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Beyond Excuses: A Critique of The Pope's Apology to The Roma¹

On Friday, May 31st, pope Francis landed in Romania for a 3-day, sojourn in Romania. After a day in Bucharest and one in Iasi, the pope spent his last day in Blaj, Romania, where his first order of business was to beatify seven Catholic priests who were persecuted on the basis of their religion by Ceausescu's communist regime. On this, the last day of his trip, the pope, also addressed a community of Roma from the Barbu Lautaru neighborhood in Blaj. In a small church constructed in anticipation of the pope's visit, he asked "for forgiveness - in the name of the Church and of the Lord...[f]or all those times in history when we have discriminated, mistreated or looked askance at you ... and were unable to acknowledge you, to value you and to defend you in your uniqueness."

The day of and the day after the pope's visit to Blaj, my feed was flooded with friends sharing the message in which the pope asks for forgiveness. I spoke to Roma who said they wept as they watched the papal visit on television. I couldn't understand what had caused such an emotional and widespread flurry and watched, transcribed and translated for myself the entirety of the pope's speech addressing the Romani community of Blaj. The following is a critique of his discourse.

A different kind of pope

I would like to preface this analysis and critique by first underling that I could not agree more with the majority opinion that the pope's apology is an unprecedented gesture on behalf of the Catholic church. Pope Francis, not just in Romania, but in his public discourse more broadly, has proven himself to be not only politically aware, but surprisingly anti-fascist. Last month, after the European Parliamentary elections skewed toward right-wing populists in France, Italy, Hungary and England among others, the pope made very clear his stance regarding rising populism—that Europe is not being attacked by cannons or bombs in this moment but by ideologies."

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And that the problem, as he sees it, is when fear “condition[s] our way of thinking and acting to the point of making us intolerant, closed and perhaps even - without realizing it - racist.”

The apology in Blaj is one of many politically-charged acts made by the pope which demonstration his intention to counter the normalization of anti-immigrant, migrant and xenophobic language in Europe. Week’s prior he invited 500 Roma in Italy to the Vatican in a Italy that is reminiscent of Mussolini’s Italy due to Salvini’s reign of terror against Roma in Italy. That is all to say that: I am quite aware of the significance that Pope Francis’s embrace of the Roma community especially within the context of rising populism which violently targets Roma across Europe, in Ukraine, for example.

The pope’s speech was a powerful symbolic gesture of solidarity with one of Europe’s most marginalized and ignored ethnic communities— one that inspired news coverage across the world to shine a light on the dark corners of Romani struggle in a way that may bolster and benefit the struggle for Roma rights and recognition in indirect ways.

At the same time, I took issue with some of the specific language in the pope’s speech. And after watching the events of his speech unfold, I was surprised not to find a single comment of critique amongst all the celebration. As an activist, I know that a voice of critique, though sometimes an unpopular voice, is a necessary one in maintaining inertia after seminal moments such as this. In the case of the pope’s speech, that voice seemed to be missing almost entirely, or it was drowned out in a massive flood of humility by the Roma community for having been paid some attention by the pope. I’d simply like to say that it could have been better.

Context of the speech

Before digging into the content of the speech itself, I want to shed light on some issues regarding the context. The Catholic church is one of the most powerful, patriarchal institutions on this planet, with a vast concentration of money and power. No matter how surprised and humbled we as a Roma community are by the pope’s apology, we should continue to question what such an apology means, symbolically, politically, materially. Why should we be honored to be treated humanely by one of the most patriarchal and historically destructive institutions in existence? Given that the Vatican has it’s own private bank, it’s difficult to pin-point the Church’s net worth.

However, with an estimated worth ranging between \$10 and \$15 billion, the Catholic church is considered the world's richest religious organization and this is not taking into consideration the value of the artwork in the Sistine Chapel. Redistribution of immense concentrations of wealth, such as that of the Catholic church, would help the 'poor' Romani in Romania more than a simple apology.

I should note that Pope Francis is an exceptional pope and has exhibited revolutionary behavior completely foreign to the papacy. His denouncement of racism aside, Pope Francis has also attempted to close the Vatican Bank's doors in order to fight corruption and fraud. But Francis is just that, an exception to the rule that has historically been part of the problem and has now begun to change that. However, an apology such as this runs the risk of becoming an empty gesture. Foucault's understanding of power relations informs subjectivity, i.e. how we are interpellated as subjects by systems of power defines who we are in fundamental ways. The pope's discourse and mode of address perpetuated current power relations. The pope remained the symbol of wealth and power in Europe and the Roma subjectified—or used, in this situation—as a minority against which the pope demonstrated his power, through an outstretched hand in the form of an apology, though one pointed down in a patronizing manner, towards the Roma who sat below him.



Inquam Photos / Octav Ganea

As the events in the church began to unfold, someone must have realized the bad-optics of filling the church with clergy and politicians, and quickly shuffled in a group of Roma kids to sit at the pope's feet. While he was asking for forgiveness he—or the organizers more probably—were simultaneously reinforcing the hierarchies and power of the Catholic church.

Critique

Moving on to the speech itself. If you, the reader take only one thing away from this critique, let it be this one. Many have, in my opinion, exaggerated the importance of the pope's apology, inferring that his apology was an implicit reference to the Holocaust and perhaps even slavery. However, it's very important within the context of the Romani struggle for recognition as targets of genocide during World War II that the pope *did not* mention the word Holocaust. The pope wasn't explicit at all. We shouldn't be complicit, touched by or grateful for an unspoken reference to the suffering of Roma. We shouldn't have to fill in the blanks. What makes Roma suffering so unspeakable, so unsayable, that the pope couldn't name The Holocaust and Roma Slavery? It's important to highlight the fact that the pope did not name these historical events. In keeping with the entire bland, un-polemical speech the pope *chose* not to name these events, strategically. That Roma were [victims](#) of the Holocaust is widely, unknown across the globe. Imagine how many people would have learned of Roma persecution if the pope had dared say the H-word.

In general, the speech suffered from a superficial level of discourse as it painted a very polarized and infantile view of the world. The pope enumerated dialectical opponents under a stark rubric of 'good' versus 'evil.' In another dichotomy he states that there are people who "see in the other a brother and those who see the other as a hurdle blocking his way." Here he alludes to the important role self-interest, individualism and self-preservation play in the subjugation of minorities by majoritarian society. By his own logic, it would be absurd, then, to say that it is through "*indifference* that we feed prejudice and instigate hatred." Yet, he contradicts himself in saying just that; as if pure carelessness sans intention leads to ethnic tension. This is simply not the case. Subjugation always benefits the subjugator. The rise of populism in Europe is happening on the backs of Roma, of migrants, of refugees who are victims of rising neo-nazism and fascism (nb: hate crimes in Ukraine, Salvini's census and ongoing 'crackdown' on the Roma population in Italy.)

The almost childlike picture that pope paints through bible stories and delusional images of choosing good vs evil is completely deaf to what is at stake and who benefits in the political climate in Europe.

In another stark polarization the pope implores Roma to: “choose the path of Jesus!” which is the “path of reconciliation [not] revenge, a path he says is “more exhausting..., but the one that leads to peace.” He then elaborates to say that this “path moves through forgiveness,” imploring Roma not to “follow the wave of wickedness that festers within us...[s]ince no harm is done for another evil, no vengeance redeems any injustice, no resentment does good to the heart, no closure itself begets intimacy.”

This kind of rhetoric is blatant victim-blaming. He puts the onus on Roma to incite change by forgiving majority society for its trespasses against them. He is right that reconciliation comes through forgiveness, However, a key piece of that equation is also the *recognition* of persecution and that the persecutor asks for forgiveness in the first place. The pope did that on Sunday but we still live in a country where the Orthodox Church refuses to apologize for its hefty role in the enslavement of Roma people for over 500 years in the Romanian Principalities and the persecution of Roma during the Holocaust is barely recognized. Where Roma survivors aren't decorated alongside Jewish survivors and are refused reparations to which they are entitled by law. It is insulting, frankly, to be shamed for feeling anger and retribution by the pope, when that anger is completely justified by the historical injustices Roma faced. The issue lies not with the bearers of resentment but 1) with those who have committed injustices against the Roma and 2) those who maintain those injustices in the present, through denial, institutional racism and refusal to acknowledge that this history of persecution directly impacts Romani people's reality in the present. Rather than addressing a community of Roma and telling them to forgive, perhaps the pope could have addressed non-Roma to ask for forgiveness. Without that crucial first step the road to reconciliation cannot be tread.

On Anger

Shaming victims for their anger is a strategy used by the majority to rob a persecuted people of their motivation to seek change. As Audre Lorde says: "My response to racism is anger." And, "I cannot hide my anger to spare you guilt, nor hurt feelings, nor answering anger; for to do so insults and trivializes all our efforts. Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge."

On Difference and Universalism

The pope's message was full of language about Roma's alterity and marked difference, as he discussed the responsibility of majority society to value Roma in "their specificity," while at the same time intoning the discourse of universal humanism as the solution to overcoming barriers. "When someone is left behind, the human family does not go forward. We are not fully Christian, not even human, if we do not know to see the person before his actions before our judgments and prejudices." This slippage, though seemingly benign, is dangerous in that it keeps Roma in a limbo, between marked Otherness as outsiders in society and as unmarked, universal humans just like the rest of 'us'! History has shown us that these barriers between 'us' and 'them,' are no so easily dissolved. Racism runs far too deep in the ventricles of society for the rhetoric of universal humanism to have any ameliorating effect. The ideology of universality will never help racial minorities be accepted in society. Roma will always be seen as Roma first, before they are seen as human, and just because the pope says so will not solve the complicated issues of identity politics. As Laclau states, "there is no universality which is not a hegemonic universality" (Butler et al., 2000: 193). Meaning that, when we try to envelope a minority group into humanity—especially in the context of political persecution—many layers of race are happening. 1) the gesture of inviting them to the human race, insinuates that they somehow remain outside of it prior to our invitation 2) we are attempting to do is to subsume them into a default category of the human and therefore 3) erase or make secondary their ethnic or racial identity. As many race scholars have demonstrated, the unmarked category of the human is always heterosexual, white, cis-gendered male—what Sylvia Wynter calls "the Figure of Man." If you try to take a person of color and force it into the outline of the "the Figure of Man," the puzzle pieces will never fit.

As my feed continued to fill with photos of the events in Blaj, I simply couldn't shake the feeling of confusion. Why should we be so honored by a gesture that should have happened ages ago and should be made by a very long list of other institutions? What is so affective about seeing exoticizing photos of brown, poverty-stricken Roma bodies being told to stop being resentful for historical traumas committed against them in a re-enactment of age-old power relations between the Vatican and poor, brown bodies around the world. Perhaps, time will show this to be an important and decisive turn in the Roma struggle for rights and recognition. But it should be understood as a step in the right direction. How we all decide to proceed from here determines that future.

Butler, J., Laclau, E. and Zizek, S. (2000) *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary dialogues on the left*. London: Verso.

Wynter, S. (1987) On Disenchanted Discourse: "Minority" Literary Criticism and Beyond. *Cultural Critique*, 7: 207-44. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354156>