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MIGRATION AND EVERYDAY RACISM IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE

Editorial Note

Mario Rodríguez Polo – Jaroslav Šotola

Recently, the discussion about migration in the East-Central European region has been framed in the terms of the increasing hysterical paranoia aimed at migrants under the blurring common label of “refugees”. Paradoxically, everyday reality is far from the announced “refugee invasion”, and the migration ratios are comparatively low. Sadly, xenophobic attitudes are maintained and performed not only by extremist political parties, but also by prominent figures in charge of key institutions, such as the Ministry of the Interior, police departments, and even reaching the prime ministers and presidents of the countries. Not only institutional figures actively contribute to the portrayal of migrants as a hazard to the region. Mainstream regional media also continuously provide bizarre and surreal xenophobic materials that spread through social networks, contributing to a social imaginary opposing migration. The impact and social consequences of such irresponsible behaviour is frequently muted. On one hand, only a few episodes of discrimination, racial aggressions, or criminal hate manifestations (constituting clear episodes of racism) get media coverage, while on the other hand, the everyday forms of racism remain muted and unconsidered.

Civil society confronting xenophobic attitudes tends to frame the situation in historic terms, remarking on the post-socialist inheritance. But racism as the expression of interaction on the basis of race – “understood as a system of social meanings and cultural classifications, which is created and sustained through relationships of power and hierarchy” (Alexander – Knowles 2005: 11) – persists in the region, and it is constructed through everyday experience. Following this understanding, the present issue will try to avoid the promotion of macro views insisting in a historic post-socialist determination or the inevitable backwardness of the region in comparison to a “better” Western Europe (Hann et al. 2002). Such Orientalist approaches should be criticised by anthropology, characterised by its attempt to avoid falling into ethnocentric biases.

The articles in this issue oppose the thesis of the eternal transition state supposedly characterising Eastern societies, arguing that the complexity of social hierarchies must be still totally uncovered with the help of post-colonial approaches, which seems to be underrepresented in local literature (Lánský 2014). Dominant discourses negate the possibility of a colonial interpretation and racialisation, claiming that the region is not part of the traditional colonial arena. Authors such as Fanon (1967) or Santos (2007) have clearly proven how concepts, such as the zones of being and non-being, may be extrapolated to a diversity of contexts, for example, to modern metropolises, in order to better understand hidden social hierarchies. We must be aware that even in countries without a clear colonial past, migrants or constructed others also inhabit a space that has been already constructed by a long history of power relations, racial/ethnic hierarchies, and gender oppressions (Grosfoguel – Oso – Christou 2014). The current studies analyse episodes of everyday racism as embodiments where the “coloniality of power” manifests (Quijano 2000). The experience of everyday racism proposes an alternative framework to understanding the incorporation of migrants into East-Central European societies.

In his article, Mario Rodríguez Polo offers an analysis of everyday racism in East-Central Europe through focusing on the hidden hierarchies of power dominating the urban space. Firstly, space and spatial embodiments of collective memory are discussed, and their supposed neutrality is deconstructed. Secondly, narratives and stories of everyday racism are exposed, revealing a racial social hierarchy presented as a key element in understanding current migration processes in the region. It is remarkable how dominant discourses insist in the need of a foreigner’s cultural integration, while everyday life proves that the problem is on the side of the normative. Even when dominant discourses are used instead in the challenges of sociocultural integration of any constructed “other”, it seems that the problem is closer to be on the other side. If someone has to challenge his or her cultural values, they tend to be the one who performs aggressions and practices discrimination.

In their article, Nicola Raúl and Jaroslav Šotola explore through narrative interviews how migrants of non-European origin are constructed as the “ultimate other” by Czech seniors. Using inspiration from *whiteness studies*, the main focus is insisted on the biographical plane of different encounters with otherness; attitudes towards migrants are thus embedded in collective memory processes, and also in rhetorical figures, which should prevent accusations of racism. In contrast to the absence of the topic of “race” in local academic

writing, the authors show that the foreigners' visual difference places them – as members of an essentially constructed group – on a scale scoping from limited acceptance to rejection. However, the presence of this imagined racial hierarchy has to be understood as a way of dominating and controlling an ethnically and racially defined space, in which only those manifestations of otherness that are subordinate to the dictates of assimilation and submissiveness are accepted.

In their text, Petr Lang, Olga Čejková, and Daniel Topinka deal with the topic of international skilled labour migration, expatriates. The study is based on the dataset of in-depth interviews with Indian high-skilled migrants, who are staying in Brno, the second largest city in the Czech Republic. At this local level, the Brno Expat Centre (BEC) is involved in the definition of expatriates on a practical scale. Its definition emphasises the aspects of work qualification, the achieved education, language skills, as well as the fact that expatriates are usually employees of large multinational corporations. This text focuses on the conceptualisation of expatriates using four basic attributes that refer to their life strategies, the temporary aspect of their residence, their professional or working skills, and their motivation to migrate. The position of these expatriates reflects their activity in the field of international organisations that is focused on employee performance, as well as the problematic social phenomena and lifestyle interactions that take place in the daily life environment of the city, which cross the borders of multinational “ghettos”.

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