



Barbora Černušáková, University of Manchester*

Roma Workers under Czech Racial Capitalism: A Post-Socialist Case Study

Abstract: This article contributes to the theory of racial capitalism by focusing on racialization of labor in the post-socialist context. Drawing on fieldwork conducted with Roma workers in the city of Ostrava, the Czech Republic, the paper investigates the role of the Czech state in confining Roma to low-paid, precarious and informal work—and how dynamics of racialization figure in this relationship. State policies like job placement programs, I claim, explicitly target Roma workers, channelling them into stigmatized and low paying positions, reproducing racial prejudices and confining them to precarious and often dangerous work. Using the category of “racialized surplus population,” I examine the functionalist relationship between racialization and capitalism in the Czech Republic, which I argue is manifest both economically—enabling capital to rely on racialized workers as a reserve army of labor—and politically, as the exclusion of Roma from the white proletariat mediates class conflict.

Keywords: racialized labor, surplus population, racial capitalism, ethnography, post-socialism

I. Introduction

This article describes the racialization of Roma workers in the Czech city of Ostrava and, specifically, the way they are confined to informal work arrangements characterized by precarity and low pay. I argue that the Roma’s exclusion from stable work is the outcome of the interplay of two main structural factors: the general increase of the “relative surplus population”—a result of de-industrialization in the 1990s—and the simultaneous increase in racism and racialization of Roma workers in the post-socialist period (Vincze et al. 2019). Drawing on ethnographic data that I collected in 2016 over eleven months of fieldwork as a participant observer with Roma workers in Ostrava, I show how policies pursued by the Czech state purposefully target the Roma, reproducing racial divisions and confining them to precarious work. Using a theoretical framework that recognizes the blurred boundaries between employment and unemployment (Benanav 2019; 2020), I further illustrate how the post-socialist weakening of labor protections, coupled with capital’s fluctuating demand for labor, resulted in the creation of a racialized surplus population of Roma workers. Thus, this study provides an empirical analysis of the operation of state policies

* PhD candidate in Sociology, University of Manchester. Please direct correspondence to b.cernusakova@gmail.com. The author is grateful to her supervisors Nicholas Thoburn and Meghan Tinsley for their guidance during the research, to Margareta Matache and Juraj Halas for their suggestions on an earlier version of the draft, to Madlen Nikolova, Eric George and Angela Harris for their review and support, and to Jan Grill for his advice during the fieldwork on which this text is based. This text would not have been possible without the Roma workers who were willing to share their time, experiences, insights, and sense of humor with the author.

ostensibly aimed at addressing long-term unemployment, which I argue have been counterproductive and have ultimately served to delimit Roma workers to low-paid and socially stigmatized jobs.

The role of race in maintaining class divisions in Czech national discourse has been obscured by oversimplified interpretations of Roma underemployment, which assume that the Roma are “unemployed” despite the fact that the majority of Roma engage in waged labor, albeit often in informal arrangements that national employment statistics do not account for. Through the 1990s, increasing reliance on informal work among Roma seemed to reinforce an increasingly powerful stigma about “generations of unemployed Roma,” which found expression not only in national political discourse, but in academic and policy circles as well. The Roma are labeled as the national pariah upon which the economic and political problems facing the Czech state and society could be blamed. During election campaigns, even mainstream politicians weaponize the image of unemployed Roma who were invariably portrayed as wasting taxpayer money while they lived off state benefits.¹ These racial stereotypes served as a prelude to calls for tougher approaches to welfare policy and labor market governance.

The intensification of racist attitudes toward the Roma relies on ideological stereotypes, particularly in relation to their employment status. One of the factors contributing to this enduring misperception of the Roma is that since the 1990s, large numbers of both Roma and non-Roma workers who had been laid off from full-time jobs in the industrial sector have been absorbed into informal, short-term forms of employment marked by low pay and weak labor protections. With nowhere to turn, these workers simply took the jobs that were available to them. But this shift to informal work arrangements amplified pre-existing prejudices about the Roma. In the Czech Republic, Roma people’s work seems to be either myopically “invisible” to the media and official political discourse that provides the justification for economic policy, or Roma are treated as an economic burden, wasting public resources. This study presents data to challenge this set of harmful and prejudiced assumptions.

Informal work has indeed been an important source of employment for the Roma, but the way that such work is theorized fails to register the complex nexus between full-time employment, part-time employment, and unemployment in the Czech labor market. Although a great number of my informants, both male and female, had some experience working in full-time jobs for companies in the city’s industrial zones, these positions rarely resulted in long-term employment. The duration of employment on an assembly line producing electronics or automobile parts, for example, varied between a few months and two to three years. By contrast, those who worked informally in construction, or formally as low-paid street cleaners, would remain in these positions for years. These findings are important because they disrupt conventional understandings of Roma “unemployment,” illustrating the way in which racial stereotypes serve to confine Roma workers to low paying, precarious jobs—and, in turn, the institutional obstacles the Roma face in navigating the highly racialized labor market.

¹ For example, during 2018 local elections, the Czech President Miloš Zeman stated that as many as 90% of Roma in the country were unemployed and that situation was better during communism when they were forced to work by law. See “Zeman pokračuje ve výroch o Romech: Za komunismu na rozdíl od jiných tak netrpěli” [“Zeman continues his statements about Roma: Unlike others, they did not suffer much during communism”], *Echo24*, 5 October 2018. <https://echo24.cz/a/SJ95F/zeman-pokracuje-ve-vyroch-o-romech-za-komunismu-na-rozdil-od-jinych-tak-netrpeli>.

Why are Roma workers' contributions to the Czech Republic's economy so persistently mischaracterized and/or ignored—and why does the image of the “unemployed Roma” figure so largely in Czech political discourse? I argue that the way the Czech state defines and responds to long-term unemployment—as “being out of work for more than 12 months”²—distorts the realities of Roma work, and plays an important role in fuelling racial stereotypes contributing to the confinement of Roma to low paying, informal jobs. OECD data on long-term unemployment indicate its steady growth in the Czech Republic from the 1990s until the time of my fieldwork in 2016. Between 1993 and 2006, long-term unemployment in the Czech Republic rose from 18.49 to 55.6 percent. By 2016, 43.25 percent of the unemployed were classified as “long-term unemployed” according to OECD data.³ In response to rising long-term unemployment, the Czech state implemented policy measures such as the Public Utility Works (PUW), which aimed to provide job seekers with temporary job opportunities to facilitate their re-entry into the job market.

Yet these approaches to labor market re-entry do not serve all Czechs equally. My analysis of the implementation of these measures in an environment marked by divisions and separation of workers along racial lines suggests that such policies are not only economically counterproductive, but serve to intensify, rather than diffuse, racial divisions. Instead of assisting workers to find full-time employment, PUW polices re/produce a racialized surplus population at the disposal of capital. This state-sponsored re/production of racialized labor, I claim, is a structural feature of neoliberal capitalism, in which racialized inequality is not merely an outcome of fluctuations in the demand for labor, but systematically re/produced by specific *regulatory* measures, including labor market regulations, training programs, housing policies, and the provision of credit on which many Roma working-class household rely for subsistence (Černušáková 2019). Thus, in order to understand the embeddedness and persistence of racial capitalism in the Czech Republic, it is necessary to disentangle the way that economic policies are complicit in maintaining racial hierarchies and social stigmas. The fieldwork that I have completed not only illustrates the way Czech policies are counterproductive, but also points to the ideological and institutional obstacles that Roma workers face in their day-to-day lives.

My fieldwork focused on the everyday experiences (Holloway and Todres 2003) of Roma workers in Údol, a neighborhood in the city of Ostrava located in the north-east of the Czech Republic, where many Roma live. In order to study the workers' reality, and their relationship with employers and state placement agencies, I determined to work alongside them in various full-time and part-time jobs. I complemented this participant observation with formal and informal interviews with informants, including my colleagues and neighbors but also employers, job agencies, charity workers, and other work-related intermediaries. During the first three months of the fieldwork, I worked as a street cleaner in a municipal company, “Clean,” where the majority of my colleagues were Roma.⁴ Later on, I took on short-term work at a privately run recycling line, “Waste,” which employed both Roma and non-Roma workers. While working as a street cleaner, I not only became acquainted with my immediate coworkers, but also with a group of Roma construction workers who were doing maintenance work on one of the main streets of the city. After

² See OECD, n.d. “Long-Term Unemployment.” <https://data.oecd.org/unemp/long-term-unemployment-rate.htm#indicator-chart>.

³ See OECD, n.d. “Long-Term Unemployment Rate.” <https://data.oecd.org/unemp/long-term-unemployment-rate.htm#indicator-chart>.

⁴ Throughout this article, I refer to workplaces and informants using pseudonyms for reasons of confidentiality.

my contract with the street cleaning company came to an end, I continued to visit my colleagues and the construction workers at their respective work sites and homes for several months (Černušáková 2020).

II. The Role of the State in the Racialization of Roma Workers

A. Post-Socialist Deindustrialization and “Relative Surplus Population”

In order to understand the socio-economic situation of Roma workers in the contemporary Czech Republic, it is necessary to provide some background about the character of post-socialist deindustrialization that evolved within the larger process of “transition” to the capitalist social formation in Eastern Europe. In the 1990s, deindustrialization took place amidst a broader global shift when capital’s demand for labor was decreasing and “non-standard employment” was expanding (Benanav 2020), leaving many chronically underemployed (Clover 2016). Still, it is important to point out that the degree of deindustrialization in the Czech Republic, resulting from the closure of coal mines, steelworks, and other industries, never reached the levels of Western Europe and North America.⁵ Despite the many plant closures that marked the 1990s, the country retained some of its industries and even opened new production lines, creating tens of thousands of jobs well into the 2000s. As a result, in 2020 the Czech Republic still had one of the highest proportions of employment in industry globally (37%), while employment in industry in North America was 20% in 2020, and the OECD average was 23%.⁶ To a great extent, Ostrava—a city of 292,000 residents⁷—remained highly industrialized, characterized by a number of new large assembly lines producing automobiles, parts, and electronics.⁸ It also retained some of its steel industry, which remained an important employer in the region.

⁵ See World Bank Data. 2020. “Employment in Industry (Percentage of Total Employment) (Modeled ILO Estimate).” https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.IND.EMPL.ZS?most_recent_value_desc=false.

Drawing on data from the International Labor Organization, the World Bank map of “employment in industry” (defined as mining and quarrying, manufacturing, construction, and public utilities such as electricity, gas, and water) shows that Czech Republic and Slovakia, and to a lesser extent also Hungary and Poland, retained comparatively higher proportion of their workforce employed in industry. See https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.IND.EMPL.ZS?most_recent_value_desc=false&view=map.

⁶ See World Bank Data. 2020. “Employment in Industry (Percentage of Total Employment) (Modeled ILO Estimate).” https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.IND.EMPL.ZS?most_recent_value_desc=false.

⁷ See Czech Statistical Office. 2016, “Population of Ostrava.”

https://vdb.czso.cz/vdbvo2/faces/en/index.jspx?_afz=uziv-dotaz#k=5&pvokc=43&uroven=70&w=

⁸ For a list of Ostrava’s industrial zones and logistics parks, see https://www.ostrava.cz/en/podnikatel-investor/real-estate/industrial-zones?set_language=en.

Figure 1. Ostrava’s former steelworks Dolní Vítkovice (closed down by 1998) received the status of “national cultural memorial” in 2002. Photo by author, March 2016.



Despite this (limited) economic recovery through the 2000s, the containment of Roma workers in low-paid, insecure, and informal jobs, which had begun with the industrial closures of the 1990s, persisted (Černušáková 2017). To analyze their situation, I use the theory of “relative surplus population” developed by the journal *Endnotes* (Endnotes Collective 2010) and Benanav (2015; 2020), which draws on Marx’s arguments developed in Chapter 25 of Volume 1 of *Capital* about workers who lack regular access to employment (Marx [1867] 2013). Attentive to historical anti-Blackness in the US and UK, Clover (2016) refined Marx’s theory of relative surplus population by focusing on the role that race and racialization played in governing the workforce. Clover’s concept of a “structurally racialized surplus population” provides a powerful analytical tool to grasp the complexity of experiences of my informants. Like in Clover’s theorizing of racialized surplus in the US and UK, the situation of Roma workers that I interviewed in the Czech Republic did not statically remain in informal work arrangements. Instead, their employment was characterized by a movement *between* engagement in low-paid formal work, intermittent periods of unemployment, and informal work. Typically, a Roma worker in Ostrava would spend a few years on an assembly line in one of the “Korean companies” (as these manufacturing companies were often known locally) in the city’s industrial zones; have an experience of informal work on a construction site (this was the case for male workers), or recycling or cleaning (for male and female workers); and at some point—often for several years—work as a street cleaner with a low but regular income. As I will show in the analysis of my data below, in some sectors—notably in construction and street cleaning—Roma in Ostrava appeared to represent the majority of workers.

The vulnerability of Roma workers in the Czech Republic resembles the experiences of racialized Black (Clover 2016) or Latino workers (Bourgois 1995) in the US: race is a significant factor in determining which jobs are available to them (Roediger 2007; Haynes

2006), the same way it determines in which parts of the city they are able to access housing. The containment of Roma in insecure and low-paid jobs, despite the recovery that brought new employment opportunities in the 2000s (Černušáková 2017; Kajanová and Kmecová 2018; Grundělová 2020), suggests that this is not a mere accident: it raises the question whether there is a functionalist relationship between structural racism and capitalism.

In the Czech Republic, racial capitalism manifests both economically—with capital being able to rely on racialized workers as a reserve army of labor—and politically, as exclusion of Roma from the white proletariat mediates class conflict. In his analysis of British racial capitalism, Sivanandan (1982) proposes that it is the state that created hierarchies on the basis of race and nationality, and helped trade unions to institutionalize divisive racist practices within the labor movement (Sivanandan 1982, 113). Although post-socialist Ostrava differs in important respects from post-colonial Britain, the anxieties of the state over Roma, who are racialized by state policies, make some tenets of Sivanandan's argument relevant for the present work. In matters of work and social security, the core transformation of the post-socialist state has been a significant reduction of its “redistribution” policies in favor of the aggressive pursuit of labor market participation (Chelcea and Druţă 2016; Smith and Rochovská 2007). As I shall illustrate in the following section, the state's labor market policies, along with the education system that continues to segregate Roma from the early stages, serve to further institutionalize racialized hierarchies in the world of work. In Sivanandan's words, the state “made racism respectable and clinical by institutionalising it. But in doing so it also increased the social and political consequences of racism” (1982, 109). Likewise, in the Czech Republic, lawmakers and businesses have weaponized racial stereotypes to keep Roma workers in a condition of social and economic precarity—and in so doing, have raised the stakes of racist social divisions and antagonisms.

B. “Public Utility Works”: Racialization Through Workfare

In response to the long-term unemployment issues that marked the 1990s, the state developed job placement programs that aimed to facilitate workers' re-entry into the job market. As I have observed, in the case of Roma, these interventions did little to alleviate the problems of precarious employment, and instead reproduced and even aggravated the racialization of Roma workers.⁹ My informants most commonly raised the municipal street cleaning companies as examples of employers hiring workers in a permanent capacity. When I worked at one of them, “Clean,” I learned that the state actively referred jobseekers, mostly young and male Roma, to these companies as part of its workfare policies. Up to twenty of my colleagues at Clean, nineteen of whom were Roma, were referred to the company from the Labor Office as temporary workers with the Public Utility Work (PUW) program. The majority of them were men in their twenties; there were only four women of various ages referred to Clean by the Labor Office in April 2016.

It was evident to my informants that PUW employees had a different—lower—status than the core street cleaners. They were treated as “work-shy” or as “lacking working habits” by the management, and were generally considered to be “slackers” by the street cleaners who held employment contracts directly with the company. The foreman responsible for the PUW workers told me in an interview: “The absolute majority of them (Roma) don't

⁹ Jill Quadagno made a similar observation about the US Employment Service, responsible for assisting with job placements during the New Deal period. She noticed that the service often excluded ethnic minority clients or offered them low-paying jobs (1994, 22).

want to work. So when I recruit the new ones, I choose those who want to work . . . at least a bit.” Some of this reflected generalized assumptions about the long-term unemployed “not wanting to work,” but at Clean these assumptions appeared to carry distinctly racialized connotations. Drawing on a data set from the Czech Information System of Employment Services (“OKpráce,” in English *OKWork*) from January 2014 to January 2015, sociologists Horáková and Sirovátka (2018) noted that PUW recruits often encounter multiple disadvantages in the labor market and many of them are low-skilled (35% to 36% of the public works program participants had only primary education). According to the data, between 48.4% and 50.1% of PUW workers were previously registered as job seekers five or more times, which indicates that the program targeted the long-term, chronically unemployed (Horáková and Sirovátka 2018, 6-7).

I spent two weeks doing morning shifts with the PUW workers, and continued to visit them during their breaks after my three-month contract with Clean had ended. The first thing I noticed was the greater degree of surveillance to which they were subject, which was much more intense than while I worked with the core staff. The forewoman or the foreman would pay regular visits to check on us, sometimes instructing us to focus on areas that needed particular attention, other times monitoring us to ensure that we would street-clean properly. It became clear that rather than being recognized as a real job, the company perceived the work as a pre-entry point to securing a longer-term contract. “We test them here and only those who ‘pass’ are considered for the employment contract,” the foreman of the PUW program explained to me about the recruitment procedure. This was indeed how many of the younger core staff at Clean got their jobs, I learned. One of them, Rosta, a Roma man in his early 20s, told me that he started as a PUW worker when he was 18. After three months, the foreman offered him a contract for one year. As management had no problems with him, at the end of the year he was awarded a permanent contract.

Figure 2. PUW street cleaners finishing a shift. Photo by author, May 2016.



However, most PUW workers did not remain at Clean for very long, and dropped out of the program one by one. When I chatted with a few former colleagues who were core staff at Clean later in my fieldwork, they told me that none of those who had started in the spring remained. There was an entirely new PUW cohort at that time, and my former colleagues had a very low opinion of them. Every year, the PUW foreman would identify two to three workers who were transferred from the program to the core group and eventually employed by the company. The first year, these workers would be paid by the Labor Office, which conveniently for the company effectively subsidized the costs of employing them. But for those few workers who had begun work at PUW and wanted to stay, this arrangement created serious distress. During my time at Clean, a colleague, Žaneta, was employed for a year through PUW, cleaning municipal apartments once the tenants had moved out. She was 55 and wanted to continue doing the job as her husband was on disability benefits and she was the only breadwinner. In early March, when Clean was recruiting the new PUW cohort to start in April, Žaneta was worried that they would simply replace her with someone else so that the company would not have to pay her wages.

Apart from myself, there were only three women working as street cleaners and another three women who later joined us through the PUW program. This contrasted sharply with the 17 male street workers and another 12 or more employed through the PUW. When I asked the PUW foreman why most of the workers were male, he said that he did not have a bigger changing room to accommodate more female workers. Then he added that it was obvious that some people [meaning, I inferred, women and old people] would struggle with the work—either physically or because of its stigma. “I won’t take those who would have a problem [and feel ashamed]. . . . For example, I would have asked you if you wouldn’t feel ashamed to do the job [of a street cleaner],” he told me. I came across similar comments about a sense of shame, the appropriateness of a job, and whiteness throughout my time at Clean and at the recycling company, Waste. During my early days, when we were sweeping the streets around the main square, one of my colleagues at Clean asked me if I felt embarrassed doing the job. She later told me that people, especially young and white people, occasionally make fun of the street cleaners.

In her research in which she interviewed both job seekers and Labor Office case workers, Gřundělová (2020) observed that Roma are often targeted by workfare policies due to institutional racism. She concluded that Czech workfare “is often aimed at young men from the Roma ethnic group, who are usually viewed as passive, or dependent on social benefits and working illegally.” (Gřundělová 2020, 16). A notable feature of the PUW was its implementation through a sanctioning mechanism. Although the current social system model in the Czech Republic has slightly departed from “radical workfare,” which the country implemented in 2007–2011, it still emphasizes obligations and sanctions for the job seekers. Under the PUW scheme (valid at the time of my fieldwork in 2016), job seekers who had been registered for the program for more than six months, and had not expressly rejected referral to a PUW employer, were obligated to accept a job upon a referral of the Labor Office, provided the employer accepted them. If they refused, they would be removed from the registry and their welfare benefits would be reduced for a period of up to six months to “existential minimum,” an amount well below subsistence level (Immervoll and Knotz, 2018, 42). A removal from the job seekers’ registry is a form of punishment with far-reaching financial consequences—as the state even stops paying the health insurance for those who have been removed. Like Wacquant’s description of the elements of the penal state that turn the remaining welfare services into forms of

surveillance and control (2009, 58-59), this policy of workfare not only marginalizes workers, but subjects them to new forms of institutionalized discipline.

III. Roma Experiences with Racism

The Roma I worked with often spoke about racism that they had experienced at work in various forms and intensity. Racism in hiring practices, racial prejudice on the job, and racialized animosity of white workers towards Roma all contributed to labor fragmentation, which in effect contained Roma in low-paid jobs.

The first instances of racial discrimination that I observed were rejections by prospective employers. During the first month of my field work, a friend and Roma rights activist, Katka, introduced me to a family with three adult daughters. One of them, 26-year-old Jana, was looking for a job, so I offered to look at her resume and then spent a day in February going to various prospective employers. As we worked on the resume, I learned that Jana went to a special school for pupils with mild mental disabilities. It is still a common practice for school systems in the Czech Republic and other countries in the region to send ethnic minority children who show difficulties in coping with their schoolwork to undergo a psychological assessment, which often results in placement in a school or class with reduced educational programming (Amnesty International 2015). As we were walking to a print shop to get the hard copies of the resume, Jana told about her job-seeking experience. She said McDonald's would not consider her application and told her they did not hire "the Gypsies." The same experience repeated in another company where she was referred by a job center: "I'm sorry but we don't take the Gypsies," Jana recalled the delivery of the rejection. During our job hunt, we first went to Tesco, where we left the resume with a staff member at an information desk. In a local hospital, we found out that their cleaning was outsourced to a company, which I visited the next day and left my phone number. We also applied to a supermarket chain, Kaufland. I never heard back from any of these employers. In April, I met Jana's sister, who told me that she was two months pregnant and had stopped looking for a job.

Among my informants, there was a widespread and distinct sense that only a limited number of employers accepted Roma workers. One afternoon in June I attended a barbeque in the neighborhood of Údol. We were sitting around a table in a back yard behind tenements with some of the families that I regularly visited and their neighbors. Among them were the parents of one of my colleagues at Clean, Damian. His mother, Zuza, told us about her work situation:

I work in a workshop where they produce wooden doors. It's quite a hard work so I tried to find something else. My colleague's mother works at Steel [the steel works] and one day I learned from him that they were looking for a cleaner. He said he will ask his mother and I was hopeful to get an interview. . . . But then his mother said that they didn't want to hire a Roma.

As he listened to her account, her husband relayed that the situation had been better under communism. I wanted to know what he meant, and he explained that racism was less obvious. "It's been always there but people wouldn't dare to express it." There was a general consent around the table about this. Another woman, Sara, added a story about when she was looking for a job as a cleaner and her husband, Roman, gave her a lift to the meeting with the prospective employer.

He saw us approaching . . . he clearly wasn't expecting Roma so at first he simply wouldn't pay attention to us. Once he realized it was us, he came up with an excuse that they wanted somebody to work full time. But I insisted and asked if it would be possible to do the job part-time and eventually he agreed. Later that day, he called and explained that they wouldn't be able to offer me the job. After that he immediately hung up.

Othering and racism were experienced strongly and painfully by those of my informants who managed to get a job in predominantly white work environments. Monika, whose family I frequented throughout the research, used to work for an NGO and complained about the double-speak and hypocrisy of her non-Roma colleagues.

Sometimes they would smile at the [Roma] clients but the moment they left, they would talk about them as if they were idiots. . . . Sometimes they treated them like that to their face. . . . Once this woman came and my colleague patronized her so much.

Monika recalled how uncomfortable she felt as a Roma to have to witness this encounter. A colleague at *Clean*, Marta told me about her previous workplace, a hospital where she worked as one of the cleaners and was the only Roma.

They didn't know I was a Roma and they would make jokes in the changing room. During the floods [in 1997] one of them said it was a pity that all the cunts [the Roma] didn't drown.

Marta later took her “revenge” and told them she was a Roma over a beer.

Recollections and references to the past that arose in these conversations about experiences with racism at workplaces were marked with a significant degree of nostalgia. Most of my middle-aged informants felt that during communism no one made them feel they were “Gypsies,” the racialized and targeted Other. The scholarship on Roma in socialist Czechoslovakia, however, indicates that, although integrated, Roma workers were also historically on the margins of the labor force (Davidová 1995; Barany 2002) and on the receiving end of employers’ negative stereotyping (Human Rights Watch 1992). In the 1990s and beyond, Roma were particularly affected by the rise of unemployment as a result of the post-socialist closure of factories, mines, and agricultural cooperatives. Stewart (2002) attributes this to the socialist regimes’ educational policies towards the Roma, which resulted in their over-representation in low-paid, labor-intensive jobs. While the point that Roma worked mostly in menial jobs and were discriminated against in access to education was made also by others (Pavelčíková 1999; Charta 77 1978), unlike these earlier accounts Stewart’s (2002) explanation appears reductive as it underestimates the power of racialization within the labor market.¹⁰ To date, policy makers and some academics alike continue to underplay the role of racialization and direct and indirect racial discrimination of public policies. Meanwhile, racialization and racism continue to be widespread—and racializing discourse shapes and deforms understanding of aspects of Roma life, including employment.

During my fieldwork, I interviewed three charity workers who were involved in a project that aimed to facilitate a return of unemployed individuals to work, and who were known for working with Roma clients. They laid out the employment options they present to the job-seekers: *Clean* or “Public Transport Company” (cleaning jobs); *Broom* (a cleaning

¹⁰ Stewart states that “There is little evidence of racial discrimination per se, although there is a tendency among employers to use Romany ethnicity as a marker for lack of schooling and other negative attributes” (2002, 134).

company); job agencies (jobs on assembly lines); and a construction company in one of the neighboring towns. The three charity workers admitted that there are some sectors where they were told by the owners or the management that they did not take Roma. According to them, this was particularly the case with small companies, restaurants, and some job agencies. One of the charity workers told me that these employers “sometimes also reject applicants because they are socially vulnerable: ‘Even a cleaner is part of a [company’s] image.’” The charity workers went on to say that clients were not happy that the Labor Office had referred them to the charity either, as they were already working, albeit informally.

IV. Informal Labor

Working informally, without adequate contracts and without workers’ rights guarantees such as pension contributions, sick pay, paid holidays, and other protections, was generally widespread in Ostrava, and not limited to the Roma. The reasons for this were complex and involved employers’ preference—they did not have any extra administrative costs or liability for injuries incurred by informal workers. Workers’ individual situations also played a role; debts and family obligations in particular made regular shift work impractical or impossible to secure. Compulsory debt repayment deductions made workers’ net wages drop to the minimum. For indebted workers, there was little incentive to do the strenuous shift work on assembly lines when they brought home almost the same (minimum) wages as street cleaners. Many workers in regular employment were disqualified from welfare benefits as a result of legally sanctioned income thresholds. Informal work, albeit lacking labor rights protection and stability, made better economic sense for several of my informants. Even so, many Roma workers were obligated to combine income from labor benefits, and creditors to get by. A single mother from Údol explained to me that it did not make sense for her to get a job with a salary of 11,000 CZK (\$510 USD)—a typical salary at Clean—as she would not be able to survive without acquiring (further) debts. Most of her income went to food and clothes for her children.

One of the chronic problems with informal work agreements was that they significantly misrepresented the actual number of hours worked per month (very often it was less than a fourth of the actual hours). The reason why these agreements were used was that the law permitted job seekers on state benefits to work for up to 40 hours a month without penalties or clawbacks. Unemployed contractors were technically required to submit a copy of their contracts to the Labor Office, which then in its turn was supposed to inspect the work sites. Informal work in recycling and construction, two sectors that my research focused on, involved the risk of being caught by the Labor Office’s routine inspection, and also an increasingly personal risk to one’s health and safety. This risk ranged from poor health and safety precautions and protection of workers at Waste, described below, to the deaths of informal construction workers, which to my knowledge did not result in any negligence proceedings against the companies. Even though both workers and capital had their reasons to opt for this form of work arrangement, in the end it worked to the advantage of employers, and exacerbated workers’ vulnerability. Indeed, informalization as a process typically results in a high return for capital and low return for labor (Clover 2016, 156).

The greater share of informal work carried out by my informants was undertaken strictly as a wage-earning practice, not as a community or kinship service. This observation stands in sharp contrast with other studies of informal work in the United Kingdom, which found that “the majority of paid informal work . . . is undertaken for kin, neighbors and friends

and involves social objectives rather than a strictly economic utilitarian rationality” (Williams and Windenbank 2000, 289). Drawing on structured interviews in 400 households in “deprived neighborhoods” in two British cities, these authors argued that informal work was mostly carried out for those to whom the workers had closer social relations and involved a degree of reciprocity and services at significantly cheaper prices. My findings drawing on ethnography resonate more with the forms and pull factors of informal labor mapped out by Wacquant (2008) in the context of US ghettos marked by chronic underemployment. The difference with the Czech context is in the role of the state, on which capital was able to rely to subsidize workers’ wages through limited welfare benefits, and the relative dependence of workers on informal labor in Ostrava. While Wacquant’s “urban outcasts” had “little choice but to ‘moonlight’ on jobs, to ‘hustle’ for money through a diversity of schemes, or to engage in illegal commerce of various kinds” (2008, 62), my informants had access to *some* formal jobs.

A. Informal Work and Gender

Overall, informal work appeared to be the only option for some of my female informants, due to childcare that clashed with shift work as well as indebtedness. The household finances of families in Údol typically consisted of a combination of one (often male) dominant salary, welfare benefits, (often female) income from informal labor, and, in many cases, also credit. Reliance on informal work for women with young children was an adaptation strategy to both their gendered roles and also to the racially oppressive labor market restricting Roma to low-paying jobs. Roma families often discussed the way they were forced to navigate these challenges. In August, Nina, whose flat I frequently visited over six months, planned to start working again at the recycling line. She described the working conditions as horrible and unsafe, with rats running around, a bad smell, dangerous items in the waste, and an unfair boss. But Nina had no choice but to work at night, so that she could take care of her son and tend to the home during the day.

When I told Nina’s partner Ivan about a job opening on an assembly line, his first concern was the working hours, from 7:45 a.m. to 4:15 p.m. “That’s not going to be possible . . . Who would take care of our son?” Their son was 8 years old and in the second grade of primary school. Ivan worked afternoon shifts and could walk him to school in the mornings, but there would still be a problem with childcare in the afternoon as Nina would not be back in Údol until after 5 p.m. These difficulties were compounded by her debts, which made jobs with a secure employment contract and regular working hours inaccessible to her. “Currently I’m on a sick leave until the end of September,” Nina told me in August. She also considered work at the chocolate packaging factory in another district of Ostrava before the end of the summer. Childcare was again a problem, however, since Ivan thought he might be transferred from afternoon to morning shifts, which would prevent them from bringing their son to school in the morning.

Monika, who was in her forties, had two children, a teenager and a young school-aged child. She also raised family obligations as the reason why she could not work on an assembly line. When we started discussing the details of the prospective job, such as its working hours and location, it turned out that Monika would not be able to commute to the industrial zone and start working at 7:45 a.m., because she needed to drop off her young son at school. “The only solution would be to put him into the nursery (*družina*) before the teaching starts.” That would mean extra expenses and much earlier mornings for her son. Monika used to work in a charity but left the job in April, partially because of childcare obligations, which she did not want to completely delegate to her mother.

Nina's and Monika's situations were not unique. According to a survey that the school director of a Roma-only school in Údol conducted among the pupils for my research, about 90 per cent of fathers worked (informally) as construction workers, while about the same number of mothers were unemployed. Indeed, the experiences of Nina and Monika show that under racial capitalism, social reproduction requires additional input which typically comes from female household members. What I have understood through these conversations is that due to racism and racialization, "homemaking" was a complex process for many Roma women, as it involved dealing both with reproductive labor and creating a space for "emotional recuperation in the face of dehumanisation, depletion and racist terror" (Bhattacharyya 2018, 44). Informal labor was not a matter of *choice* but a necessity for Roma women with school-aged children. The position in which Roma women find themselves is an outcome of the intersection of various forms of oppression: exploitation, patriarchy, and racism (Vincze 2013).

B. Down and in Waste

The waste management industry used to employ many Roma workers during the socialist period, at that time mostly as dustbin collectors. "It was a Gypsy company," one informant once told me about a state-owned company in the industry. But the company was privatized in 1995—and as several of my informants recalled, this resulted in the termination of many Roma workers. This coincided with the period of mine closures and soaring unemployment in Ostrava. As masses of workers were left without jobs in the early 1990s, kinship and social capital have become important factors capable of facilitating access to scarce employment opportunities. The Roma I spoke to during my research considered dustbin collecting a good job with stable and relatively good income, but completely inaccessible to them. They would often say that "only the gajos [the whites]" worked there. One of the former Roma dustbin collectors recalled a linear sequence of events in the 1990s: "They first sold the state company, then fired all the Gypsies, then increased wages, and finally hired gajos." Another former worker added that as unemployment was growing in Ostrava and the broader region, the leadership of the waste management company "wanted to secure jobs for their friends and relatives." (Černušáková 2017).

My colleague at Clean, Ondro, used to work for the dustbin collectors and was laid off in 1994. "They fired us in groups, not all at once. [First] they turned the business into a limited company, increased the salaries, and now it's a family business. A lot of young guys who have trained as smiths, for example, work there. It's more profitable. We [the street cleaners] earn 13,000 CZK (\$603 USD) with overtime. They earn 19,000 CZK (\$882 USD) without overtime." While transition-related processes such as the privatization of state enterprises also affected white workers, social capital linked to their whiteness seemed to have enabled them to secure and negotiate better pay and working conditions than those available to Roma workers.

The jobs in waste management that were accessible to my informants were at the city's recycling facilities. There were a few of them at the outskirts of the city. I got a job at Waste by directly contacting the manager, upon the advice of one of my informants who used to work there. Once I started the job, I learned from colleagues that many of them got their jobs at Waste through a middleman, who also helped with all the necessary paperwork, such as the fit-for-work medical certificate. Most of my former colleagues and acquaintances—Roma and non-Roma alike—were disapproving, however, of my choice

of Waste as a workplace, even for research purposes. Ondro said: “I understand that you want to try everything, but you really can’t find something more suitable? [Waste] is the last resort for those who can’t find anything else. It’s like: You are 40 and you have [only] primary education, who is going to take you?”

Waste did have the reputation of being at the bottom of the hierarchy of low-paid, hard, and dirty jobs. “It’s disgusting, there is a horrible smell and rats,” Mila, another street-cleaning colleague, told me, shaking her head, when I first expressed my intention to work at Waste. Several others thought the job presented health risks.

I worked five shifts at Waste, as a conveyor belt operator. It was a very hot July, and the warehouses where the conveyor belts were placed, as well as the area around, smelled of disintegrating waste. There were six of us separating waste, which arrived on two parallel conveyor belts: PET bottles, Tetra packs, and transparent and colored films. The first week I worked afternoon shifts, from 2 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. with one 30-minute break.

My introduction to the job took about five minutes and did not include any health or safety instructions, nor were we told what time to come to the next day’s shift. I learned these details from my coworkers. The white frontwoman responsible for our shift explained to us at the beginning which items to recycle, and offered us the option to wear a face mask to protect our mouths and noses. No one wore a face mask in our crew. Unlike at Clean, there was no space to hide and take a bit of rest; we worked nonstop during the entire shift, except for the lunch break. Occasionally large items, such as shards of metal or boards, came at us on the conveyor belt, evoking the dystopian ambience of 1980s cinema. It was not so much the smell, which I got used to quite quickly, but the fear of sharp objects such as needles that made me particularly anxious: Ostrava is considered a city with higher-than-average use of drugs, particularly crystal meth which is both smoked and used intravenously (Černý and Szotáková 2015). My coworkers told me that I simply needed to be careful.

The other operators at Waste were a mix of Czech and Slovak Roma (the majority of workers); four male Ukrainians, who worked mainly as drivers of various vehicles; one Cuban man; and a few white Czechs and Slovaks. In my crew, there was Blažena, a Roma woman in her late fifties who used to work as a street cleaner through PUW in a town close to Ostrava. She could only work there for one year (the period during which the Labor Office pays the salaries of job-seekers), after which she stayed at home waiting for another PUW call for applications. When the call came, she was unsuccessful. “They told me I should wait three years, because they have a lot of people.” Although her husband had a good-enough pension and was earning some extra money as a construction worker, Blažena did not want to stay at home. “I would get bored. Cooking, cleaning and shopping . . . that takes only a few hours, what would I do with the rest of the time?” When she learned about the opportunity at Waste, she and her daughter decided to try it together. They did not like the forewoman or her friend, the “right-hand,” who were both white. Blažena thought that the forewoman’s bonuses depended on whether we met the daily production target. She was indeed rushing us and always wanted to have the conveyor belt on high speed. “Faster, faster [move] your little hands!” At one point, Blažena complained, albeit not very loudly, that such treatment bordered on bullying. During very hot days, the workers were entitled to additional ten-minute breaks. I missed a shift on the hottest day and Blažena later told me that the forewoman would not allow them the extra break. “She wanted to meet the targets, so she pushed us, saying that our warehouse is less hot than the large one where workers work on the elevated floor.”

Waste offered the conveyor belt operators a minimum salary, and the only way to earn more was to work overtime. “Take as many 12-hour shifts as possible,” one of my colleagues told me. These long shifts were available during the weekends and most workers were interested in taking them. But there was also an expectation from management that everyone would take them only once in a while. Blažena told me about a young man who had recently stated that he did not want to work weekends, and the manager fired him.

C. Construction: Build

I now turn to the working conditions of informal construction workers. The 1990s in the Czech Republic produced a class of entrepreneurs in the construction industry, some of whom would employ Roma workers. “Yes, the mines got closed but there were a lot of new jobs in construction, especially digging,” a worker who moved to Bohumín, a town north of Ostrava, from Slovakia in 1994, told me (Černušáková 2017). These entrepreneurs were mostly small operators who learned about work opportunities through word of mouth, but some of their businesses grew to medium size, gained a reputation, and got access to bigger (often foreign) companies, which outsourced to them parts of larger construction or infrastructure improvement projects. The smaller companies were then given “gigs” such as excavating the gas or water pipes in the main roads, while specialized gas companies dealt with the pipe replacements. This practice corresponds with the observation of Lillie and Wagner (2015), who examined the operation of construction companies in four countries—Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK—and observed that “large companies function as main contractors or as building service providers while small and medium-size companies assume the role of the subcontractors and provide the majority of workers” (Lillie and Wagner 2015, 166-167).

Tom Brass (2017) notes that, “out of the sight of government regulation,” subcontracted production (in his case, agricultural production) often uses unfree labor as a result of de-proletarianization. The worker is no longer able “to withdraw their labour-power, either absolutely by going on strike, or relatively by selling their commodity to the highest bidder” (Brass 2017, 213-214). This points towards the specific vulnerabilities of informal construction workers, members of the relative surplus population. In 2001, the International Labour Organization (ILO) published a report mapping the construction industry in the twentieth century. The report noted a global trend toward outsourcing construction work and/or the use of casual labor, focusing on examples from Brazil, Kenya, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and Spain, among others (ILO 2001). In the case of the UK, “self-employed labor comprised under 30 per cent of the construction workforce [in 1977], but by 1995 the level had risen to over 60 per cent. The proportion of manual workers who are self-employed and work for labor contractors is even higher” (ILO 2001, 20). This has significantly undermined collective bargaining which, as I will now discuss, was replaced by informal arrangements and negotiations between the workers and their bosses.

Figure 3. Roma construction workers digging a road in the center of Ostrava. Photo by author, May 2016.



I spent the spring and summer of 2016 talking to and observing workers at Build, a company run by a white man named Zdeněk. He was an example of a successful mid-size entrepreneur in construction. My informants considered him a “self made man” who had managed to become a multimillionaire. Due to his success and skillful treatment of his workers, they looked up to him as an inspiration and a role model, as well as a boss. His reputation involved stories about his generosity (especially before Christmas, when he gave his workers presents that included large bottles of whiskey), but also tales about his consumption. During my summer in Ostrava, people were talking about his purchase of a Rolls Royce. In December, when his workers were asked to stay home because there were no jobs, they were discussing his holiday in Thailand. But the two most important things for his company’s reputation among Roma workers were: he *pays* his workers; and he *pays on time*.

1. Asymmetries of Power and Working Conditions

Between March and November, the shifts at Build ranged between 10–12 hours long, usually six days a week, with an hour break for lunch. When I observed the workers during one of my afternoon shifts at Clean in May, they worked intensively and fast, in comparison with my slow afternoon street-cleaning pace. The construction workers I spoke to during my research mostly worked informally, and unless they worked long overtimes, their monthly earnings would range between 16,000 to 20,000 CZK (\$745 to \$931 USD).¹¹

¹¹ The hourly wage of construction workers ranged from 80 to 90 CZK (\$3.71 to \$4.17 USD).

When we discussed the issue of wages, most of my informants initially significantly exaggerated their actual income. For example, at Waste a colleague told me that his father was earning as much as 5,000 CZK (\$233 USD) a day as a construction worker. Another colleague at Clean, with whom I had only two conversations, told me that construction workers could earn 2,000 CZK (\$93 USD) a day. Lukáš worked with a crew that included his son and a friend. They worked on an ad hoc basis and were called in whenever the company needed workers. The crew was paid by the cubic meter rather than by the hour, and Lukáš said he earned 2,000 CZK, sometimes even 3000 CZK (\$140 USD) per day. However, his work lacked stability and there were periods when he would not get any work—for example, for several weeks in August. In the end, his son and his friend got a referral from the Labor Office and started to work in the steel works in the late summer, which provided more regular income.

As I later learned from other construction workers, the real hourly rate was between 70 to 100 CZK (\$3.20 to \$4.60 USD), and their daily income varied from 700 to 1,000 CZK (\$32 to \$46 USD) if they worked 10-hour shifts. While this arrangement worked in the spring and summer, informal construction workers struggled during the winter months (from December to February) when there was no work due to cold weather, or during periods when “their” company did not have any work for them. As a result, they relied on additional modest welfare benefits. In July, the Build crew finished a major job, and the company did not have work for them for four weeks. One of the workers, Radek, said that his foreman told him: “Oh well, you will manage without work for a month, won’t you?” In such situations, informal construction workers relied on their networks—friends or smaller companies—to do odd jobs that got them through the period when their “main” employer did not have work for them.

These informal work arrangements had several other downsides. For example, workers who were unfairly treated or dismissed had no remedy. Moreover, companies had no responsibility in cases of injury or death—the possibility that they might be sued for negligence was not part of the debate at all—and, because they were registered as job seekers with the Labor Office, workers did not contribute to social security and thus were not contributing towards their retirement.¹² Despite these problems, some workers preferred to work informally. One of them, a 40-year-old named Honzo who worked for a company other than Build, said he preferred it to being regularly employed, as it allowed him to supplement his income with welfare benefits. He had worked ten hours a day, six days a week, for 18 years (Černušáková 2017). Because for all those years he had worked informally, he was not entitled to annual leave and had no pension scheme.

¹² The legal threshold for pension entitlement is a minimum of 30 working years. See <http://www.duchody-duchodci.cz/doba-pojisteni-starobni-duchod.php>.

Figure 4. A memorial plate at the entrance to the office of one of the construction companies, featuring the names of construction workers who died while working on projects for the company. Photo by author, July 2016.



My colleagues at Clean once introduced me to a man who was a former worker at Build. He said he decided to quit and move to a competitor because the company had very long shifts. “It’s not a life. You work until late evening, then sleep and repeat the same in the morning. No time for family and children. . . . [The company] used to be different in the past. He [Zdeněk] would make sure that we had something [for us] to do also during the winter months. We would do demolition works. But now that he is a millionaire, it doesn’t make sense for him to accept small contracts.”

At Build, the workers seemed to have a familial relationship with the bosses, and any collective action for their rights and against the company was practically out of the question. Nevertheless, there were times when they felt they were treated unfairly. In early August, a group of workers left to work on a construction job in the town of Lonzo, about three hours away from Ostrava. Monika’s husband was among them. What was supposed to be a two-week job was extended to over a month, with only a short weekend break in the middle. Monika was very unhappy about the entire arrangement, including the fact that the men only got an advance and not their salary while they were away. They were told they would get paid only once they finished the job.

This extended stay in Lonzo created additional costs for the workers’ families. Monika explained that had her husband worked in Ostrava instead of Lonzo, they could have saved money by preparing breakfast and dinners jointly at home. Later, I learned from one of the Lonzo workers that he had worked over 300 hours during the month there. These and similar experiences of informal construction workers show how the asymmetries of power embedded in this type of arrangement between capital and labor translate into workers’ limited ability to negotiate their working conditions and pay. One of the reasons for the lack of contestation of such arrangement by the workers, however, was that the informality created the illusion of a degree of freedom.

2. The Friendly Face of Capital at Build

In her description of the working conditions of informal dustbin collectors (*catadores*) in Brazil, Millar (2008) notes the autonomy of the labor process, as workers were “in position to determine the schedule, pace, and intensity of their work. Furthermore, *catadores* work in the absence of any supervisor, manager or boss, and therefore, are not subjected to disciplinary practices that arose in conjunction with capitalist wage labor” (Millar 2008, 27). Although the foreman was generally present on the site with the construction workers at Build, his attitude was much more relaxed and friendly than what I witnessed at Clean or Waste. Working in the open air allowed for some engagement with people on the street, as well as cigarette breaks. Importantly, there was also a sense of camaraderie among the workers. The shifts were often long, especially if there was a deadline from the main company given to the subcontractor, but it was not uncommon for the workers to show up later than the required time of 6 a.m.¹³ There was also greater flexibility when taking (unpaid) leave: construction workers at Build would sometimes take leave on less than 24 hours’ notice. This was very different from Clean, where a 48-hour notice policy for (paid) leaves was strictly observed by the management. The flexibility at Build appeared to be a by-product of the absence of a formal employment contract. As builders worked informally, taking leave was a matter between them and their foreman and it meant a loss of income for its duration.

V. Conclusion: Racialized Workers in the Post-Socialist Context

In this article, I have presented data that show how the racialization of Roma workers operates as a vector of relative surplus population. Race is “produced” in some employment sectors: simply by doing certain jobs, workers get “othered” and racialized. In the absence of ethnically disaggregated data on unemployment, including long-term unemployment in the Czech Republic,¹⁴ my analysis relied on qualitative data gathered through ethnography.

When comparing the empirical data from my research with studies on racialization of labor from the US, I observed some similarities between the Anglo-American forms of racialized labor and the Czech experience. In both cases, overt racism and segregation were initially kept at bay politically (by the communist state in Czechoslovakia) or economically (when the economy was doing well). After deindustrialization and temporary hikes in unemployment, the recovery featured increased containment of racialized workers in low-paid jobs. There are, however, also significant differences between the operation of neoliberal capitalism in Britain and the US on one hand, and in the Czech Republic on the other. The availability of jobs in the latter—capital’s demand for labor—is determined by sustained low wages. Relatively cheap labor, indirectly subsidized by the state benefit system, has been a “selling point” used by local authorities to attract investors to Ostrava since the 2000s. As a result, there was no shortage of formal and informal work in Ostrava during the time of my field work.¹⁵ Despite the new employment opportunities, Roma

¹³ To compare, shifts started at 6 a.m. at Clean and at Waste, and at 7 a.m. in the chocolate-packaging warehouse where I worked for a few days in October 2016. The shifts in the industrial zone started at 6 a.m. or at 7:15 a.m., depending on the company.

¹⁴ The Czech authorities claim that the absence of a system for collecting racially disaggregated data is due to their obligation to protect personal data (Czech Government 2019).

¹⁵ The Czech Statistical Office reported 7.45% unemployment rate in the Moravia-Silesia region, of which Ostrava is the capital, in 2016. The rate has further dropped in the coming years to 4.44% in 2019. The rate

workers remain contained in certain sectors: construction, recycling, and street cleaning. These jobs are lower paid, present health and safety risks, and are more precarious, often offering few or no labor protections. Many of these jobs were also seasonal. In construction, demand peaked between spring and late autumn, and there was no work during the wintertime. In logistics, such as food packaging, there was a pre-Christmas peak starting in September.

Overall, because all of these companies need to be able to hire and fire workers as it suits their needs, Ostrava's Roma population presents a pool of labor at the disposal of capital. The experiences of Roma workers in Ostrava illustrate that the relative surplus population does not stand outside of capitalist work relations, but that its members circulate between forms of employment, some of which are outside formal wage labor.

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reflects job seekers registered with the Labor Office and as I will illustrate below, includes those working informally. The real unemployment rate could thus be reasonably anticipated to be lower. See Table 5.08: <https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/ceska-republika-od-roku-1989-v-cislech-aktualizovano-2882020#05>

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