma people - also compromising with their identities a necessity and a way to navigate through the society.

The new neoliberal policies that accompanied the transition prioritized individual competition, privatization, and the withdrawal of state support. These changes placed Roma at an even greater disadvantage. Far from offering equal opportunities for all, neoliberal reforms exacerbated existing inequalities and made socio-economic mobility increasingly unattainable for marginalized groups. In this context, Roma were widely regarded as some of the greatest losers of the transition (Szombati, 2018, p. 61). The promise of empowerment, often associated with democracy and market liberalization, remained out of reach for them. Instead, the structures of neoliberal capitalism actively worked against their efforts to improve their living conditions.

Thus, rather than experiencing inclusion and upward mobility, Roma were systematically pushed further to the margins of Albanian society. Their exclusion was not incidental but a consequence of broader systemic changes that privileged those already in stronger socio-economic positions. In other words, the transition period and the rise of neoliberalism not only failed to create opportunities for Roma empowerment but effectively entrenched their socio-economic vulnerability, making genuine empowerment an elusive goal in the new Albania. At this point, migrating towards the EU countries was not the scariest decision they were taking, but the only way left to provide what their state lacked to provide to them, even if that would mean compromising with their identity, or values.

But why are certain people oriented to the informal labour market, being aware of the hazards that such employment entails? How did this concept itself emerge? According to Bangasser P. E. (2000), the informal employment sector dates back to 1972 which was used to define small, family-oriented enterprises to generate incomes. As such, informal employment is an *additional* site that was used to fill the gap of unemployment the state lacked to solve - no job opportunities, with

the cost of the lack of social, or legal protection, as well as employment benefits (Tokman, 1990, 1992). Many people consider taking this risk as the only way out and as a necessary site through which, even though putting their own security at risk, could generate financial income and a bit of stability for their loved ones. In other words, I would consider it as an act of sacrifice where *“One family member, or two, endure all the hardships, so that the others - children, grandparents - can be spared”*.

Hence, this need for survival through informal work was not just an individual choice, but it was deeply shaped by broader structural forces. As national economies struggled to provide stable employment opportunities for all, marginalized individuals increasingly turned to informal labor. Over time, this phenomenon intersected with migration patterns, where mobility became both a survival strategy and a response to exclusionary economic policies. Migration, particularly irregular migration, further complicated access to formal employment, pushing many newcomers into precarious, unregulated jobs. In this context, the decision to enter informal labor markets is better understood not as a voluntary act, but as one heavily influenced by systemic barriers and inequalities.

Castles, Cubas, Kim, and Özkul (2012) argue that irregular migration is largely driven by national legal frameworks that categorize migrants into 'desirable' and 'undesirable' groups. While states may restrict the mobility of certain populations/groups - in this case Albanians because they are not part of the European Union, thus having limited rights to locate in another country - they often tolerate irregular migration and informal labor markets to satisfy the demands of domestic employers. Neoliberal globalization has further intensified these patterns by deepening inequalities both within and between countries, within and between groups and communities. Different scholars who adopt a 'Southern' perspective on migration and development emphasize the role of

uneven development as a fundamental characteristic of monopoly capitalism³. They seek to expose irregular migration not as a random occurrence, but as a consequence of state policies aligned with capitalist interests - policies that facilitate access to a vulnerable foreign labor force, which can be exploited without the protection of social benefits or labor rights (Gülay Toksöz, 2020). Consequently, the increasing social inequalities that come as a result of the concentration of the capital, wealth and power only on the hand of the one who exploits - have brought marginalisation and exclusion of certain groups of people (Delgado Wise, 2018).

Building on this, it is important to recognize that while there is a continuous demand for migrant labor, regulatory restrictions on migration serve as a mechanism of control—acknowledging the economic need for workers while simultaneously limiting and managing their flow. In this way, states maintain a deliberate balance: facilitating access to cheap labor while ensuring that migrants remain marginalized through legal and policy frameworks. As a result, irregular migrants are positioned as essential for economic purposes, yet socially and politically undesired, confined to the peripheries of society through systemic exclusion.

4.5 Risks of the Invisible Work & Internalized Exploitation

Albanian Roma migrating to Greece was not a free choice, but a forced response to structural exclusion after socialism's collapse. Neoliberal reforms deepened existing inequalities, pushing Roma further to the margins and making survival dependent on migration and informal labor. To navigate this, many were forced to hide or alter their identities. Informal work, while essential for survival, exposed them to exploitation they often internalized as necessary. Ultimately,

³ **Monopoly capitalism** refers to a form of capitalism characterized by the dominance of a few large corporations in the market, leading to reduced competition and potential negative impacts on consumers and society.

their experiences reflect how racism and capitalism intersect to normalize inequality and invisibilize exploitation.

For instance, when asked about the working conditions in informal jobs, Agron said:

“I worked in black, without any sort of insurance. I slept in fields of corn and watermelon, in peripheries where I built a straw shelter. I was safe there without any police surveillance. I would wake up and go directly to work in agriculture, which was basically around my shelter. It was the same job for me, my wife, and my children, where 16 working hours per day was the minimum we could do. The payment was based on how many boxes we would fill, where the cost of each was 100 drachmas. My children were 15, 16, and 18 years old, and it was extremely difficult for them.”

Then I asked if given the long working hours, he would consider this as exploitation. He added:

“No, it was not, because it was us who were in need and went to the Greek to ask for a job. We were just replacing the agricultural machines. Of course, we were paid very little compared to the work we were doing. However, it was enough to make a living.”

Agron provides a rich and painful illustration of how racialized labor exploitation, particularly in informal economies, is normalized and internalized by those subjected to it. Agron's account is deeply embedded in intersecting dynamics of informality, migration, racial capitalism, and survival, and calls for critical unpacking of how structural violence becomes lived reality - often unrecognized by those most impacted. Agron's description of working conditions - “in black, without any sort of insurance,” living in self-made straw shelters on the periphery, and working 16-hour days - aligns with the core features of informal labor markets, where legal protections, labor rights, and regulatory oversight are absent. This type of labor, while economically essential to the host country (in this case, Greece's agricultural sector), remains invisible, precarious, and exploitative. As Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) argue, informal labor should not be seen as a separate or marginal economic sphere but as an integral component of global capitalism, especially where

racialized and migrant populations are concerned. Agron's narrative shows how informality is both a mechanism of economic survival and of racialized control.

Perhaps most revealing is Agron's denial that his experience constitutes exploitation, and this was a reasoning that was so similar to what other interlocutors also stated. His reasoning - "because it was us who were in need and went to the Greek to ask for a job" - exemplifies what critical scholars such as Fraser (2016) and Dardot & Laval (2014) describe as internalized neoliberal logic, where market dependency is seen as natural, and inequalities are rationalized as personal responsibility. This belief masks power asymmetries and renders structural exploitation invisible. Agron even likens himself to a machine - "we were just replacing agricultural machines" - suggesting a dehumanized self-understanding, where labor is valued purely in terms of productivity. His acceptance of "very little" pay, justified as "enough to make a living," reinforces how economic survival can obscure recognition of exploitation. Agron's story reveals a powerful contradiction: that conditions of deep structural exploitation can coexist with individual narratives of dignity, pride, and even denial of exploitation. This dissonance does not reflect ignorance, but rather, the adaptation to and internalization of racialized economic systems, where survival is the primary goal, and questioning the terms of one's oppression becomes a luxury few can afford.

Chapter 5 | “Surplus Lives”: Roma Migrants in the Shadow of Neoliberal Hegemony

This chapter examines how Albanian Roma migrants are positioned as surplus populations within neoliberal capitalism. Drawing on Rajaram’s (2015) critique, it explores how exclusion is not accidental but central to economic and cultural systems that commodify human value. Through a postcolonial lens, the chapter reveals how historical legacies and contemporary policies intersect to normalize exploitation and marginalization in informal labor markets.

5.1 The Surplus Roma

Prem Kumar Rajaram (2015) presents a critical rethinking of how undocumented migrants are situated within neoliberal political and economic structures. Rather than treating the marginalization of undocumented migrants as a discrete or exceptional condition, Rajaram states that their exclusion is deeply embedded in a broader logic of neoliberal capitalism, which has systematically produced surplus populations. Neoliberal capitalism, according to Rajaram (2015), works by prioritizing free-market policies, individualism, and the deregulation of industries.

Within this framework, there is a tendency to exploit labor and create vast economic inequalities that lead to the production of “surplus populations” - people who are either underemployed, exploited, or rendered invisible. Undocumented migrants are part of this surplus, as they are excluded from formal labor markets and protections but still serve as a cheap and expendable workforce in various sectors.

With this being said, undocumented migrants are not an anomaly but rather a direct result of how capital (economic interests) and labor (workers) have been historically structured in a neoliberal economy. Their exclusion is not accidental but part of the broader economic logic that continuously generates a reserve of labor that can be exploited when needed but discarded when no longer required.

5.2 Capitalism as a cultural ideology

Another pivotal aspect of Rajaram's (2015) argument is his understanding of capitalism as not merely an economic system but a cultural ideology. In traditional economic terms, capitalism is often viewed simply as a way to organize production and exchange - markets, businesses, and financial systems designed to generate profit. However, Rajaram expands on this by suggesting that capitalism is deeply embedded in the culture of a society. It shapes the ways people think about things like success, worth, ambition, and even human dignity.

For example, in capitalist societies, people are often valued for their economic contributions - how much money they can make, or how productive they can be. This cultural framework influences how we perceive others, who gets access to resources, and who is considered valuable or disposable. In these lines, capitalism does not just control economic transactions, but also influences the moral and social values of a society. It affects how individuals are treated, what rights they are afforded, and how groups are marginalized or excluded. This cultural aspect of capitalism is what Rajaram is referring to when he calls it an "ideology" - it is a set of beliefs that shapes society's views and practices. In this sense, capitalism becomes more than just an economic system; it dictates who

is included or excluded based on their perceived value within the market and beyond. Rajaram (2015) has situated this process within the legacy of colonial capitalism.

Through examples drawn from colonial histories, he demonstrates how capitalist production was deeply racialized and justified through narratives of civilizational difference. These legacies endure, he suggests, in contemporary Europe where austerity policies and immigration laws converge to marginalize racialized and migrant groups. He argues that neoliberal austerity policies - justified as necessary and virtuous responses to economic crises - work hand-in-hand with restrictive immigration measures to reinforce boundaries of deservingness (p. 72–73). This convergence is not incidental but part of a broader hegemonic project that moralizes economic exclusion.

Rajaram's (2015) analysis offers a critical lens through which to view the marginalization of undocumented migrants, including Albanian Roma, within the broader framework of neoliberal capitalism. By challenging the dominant narratives that focus solely on state sovereignty and border control, Rajaram encourages us to look beyond simplistic explanations of exclusion. He argues that the political, economic, and cultural systems in place not only dictate who belongs but also shape the very concept of worth in society. The notion of who is deemed "worthy" or "disposable" is intricately tied to economic logic, where people are valued not for their inherent dignity but for their capacity to contribute to the accumulation of capital. This ideological framing extends far beyond economic transactions and becomes embedded in the moral fabric of societies. For Albanian Roma migrants, this process is evident in their treatment within both Albania and the European Union. They are subjected to exploitation and exclusion, not merely because of their legal status but because they are deemed as expendable within the neoliberal economy.

Rajaram's assertion that capitalism is a cultural ideology resonates particularly in the context of Roma migrants, who face systemic racialized exclusion. Roma's historical relationship with capitalist structures, which often relegates them to the lowest rungs of the labor market, aligns with Rajaram's broader critique of neoliberalism. The moral and cultural dimensions of exclusion he highlights are evident in the ways Roma migrants are treated - both in their countries of origin and their host nations.

For instance, while having different conversations with my interlocutors, they have shared how many times they had to compromise and hide their identity as Roma, just to not be discriminated against and racialised, by the Greek employees.

"I tried to avoid the discrimination that could lead to physical and psychological violence towards me. I would be oppressed, and I could not allow this to happen in front of my wife and children. Secondly, by behaving like a native Albanian, I could be given proper food and utensils by the Greek employer, and most importantly I would not lose my job or get paid less."

Ben

From these conversations, it is evident that being undocumented was an issue, going against the laws and regulations would create a different image of how Roma were viewed and perceived as migrants, but adding to it the identity, belonging to a community which has been for centuries put in the margins, would sometimes seriously shape the experiences of labour and life of my people in the hosting countries.

Hence, the intersection of austerity policies, restrictive immigration laws, together with the historical legacy of colonialism creates a nexus of marginalization that makes it even harder for groups like Roma to escape the cycle of exploitation. The convergence of these forces reflects a hegemonic project that not only limits economic opportunities for marginalized groups but also inscribes a moral hierarchy that determines who is deemed "worthy" of dignity, rights, and

opportunity. In this way, the exploitation of Albanian Roma migrants is not a side effect of neoliberal policies; it is a product of them.

5.3 Neoliberal Hegemony and the Informal Incorporation of Migrants

Gramscian thought on the hegemonic project helps us to understand and critically analyse how law and policy are embedded in moral economies that reflect dominant cultural values. Rajaram suggests that law is not simply coercive but "*the instrument par excellence for conveying hegemony by consensus*" (2015, p. 77). This process depends on public consent to narratives of virtue, responsibility, and productivity - qualities increasingly tied to market-based logic. In this context, migrants and other marginalized groups are not merely outside the system but are instead incorporated through precarious, informal, and exploitative arrangements that underscore their surplus status.

Similarly, Lama Kabbanji's (2021) argues that the marginalization of undocumented migrants is not incidental, but rather symptomatic of the neoliberal political economy which produces surplus and expendable populations. Since the 1990s, migration and development discourse has shifted toward a neoliberal framework, where migrants are considered not anymore as individuals who are seeking for a better live, but as instruments of development for their countries of origin. Under this regime, migration is framed as a "solution" to poverty and instability, thereby transferring the burden of development from states and institutions onto individuals - particularly migrants from the Global South (Kabbanji, 2021; De Haas, 2010). This framing aligns with the broader critiques of neoliberal globalization, which argue that such policies exacerbate global

inequalities and perpetuate structural underdevelopment (Gülay Toksöz, 2020; Delgado Wise, 2018).

Drawing on Gramsci's concept of the "integral state" - which includes both state institutions and civil society - hegemony is most effective when it appears voluntary rather than coercive. In the context of migration and development, international organizations, philanthropic foundations, and development agencies play a key role in shaping this form of consent. They embed the migration-development narrative into policy, academia, and humanitarian responses (Kabbanji, 2021). These actors often co-opt NGOs and migrant associations by providing funding or institutional legitimacy, which diminishes critical opposition and strengthens neoliberal models of governance. As Kabbanji (2021) argues, such initiatives reduce refugees to economic agents, while overlooking their lived experiences and the geopolitical role of Western states in driving displacement. (Kabbanji & Kabbanji, 2018; Chimni, 2019).

This process reveals how migrants are increasingly governed not through direct state control, but through dispersed networks of civil society and development actors that normalize precarity and informality. Migrants are subtly integrated into informal labor markets, not as rights-bearing individuals, but as flexible, low-cost labor to be managed for economic gain. The co-optation of grassroots actors also strips away the potential for solidarity-based resistance, reinforcing a system where migrants' vulnerabilities are depoliticized and reinterpreted as developmental opportunities. Ultimately, this reflects a broader neoliberal logic where the informal labor market becomes a site of exploitation disguised as empowerment.

This mirrors Rajaram's argument that capitalism not only filters human aspirations through commodification, but also moralizes exclusion by portraying market-based participation as the

ultimate marker of value and deservingness (Rajaram, 2015). In other words, if certain people find it difficult to integrate into the market they are consequently considered surplus and become the “unwanted” “undeserving” migrants, while those who make it to the labor market are the ones upon which the state sees more value and deservingness. This statement leaves a lot of space for criticism, especially in the cases when the migrants are not given space to integrate into the labour market, are pushed, or forced to work on the so-called by them “black-market”, while at the same time the state considers them from the very beginning as a surplus population which will not serve them much, besides becoming a “burden” for the state.

Kabbanji’s (2021) insights are particularly valuable when examining the informal labor market orientation of undocumented migrants. As Bangasser P. E. (2000) and Tokman (1990, 1992) have outlined, and as I have also stated earlier, informal work emerges where state support is lacking, but neoliberal policies have systematically eroded public safety nets, making informal survival strategies not only common but necessary. By situating these developments within a historical continuum of capitalist restructuring and postcolonial governance, we can understand how certain populations are continuously pushed to the margins of labor and society.

5.4 Postcolonial Interventions in the Study of Migration and Labor

Rajaram extends his analysis to contemporary Europe, where he discusses the dialectical relationship between austerity and immigration policy. He observes that the state’s selective austerity measures disproportionately target those already marginalized, such as the poor, disabled, and racialized migrants (2015, p. 77). According to Anthias and Lazaridis (2000) informal labor markets reflect and reinforce ethnic, racial, and social hierarchies where migrant labor is not only

economically exploited but also socially stratified, with certain groups - such as Roma - occupying the most marginalized and invisible roles within these systems (Sigona & Trehan, 2009). For instance, Mains et al. (2013) refer to the contemporary migration movement and all the informality around migrants which end up in different categories within the “other”, draw on colonial and postcolonial ideologies (Mains, S. P., Gilmartin, M., Cullen, D., Mohammad, R., Tolia-Kelly, D. P., Raghuram, P., & Winders, J. (2013). Furthermore, they argue for the necessity of integrating postcolonial thought into the study of migration, emphasizing that the colonial legacy persists not only in migration patterns but also in how migrant identities are constructed, governed, and represented.

At the heart of this scholarly intervention is a call to challenge the binary logic often dominating migration studies, particularly the conceptualization of migration as a simple movement from 'here' to 'there.' Drawing on Raghuram's (2013) contribution, he asserts that postcolonial theory complicates these distinctions, highlighting instead the mutual constitution of spaces and the interconnectedness forged through colonial histories (Mains et al., 2013, p. 134). Migration is thus not just a matter of movement but an embodied and historical process where the 'here' is shaped by the colonial 'there'.

Moreover, **Mains et al. (2013) critique** the dominant temporal lens through which migration is analyzed, which often privileges immediacy and future-oriented frameworks. Postcolonial theory disrupts this tendency by foregrounding the colonial past as a persistent and shaping force in contemporary migration experiences. The authors underscore how colonial-era movements - such as forced displacement, indentured labor, and administrative mobility - resonate within current mobility structures and hierarchies (Mains et al., 2013).

Several contributors expand on how postcolonial theory reframes spatial understandings. This challenges the tendency to geographically fix postcolonialism within the global South and suggests that colonial legacies are also alive within global North peripheries (Mains et al., 2013, p. 136).

Thus, postcolonial theory is not just a mere analytical tool but also an ontological challenge to the ways migration is studied, narrated, and governed. As the authors note, invoking Mignolo (2009), this demands a deeper interrogation of the “colonial matrix of power” and the positionalities through which migration knowledge is produced (p. 140). It also requires sensitivity to the lived consequences of these epistemologies - how they frame migrant bodies, histories, and futures.

Conclusions: The marginalization of Albanian Roma migrants cannot be understood in isolation from the broader dynamics of neoliberal capitalism and postcolonial power. As this chapter has shown, their exclusion is not a byproduct of failed integration but a structural feature of systems that rely on surplus, racialized labor. By viewing capitalism as both an economic and cultural ideology, and by situating migration within colonial continuities, we can better understand how exploitation is normalized and resistance is suppressed. Recognizing these patterns is essential to challenging the hegemonic narratives that continue to render Roma lives invisible and expendable.

Findings & Conclusions

Navigating Informality: Survival, Strategy, and Sacrifice

To answer the first research question, here I draw the findings on how Roma migrants from Morava navigated the informal labor market in Greece. Their entry into informality was not accidental but a forced adaptation to exclusionary structures. Interviews reveal that informal labor, particularly in agriculture, construction, and seasonal work, became a survival strategy. Most interlocutors accepted exploitative conditions - long hours, lack of contracts, and unsafe accommodations - because formal employment was structurally inaccessible. Agron's account of sleeping in makeshift shelters and working 16-hour shifts exemplifies this. These experiences reflect informality not as opportunistic but as a necessary, if deeply precarious, mechanism of survival.

What emerges clearly is the active role migrants played in developing survival strategies: using kinship networks to find jobs, moving frequently to avoid police, and even altering their names or identities. Informality became a social field where dignity, shame, sacrifice, and resilience converged. "We were just replacing the machines," Agron said - illustrating the dehumanization process that they were not even aware about, but also the awareness of their economic utility. This confirms that informality is both a structural imposition and a site of negotiation and agency.

Race, Legal Status, and Neoliberal Precarity

Despite the fact that Roma did face a lot of challenges during their journey to Greece, their experiences were not shaped by informality alone, but by how racialized identity, undocumented status, and neoliberal state policies intersected to produce deep precarity. Race played a crucial role in shaping employer expectations and worker experiences. Migrants frequently hid their Romani identity to avoid additional layers of discrimination. As Agron explained, presenting himself as a "white Albanian" allowed him better

treatment and access to work. These performances of identity were not about deception but about survival in a system that punishes racial visibility. Legal status compounded these challenges. Without papers, migrants were vulnerable to deportation, police raids, and employer abuse. Their illegality was a tool of discipline and control - as De Genova (2002) argues, it rendered them permanently deportable, and thus permanently exploitable.

Finally, neoliberal restructuring both in Albania and Greece exacerbated these conditions. In Albania, the collapse of the state left Roma without options. In Greece, deregulated labor markets and limited state protections ensured that informal sectors thrived — fueled by undocumented labor. The result was a system where Roma migrants were indispensable but undesired, exploited but invisible.

Informality, Racial Capitalism, and Postcolonial Governance

The third question is addressed here by situating Roma migrant experiences within larger systems of racial capitalism and postcolonial exclusion. Drawing from Rajaram's (2015) notion of "surplus populations," Roma migrants represent labor that is simultaneously necessary and disposable. Their racialization under neoliberal regimes mirrors colonial logics: where economic worth is tied to race and legality, and where exploitation is normalized through ideology.

Postcolonial theory helps us understand this as more than economic marginality. Roma are excluded from belonging in both Albania and Greece, echoing colonial-era constructions of internal "others." Their condition reflects what Yildiz and De Genova (2017) term "un/free mobility": legally allowed to move, but socially and economically constrained.

Gramsci's theory of hegemony explains how these contradictions are ideologically sustained. Roma exclusion is justified not through open racism, but through common-sense notions of productivity, legality, and deservingness. Their labor is framed as informal not because of its inherent illegitimacy, but because of the racialized bodies that perform it.

In sum, this thesis has explored how Albanian Roma migrants from Morava, Berat navigated and experienced the informal labor market in Greece during the 1990s and 2000s. By centering the lived experiences of Roma migrants, this research has shown that their entry into informality was not merely an economic choice, but a survival strategy shaped by racialized exclusion, legal precarity, and the violent restructuring of post-socialist and neoliberal governance.

The findings illustrate that Roma migrants were not passive victims of structural forces but active agents navigating an exploitative system. Their decisions to hide their identities, migrate irregularly, or accept informal labor were tactical responses to the combined forces of antigypsyism, economic dispossession, and state abandonment. These choices, however, came at significant personal and collective costs in dignity, safety, and identity.

Through the lens of critical race theory, postcolonialism, and Gramscian hegemony, this research serves as a ground to demonstrate that the informal labor market functions not as a marginal or secondary space but as a racialized economic system central to neoliberal capitalism, despite the fact that it also appears to be the only accessible opportunity for undocumented migrants. Roma migrants' exclusion from formal labor was not incidental, but ideologically and materially sustained by discourses of legality, productivity, and social worth. Their experiences of invisibility and hypervisibility, exploitation and resilience, speak to the contradictions of contemporary European governance, which demands cheap migrant labor while denying rights and recognition to those who provide it.

By invoking the concept of racial capitalism, this thesis situated Roma labor exploitation within a global system that commodifies racialized bodies for economic gain while denying them political belonging. Similarly, postcolonial theory illuminated how historical hierarchies of power and race continue to shape European labor markets and migration regimes, reproducing Roma as Europe's internal "others."

The thesis also contributes methodologically by foregrounding by the open-ended interviews to storytelling, semi-structured interviews, and auto-ethnography as vital tools for counter-hegemonic

knowledge production. As a member of the Romani community, my own position enabled a deeper, more ethical engagement with the lived realities of migration and labor. These stories not only fill empirical gaps in migration and Romani studies but also challenge dominant narratives that depoliticize Roma exclusion.

In conclusion, this thesis advocates for a reevaluation of how we perceive informality, migration, and race in Europe. Roma mobility is not a problem to be managed but a mirror reflecting the deep structural inequalities embedded in capitalist modernity. Their labor sustains economies, yet their humanity remains systematically denied. To move forward, scholarship and policy must reckon with the enduring legacies of racial capitalism and listen to the voices of those who have been silenced for too long. By understanding how the states work and how certain structures are built on neoliberal ideology, advocates can push the state not only through policies that would limit undocumented migration – but by recognising their worth in fulfilling certain exploitative and deeply racialised positions, support them and combat antigypsyism deeply embedded in every societal and institutional structure.

Limitations

This study is context-specific and thus limited in its broader applicability. By focusing on the Albanian Roma community from Morava, Berat, and their migration experiences in Kos, Greece, during the 1990s–2000s, the findings are deeply embedded in a particular socio-historical and geographical context. As such, the conclusions drawn may not be generalisable to other Roma communities, migrant groups, or informal economies in different regions or time periods. Furthermore, the specificity of the case limits the potential for direct application in policymaking or comparative studies without careful consideration of contextual differences. Further research is required in order to apply and shape these findings into meaningful solutions for Roma in Europe and beyond.

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