

Hungary: The Enduring Racialization of the Roma and the Banality of Evil

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Structural, racialized patterns of segregation and structural violence against Roma people have been institutionalized in Central and Eastern Europe for centuries, before, during and after state socialism. After 1989, despite the rise of human-rights and pro-Roma discourse in post-socialist countries, neoliberal capitalism, marketization, financialization, and privatization of public institutions perpetuated racial inequality and reinvigorated intersecting forms of structural violence against Roma and other racialized minorities through subtle, institutional, and seemingly “spontaneous” forces. In fact, the new capitalist political economy produced a racialized social system that keeps Roma in a deprived, marginal position, often coupled with spatial segregation.

The new dispossession and precarious situation of the segregated Roma population is a consequence of both deep-rooted racialization and neoliberal restructuring, which together deprive precarious groups of their dignity and humanity. This structural condition provides a backbone for populist and illiberal politics in Europe.

The normalization of structural race-based exclusion has become a foundation of the inferiorization and dehumanization of the Roma in the public imagination. Based on populists’ belief and their conscious political agenda to mobilize deep-rooted anti-Roma racism, Roma are now simply “inferior” and their material dispossession is the outcome of their “cultural tradition.” Their structural dispossession and advanced marginalization, framed as a “Roma lifestyle,” renders their lives disposable, as if they simply did not matter! This message is legitimized on a daily basis by politicians and extensively replicated and reproduced by individuals and organizations – police officers, bankers, teachers, doctors, local authorities, and so on – who consciously and unconsciously endorse the deeply rooted cultural and political script of racialization.

Consequently, *de facto* material deprivation, repressive legislation, micro-aggression, and routinized discrimination and violence against Roma have been encouraged, confirmed and consolidated by powerful European political leaders such as Matteo Salvini, Viktor Orbán, and lately Boris Johnson, whose repressive legislation outlined in the Queen’s Speech will criminalize a significant number of Roma, Gypsy, and Travelers in UK. Unfortunately, these events are not isolated; rather, they are part and parcel of a growing institutionalized anti-Roma racism, which, as Bernard Rorke from the European Roma Rights Center has noted: “Smells like Fascism”.

Thinking about these interrelated and mutually reinforcing phenomena militating against Roma, and the lack of public outrage and outcry, reminds me of Hannah Arendt’s observations on the trial of Adolf Eichmann for his role as the chief organizer of the Holocaust, the systematic extermination of Jews and others, including Roma in Europe in the mid 20th century. Arendt’s remarks sparked considerable debate over guilt and the individual’s responsibility in society, which might help us understand the danger of silence and the “bystander” mentality that is decimating our societies.

One of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, Hannah Arendt reported on the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in April 1961. The trial resulted in Eichmann's conviction for "crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, war crimes and membership in criminal associations" during the Holocaust. As a consequence, he was hanged in May 1962.

In a revised edition of *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil*, Arendt explained two interconnected ideas. First, she argued, Eichmann was not an exceptionally evil or satanic person, but rather an ordinary man on duty who had completely interiorized the values and norms of Nazi Germany. His deeds were ordinary and banal in a totalitarian society that executed via bureaucratic apparatus, without significant outrage, and public resistance. Secondly, Arendt observed that Eichmann may have lacked the intention to reflect critically on his deeds, and was, therefore "thoughtless," a condition she defined as the "inability to ever look at anything from the other fellow's point of view." One of the main lessons we learn from Arendt's philosophical contemplation is that in the atmosphere in Nazi Germany, Eichmann could not distinguish between good and evil. Arendt called Eichmann a "new type of criminal", who commits crimes "under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible to know or to feel that he is doing wrong".

Coined in her report on the trial, Arendt's phrase, the "Banality of Evil," resonates in the moral, ethical, political, and social effects of the calculated message on Roma by the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, on January 9th of this year at his annual press conference.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's racist comments on the school segregation of Romani students on January 9th were received by fellow Hungarians without massive public outrage. The Prime Minister publicly contested the ruling by the Debrecen Court of Appeal in favor of Romani families in the town of Gyöngyöspata, whose children were forced to learn in segregated, unequal settings between 2004 and 2014.

It is important to note that Gyöngyöspata was one of the most important sites used by the far-right campaign in the spring of 2011 to incite anti-Roma hatred and catalyze forces against the Roma. The Civil Guard Association for a Better Future (*Szebb Jövőért Polgárőr Egyesület*), a radical right-wing paramilitary group, then began "patrolling" and marching in towns with significant ethnic tensions (including Gyöngyöspata and Hajdúhadház), claiming to protect "Hungarians" from "Gypsy criminality".

In a reaction to the racist paramilitary groups' patrols in Gyöngyöspata and Hajdúhadház[12], in March and April 2011, the Criminal Code was amended in May of that year. The amendment penalizes racial incitement and unauthorized activities to maintain public security or public order. It was an important legal step to ban anti-Roma campaigns. A few detailed [analyses](#) of that period have been published by scholars as well as human rights organizations.

On September 18, 2019, the Court of Appeals upheld the initial judgement and concluded that the Hungarian state must pay HUF 80 million (approx. USD 259,000) in compensation to the Roma children who were forcedly segregated for a decade from their non-Roma Hungarian peers in school. The court case was litigated by the brave legal defense organization, the Chance for Children Foundation (CFCF). CFCF proved in court that Romani students, educated in separate classes on a separate floor, rarely met their non-Romani peers. They were not allowed to take part in social events; they were not taken on field-trips; and they were denied IT and swimming lessons. According to the CFCF report, a significant number of Romani students were not able to graduate due to the low quality of the education in the segregated setting, which left most of them functionally illiterate. Consequently, they are likely to be deprived of any legal well-paid meaningful jobs for the rest of their lives.

On January 9th, Viktor Orbán stated: “I am not from Gyöngyöspáta, but if I were to live there, I would be asking how it is that, for some reason, members of an ethnically determined group living in a community with me, in a village, can receive significant sums of money without doing any work, while I toil every day.”

This is not the first time that Orbán and his government have explicitly declared Roma an open, accessible, and easy target for racial hatred without subsequent public outcry. As mentioned at the start, the racialization/inferiorization of Roma has been normalized over centuries and supported by social structures. Therefore, instead of organizing public protest against such statements, we rather tacitly accept and even mainstream these violent discourses. In this sense, the racialization of Roma is not a novelty. However, the way it is framed in illiberal political discourse excludes any other point of view, even if comes from the independent judiciary. This particular case, involving the segregation of Romani students in the educational system, shows how discrimination against Roma has become accepted and normalized by European societies. This normalization gives local authorities, educational experts, schools, teachers, indeed anyone who has the power to influence the educational outcome of Romani children, the right to routinize these racialized tracking mechanisms (systematic and intersecting race and class-based segregation, and the provision of low quality of education) without any moral revulsion.

The Orbán government’s policy is more subtle than it appears on the surface. The state-supported violent racial incitement campaign against Roma could result in a dangerous local ethnic conflict and facilitate the opportunity to declare a “state of emergency”, which could be used as a pretext to suspend the legal rights and protection that normally should be provided for everyone. For the moment, his statement (which just as easily refers to school segregation as to the violent attacks of 2011) implicitly challenges the amended Criminal Code of 2011, which penalizes racial incitement and unauthorized activities to maintain public security and order.

In her seminal text, Arendt focuses on Eichmann’s failure to think, his “thoughtless” uncritical and unreflective deeds. In fact, the banalization of evil deeds is consciously undertaken by authoritarian political leaders to attack and eliminate critical and reflexive thinking, as demonstrated by the recent attacks on academic freedom. In Nazi Germany, Eichmann was able to exterminate Jews, Roma, homosexuals, Communists and other targeted groups because killing them was valued, normalized, and routinized. Today, when I hear Orbán’s political call to challenge the court decision on segregation as a violation of “the people’s sense of justice,” I have to ask: where is the conscience of elite intellectuals, whether Hungarian, European, or American, who have the responsibility to think critically, stand up, and loudly condemn illiberal, authoritarian political leaders for depriving Roma of their human dignity, and to hold them accountable for the consequences?

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