

# 'Standard workers are from here, normal people': Ethnoracial closure and industrial organisation of cheap labour in the Czech Republic

**Petra Lupták Burzová**

Charles University, [petra.luptakburzova@ff.cuni.cz](mailto:petra.luptakburzova@ff.cuni.cz)

## Abstract

This paper examines ethnoracial boundaries within the context of flexible production in the Czech city of Pilsen. The goal is to discuss the conditions for the contemporary constitution of "ethnoracial subjectivities" within this particular context. The primary focus is on the ideological production of the identity of a "normal citizen" and a "standard worker", and the associated struggles to fix these definitions by establishing homogenising racialised myths of unskilled labour.

KEYWORDS: ethnoracial boundaries, Barth, ideology, migrant workers, unskilled labour, flexible production

## Introduction

Fifty years ago, when presenting ethnicity as a principle of social organisation of cultural difference, Fredrik Barth (1969: 14) stated that:

Since belonging to an ethnic category implies being a certain kind of person, having that basic identity, it also implies a claim to be judged, and to judge oneself, by those standards that are relevant to that identity. Neither of these kinds of cultural 'contents' follows from a descriptive list of cultural features or cultural differences; one cannot predict from first principles which features will be emphasized and made organizationally relevant by the actors. In other words, ethnic categories provide an organizational vessel that may be given varying amounts and forms of content in different socio/cultural systems. They may be of great relevance to behaviour, but they need not be; they may pervade all social life, or they may be relevant only in limited sectors of activity.

In his discussion of ethnic boundaries in complex "poly-ethnic" societies (1969: 17), he briefly describes those contexts in which 'ethnic categories ... pervade all so-

cial life,' contexts that make ascription and articulation of 'ethnic identity' imperative, in which it is seen as 'a status' and appears in the form of 'a series of constraints on the kind of roles an individual is allowed to play.' Under such circumstances, Barth continues, 'ethnic identity is similar to sex and rank, in that it constrains the incumbent in all his activities, not only in some defined situations':

One might thus also say that it is *imperative*, in that it cannot be disregarded and temporarily set aside by other definitions of the situations. The constraints on a person's behaviour which spring from his ethnic identity thus tend to be absolute and, in complex poly-ethnic societies, quite comprehensive; and the component moral and social conventions are made further resistant to change by being joined in stereotyped clusters as characteristics of one single identity (*ibid.*).

Bearing in mind the critical discussion sparked by the edited volume ever since its publication (especially Barth's "naturalist" view of ethnic boundary construction, see Eriksen in this volume; for other critical accounts see, e.g., Nagel 1994; Jakoubek in this volume; Jakoubek & Eriksen 2019), I concentrate in this paper on the construction of the imperativeness of ethnic identities as "kinds of persons" entailing "statuses", which I assume is a rather overlooked observation in Barth, but has nevertheless proved to have continuous relevance in the analysis of complex (post-)industrial societies in general and urban contexts in particular. Although there has been a shift toward the analysis of the state in ethnicity studies, which might seem underestimated by Barth (the point which he himself subscribes to twenty-five years after the publication of the *Introduction*, see Barth 1994), the idea of ethnic boundary maintenance contrasting with the commonsensical image of immutable (contents of) ethnic categories is still widely used in studies on ethnicity and beyond. However, the implication often made that the "cultural stuff" is irrelevant in the debate on ethnic boundary construction will be replaced in this paper by a somewhat conflicting notion (see also Cohen 2019). It is the ("cultural") definition of a national subject, which is promoted as fixed and essential by the ideology of the nation-state (and the political-economic regime of capitalism on the macrostructural level), that produces the principles for the social organisation of difference based on presumed significant differences such as "descent", "origin", "mentality" or "blood" under the contemporary condition of complex societies, nation-states and global market economy. Moreover, it is precisely the loose correspondence between definitions of identities and boundaries that enables the instrumental redefinitions of identities while fixing "ethnoracial" closure (see Wacquant 2013 for the concept of "ethnoracial closure").

This paper follows the (old but perhaps still timely) call of Katherine Verdery (cf. also, e.g., Jenkins 1996) based on the reading of Brackette Williams' important article *A class act: Anthropology and the race to nation across ethnic terrain* (1989), that to move beyond *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* yet build upon its contribution, it is useful – in the present context – to study 'the conditions that make identities more or less imperative, according to the organization and histories of the states that contain them' (Verdery 1994: 40):

Thus, Barthian ideas about ascription/self-ascription and situational manipulation would come together with current theories about the constitution of modern subjectivities and with an anthropology of the 'person', as well as with an inquiry into how the forms we call 'states' have been variously made (ibid.).

Ethnicity, as used in this text, refers to a concept of (ethnic) ideology positing the "social organisation of difference" into ethnic groups according to the principle of putative descent. Ethnicity-as-ideology explains the world as divided into interacting 'culture groups operating within common social contexts' (Cohen 1974: xi). "Ethnic group" here is thus an idea of social and economic organisation imagined as different from the political organisation of the nation. The form of the ideology, the use of the idea, as well as the difference in the definition between the idea of an ethnic group and that of the nation, vary depending on the context, its users and their particular ends and interests. The notions of ethnic group and nation emphasise not only (ethnic and national) identity, that is, a sort of socially significant similarity and sameness, but also bounded cultures peculiar to ethnic group or nation. Ethnicity-as-ideology is, in a similar manner as nationalism, bound to the discourses of the state and the organisation of state belonging and membering. As we will see below, people are often forced to member "ethnically", as "ethnic membering" is frequently made politically, socially and even economically significant, namely within contemporary urban contexts. Race in a similar manner is a concept of (racial) ideology which naturalises putative differences among people. For the purposes of this text, adjective "ethnoracial" is used to refer to ideological notions of radical and essential difference of the "ethnic Other".

The aim of this chapter is not to review the theoretical debate on ethnic boundary construction (for the purposes of such reviews see, e.g., Eriksen 1993; Jenkins 2008; Jakoubek 2016) but to examine the conditions for the contemporary constitution of "ethnic subjectivities" within the particular context of Pilsen, a Czech (post-)industrial city, focusing on the ideological production of the identity of "normal citizen" and the associated struggles to fix its definition by establishing homogenising racialised myths (cf. Williams 1989) of unskilled labour. More specifically, the key question is how the production of ethnic categories within the Czech (post-)industrial urban context combines with class to reproduce the seemingly fixed division of social space that secures both cheap labour and "bounded" social closure. The study is based on ethnographic research in factories (assembly plants) and among former industrial workers conducted in the Pilsen region since 2016. In addition to ethnography, the author draws upon more than thirty in-depth interviews held with former inhabitants of workers' colony Karlov based in the city of Pilsen<sup>1</sup> and on two ethnographic studies of workers' dormitories.<sup>2</sup>

## **The city of assembly plants**

The modern history of the city of Pilsen is deeply entangled with the rise of factories, most notably the Skoda Works since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Burzová et al. 2013a). This paper focuses on processes spurred by socioeco-

<sup>1</sup> Interviews were realised with Ilona Dvořáková, National Archives, Czech Republic.

<sup>2</sup> One of them realised with social geographer Hannah Schling.

conomic transformations in the 1990s and the establishment of a new industrial zone named “Borská pole” built at the location of a former airport in 1995-1996, hosting predominantly assembly plants of transnational corporations. The industrial zone provokes ambiguous representations in the urban discourse. Politicians often refer to its construction as the salvation of the city’s economy after the chaotic privatisation of the Skoda Works in line with the official urban ideology of growth (cf. Burzová 2014; see also Molotch 1976):

Pilsen was lucky to have visionaries in the beginning of the 1990s who understood its potential. Thanks to the project of the industrial park, our city has something to build on (Interview with a high-ranking official, October 2012).

Other voices, my informants who worked in the Skoda Works before 1989 among them, have been highly sceptical about the project and its putative benefits to the city, stressing the foreign ownership, its assembly (unproductive) character and, most significantly, the recruitment of foreigners by job agencies (cf. Andrijasevic & Sacchetto 2016), their concentration in workers’ dormitories, and the problems associated with their growing presence in Pilsen.

Migrant workers, especially those contracted by employment agencies as unskilled labour, have been overtly stigmatised ever since the construction of the industrial zone. In both official and popular urban discourses, they have been represented as outcasts, criminals, brutes, sexual offenders, alcohol and drug abusers, “parasites” transmitting dangerous diseases, such as tuberculosis and hepatitis, and polluting urban public spaces. Bulgarian-, Romanian-, Russian- or Ukrainian-speaking people are often perceived as embodying such stereotypical images and workers’ dormitories are usually seen as sociospatial manifestations of all such evils, which is usually underlined by the material character of the buildings (although the majority of migrant workers are not concentrated in such “socially excluded localities”, see Přidalová & Hasman 2017). These are typically residual spaces and constructions from the early industrial era as well as state socialism that can be traced across the Czech Republic (cf. Schling 2017). Very often, they are on the material as well as symbolic downgrade caused by disinvestment and politics of segregation leading to high concentrations of vulnerable populations (sometimes leading to virtual ghettoisation, see, e.g., Růžička 2012; Sýkora et al. 2015). In the popular press, these places are frequently represented as no-go areas, securitised as dangerous places and subjected to repressive measures, and they are typically racialised (the most vulnerable groups to racialisation being the Roma or so-called Gypsies, cf. Budilová-Jakoubek 2009, 2014, 2019; Jakoubek 2018; Lupták 2017, Lupták et al. 2013; Walach 2016).

In recent decades, the “dormitory” (*ubytovna*) has emerged as a distinct sociospatial form inhabited by Roma as well as migrant workers. The dormitories are characteristically situated in physically or symbolically segregated residual disinvested spaces owned by private profit-seeking actors. There is no significant permanent police presence, but the spaces are represented as subjected to strict policing, with numerous raids focusing on “illegal migrants” taking place, especially during electoral campaigns. Other forms of state intervention are practically absent (even social workers are often denied access),

except for the depersonalised flow of housing and welfare benefits for the inhabitants who are eligible – the money is however almost automatically collected by the owners of the dormitory. The inhabitants are subjected to complex, strict, but also unusual rules varying across the dormitories, regulating spheres of human life that would otherwise be unregulated in a manner that would not be acceptable in any other space.

## **'Every weekend, there is a fight'**

The Pilsen district of Karlov is one such complex product of macrostructural transformations driven by changing economic regimes, as briefly described above. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was constructed by the Skoda Works to provide housing for the company's workers (see Burzová et al. 2013a). Originally, it was perceived as a good place to live within the context of the housing crisis caused by industrialisation and urbanisation, similar to many other cities across the world. Planned as a part of a new urban district (which was however never actually built), its location in the close vicinity to the factory and at the periphery of the city led to sociospatial seclusion and a rather rural character of the district, which is something the former inhabitants often point out, saying they virtually lived "in the countryside", making Karlov in their memories the "perfect place to raise your children in" as opposed to today's (perceived) alienated and hostile city. The relative isolation and class homogeneity led to the birth of "a community" (*Karlováci* – "Karlovers") whose members have continued to meet regularly ever since the demolition of the workers colony in the late 1980s and who try to promote Karlov as a space worth remembering within the official urban memory which today valorises the early industrial period and its material constructions (see Burzová et al. 2013b).

Despite the residues of the early industrial Karlov and the workers' colony as a physical space (there are two buildings from that period still standing, and the toponyms are preserved – "Karlov" itself, as well as some of the names of the original streets etc.), those who take part in the "community of remembering", deny the place's existence today. 'Karlov doesn't exist anymore,' is a phrase many of them repeat. And some of them, although articulating place-specific identity of Karlovers, refuse to visit the spot today. The distancing language they use to explain their attitude toward the place is the language of ethnicity, race, and class, viewing the appearance of the place as the symptom of the contemporary disorder: 'It used to be so beautiful, now it is dirty and awful.' Their discourse is also firmly embedded in media representations of (in)security: 'Read the news, it is very dangerous there, I am afraid to pass by, even by car ... No one goes there, just the police or ambulance...'. The carriers of disorder and insecurity are the present inhabitants, especially "the workers". These workers, as the informants often add to explain, being former workers themselves, are different from what they used to be, they are dangerous foreigners with poor work ethics, no moral values, violent because of "their blood" or "East European mentality".

Today, in the dominant discourse of the city, Karlov is a problematic locality due to the several dormitories inhabited by migrant workers represented as East European foreigners (of foreigners from "the East"). In fact, "foreigners" and "workers" are sometimes used as synonyms, and one can hear people use the word "worker" (*dělník*) without

adjective as a substitute for various ethnic labels. The official urban policies to counter the alleged problem with rising crime range from investment and industrial development (thus a new Pilsen central bus depot was built in Karlov at the very spot of the former early industrial workers' colony) to harsh policing (present inhabitants face regular ticket inspections, identity checks, immigration police raids, etc.). In 2017, the place became a site of spectacular inspections by Minister of Interior accompanied by the police president, the president of the region, the mayor, and a group of policemen, which attracted considerable media attention. When asked by an activist why they organise such expensive raids which only further stigmatise the exploited workers, the minister responded that they need to prepare for the arrival of many more migrant workers and make sure that children are not afraid in the streets,<sup>3</sup> a statement echoed in his official proclamation that 'We will not tolerate yelling at Czech women after drinking cheap wine, we have to secure that the children of Pilseners are safe when they go home in the evening.'<sup>4</sup> Regularly, Karlov is used as a symbol in such ritual language of politicians to legitimise the social order, rising budgets for security measures as well as of the success of the municipality to counter the negative consequences of labour migration (as well as its preparedness for any future threat posed by the presence of "terrorists among the refugees").

The dormitories are perceived as among the most dangerous in the city with frequent violent conflicts and even cases of murder. They are inhabited by people of various nationalities, there are Czech citizens there and among them people perceived as Roma, others are mostly of Slovak, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, Romanian, Polish or Vietnamese citizenship. Many of the inhabitants are hired by employment agencies to work in one of the industrial zone's plants, some of them are unemployed, there are also old age pensioners and families with children. Living standards in the dormitories are very low (see the linked photo gallery, endnote 3): the buildings themselves are panel constructions located in the area of a car-repair shop, there are mould and bedbugs in the rooms, little hotplates in the corridors instead of kitchens and just a few bathrooms and toilets for the hundreds of inhabitants. There are no common rooms, no benches in front of the buildings; people spend their time in their rooms or cooking in the corridors. Rules are quite strict, and the owner's communication very impersonal (owners usually communicate via posters with bans and warnings such as: 'No guests allowed in the rooms'). The administrators are often absent and are hostile when present. Inhabitants are informally forbidden to talk to the media, researchers, or other agencies about the conditions inside the dormitories.

The daily routine is determined by shifts in the assembly plants which are routinely conflicting with the shifts of one's neighbour. The (most often low-skilled) work is very boring yet exhausting, both physically and emotionally, as the following quotations from informal interviews illustrate:

---

<sup>3</sup> The author was present at the spot.

<sup>4</sup> For illustration, see the picture gallery from one of the police raids mentioned above <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/halekani-na-ceske-zeny-nebudeme-akceptovat-ministr-chovanec/r~52e45ad8ec7f11e69d89002590604f2e/>.

You only stand and must work in a hurry; the good work is where they let you to the toilet when you need it.

They treat us as scum, they overlook, call you by – Hey, you – I even cannot move from the spot although there are moments when there is nothing to do.

We produce air-conditioning, but the funny thing is, the hall is not air-conditioned itself, so there is like 40 degrees in summer, we complained and only got allowed to bring water with us.

The workers are exhausted after the shift, so the only thing they can think about is to go to the dormitory, cook something, drink a bottle of beer and sleep. Sometimes, the only thing to look forward to is the day when you are “free”, when one can go on a trip and perhaps go to the pub and get drunk. However, there are “good” and “bad” pubs – some of them let them in, some do not want workers, especially those dark skinned. The “mental map” of the city is highlighted with the spots one can be in and places to avoid (‘I don’t like it there’ – a phrase that many times means experience with ill-treatment).

Relations among the inhabitants of the dormitories are burdened by lack of trust, high turnover as well as the physical aspects of the dormitory building itself (allowing little space for social activities). There are just a few friendships and few ‘permanent’ residents who try to maintain a climate favourable for social interaction, these may stroll the corridors, talk to people while cooking, try to establish rapport with the management or perhaps the cleaning lady (who may be a significant connection with the outside world as well as a means of reassurance, since she checks the rooms of other suspicious inhabitants). The atmosphere might be characterised by that of cautious fear. Bad things happen: ‘Sometimes it is better not to see...’, ‘You should avoid strangers...’, ‘It is very difficult with them...’, ‘You never know who lives next door...’.

## **The myth of the Bulgarian**

“Strangers” refer to migrant workers with “hot blood”. As one woman standing next to me at the assembly line told me when asked how she likes her job:

Well, I could do worse, life is good, I do my hours, I behave, the plant would be okay if there were not those people who spoil everything, they don’t want to work, cheat and leave all the toilets dirty.

One can hear such narratives frequently in the context of flexible production, and they often refer to “Bulgarians” or “Bulgarians and Romanians” (although any other East-European nationality can be involved as well). It seems there is an emerging system of communication in the context of Pilsen (and beyond), in which one can apparently reach considerable amounts of symbolic capital by using ethnoracial distancing corresponding to the Czech ideological complex (see below). The symbolic Bulgarian has similar features as the symbolic Roma (see below): low work ethic, dangerous, filthy and loud, ‘the permanent foreigner’ who must be contained.

To illustrate the power of the myth, let us “move” from the Karlov dormitories to the opposite side of the street, where there is a residual building of the former industrial

workers' colony of Karlov mentioned above, now a restaurant and night club, owned by a self-ascribed Roma who organises "high quality Roma music" events. I have visited the restaurant several times, and each time (when I introduced myself), he repeated the same self-legitimising narrative. He said that Karlov is the best spot for such a club because there is "nobody" in the neighbourhood, and they can play music loud at night. When asked about the inhabitants in the dormitories, he said that 'they do not go to the restaurant' (even though they actually do) and they can be completely ignored:

Nobody visits the restaurant from the neighbourhood, you know, we can have loud late-night parties and concerts, because there is nobody there, just the Bulgarians in the dormitory, and they wouldn't come here and neither they would call the police [since they are afraid of checks and harassment].

To give another illustration, let me briefly describe one of the tragic incidents that happened in the dormitory in 2017 and attracted much attention, becoming part of the ritualised narrative on migrant workers, foreigners and dormitories. After a quarrel, a woman stabbed her life partner. They were both Czech citizens, they were drunk, and according to the inhabitants they had a long history of fights in the dormitory. Although a quarrel between partners, the police, media and many discussants in online fora represented the incident in ethnoracial categories of 'Bulgarian hot blood'.

When sitting in front of the dormitory with my fellow researcher, after being warned by the dormitory administrator not to talk to anybody about it, we were approached by two journalists from the nation-wide TV stations Prima and Nova who asked about the tragedy. After we refused, they said, 'we would like to know what *kind of person* the stabbed man is, the administrator doesn't want to say anything because he wants to save his reputation, but we know they move here the scum from the East' (italics added).

Somewhat later, we checked the news about the incident and found it directly associated with the murder of the former administrator of the dormitory who was actually killed in 2016 in a fight with two men, one of whom was a Latvian citizen. Regardless of the actual course of both events, they were several times represented as acts of violent "Bulgarians" or "foreigners". If ritual might be understood as a form of 'symbolic statement about the social order' (Leach 1970: 14) and symbolises 'the system of socially approved "proper" relations between individuals and groups' (ibid.: 15), we can say that the incident has been used ritually to reproduce the dominant view of ethnoracial (class) relations in the city (between the normal decent Czech people and the foreigners, workers, Roma, Bulgarians etc.).<sup>5</sup>

## The myth of the Czech

To understand the current boundary constructions, we need to focus on the conditions of their existence, and, specifically, on the constructions of myths of homogeneity:

---

<sup>5</sup> At the time of writing, one of the most stigmatized Karlov dormitories burnt down, leaving twelve people injured and one dead, and all personal belongings destroyed. Although the press soon informed that the inhabitants were mostly Czech citizens, the incident is again ritually represented in ethnoracial categories.

The study of ethnicity should ... encompass investigating the nature, intensity and means by which a given state or a given nationalist movement pursues homogenization. The processes through which it does this implicate not only culture but also the body – that is, ideas about race, gender and sexuality as well as ethnicity. Work on ethnicity therefore necessarily intersects with research into these other forms of ‘difference’, especially race, with which it is deeply enmeshed (Verdery 1994: 47).

Myths of homogeneity seek to interpellate (in the sense of Althusser 2008) into “good citizens” and “national subjects” and in this way not only might “the Other” become the “constitutive Other”, but also – and more significantly – the definition of national identity constitutes “the Other”. We need to understand how the national “we” is to be different from “them” (Barth 1994: 14), that is, how the national “cultural” definition of ideal “kinds of person” is ideologically fixed by the constructions of boundaries. As the stigmatising ethnoracial language invoked above is not anchored in actual experience, it might be seen – on one hand – as a *suture* (Heath 1981), a link people find (when they articulate or perform identity – when they identify) with a socially validated position constructed by the authoritative discourse in their quest to attain social worth, to state who they are, and – on the other hand – as a means to forge loyal national subjects, to reproduce the social order. Let us now briefly (and necessarily superficially) attempt to outline the workings of the Czech ideology and the concept of ideal “kinds of person” (or “Czech identity”) it seeks to naturalise by means of ethnoracial boundary constructions. In other words, let us ask what it means to be (or to act as) Czech (as Holy 1996 did more than twenty years ago) in the context of flexible industrial production.

To outline briefly the Czech ideological complex underlying the dominant discourse on migrants and refugees (the Czech Republic refuses to fulfil the EU quota on asylum seekers and politicians typically use the language of moral panic anytime the agenda is discussed) we need to go back to the transition to neoliberalism. In the 1990s, in the era of economic reforms labelled as “shock therapy” involving privatisation of industries, land and housing, market deregulation and followed by austerity measures leaving many people without protection, the most severely hit were members of the only available “visible minority”, people who are perceived as “the Roma”, the most vulnerable, ethnoracially stigmatised population (see, e.g., Picker 2017 for a recent account of the situation of the populations labelled “Roma” or “Romani” across Europe). A “pro-Western” ideology based on economic growth and competitiveness predominated for many years, dividing the society into the “winners” and “losers” of the transition, the deserving and undeserving poor, the sociospatial representation of which are the spaces of poverty and decay named “socially excluded localities” (see Eyal et al. 1998; Eyal 2003).

“The Roma” became “the radical Other” to the newly formed ideological subject defined by a good work ethic and ordered behaviour, the law-abiding white citizen who has earned by his or her diligent work the support of the state if there is a need for it. “The Roma”, in contrast, are the people who – in the political and popular narrative – refuse to work, and only want to take social benefits for free, they don’t behave themselves, they are loud, violent and thieving, they abuse drugs and live in dirt, they even have no capa-

bility to live in normal housing, destroying everything the state provides. This myth of the “unadaptable Roma” proved crucial in allowing a range of actors to economically and symbolically exploit the populations inhabiting the socially excluded localities (Lupták & Růžička 2013), leading to a unique “economy of exploitation”.<sup>6</sup>

Another part of the new ideological complex was the virtual loss of class as a category used to explain social phenomena in many discourses (in politics, media and academia) due to the rise of “anti-Communism” as a crucial part of the new national myth-making and the rejection of Marxism as a framework of analysis. “The working class” virtually disappeared from the discourse, with serious social consequences (such as social fragmentation of labour, weak unions, social closure, inability to access a representation of one’s experience, displacement of personal histories, traumas and worldviews etc., cf. Kalb 2014 on a similar process in Poland). Analytic value of race was similarly dismissed, although “race” as conceptualised by (critical) racial studies theorists continued to be relevant in the analysis of socially relevant and coercive biologically based abstractions. The status of workers as workers decreased, which led to perceived economic but also symbolic dispossessions. This has left many people unprotected face to face the new “economy of exploitation” (see above), which led to a situation where the signifier “socially excluded” or simply “poor” was gradually embodied and ideologically fixed (in the sense of Barthes 1957) by naturalisation (such as the “colour of skin”, the “blood”, the different “mentality”, “culture”) while the “ordinary citizen” – the one who causes no trouble – was associated with Czech nationality and white skin.

In this sense, we can say that, in the words of Etienne Balibar:

... the construction of the Other is the construction of an alienated Self, where all the properties attributed to the Other are inversions and distortions of those vindicated for oneself, where indeed the Self is nothing but the Other’s Other (2005: 30).

The more acute the need to secure the identity/definition of the ideal “kind of person” in the time of crisis, globalisation, migration, and flexible production is, the more essentialised forms of subjects emerge whose “stability is permanently asserted and secured (in the imaginary) through the representation of an essential Other, or an essentialized Other” (ibid., see also Comaroff 1991). An interpellated “Czech” is thus *a priori* fundamentally engaged in the ethnoracialised social order (cf. Fulka 2010), and the authoritative discourse seeks to secure that, in the last instance, “the Czechs” are “a kind of people” (cf. Astuti 1995). This is why ethnoracial boundaries become so significant in the

---

<sup>6</sup> “Economy of exploitation” is a dynamic and predatory capitalist system concentrating on vulnerable (poor and ethnoracially stigmatised) populations and non-lucrative (neglected, peripheral) spaces. When these two elements are combined – a place of decay is inhabited by impoverished, stigmatised population – private entrepreneurs who provide housing and other vital services abuse their vulnerability to leech the funds provided to the poor in the forms of housing and welfare benefits, while simultaneously drawing political capital from mobilisation against the “unadaptables”, blaming them for the decay of the spaces they inhabit. This system flourishes in conditions of extreme social inequality, commodification of public services, extending opportunities to trade in poverty, its symptoms or the struggle against it and it is strengthened by growing variability of local practices (decentralization) (cf. Lupták 2017).

context under examination and their reconstructions become perceived as a “social norm” (Banton 2005: 624; cf. Malešević 2006: 3) making the socially validated integration into the community of “normal inhabitants” possible only through accepting the legitimate social order based on the immutability of ethnoracial relations (and perhaps establishing conditions for “banal racism” cf. Billig 1995). Thus if the Czech Minister of Interior says that “If they want to live here, they can. But they must integrate into our society”<sup>7</sup> what he ritually expresses is a view of social order in which “the Roma” or “the Bulgarians” can “adapt” only if they work, behave themselves and *accept* their racialised position of *not* “authentically” belonging.

## Conclusion

Political representatives have recently announced that many more migrant workers are needed because “Czechs” do not want to take the vacant jobs in the assembly plants. The apparent problem for them is how to satisfy the companies and keep the labour cheap while being able to extract political capital at the same time. In fact, it seems necessary to reproduce the traditional idea of labour surplus (as discussed by Marx 1990) to keep the low costs of labour even if there is no “real” surplus. The construction of a new “surplus class” means the production of such relations of inequality within which certain groups of the population that are represented as unwanted, disposable and even threatening the social order (that is the “social surplus”) are simultaneously represented as the only solution for the low-paid unskilled vacant jobs. Unwanted yet necessary, excluded yet invited, migrant workers, can be at the same time used to extract political capital in the various campaigns to promote social order by constructing ethnoracial boundaries.

Workers’ voice (or agency) is virtually invisible within the Czech dominant discourse, the only visible feature of the “working class” condition is disorder and danger. Although discursively fixed as the “unadaptables”, although racialised, used as a symbol of impurity when any kind of material and symbolic purification is needed by dominant actors, they themselves still seek to articulate belonging of some sort, seek to perform any valorised identity that is available to them, any legitimate position within the discourse that would enable social worth. As stated above, it is the language of work ethic, order, race and ethnicity that seems to present the only accessible way to distance oneself from the ideological Other, forcing the racialised self to stay invisible, not to cause problems, not to complain. For many, if available, distancing through ethnoracialised class categories help to escape situational and positional suffering, help to experience at least temporarily the feeling of belonging, “membership of a culture” (cf. Cohen 1982: 6). Moreover, if we follow the Czech discourse on the so-called refugee crisis, we can see that the categories used are very much the same: it is the ethnoracialised class (“lazy, cheap black workers who only want to exploit the system we already have here”) and order (“unadaptable dangerous trouble makers, even paedophiles and terrorists”) that are being (re) produced as the dominant framework for interpreting future social relations.

This paper dealt with the problem of production of “kinds of person”, of ethno-

---

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.qap.cz/object/problemu-s-cizinci-v-plzni-pribyva-resila-to-mimoradna-konference-87453>.

racial identities within the context of flexible production. Special attention is paid to imperitive ascriptions and articulation of “ethnoracial” identities, which were very briefly discussed by Fredrik Barth in his introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969: 17). Somewhat contrary to Barth, my analysis gives priority to the “cultural stuff” over “ethnic boundaries”. This does not mean that I consider the cultural aspects of “ethnic groups” natural and immutable. My argument is that the contents of “cultural” definitions of ideal national subjects, fixed and interpellated by national ideologies should be meticulously examined to understand the construction, distribution and reproduction of changing yet solid “ethnic” boundaries. I argue that within the context of flexible production, the fixing of definitions of the standard, well-behaved, economically productive citizen is managed by the racialisation of subjectivities. This enables the production of ethnoracial boundaries and social closure that might be perceived as natural and self-reproducing regardless of the “actual” contents of categories implied. The fact is that in the corresponding context, the “cultural” definitions of groups of workers, foreign citizens, the poor etc. tend to be ritually homogenised and reduced to the radical difference of “race” – to putative essences of “blood”.

These processes further problematise Barth’s discussion of the universal character of permeable ethnic boundary construction and processes of ascription and self-ascription. I do not wish to claim that ethnoracial boundaries cannot be situationally crossed, my point is rather that when certain definitions of identities are successfully interpellated and articulated, the possibilities to flee across the border and become the member of the other side without suffering the visibility of being at least symbolically “illegal”, “illegitimate” or “foreign” might be almost impossible (see Okamura in this volume). Moreover, maybe we should replace the idea of the boundary with that of ghetto or internment camp. “Ghetto” refers to a segregated area, the inhabitants of which are allowed to leave its walls and become part of the everyday economy, they can become a significant object of exploitation (see Wacquant 2013). However, anytime needed, these people can be sustained and contained as undesirable aliens.

## **Acknowledgements**

The work was supported by Faculty of Arts, Charles University within the 2019-2020 project *Innovation of AET500100 course Multiculturalism*.

## **References**

- Althusser, Louis. 2008. *On Ideology*. London: Verso.
- Andrijasevic, Rutvica, and Devi Sacchetto. 2017. ‘Disappearing workers’: Foxconn in Europe and the changing role of temporary work agencies. *Work, employment and society* 31(1): 54–70.
- Astuti, Rita. 1995. ‘The Vezo are not a kind of people’: identity, difference, and ‘ethnicity’ among a fishing people of western Madagascar. *American ethnologist* 22(3): 464–82.
- Balibar, Etienne. 2005. Difference, otherness, exclusion. *Parallax* 11(1): 19–34.
- Banton, Michael. 2005. Three current issues in ethnic and racial studies. *The British Journal of Sociology* 56: 621–33.
- Barth, Fredrik. 1969. Introduction. In Fredrik Barth (ed.) *Ethnic groups and boundaries. The social organization of culture difference*. Boston: Little Brown and Company, pp. 9–38.

- Barth, Fredrik. 1994. Enduring and Emerging Issues in the Analysis of Ethnicity. In Hans Vermeulen, Cora Govers (eds.). *The Anthropology of Ethnicity*. Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, pp. 33–58.
- Barthes, Roland. 1957. *Mythologies*. Paris: Seuil.
- Billig, Michael. 1995. *Banal Nationalism*. London: SAGE.
- Budilová, Lenka and Jakoubek, Marek. 2009. Anthropological fieldwork, site and Roma communities: Roma/Gypsies in the Czech and Slovak Republic. *Anthropological Notebooks*. 15(2): 5–14.
- Budilová, Lenka J. and Jakoubek, Marek. 2014. Romové, Československo a transnacionalismus, *Sociológia*. 46(5): 487–503.
- Budilová, Lenka J. and Jakoubek, Marek. 2019. Transformations of Roma's marriage patterns after migration from Slovakia to the Czech Republic. *Journal of Family History*. 44(3): 280–296.
- Burzová, Petra Lupták et al. 2013a. Dělnická kolonie Karlov: Místo, paměť a identita. *Český lid*. 259–79.
- Burzová, Petra Lupták et al. 2013b. Paměť a prostor: Reprezentační strategie společenstva vzpomínání v postindustriálním městě. *Sociální studia/Social Studies* 10(4): 107–126.
- Burzová, Petra Lupták. 2014. *Politika poloveřejnosti: narativní analýza sporů o demolici Domu hrůzy u Radbuzy*. Brno: Doplněk.
- Cohen, Abner. 1974. 'Introduction: The Lesson of Ethnicity,' In: Abner Cohen (ed.), *Urban Ethnicity*. London: Tavistock, pp. ix–xxiv.
- Cohen, Anthony Paul (ed.). 1982. *Belonging: identity and social organisation in British rural cultures*. Manchester University Press.
- Cohen, Anthony P. 2019. 'Barth, Ethnicity and Culture,' In: Thomas H. Eriksen and Marek Jakoubek (eds.) *Ethnic groups and boundaries today. A legacy of fifty years*. London: Routledge, pp. 20–28.
- Comaroff, John. 1991. Humanity, Ethnicity, Nationality: Conceptual and Comparative Perspectives on the U.S.S.R. *Theory and Society* 20(5): 661–87.
- Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. 2019. The epistemological status of the concept of ethnicity. In this volume.
- Eriksen, Thomas Hylland (1993) *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*. London: Pluto.
- Eriksen, Thomas H. and Jakoubek, Marek. (eds.) 2019. *Ethnic groups and boundaries today. A legacy of fifty years*. London: Routledge.
- Eyal, Gil, Ivan Szelenyi, Iván Szelenyi, Eleanor R. Townsley. 1998. *Making capitalism without capitalists: Class formation and elite struggles in post-communist Central Europe*. London: Verso.
- Eyal, Gil. 2003. *The origins of postcommunist elites: From Prague Spring to the breakup of Czechoslovakia*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Fulka, Josef. 2010. *Roland Barthes – od ideologie k fantasmatu*. Praha: Togga.
- Heath, Stephen. 1981. *Questions of cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Holy, Ladislav. 1996. *The little Czech and the great Czech nation: National identity and the post-communist social transformation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Jakoubek, Marek (ed.) 2016. *Teorie etnicity: Čítanka textů*, Praha: Sociologické nakladatelství SLON.
- Jakoubek, Marek. 2018. Two Cultural Causes of Roma Criminality: Application of Amoral Familism and Culture of Poverty Concepts to the Situation of Roma-dense Localities in Northern Bohemia, *Journal of Criminal Investigation and Criminology* 69(4): 310–19.
- Jenkins, Richard. 1996. Ethnicity etcetera: social anthropological points of view. *Ethnic and racial studies* 19(4): 807–822.
- Jenkins, Richard. 2008. *Rethinking Ethnicity*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Kalb, Don. 2004. Conversations with a Polish populist: Tracing hidden histories of globalization, class, and dispossession in postsocialism (and beyond). *American Ethnologist* 36(2): 207–23.
- Leach, Edmund R. 1970. *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A study of Kachin social structure*. London: Athlone Press.
- Lupták, Lubomír et al. 2013. *Neoliberalismus a marginalita: studie z českého reálnokapitalismu*. Brno: Doplněk.
- Lupták, Lubomír, Michal Růžička. 2013. Těžební limity prolomeny: extrakce ekonomického a politického kapitálu z romského ghetta. In: Lubomír Lupták et al.: *Neoliberalismus a marginalita: studie z českého reálnokapitalismu*. Brno: Doplněk, pp. 192–208.
- Lupták, Lubomír. 2017. Jak se dělá etnicita bezpečností: bezpečnostní praktiky a diskurzy a nastolování etnorašového stigmatu. *The Journal of Culture* 2: 18–24.
- Malešević, Siniša. 2006. *Identity as ideology: understanding ethnicity and nationalism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Marx, Karl. 1990. *Capital*, Volume I. London: Penguin Books.
- Moerman, Michael. 1965. Ethnic Identification in a Complex Civilization: Who Are the Lue? *American Anthropologist*: 1215–30.
- Molotch, Harvey. 1976. The city as a growth machine: Toward a political economy of place. *American journal of Sociology*: 309–32.
- Nagel, Joane. 1994. Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture. *Social Problems* 41(1): 152–76.
- Picker, Giovanni. 2017. *Racial cities: Governance and the segregation of Romani people in urban Europe*. Routledge.
- Přidalová, Ivana, and Jiří Hasman. 2018. Immigrant groups and the local environment: socio-spatial differentiation in Czech metropolitan areas. *Geografisk Tidsskrift-Danish Journal of Geography* 118(1): 72–87.
- Růžička, Michal. 2012. Wacquant v „romském ghettu“: Poznámky k procesu ghettoizace v českých městech. In: Temelová Jana, Pospíšilová Lucie, Ouředníček Martin (eds). *Nové sociálně prostorové nerovnosti, lokální rozvoj a kvalita života*. Plzeň: Aleš Čeněk, pp. 20–45.
- Schling, Hannah. 2017. (Re)production: everyday life in the workers' dormitory. In Max Andrucki, Caitlin Henry, Will McKeithen & Sarah Stinard-Kiel (eds.): *Beyond binaries and boundaries in 'social reproduction'*. Online at: [societyandspace.org/2017/10/31/intro-beyond-binaries-and-boundaries-in-social-reproduction/](http://societyandspace.org/2017/10/31/intro-beyond-binaries-and-boundaries-in-social-reproduction/).
- Sýkora, Luděk et al. 2015. *Metodika prevence rezidenční segregace a podpory integrace cizinců v lokalitách koncentrace zahraničních pracovníků*. Univerzita Karlova v Praze, Přírodovědecká fakulta, katedra sociální geografie a regionálního rozvoje, Centrum pro výzkum měst a regionů a Multikulturní Centrum Praha.
- Verdery, Katherine. 1994. Ethnicity, Nationalism, and State-making. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: Past and Future*. In: Hans Vermeulen, Cora Govers (eds.). *The Anthropology of Ethnicity*. Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, pp. 33–58.
- Wacquant, Loïc. 2013. A Janus-faced institution of ethnoracial closure. *Mainz Historical Cultural Sciences* Volume 17: 15.
- Walach, Václav. 2016. (Ne) bezpeční Romové? Analýza významu bezpečnosti ve vztahu k Romům ve vládních dokumentech České a Slovenské republiky. *Sociológia* 48(2): 172–91.
- Williams, Brackette F. 1989. A class act: anthropology and the race to nation across ethnic terrain. *Annual review of anthropology* 18(1): 401–44.

## **Povzetek**

Článek raziskuje etnorasne meje v okviru prilagodljive proizvodnje v českem mestu Pilsen. Cilj je razpravljati o pogojih za sodobno konstitucijo “etnorasnih subjektivnosti” v tem specifičnem kontekstu. Glavni poudarek je na ideološki produkciji identitete “običajnega državljana” in “standardnega delavca” in na povezanih naporih za določitev teh definicij z vzpostavitvijo homogenizirajočih rasnih mitov o nekvalificirani delovni sili.

**Ključne besede:** etnorasne meje, Barth, ideologija, delavci migranti, nekvalificirana delovna sila, prilagodljiva proizvodnja

**CORRESPONDENCE:** PETRA LUPTÁK BURZOVÁ, Charles University, Department of Ethnology, nám. Jana Palacha 2, Prague 1, 116 38, Czech Republic. E-mail: [petra.luptakburzova@ff.cuni.cz](mailto:petra.luptakburzova@ff.cuni.cz).