

# Racialization of Roma, European Modernity, and the Entanglement of Empires

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## Abstract

The article explores how anti-Roma racism results from the complex interplay of imperial histories and is influenced by racial thinking shaped by colonialism. Looking at the diverse primary and secondary historiographic resources about Romani people across Europe, the article shows how intra-European hierarchies set the stage for racial logic and points out the complex interplay of factors contributing to anti-Roma racism. Specifically, the article delineates how race, religion, and the rise of capitalism intersect in the racialization of Romani people in Europe, including Eastern Europe. In doing so, I interweave the fields of critical race and critical Romani studies to explore the mechanisms leading to the racialization of Roma. To understand the roots of anti-Roma racism, I examine historical processes of intra-European othering of Romani people as entangled with European modernity and colonialism. The article illuminates how Roma were placed among racialized and itinerant groups of valuable labor while they simultaneously were ostracized and persecuted as “vagrants” and “barbarians,” deemed “unwilling to work,” and inscribed with markers of non-whiteness, foreignness, and criminality. In this way, the capitalist logic established a white European norm in relation to which Roma were constructed and positioned.

## Keywords

- Anti-Roma racism
- Critical Race Theory
- Eastern Europe
- European Modernity
- Imperialism
- Racial Capitalism

## Introduction

Scholars note high rates of discrimination and violence against Romani people across Eastern Europe (Demeter et al. 2000; Crowe 2007; Law and Kovats 2018; Kóczé 2020).<sup>[1]</sup> In anti-Roma attacks, despite any facts, Romani people are often accused of criminality by virtue of being perceived as Roma. Importantly, most anti-Roma assaults are committed against Roma who live below the poverty line or who migrate for seasonal work. Although the presence of a racial logic in Eastern Europe often is denied, the assumption of criminality and blame for potential fraudulent behavior are imposed onto Romani people who are racialized as non-white and non-European (Matache 2016). In response to the persistence of systemic violence and exclusion, Romani scholars have developed diverse theorizations, for example, the concept of antigypsyism, to highlight how anti-Roma racism is not merely contemporary prejudice but deeply rooted in European history, functioning as a foundational element of racial capitalism and neoliberal governance (Taba 2021). Similarly, this article highlights that anti-Roma racism points to a long-lasting system of racialization in place that relegates Romani people to the margins of society.

Intra-European hierarchies set the stage for racial capitalism and a racial logic that was later reworked when European expansion left the continent and encountered distant “others” in Africa, the Americas, and Asia. This reworked racial logic returned to Europe when conquistadors engendered colonialism and transatlantic slavery. Therefore, contemporary practices of race-making in Europe, including Eastern Europe, are the products of early modern intra-European hierarchies and a “boomerang effect of colonization” (Césaire 2000). In particular, a logic of anti-Blackness haunts the European imagination of what constitutes the human, which underlies racial capitalist formations across Europe and globally. I suggest that Eastern Europe also is entangled with racial fabrications of European modernity. Specifically, this article points out a complex interplay of factors contributing to anti-Roma racism in Europe.

This article approaches Eastern Europe as a place that has borrowed and reworked the racial logic of European modernity and contributed to it in specific ways due to its social, political, and historical contexts. I argue here that anti-Roma racism is the effect of entanglements of imperial formations and is intertwined with a transnational flow of colonial racial logics. To do so, I zoom in on the historical narratives and policies that produced and maintained the racial order historically impacting Romani people across Europe. I also explore the relations between anti-Roma racism and anti-Blackness, pointing out that the racial logics of anti-Blackness have iterations in Eastern Europe. Furthermore, I situate European racial thinking about Roma within racial capitalism.

I position this work within critical race theories developed in North American and Caribbean contexts (Sylvia Wynter and Cedric Robinson), while also drawing on Eastern European Romani scholars such

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1 I use the term “Roma” as it is widely used by Roma activists, scholars, international actors, and the general public. Introduced by Romani activists in the late twentieth century, it serves as a political and self-identifying label aimed at countering the stigma of pejorative terms. While not universally accepted among all Roma, many Romani communities continue to use different terms. The diversity of naming used across different communities, such as Sinti, Kale, Manoush, Rudari, or Travellers, further complicates the landscape of Romani self-identification and categorization, highlighting the complexity of how Romani ethnicity is understood and experienced.

as Margareta Matache and Angéla Kóczé. Rather than aligning with the Frankfurt or Dutch schools of thought – which conceptualize antigypsyism as a function of ethnoclass constructs and emphasize the socio-economic positioning of Roma within modern capitalist society – I argue that racial and ethnic hierarchies, including anti-Roma racism, cannot be fully understood through class-based or solely social lenses. Instead, they require a deeper historical analysis of the production of race, rooted in colonialism and Enlightenment thought. Continental theorists often underplay the foundational role of anti-Blackness and coloniality – issues that I seek to center in the conversation. While these continental frameworks do engage with such topics, they tend to do so only sporadically, rather than as part of a sustained dialogue with Black radical thought. In contrast, Black critical theory helps critique not only racism or policy but the entire epistemic and political order that produces Romani and Black people as non-/sub-human or surplus life. It offers a global, decolonial perspective that allows us to see Romani racialization not simply as a European prejudice but as intimately entangled with slavery, empire, and racial capitalism.

From this standpoint, race is not derived from class or discourse; rather, it is co-constitutive with capitalism. This perspective positions my work beyond the Frankfurt and Dutch schools, while still in dialogue with them. I also acknowledge that fully integrating Black radical theories into debates around anti-Roma racism and antigypsyism in Europe – as informed by Frankfurt or Dutch school traditions – would require a separate, more extensive treatment, which lies beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, my analysis both recognizes and departs from existing continental framings. For instance, I engage with the Dutch school later in the article to explore the relations between anti-vagrancy politics and racial capitalism. While my approach might be perceived as “importing” race into Europe, I argue that it instead restores attention to Europe’s historical role in generating racial categories that later acquired global significance. My framework also aims to contribute to the understandings of anti-Roma racism and antigypsyism by centering racial formations as foundational to modern social and political relations in Europe. Through a global lens, I aim to bridge diverse perspectives by acknowledging the divergent historical experiences of Roma across East and West Europe. While this work is a starting point, it invites a more in-depth relational exploration of South-East and North-West European histories as well as practices of assimilation, exploitation, exclusion, and genocide across geographies. Meanwhile, this article underscores the importance of a theoretical model that accounts for structural racialization and its entanglement with capitalism across geographies and imperial formations – highlighting entanglements, resemblances, and parallels without erasing differences (for similar inquiry, see Parvulescu and Boatcă 2022). Further work is necessary to explore these distinctions in more depth, but my contribution lies in foregrounding the interwoven nature of racial and economic structures. Ultimately, I propose that race is not secondary to class but co-constitutive to modern systems of domination and exclusion in Europe.

## 1. Uneasy Historiographies and Entangled Empires

Historian Angus Fraser (1992) notes that negative attitudes toward Romani people in Western Europe began to grow in the mid-fifteenth century and spread to Eastern Europe. Ian Law and Martin Kovats

state that Roma were described as “black” and “dirty” as early as 1422 (2018, 78). Other scholars also note that fifteenth-century texts depicted Roma as foreigners, vagabonds, “ugly people whose skin was burnt black by the sun” (quoted in Shahar 2007, 5), and “ugly in appearance and black as Tartars” (quoted in Fraser 1992, 67). These descriptions of Roma emphasized their dark skin and rendered them outlandish, barbaric, and heathen (Fraser 1992). Their distinct appearance made them eternal foreigners, non-Europeans, and targets for anti-vagrancy laws and accusations of espionage and infidelity to Christendom (Demeter et al. 2000, 31–32). As Edward Said (1978) argued in *Orientalism*, European colonial powers constructed imagined geographies that positioned the “other” as morally and culturally inferior to justify control and exclusion. Similarly, Roma were portrayed as internal outsiders – rootless, alien, and morally suspect – within Europe’s own borders, drawing on orientalist logics to justify legal violence and racial exclusion.

These histories support Cedric Robinson’s (2000) argument that the invention of race originated within Europe, predating Europe’s encounters with African and “New World” peoples. Racism evolved from “‘internal’ relations of European peoples” and the construct of “barbarians” created by Western European feudal nobilities (*Ibid.*, 2, 21). This construct, fueled by fear of “Blackamoors” and the demonization of Islam, laid the groundwork for “the extension of slavery and the application of racism to non-European peoples as an organizing structure by first the ruling feudal strata and then the bourgeoisies of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries” (*Ibid.*, 67).

Furthermore, many scholars (Wynter 2003; Shohat and Stam 2012; Baker 2018) underscore the 1492 expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain as pivotal in producing racial/ human difference. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (2012) discuss “the two 1492s,” when the conquest of the “New World” converged with this expulsion. They argue that Christian demonology, the Inquisition’s *limpieza de sangre*, and the expulsion “set the tone for racialized colonialism, equipping the conquistadores with a ready-made conceptual apparatus to be extended to the Americas,” providing “a template for ethno-religious cleansing and the creation of other racial states” (*Ibid.*, 155).

Notably, Sylvia Wynter (2003) emphasizes the shift in the “major Other figure” for Christian identity with the rise of the modern Spanish state in 1492, which aimed for religious unification. Conversion to Christianity became crucial for establishing “the norm subject of the Spanish religio-political monarchical state as a ‘clean’ and therefore rational subject,” replacing the earlier focus on spiritual redemption (*Ibid.*, 309). In turn, the “Black Other” was fundamental “in the construction of Europeans as racially ‘pure,’ secular subjects” (*Ibid.*). Wynter explains how the early constructions of “purity of faith,” enforced through the conversion of Jews and Muslims, transformed into the metaphor of “purity of blood,” leading to biological and scientific racism. With Europe’s expansion in the fifteenth century, the “Negro” started to replace Jews and Islamic Moors as the major Other. In the sixteenth century, an emerging projected human taxonomy positioned the “Negro” at the bottom (*Ibid.*). Importantly, while Wynter’s argument reflects broader transformations in Western European thought, it is important to examine further how such shifts operated – or were resisted – within Eastern European intellectual and political contexts, which may reveal different timelines or racial logics.

Fifteenth-century Western colonialism, along with the complex relations between “Eastern” empires, also affected the racialization of Roma. Ian Law notes that anti-Roma racism stemmed from “early associations between the Roma and an Islamic threat” and “the equation of Roma skin color with darkness, sin, dirt and evil, with accusations that they were spies, carriers of the plague and traitors to Christendom” (2012, 37–38). Perceived as Turkish spies and non-Christians, Roma were described as a “thievish race of men” (quoted in Fraser 1992, 85). The Ottoman Empire’s conquest of Constantinople in 1453 increased fears of Muslim invasion in Christian Europe, worsening attitudes toward Roma. Moreover, the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries brought a shift in attitudes toward Roma and other wanderers as alleged “social parasites” avoiding work.

Fraser (1992) illustrates the deteriorating attitudes toward Roma in Germany, the heart of the Holy Roman Empire, from the 1440s onwards. Romani people often were denied entry or expelled from German towns, with the Holy Roman Empire issuing edicts in 1497, 1498, and 1500 accusing Roma of espionage for the Ottoman Empire and singling them out for expulsion (Fraser 1992; Crowe 2007). Those edicts legitimized violence against Roma. Later acts harshened punishment for the nomadic lifestyle. In Spain, the Catholic kings issued a decree in 1499, after the expulsion of Jews and shortly before the forced conversion of Muslims, ordering Roma to settle and serve a local lord or face expulsion. Charles V, King of Spain (1516–1556), later Holy Roman Emperor (1519–1556) and a head of the rising House of Habsburg, repeatedly renewed these provisions and ordered Roma to be sent to the galleys if not settled or expelled. Persistent “offenders” risked enslavement (Fraser 1992, 100).

From the mid-sixteenth to the late eighteenth century, European powers uniformly responded with violence to the presence of Roma (Fraser 1992, 130). In the sixteenth century, several Italian states, the Swiss Confederation (1510), England (1530), and France (1539) banned Roma from entry. The Imperial Diet of the Holy Roman Empire did not consider the murder of a Romani person a crime (Crowe 2007, 34). Anti-Roma hostility extended to denying Roma burial in Christian cemeteries (Mróz 2015, 96). In 1619, Spain mandated settlement or expulsion of Roma on pain of death (Law and Kovats 2018, 78–80). Moreover, the anti-Roma discourse constructed paganism and thieving as inherent to Romani existence (*Ibid.*, 80).

The ideologies underlying these policies affected Roma in Eastern Europe due to various geo-historical changes, including shifts between imperial formations, modernization, aspirations for alignment with Western Europe, and the spread of the European Enlightenment. The disenfranchisement of Roma in Eastern Europe formed gradually and unevenly over time and territories. For instance, from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, Roma could work as smiths, musicians, and soldiers across Eastern Europe, with significant enrollment in the military in Hungary, where King Sigismund granted them travel privileges in 1423 (Crowe 2007). In the Polish Kingdom, Roma could own land or a house and settle in the fifteenth century (Mróz 2015). Similarly, in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania/Litva, Roma were known as good smiths, stablemen, musicians, and fortune tellers (Červinski 2008). However, socio-political changes, including the threat from the Ottomans and anti-Roma hostility in Western Europe, also contributed to a negative shift in attitudes toward Roma in Central and Eastern Europe.

In Moldavia and Wallachia<sup>[2]</sup> (modern-day Romania), Roma were enslaved from the late fourteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century (Hancock 1987; Gheorghe 1991; Achim 2004; Matache 2020). Romani people enslaved by the monasteries and the boyars/landlords were considered chattel, with their children also treated as chattel (Fraser 1992; Achim 2004). They could be sold or exchanged. Only in the early nineteenth century, Moldavia's ruler Ghica outlawed the separation of enslaved Romani children from their parents (Crowe 2007, 118).

The defeat of Hungarian forces by Turkey at Mohács in 1526 and subsequent Ottoman expansion into Central and Eastern Europe heightened fear of Muslim advancement in Europe, altering public attitudes toward Roma in the region (Crowe 2007). Perceived as Turkish spies, Roma faced restrictive policies. For example, in Royal Habsburg Hungary in the fifteenth century, Roma were increasingly segregated from Hungarian peasants and limited to less profitable craftwork. Their situation worsened in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, with the Habsburg emperor introducing entry restrictions and severe punishments for Roma in Habsburg domains in the early eighteenth century (*Ibid.*, 72–73). In the late eighteenth century, Habsburg Empress Maria Theresa changed policies from physical extermination to coerced assimilation of Roma (Horváthová 1964, 375–376; Demeter et al. 2000, 49).

From the mid-sixteenth century, Mróz (2015) highlights the drastic shift in the perception of Roma in Poland. Among the surrounding territories, the earliest decree expelling Roma was issued in 1538 in Moravia (then part of the Austrian Habsburg domains), followed by repressive laws in Poland in 1557 (Fraser 1992; Zinevych 2001; Mróz 2015). The Polish Diet Constitution of 1578 persecuted those who sheltered (nomadic) Roma. Around 1557, the tone of letters sanctioning Romani wandering also changed, losing any mention of a religious mission imposed by the pope to fulfill the penance (Mróz 2015, 118–119). Furthermore, by the mid-sixteenth century, or even earlier, dark skin and hair became distinguishing features used to identify Roma (Byelikov 2003; Mróz 2015, 17, 58).

In the Grand Duchy of Lithuania/Litva, attitudes toward Roma also shifted in the late sixteenth century (Červinski 2008). An order in 1566 mandated that Roma unwilling to leave the country must settle in lands of nobility and serve landowners. The Third Statute of Lithuania/Litva (1588) confirmed the expulsion of all nomads, including Roma, due to suspicions of espionage (*Ibid.*; Mróz 2015). Additionally, evidence suggests that some Romani families and groups led settled lives and worked as craftsmen and servants, undergoing considerable assimilation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Byelikov 2003; Mróz 2015). In the seventeenth century, Romani people in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth increasingly became defined as untrustworthy and condemned for their nomadic lifestyle (Mróz 2015, 161). In the eighteenth century, they were increasingly perceived as thieves and criminals, fueling anti-Roma hostility and violence (*Ibid.*, 254–255).

Emphasizing the impact of European Enlightenment and imperial “inspiration of racial thinking” (Law and Kovats 2018, 81), scholars note forced sedentarization and assimilation in the eighteenth

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2 Under Ottoman rule, Wallachia and Moldavia remained Christian principalities and retained control over their internal affairs (1992, 81; Crowe 2007, 109).

century as key to emerging politics in Eastern Europe towards Roma (Demeter et al. 2000; Zinevych 2001; Mróz 2015). These measures aimed to disrupt Romani people's communal relations and ways of life, with devastating consequences (Byelikov 2003). For instance, historians note the influence of neighboring countries' laws (particularly, Austria's) on Russia's imperial policies to settle Roma (Zelenchuk 1979, 213). Catherine II, German-born Empress of All Russia (1762–1796), embraced Enlightenment ideals and pursued modernization along Western European models, building on Peter I's reforms (Demeter et al. 2000, 186; Shaidurov 2018, 204). Russia's encounter with Roma, starting with the late seventeenth-century annexation of some Ukrainian lands from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, led to the development of policies towards Roma later than in other countries. Yet these policies shared commonalities with European regulations alongside unique features.

Imperial Russian rulers, fearing the nomadic lifestyle of Roma and their alleged “harmful” influence on local populations, implemented settlement measures that compelled Roma to work as peasants on land. For example, from 1765 in Left Bank Ukraine, all Roma were ordered to settle permanently, with nomadic Roma outlawed (Zinevych 2001, 44). Legally, Roma were positioned as inferior to regular residents, with penalties for bodily injuries, wounds, or murder of a Romani person set at half those for harming a peasant (Kistyakovskiy 1879, 820; see also Zinevych 2001; Byelikov 2008). In the early nineteenth century, the Russian Empire ruled to settle Roma on state lands to farm and breed cattle, enrolling those on private or state lands as serfs. Anti-vagrancy acts of 1809, 1811, 1818, and 1839 persecuted nomadic Roma, including punishment by exile to Siberia (Zinevych 2001; Shaidurov 2018). Such policies labeled all Roma as vagrants and fugitive serfs/peasants (Smirnova-Seslavinskaya 2021, 85).

Upon Bessarabia's accession by the Russian Empire in 1812, the government implemented measures to improve conditions for Roma enslaved by the state (Crown) and to collect taxes from them. However, the Russian government did not change the situation for Roma enslaved by boyars and monasteries, allowing masters to retain control (Zelenchuk 1979; Achim 2004; Byelikov 2008). The empire compelled nomadic Romani people, many formerly enslaved by the Crown or who had escaped slavery in the Romanian principalities, to settle as peasants and state serfs, thus changing one form of exploitation into another (Zelenchuk 1979, 213–216).

The Soviet Union also imposed a policy of forced sedentarization on Roma, attempting to involve them in the agricultural and industrial labor force (Byelikov 2003, 87). In 1956, the state adopted laws under which Romani people were sentenced to five years of forced labor for “vagrancy” and a “parasitic lifestyle.” These provisions caused Roma to hide their ethnicity (Zinevych 2001, 48).

Thus, the development and spread of racial logics across borders perpetuated the marginalization of Romani people in early twentieth-century Eastern Europe, where they still faced violence (Crowe 2007). Understanding these historical dynamics is crucial for grasping the connections between contemporary racial violence in Eastern Europe, race-making, and European colonialism. The next section explores how knowledge about Roma was formed during the Enlightenment rooted in preexisting texts. This corpus of knowledge also illuminates the circuits of racial logics.

## 2. Logics of Anti-Blackness

In 1783, Heinrich Moritz Gottlieb Grellmann published *Die Zigeuner* [Dissertation on the Gipseys], a book on Romani people in Europe.<sup>3</sup> It provided a foundation for a longstanding racialization and homogenization of Roma, contributing to race-making as part of cultural common sense. Grellmann, among the first Enlightenment scholars to study Romani languages, classified Roma as originating from India, what allegedly explained their “vices.” He advocated for Enlightenment-driven interventions to “reform” and integrate Roma into a “civilized” society. Widely circulated and translated, Grellmann’s work became an authoritative text on Roma, considered of great value to ethnographers, historians, linguists, and philosophers (Willems 1997; Shmidt and Jaworsky 2020). Grellmann left a deep imprint by establishing a foundational set of ideas about Roma that constantly persisted in publications in the following centuries and until the present-day (Willems 1997).

For instance, in 1794, an extensive essay on the origin of Roma was published in Russia, summarizing Grellmann’s work on Romani customs and way of life (Kirey and Serdyuk 1984, 113–114). Russian imperial ethnographers echoed Grellmann’s idea that Romani people are inherently prone to theft and unwilling to work (*Ibid.*, 118). In 1804, Grellmann worked as a professor of universal history and statistics at the University of Moscow (Willems 1997, 44). He was highly revered by the Russian intelligentsia. This example of Grellmann’s work travel illustrates the circulation of ideas and logics, including about race and what constitutes a (civilized) human. In his explorations, Grellmann also relied on works from Central and Southeastern Europe.

Grellmann belonged to the Göttingen school of pragmatic history (Shmidt and Jaworsky 2020, 57). He studied and taught in Göttingen, which, “in the 1780s, was considered to be the academic center of the German Enlightenment” (Willems 1997, 24). His work on Roma reflected prevalent Enlightenment views and coincided with the rise of scientific disciplines. Referring to Grellmann’s book, Romani scholar Ian Hancock asserts:

[...] the need to categorize the plants and animals being encountered in the new European colonies overseas quickly extended to the classification of non-European human populations as well, and the nineteenth century saw a plethora of dissertations dealing with “race” and the ranking of human groups (2008, 183).

For example, studying the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Mróz highlights the intellectual upheaval in Europe during the late eighteenth century that made this period “a time of fundamental transformation,” including in thinking about Roma and policies towards them (2015, 11).

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3 While Grellmann used the term “Zigeuner”/ “Gipsey,” I use “Roma” throughout this article, as explained in note 1, to reflect a self-identifying term widely used by Romani activists and scholars. I acknowledge that this is not a historically precise translation. Grellmann’s category encompassed not only Romani people but also other marginalized and mobile groups – including non-Romani Travellers and homeless people – and was deeply embedded in Enlightenment discourses of classification, population control, and racialization. His terminology reinforced perceptions of these groups as irrational, foreign, and socially deviant, based on social, cultural, and biological markers. I aim to foreground the lasting effects of these constructions on Romani communities, while recognizing the broader reach of Grellmann’s categorization.

Claiming to produce the first comprehensive work about Roma, Grellmann (1807) synthesized pre-existing perceptions about Roma, entrenching their othering by portraying them as evil, heathen, irrational, lazy, uncivilized, unwilling to work, and wild. His book sketched a kind of Romani archetype that “held sway for centuries, admitting only slight variations without anyone ever challenging the portrait’s historical merits” (Willems 1997, 24). He drew heavily on a series of articles about Hungarian and Transylvanian Roma written by a Protestant minister and scholar of Hungarian descent, Sámuel Augustini ab Hortis, missing the nuances and generalizing his findings to all Romani groups (*Ibid.*, 63–65). The minister aimed to “civilize” Roma and turn them into good Christians. Furthermore, Grellmann was an ardent supporter of Enlightenment reforms towards Roma, particularly the assimilation policies of the Austro-Hungarian sovereigns Maria Theresa and Joseph II.

Grellmann emphasizes Europeans’ perceived ability to civilize non-Europeans and draws an analogy between Roma and enslaved Africans. Historical references to Roma as “black” predate Grellmann’s work. Before the sixteenth century, colonial rhetoric already named Romani people as external “racial others,” non-white, non-European, uncivilized, and wild (Fraser 1992; Shahar 2007). While Roma were often described as dark skinned, swarthy, or black, they were also compared to African people in travelogues, chronicles, and other writing of Westerners, who apparently felt an urge to find a resemblance to Blackness, other physical traits, and character of African people. This resemblance led the authors to conclude about irrationality and “uncivilized nature” of Romani people, banishing them to the archipelago of Human Otherness.

Importantly, Grellmann developed his ideas in the late eighteenth century amid the peak of the transatlantic slave trade and European colonial expansion, which contributed to and came along with reinscribing the human in biologized terms. Sylvia Wynter (2003) theorizes that the overrepresentation of the (Western) European conception of “Man” as the Human itself was foundational for European modernity from the fifteenth/sixteenth centuries onwards. This conception, containing racial and colonial difference at its core, serves to ensure the (Western) European Man’s interests and well-being and to sanction the subjugation of human “others.” Having had a tangible effect globally, European modernity and its social order safeguarded the “rise of the West” and instituted Western thought as the most enlightened, modern, and progressive. This Eurocentric worldview, reinforced by Enlightenment thinkers, constructed race as a tool to maintain a hierarchy of human difference, associating superiority with whiteness and Europeaness, and inferiority with non-whiteness and non-Europeaness.

The invented category of race became the ground for projecting and rebuilding a new secularizing human/subhuman distinction. This “new mode of being human” was redescribed as the rational political subject of the state in the place of the human as the religious subject of the (Christian) Church (Wynter 2003, 265). Wynter continues that in this descriptive statement of the human:

[...] it was to be the peoples of Black African descent who would be constructed as the ultimate referent of the “racially inferior” Human Other, with the range of other colonized dark-skinned peoples, all classified as “natives,” now being assimilated to its category – all of these as the ostensible embodiment of the non-evolved backward Others – if to varying degrees and, as such, the negation of the generic “normal humanness,” ostensibly expressed by and embodied in the peoples of the West (*Ibid.*, 266).

This framework designates Blackness as the extreme position of subhuman and determines the European Man as the only referent of the human, a universal representative of “pure reason,” a rational and civilized self, rendering non-European ways of being and thinking as barbarian, incapable of reason, irrational, subhuman, and uncivilized.

As European colonialism unfolded, the preoccupation with Africans’ Blackness became evident in the colonial descriptions of Roma. For example, in 1646, English scientist Thomas Browne described Roma as “artificial Negroes,” attributing their dark complexion to sun exposure (Shahar 2007, 7). Although the modern conception of race was yet to be scientifically invented, the black-and-white binary became typical in defining the human hierarchy. For instance, seventeenth-century German philosopher, jurist, and theologian Jacobus Thomasius asserted about Romani people: “these black-looking heathen foreigners speaking a strange tongue, were not fully human” (cited in Lewy 2000, 2; see also Fernández 2021). In 1848, Vladimir Dal’, a famous ethnographer, lexicographer, and writer of the Russian Empire, portrayed Roma as “black-complexioned,” contrasting “white Russian face” with “black face” of Roma and emphasizing their “savageness” (1883, 140–142).

Likewise, Grellmann (1807) emphasized the difference between Europeans and Romani people as follows: “the one is white, the other black; – this clothes himself, the other goes half naked; – this [one] shudders at the thought of eating carrion, the other regales on it as a dainty” (viii). He further noted that Roma were “famed [...] for being plunderers, thieves, and incendiaries” (*Ibid.*). Throughout the book, the remarks of blackness and dark skin of Roma constantly reappear to solidify them as subhuman and racial other. Grellmann equates Roma’s “blackness” with “primitive” and “wild” attributes (Clark 2004, 231). Hence, the haunting images of Blackness integrated into humanist thought since the Renaissance explicitly manifest in Grellmann’s conceptualization of the long-lasting archetypal image of Roma. This image has served as the racial other in Europe and led to the construction and reinstitution of white West European Man as the human itself and the European in particular. These constructed meanings also further demonize Blackness in general.

Roma, once considered heathens and infidels, as I showed in the earlier section, carried over this marker into the modern conception of human/subhuman, redescribed by Renaissance humanists and later Enlightenment thinkers along a rational/irrational divide and physical properties. Grellmann describes Roma as inherently irrational, who remain unchanged across time and space, “neither time, climate, nor example, has, in general, hitherto, made any alteration” to Romani peoples’ way of life (1807, i). This irrational stagnation and stuckness in the past are sutured to their non-European origin, dark complexion, and “wild” and “vagabond” way of life. These factors lead Grellmann to conclude that Romani people need “civilizing” through European interventions of Enlightenment thought, reform, and governance. Moreover, according to Grellmann, the civilizing mission of bringing “irrational savage” Roma towards humanity can and should be effected by means of their divestment of the dark complexion and enforced sedentarization into steady employment to make them “useful citizens” and “profitable subjects” to the state and landowners.

“Blackness,” embodied by Romani people, in Grellmann’s logic, has the following avenues of non/existence in Europe: (1) it must never appear in Europe; (2) if appeared, it must be made invisible under the police/

carceral regime, “till the police officers get hold of him, and make him again invisible” (1807, 6); (3) or it must disappear through assimilation and hard work for the European Man (*Ibid.*, 13). In any way, the European conception of the Human insists on the disappearance of Blackness, including when projected onto the Romani body. Insisting that Romani people’s dark complexion can be changed, Grellmann maps a “way out” for Roma to leave their “savageness,” peripatetic way of life, and racial difference behind. Only through this conversion, settlement, and steady work can they become “rational,” “civilized,” and therefore human. He argued that Roma, serving in the imperial army in Hungary or as musicians who kept themselves loyal to the state and committed to forgetting their descent, had lighter skin. In a way, sedentarization was also part of “whitening.”

Importantly, Grellmann concluded that the alleged inherent irrationality of Romani people rendered them unable to be political subjects and govern themselves properly. He calls Romani people “deficient in thought or consideration,” “childish,” “guided more by sense than reason” (1807, 89). Romani political institutions such as Romani chiefs are considered “merely a ridiculous imitation of what they had seen and admired among civilised people” (*Ibid.*, 72–73). Moreover, Grellmann asserts that music is “the only science” in which Roma can participate, relegating them either to heavy work or entertainment, furthering Roma on the scale of sensuality away from reason. Thereby, he reworks the image of Roma, non-European and heathen, into the irrational Human Other, who is unable to be a rational political subject of the state. Furthermore, Grellmann blames Romani women for not abiding by white European gender norms – “improperly” doing domestic work and caring for their children – and, as a result, for reproducing an “uncivilized,” “irrational” way of life (*Ibid.*, 25).

Thus, the racialization of Roma in Europe, including Eastern Europe, was influenced by the logic of anti-Blackness, which affects and shapes racial distinctions. Anti-Roma racism is a result of inter-imperial and colonial relations and the circulation of ideas between different imperial formations. However, one more aspect that influenced the racialization of Roma is the development of racial capitalism. Colonization and Enlightenment ideas about race both contributed to and were affected by capital accumulation and its forms of governance, which sustain capitalism as the primary economic system.

Thus, while this article primarily focuses on the entanglements between anti-Roma racism and anti-Blackness, it is important to acknowledge that the racialization of Roma has also historically intersected with antisemitic logics – beginning at least with the expulsion of Jews from Spain and continuing into the Enlightenment. Scholars such as Wolfgang Wippermann (1997) have shown that anti-Roma and antisemitic discourses emerged in parallel and often operated through structurally similar mechanisms, positioning both Roma and Jewish populations as internal outsiders: mobile, morally suspect, and resistant to state control. For instance, in the seventeenth century, Johann Christoph Wagenseil propagated the idea that “Zigeuner” were actually Jews in disguise – an assertion that reveals how anxieties about alterity were projected onto multiple racialized and marginalized groups. These parallels – along with resonances with the treatment of Indigenous peoples – offer important avenues for future inquiry. While I do not explore these intersections in depth here, they point to the need for further scholarship that examines how anti-Roma racism has been co-constructed with other forms of racial and religious exclusion within European modernity.

### 3. Racial Capitalism, Land Enclosure, and Criminalization of Vagrancy

Alongside establishing a normative Human/Man, the development of racial capitalism created a profitable subject, obedient to the law and capital. Ian Law and Nikolay Zakharov state that the “multi-faceted racial discourse about the Roma constructed key ideological linkages between the central elements,” including the portrayal of Roma as “a parasitic group that fed on ‘real’ workers” (2019, 119). This portrayal demonstrates the intertwining of racism and capitalism and justifies actions against Roma, ranging from ethnic profiling and hyper-surveillance to demolition of their homes, dispossession, eviction, and school and residential segregation. Unsurprisingly, the question of assimilation of Roma is often tied to their integration into a capitalist economy, which historically involved forced sedentarization despite many Romani communities already being sedentary.

Besides justifying violence, the production of a racial “other” also created preconditions for the economic exploitation of Romani people. Capital accumulation depends on the production of labor power that can be commodified, thus alienated from traditional, self-sufficient production and re-cultivated into labor practices and skills suitable for modern, industrially centered mass production. At the same time, labor power is racialized. As Jodi Melamed (2015) notes, racism enshrines the unequal differentiation of human value that capital requires for its accumulation through loss and disposability. For example, contemporary attacks on Romani settlements illustrate the extreme vulnerability of Romani poor and seasonal labor migrants. At the same time, Romani people often are pushed to do the hardest, most shunned work, while limited access to social services and institutions (such as education) prevents them from overcoming this labor division. In this regard, Enikő Vincze notes that the impoverished Roma both “proved to be redundant or useless on the formal labour markets” and “kept in total economic dependence and under control, could be always abused as a cheap labour force ensuring that they would never resist their exploitation” (2015, 28). Moreover, the alienation of land and the enclosure of the commons historically proved to be a means of capitalist accumulation.

Specifically, Robinson’s concept of “racial capitalism” reveals the interconnected roots of racism and capitalism. Robinson (2000) asserts that racial capitalism evolved based on and together with racism and has been dependent on colonialism, genocide, imperialism, slavery, and violence. Furthermore, starting from the twelfth century, state power administrators and elites sustained myths of egalitarianism while seeking every opportunity to dominate various groups of people by dividing them. Robinson emphasizes that “race became largely the rationalization for the domination, exploitation, and/or extermination of non-‘Europeans’ (including Slavs and Jews)” (*Ibid.*, 27).

While I draw extensively on racial capitalism to trace the historical entanglement of anti-Roma racism with processes of accumulation, exploitation, and colonial governance, I recognize that this framework – particularly as theorized through Robinson – has its own limitations. Scholars such as Jenkins and Leroy (2021) have pointed out the tendency within racial capitalism theory to center transatlantic slavery and the black/white binary in ways that risk marginalizing other racialized experiences, including those

of Indigenous and Romani populations. In response to such critiques, I seek to extend rather than merely apply the racial capitalism framework by situating the racialization of Roma within both intra-European hierarchies and global colonial logics. This approach aims to foreground how forms of racial subjugation in Europe, including the criminalization of Roma, were mutually constitutive with global processes of dispossession and labor extraction. Rather than treating racial capitalism as a totalizing or universally explanatory model, I use it as a heuristic to examine how Roma were racialized through specific mechanisms – such as anti-vagrancy laws, labor control, and sedentarization – that resonate with but are not reducible to or equated with other formations of racial violence. In this way, my analysis both engages with and builds on critiques of racial capitalism, advocating for a more relational and multi-sited understanding of how race and capital co-construct social hierarchies across geographies.

Thus, for instance, Robinson summarizes the development of racial capitalism through four moments: first, the racial ordering of European society; second, the Islamic (that is, African, Arab, Persian, and Turkish) domination of Mediterranean civilization and the consequent impediment to European social and cultural life; third, the incorporation of African, Asian, and peoples of the “New World” into a world system emerging from late feudalism and merchant capitalism; and fourth, the dialectic of colonialism, plantocratic slavery, and the formations of industrial labor and labor reserves (2000, 67). The capitalist modes of production and ideology created distinctions and oppositions among races, ethnicities, and nationalities and between skilled and unskilled workers (*Ibid.*, 42).

Robinson notes that the analysis of racism in Western societies often starts with the third moment while much less attention is paid to intra-European roots of racial capitalism. In his analysis of racial capitalism, he omits Roma, despite their presence in Western Europe since at least the early fifteenth century and their enslavement in Romania since at least the late fourteenth century. I argue that Roma, racialized as non-Europeans, were part of racial capitalist relations. I suggest that land enclosure and the criminalization of vagrancy, crucial for racial capitalism (see Melamed 2015), contributed to the racialization of Roma, alongside the projection of Blackness onto them, as discussed here earlier. Despite Roma historical contributions in various occupations, they were considered “not profitable citizens” in need of civilizing through sedentarization and full control of their labor (Grellmann 1807). Since the sixteenth century, with another peak in the late eighteenth century, Roma in Europe became increasingly associated with vagrancy, criminalized, and forced into sedentarization to serve local landlords or states (Willems 1997; Lucassen 1998).

The spread of the criminalization of Romani people and their association with vagrancy in Europe occurred amid the colonization of the Americas and the rise of the transatlantic slave trade in the mid-sixteenth century. Silvia Federici (2004) emphasizes the cross-fertilization of repressive mechanisms between Europe and the Americas in the development of capitalism. Resembling colonial politics, the Christian Church utilized “heresy” charges to suppress social dissent in Europe, including revolts against feudal authorities, landlords, and employers. By the end of the fourteenth century, mass peasant revolts in Western and Central Europe, with significant women’s involvement, sought alternatives to feudal relations and resisted the growing money economy (*Ibid.*, 46).

In response, feudal nobilities toughened up the repressive measures, attempting to increase labor exploitation through different forms of serfdom and slavery (Federici 2004, 45). State centralization

also emerged to quell social conflicts and protect the wealth of the lords (*Ibid.*, 49). With the onset of colonialism in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Eastern Europe saw a “second serfdom,” while Western Europe witnessed “the Enclosures, the Witch-Hunt, the branding, whipping, and incarceration of vagabonds and beggars in newly constructed work-houses and correction houses, models for the future prison system” (*Ibid.*, 64). Federici continues, “[...] on the horizon, we have the rise of the slave trade, while on the seas, ships are already transporting indentured servants and convicts from Europe to America” (*Ibid.*).

Having started in thirteenth-century England, the *enclosures* designate land privatization through a set of strategies the lords and wealthy farmers used to expropriate peasants and workers from their common holdings, eliminate communal land property, and expand lords’ assets for their sole use. Enclosures involved abolishing the open-field system, where “villagers owned non-contiguous strips of land in a non-hedged field,” and also included fencing off the commons and pulling down “the shacks of poor cottagers who had no land but could survive because they had access to customary rights” (Federici 2004, 69–70; see also Acton 1974). Federici notes that land privatization boosted capital, enabling landlords to exploit land for accumulation rather than subsistence. Landlords granted peasants and workers access to some means of subsistence only when directly employed, increasing their dependence on monetary relations and capital owners.

Land enclosure led many people to travel in search of work from the fifteenth century onwards. In response, many authorities introduced regulations to fight vagrancy, “which, from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, was perceived as one of the most pressing social problems of the day and coincided with a peak in state activity against vagrants” (Lucassen 2008, 430). In authorities’ eyes, “vagrants” embodied the protest to the ruling capitalist economic system, “their behavior, often depicted in strong moral language, generated anxiety because they could encourage others to follow their example and so undermine the social order” (Willems 1997, 8). Melamed explains the racializing work of anti-vagabond laws that mark wageless people as criminal and qualify them as “useless, immoral, and disposable” (2015, 81). Therefore, the “vagrant” becomes a racialized status designated as criminal and disposable. Importantly, “vagrants” are blamed for their dire situation and cannot claim their way of living and subsistence, as well as their presence on the land. Capital owners and nobility intensified penalties for crimes against property to force “vagrants” into the imposed jobs (Robinson 2000; Federici 2004). In the eighteenth century, this criminalization became one of the state’s main tools to fight the mobile poor.

Racialization and repression of Romani people were also part of these broader politics to control the unwanted mobility of the poor (Lucassen 2008). Wim Willems suggests that governments used the word “[G]ypsies” to designate those groups of “vagrants” who were not practicing Christians and were perceived as foreigners (1997, 8–9). At the same time, an image of “[G]ypsies” became largely defined by their “heathen condition” and “criminal way of life,” concerned with the lack of sedentariness and ties to steady work and land (*Ibid.*, 14–15). Thus, sixteenth-century sources on Romani people demonstrate an anti-vagrancy shift of that time with Roma being increasingly criminalized. They were perceived as potentially disturbing the socio-economic order with their itinerant way of living. Supported by state and church, the image of Romani people as vagrants increasingly marked them as lazy and crime-prone and overshadowed the multiplicity and complex reality of Romani lives (Willems 1997; Lucassen 1998).

Many historians note the impact of Western European tendencies on Eastern Europe. For example, Western intellectual currents reached Poland and fundamentally changed the attitude towards wandering people, in particular, Roma (Zinevych 2001; Mróz 2015). The 1510 Polish Diet resolution signaled these changes, ordering itinerant people to be captured and exploited in fortification works. Although this law predominantly targeted vagrant runaway peasants, in the mid-sixteenth century, state institutions started targeting Romani people. For example, in 1553, four years before the first anti-Roma legislation in Poland, the Polish Chancellor Ocieski sent a letter to the authorities in Vienna to cooperate in expelling Romani people from Poland, as well as the lands of present-day Czechia (Mróz 2015, 128).

Also in 1553, Jakub Przyłuski, a Polish political and law scholar, published the *Leges seu statuta ac privilegia Regni Poloniae* (from Latin, *Laws, statutes and privileges of the Kingdom of Poland*). This work portrayed Romani people as lazy wanderers, thieves, and much less useful for military or domestic services than regular vagrants (quoted in Mróz 2015, 129). He claimed the immorality of accepting Roma and their nomadic lifestyle, calling for strict regulations regarding Roma and other vagrants. Furthermore, in 1564, Polish chronicler and historian Marcin Bielski published *The Chronicle That Is the History of the World*, a Polish literary-historical text presenting a negative image of Roma. The fragments devoted to Romani people in *The Chronicle* are similar and sometimes copied from the broadly circulated work *Cosmographiae Universalis* (1544) of Sebastian Münster, a German cartographer and cosmographer (Mróz 2015, 131). Bielski portrayed Roma as lazy, wandering, wild, and cunning thieves, emphasizing their non-compliance with capitalist labor norms and Eurocentric gender roles, and associating them with espionage for Muslim Turks (quoted in Mróz 2015, 131–132).

These ideas illustrate several important moments. First, the impact of Western European Renaissance thought, particularly German thinkers,<sup>[4]</sup> on the intellectual thought in Central and Eastern Europe. Second, the thinking about Roma in Poland retranslated the Western logic of othering of Roma. In the eighteenth century, Romani people were increasingly perceived as thieves and criminals in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Importantly, this process took place along the expansion of the cities and the growth of the bourgeois stratum (Mróz 2015, 233–234). The construct of laziness was especially projected onto non-white bodies, including Romani people, despite their occupation, which strongly resonated with ideas developed by Grellmann.

German criminologists, court officials, and investigators referenced Grellmann's work to identify Roma and propose "rehabilitating" measures to make them "profitable citizens" (Willems 1997, 22–23). The image of Roma as non-sedentary vagrants stemmed from the belief that they refuse to work and are prone to stealing. This belief linked criminality to the racialization of Roma, on one hand, and reflected authorities' anxiety about protests against the capitalist system, on the other (*Ibid.*, 8). The capitalist incorporation of Roma through their forced sedentarization by criminalizing vagrancy reinforced the formation of a profitable subject. Commending the assimilation policies of Habsburg Emperor Joseph II, "for the purpose of civilising, and rendering good and profitable citizens," Grellmann regards the wandering Roma as "scarcely deserving to be considered as human beings" (1807, 108). In this logic,

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4 Germany was the cradle of violent anti-Roma laws.

sedentary Roma chose the “civilized”/ “rational” path that would make them assimilate, therefore, “reform into useful citizens” and become “better men” (*Ibid.*, 26, 85).

Grellmann asserts that, in order to become human, Romani people must work more and be useful/profitable to the state and landowners. For this purpose, he insisted that state authorities must make sure that Romani people did not waste any time in idleness and “shall be compelled to work for hire” (1807, 87). Denouncing a wandering mode of life of Roma and praising their “healthy robust bodies,” Grellmann states that “their skill and ingenuity might render them very profitable subjects to the state, but their disposition makes them the most useless pernicious beings,” preventing a state and landowners from “reaping advantage” from Roma (*Ibid.*, 69–70).

In line with the predominant racial logics, the Russian imperial government also claimed to implement the “civilizing” mission towards Romani people by changing their way of life and incorporating/converting them into a controlled labor force, mainly in land cultivation. Along with these policies, most Roma remained disenfranchised, and their way of life was criminalized, as “the imperial regime perceived sedentarization as a necessary precondition for the primitive ‘nomads’ to advance to a higher civilization stage as settled agriculturists or artisans” (Smirnova-Seslavinskaya 2021, 91). Ethnographers of imperial Russia perceived the politics of sedentarization as rational administration seeking social order and converting Roma into “useful citizens” (O’Keeffe 2014).

Further, denouncing tsarist oppression of non-Russian peoples, the Bolsheviks declared themselves the rational leaders of a multiethnic Soviet Union. While early Soviet policies – especially during the 1920s *korenizatsiia* (indigenization) period – did support national cultures, languages, and political autonomy to a certain extent, this recognition was often instrumental and uneven. Soviet officials aimed to integrate non-Russian peoples as “conscious, ‘socially useful’ citizens invested in a distinctly Soviet way of life” (O’Keeffe 2014, 125). Roma were, at times, officially recognized as a “special nationality” and engaged in efforts of cultural production and political organization. Notably, this period also saw the emergence of critical Romani voices, including the coining of the term *antiziganism* by Romani activist Aleksandr German (Holler 2015, 84). However, these policies did not escape the broader Soviet aim of producing socially useful, sedentary, and ideologically aligned citizens. For example, Barannikov (1931), an Orientologist based at the Russian Museum and Leningrad University, claimed that the Russian Empire had aimed at depriving Roma of their distinctiveness, leading to the conclusion that only the Soviet Union had governed Roma rationally and benevolently, both modernizing them through sedentarization and recognizing them as a “special nationality” (74). Yet this modernization was deeply ambivalent. Early Soviet ethnographers continued to underline civic inclusion and sedentarization of Romani people as “the hallmark of rational, tolerant, and ideologically righteous governance” (O’Keeffe 2014, 126), even as state policies often criminalized itinerant lifestyles and undermined traditional trades and occupations (Zinevych 2001; Byelikov 2008). Romani individuals who did not conform to the Soviet model of the productive, settled worker could be targeted under anti-vagrancy laws or other legal pretexts (see also Thomas 2018 on Soviet politics of sedentarization of nomads in Central Asia). Thus, while *korenizatsiia* opened limited spaces for recognition, Roma still were compelled to conform to Eurocentric and state-defined ideals of labor and citizenship, disrupting longstanding relations of kinship, mobility, and space.

## Conclusions

This article shows differences and similarities as to the racialization of Roma across spaces and in relation to the colonial racial formations. Delineating various imperialisms helps see the similarities, their travel and formation, as well as illuminate how the distinctiveness of the racialization of Roma differently informs larger racial structures. The early histories of the intra-European racialization of Roma help locate the marginalization of Roma in the racial matrix, as well as prompt to look at the contemporary making of the normative profitable subject informed by historical legacies. As this article shows, among other factors, the racialization is produced through ordering social life according to the dictates of private property and land enclosure, as well as through labor alienation, criminalization of vagrancy, and the formation of the profitable subject. Overall, this article illuminates how the racialization of Roma historically combined the fear of Blackness, non-Christianity, and non-compliance with the capitalist logic of labor exploitation and with Eurocentric gender prescriptions.

Future research could examine whether the status of Roma under other imperial formations – such as the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires (Marsh 2008), or within socialist Yugoslavia – supports or challenges the trajectories outlined here. These cases may complicate or nuance the dominant patterns discussed, offering productive ground for rethinking how different political-economic systems mediate the racialization of Roma. Additionally, further work is needed to trace how colonial and historical tropes – such as associations with criminality, Blackness, impurity, and parasitism – were not only instrumental in enabling the Holocaust, the Porajmos, and other instances of genocidal violence but also persist in shaping mechanisms of exclusion today (Césaire 2000). Building on this article’s historical framing, such inquiry could deepen our understanding of how long-standing racial logics continue to structure contemporary state violence and social abandonment targeting Romani communities.

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