Racialised Stereotypes of Scrap Iron Collection as Failures of Ecological Citizenship

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Abstract

Despite scrap metal collection being a valuable ecological practice, one which exposes collectors to health hazards and poor working conditions, it is frequently devalued and rarely portrayed as a positive environmental contribution. Our article examines views regarding scrap metal collection expressed in response to *Charlie Hebdo*'s caricature of the (non-Romani) Romanian tennis player Simona Halep as a scrap iron collector. We argue that the reactions to the caricature are evidence of a racially charged negative stereotype of Roma as (illicit) scrap iron recyclers. Second, we argue that what makes this stereotype wrong is not (just) that it is false or demeaning, but that it contravenes duties to reduce material footprints through activities like metal recycling. Drawing on Andrew Dobson's work, we explore the stereotype's negative framing of metal collection as a failure of ecological citizenship, and we consider how its racial elements challenge Dobson's neutral image of ecological citizens. We argue that addressing the stereotype requires a more inclusive and transformative understanding of ecological citizenship, and we end by considering ways in which focusing on the duties of ecological citizenship can boost the struggles against the various forms of ecological injustice and exploitation that Romani communities face.

Keywords

- Ecological citizenship
- Ecological justice
- Roma minority
- Scrap metal recycling
- Stereotypes

Introduction

Advances in recycling technologies, infrastructure, policies, and sustainable practices are customarily praised in the media, with frequent calls for improving recycling methods, supporting recycling targets, and making facilities more accessible. Among the various materials that can be recycled, metals present distinct advantages. First, as metals are used in a high proportion of everyday products, their footprint is incredibly high, so recycling metal significantly reduces waste. Second, recycling metal is incredibly efficient because metals are relatively easy to separate from contaminants, making the potential recovery rate over 95 per cent (Hagelüken 2012). Finally, as metal is a raw material, recycling it reduces both human and environmental costs of extraction, directly protects habitats, lowers the actual expense of extraction, and cuts waste in production. For example, aluminium requires 186 MJ/kg for primary production due to the high temperature needed to produce it, but only 10–20 MJ/kg for recycling due to the relatively lower temperature required at this stage (Gaustad et al. 2012).

However, metal recycling is often difficult or hazardous, especially in lives already marked by extensive social and political challenges (Saethre 2020). Unlike recycling paper or plastic, metal objects can be bulky and heavy, making handling more difficult – especially if handled without proper equipment. Discarded metal objects are also prone to rust and are often found outdoors or in other spaces where soil bacteria (including tetanus) can fill rusty crevices and infect handlers. Moreover, for objects not entirely made up of metal, handling difficulties are compounded by the laborious activity of manually taking components apart.

This combination of the desirability of metal recycling on the one hand, and its hazardous nature on the other, should indicate that scrap metal recyclers would be seen as extremely valuable. People engaged in scrap metal recycling are doing valuable work at considerable cost to their own health, well-being, time, and safety. But this is not always the case as scrap metal collecting is often portrayed as a negative, illicit practice even while dominant discourses encourage recycling.

Our paper identifies a negative stereotype of scrap metal recycling in a caricature of the Romanian tennis player Simona Halep as a scrap iron collector in the satirical French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, and in the reactions of diplomatic institutions, European media, Romanian sports newspapers, and others to the caricature. We argue the frequent mention of Romani identity and insistence on separating it from (non-Romani) Romanian identity in this context is evidence of a negative *racialised* stereotype. We briefly present two views of what makes the depiction in the media morally wrong, and then we argue these explanations cannot properly capture the racialised underpinnings of the stereotype. Instead, we suggest that an especially useful standpoint is Andrew Dobson's political theory of ecological citizenship, which links a global conception of citizenship to individuals' material contributions to ecological risks. We then explore the implications of adopting an ecological citizenship standpoint in addressing ecological (in) justice for the Romani minority.

However, we also identify two ways in which the notion of ecological citizenship is insufficiently critical of the socio-economic context of recycling practices which a racialised stereotype of scrap iron collection

highlights. First, by decontextualising discussions of ecological duties from systemic inequalities, Dobson ends up proposing an image of virtuous ecological citizens which risks promoting racial and/or class-based hierarchies even more. Second, by focusing exclusively on nature-human relationships, ecological citizenship does not take advantage of the more transformative possibilities inherent in the notion of citizenship to question the human to human relations in which recycling practices take place. We show how emphasising a shared ecological vulnerability can serve to contest the racially charged hierarchical depiction of scrap iron recycling as deviant.

This article addresses stereotypes predominantly perpetuated by white politicians, media commentators, and third parties, by linking discussions of racial and environmental injustice in Romani communities (Latta 2007; Harper et al. 2009; Saethre 2020) to theoretical debates in environmental politics and theory (Dobson 2004; MacGregor 2006; Bourban 2023). Our position as non-Roma but otherwise minoritised (in terms of race, gender, and/or disability) migrants to the United Kingdom and the European Union allows us critical insight into the way dominant populations propagate stereotypes about vulnerable groups in the context of migration. However, our position might also bias us towards preferring an account of citizenship from a political theory that emphasises a seemingly universal standpoint of non-territorial wrongs beholden to a cosmopolitan community. Although we draw on insights from critical race theory and critical Romani studies to outline ways in which ecological citizenship erases the standpoint of marginalised people when advancing, for example, a kind of purity of motivation, our own proposed remedies might not go far enough in challenging "the invisibility of white positionality" (Howard and Vajda 2016, 44; Fremlova 2018, 105).

1. Shiny Trophies, Rusty Iron

In June 2018, the (non-Romani) Romanian tennis player Simona Halep beat Sloane Stephens in the Roland-Garros women's final. Among the various depictions of Halep holding the coveted Suzanne-Lenglen cup, one stood out for the wrong reasons: the satirical French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* published a caricature of Halep holding the trophy, her smile morphed into a grin through long, sharp teeth, and exclaiming *"Ferraille! Ferraille!"* ("Scrap iron! Scrap iron!"). The caricature was accompanied by the text *"Une Roumaine remporte Roland-Garros"* (A Romanian wins Roland-Garros).

The caricature attracted widespread criticism, prompting a formal complaint against the publication by the Federation of Romanian Associations in Europe (FADERE), as well as formal statement from both the French and Romanian ambassadors. FADERE filed a lawsuit against *Charlie Hebdo* for not just depicting Halep's victory in a negative light but also for the magazine's "mockery of the community of Romanians in France," as FADERE president Daniel Tecu put in in a TV interview for Antena 3 (News.ro 2018). This anxiety about how the Romanian diaspora is represented is in line with reactions by the Romanian UK diaspora to the "Romanians are coming" ITV documentary in 2014 (Popescu 2014) as well as the 2007 "Romanians in Europe" campaign which aimed to rehabilitate perceptions about Romanian migrants in EU countries following the murder of an Italian woman by a Romanian man in 2007 (Kaneva and Popescu 2014).

The French and Romanian ambassadors also viewed the caricature as having higher stakes than the way Halep herself was depicted. The French Ambassador to Bucharest Michele Remis stated the Embassy regards Halep as a "beautiful and powerful symbol" and that while freedom of expression is a fundamental principle,[1] the caricature "is in no way representative of French public opinion" on the matter (*LeParisien* 2018). Similarly, the Romanian Ambassador to Paris, Luca Niculescu, mentioned a flurry of positive reactions he had received on Halep's victory, while reassuring Romanians that the French embassy "is fighting against stereotypes, clichés or prejudices which sometimes arise" (*Ziare.ro* 2018). Halep herself declined to comment on the incident.

Interestingly, lingering over (and intersecting with) this concern for attitudes towards Romanians in European countries is a pervasive understanding of the caricature as referring to Romani people. This might be surprising, as no Romani persons were depicted in the caricature or directly mentioned in its captions. Nonetheless, most reactions within Romania read the caricature as referring to stereotypes about Romani people (for example, Mihaiu 2020; Toma 2021; Jumatate 2023). This angle was also adopted by various international publications. *Balkan Insight* interpreted *Charlie Hebdo's* caption of the caricature to refer to "Romanian Roma who often peddle scrap iron" (Luca 2018). *Deutsche Welle* reported the incident as "*Charlie Hebdo* angers Romanians with 'racist' cartoon" (Deutsche Welle 2018), saying the publication "had likened the country's popular tennis champion Simona Halep to a Roma scrap metal collector" as it alluded "to the fact that some members of the Roma community have traditionally made a living from gathering scrap metal". Similarly, the Spanish paper *Marca* read the caption about scrap iron as an "allusion to the stereotype that Romanian 'gitanos' [sic] steal [iron] in France" (*Marca* 2018).

How should we interpret the stereotype depicted in the caricature, and what (if anything) makes propagating the stereotype morally wrong? The rest of this article is devoted to analysing the various components of this question, and it is organised as follows: first, the article seeks to demonstrate that the caricature should be understood as depicting a racially charged negative stereotype. Then, the article asks what makes propagating the stereotype morally wrong, arguing the answer does not lie with the accuracy or inaccuracy of the empirical reality the depiction is hinting at, but with power asymmetries that allow dominant groups to erase the contributions of subaltern voices, with a particular application to erasing contributions as ecological citizens. The final section of the paper explores how integrating subaltern perspectives should be used to extend the ecological citizenship framework.

2. The Caricature as a Racialised Stereotype

As discussed above, *Charlie Hebdo*'s caricature of Halep's victory did not depict any Roma, yet it was widely read as such. What makes this interpretation plausible? This section argues the caricature is plausibly interpreted as propagating a stereotype about Romani people for two reasons: first, the interpretation can

1 This could be a reference to a terrorist attack at the *Charlie Hebdo* headquarters in 2015, in response to the publication's depiction of Islamic religious symbols. The attack, which killed 12 people, was met with affirmations about the importance of freedom of speech in the face of disagreement.

be corroborated by depictions of the stereotype of Roma as scrap metal collectors in Romanian media outlets. Second, the stereotype follows a similar pattern of other constructions of Romani alterity in the context of the "othering" of Romani people in official reactions to European attitudes towards Romanians.

A first reason to consider the interpretation of the caricature as depicting a negative stereotype about Romani people is that there is some evidence of an ethicised stereotype of Roma as scrap metal collectors, whereby we understand "stereotype" as "cognitive structures that contain the perceiver's knowledge, beliefs, and expectations about human groups" (Peffley et al. 1997, 31). While demonstrating the prevalence of this stereotype in Romanian society is beyond the scope of this paper, we have found evidence of a racialised stereotype in the associations between scrap iron collection and ethnicity in the only Romanian publication to have a dedicated archive for the label "fier vechi" (scrap/old iron): Digi24 (*Digi24* 2012–2023). DIGI24 is "a 24-hour TV news channel with leading positions both offline and online", being rated as the third most widely read Romanian news source in 2023 (Radu 2023). Of the 67 articles spanning 11 years filed under this label, we found that nearly two-thirds (42) link scrap metal collection to illicit activity, most notably theft, tax evasion, fraud, destruction of public goods, destruction of art works, causing pollution, and even physical violence. Only two articles portray reusing scrap iron in a positive light, both concerning the benefits of recycling (*Digi24* 2013a; *Digi24* 2014a).[2] Moreover, when the impact of scrap metal recycling on the environment is mentioned, there are as many articles highlighting its *negative* environmental impact (through, for example, the theft of iron leading to a spill) as there are mentions of the *positive* environmental effects of scrap metal recycling (*Digi24* 2013b; *Digi24* 2017). While it is possible for the theft of metal items to lead to environmental disaster, it is unlikely that the practice (even when done illicitly) would lead to negative environmental consequences just as often as to positive benefits. This limited analysis does not prove but supports the interpretation that scrap metal collection is frequently portrayed in a disproportionately negative light, as a demeaning or illicit activity.

While the articles filed under "scrap iron" in the *Digi24* archive do not frequently mention the ethnicity of scrap metal collectors, when the ethnicity *is* mentioned, it is overwhelmingly Roma. Except for the Halep scandal, the news articles about old iron which mention ethnicity at all, mention Romani ethnicity – such as Romani people living in Parisian slums (*Digi24* 2014c) or palaces allegedly built by wealthy Roma with profits from scrap metal collecting (*Digi 24* 2014b). Given that a very large proportion of the stories concern theft where the ethnicity remains unknown because the culprits are not identified, the selective mentioning of Romani people indicates scrap metal collecting is at least intermittently associated with Romani ethnicity. The association is not a strong one whereby "thieves" are invariably identified as Roma, but a weaker one whereby the salient ethnicity associated with scrap metal collection (when it is) is Romani ethnicity. Given the power that mainstream institutions like the media have in constructing, propagating, producing, and re-producing stereotypes, the effects of this association between Romani people and the largely illicit practice of scrap metal collecting by authoritative sources deserve further scrutiny.

2 The remaining articles include 11 articles about how government mismanagement has laid to waste ("scrap iron") once thriving factories, and 3 articles on the Simona Halep scandal.

In addition to the evidence that negative stereotypes regarding scrap metal collecting tend to be associated with Romani people, interpreting the caricature as targeting Romani people is also plausible considering a persistent pattern of constructing Romani alterity in post-socialist Romania. Returning now to the reactions to the caricature in Romanian media, a key critique of it has been that the behaviour imputed to Halep (a non-Romani Romanian) is only true of Romani people. For example, a Romanian organisation for Women in Sports called the cartoon racist and complained the problem was that Halep was portrayed like "une gitane", being called "gypsy [sic] because she's Romanian" (Femei din Sport 2018; see also Burcescu 2018). For their part, *Charlie Hebdo* seem aware of this interpretation when writing on their website a few days after the initial caricature that "Romanians do not want to be confused with the Roma, Gypsies who steal scrap metal within the collective consciousness" (*Charlie Hebdo* 2018).[3] As the EU-focused Rroma Foundation summed up reactions to the caricature, "the outrage is not about the racist portraying of Roma – it is about associating Simona Halep and thus Romanians to Roma" (Rroma.org 2018).

The existence of a pattern of constructing Romani alterity as distinct from Romanian identity has been evidence by Nadia Kaneva and Delia Popescu in the context of the "Romanians in Europe" campaign, which can be said to pursue construction of "Romani alterity as an explicit national goal" (Kaneva and Popescu 2014, 511). The incident which prompted the campaign was allegedly perpetrated by a Romani person, yet the legal response by Italian authorities was motivated by reference to all Romanians, as it was said that those who commit most crime are "the Romanians" (Hooper 2007). With Romani people being over-represented among the Romanian citizens who were deported from EU countries like France (Vrabiescu 2021), various voices insisted on demarcating Romani and Romanian identity as clearly as possible.

Highlighting differences between Romanians and Roma is reminiscent of the nationalist stance some former communist states took after 1989 aiming to "recreate the national community of the pre-communist state" (Dumbrava 2017, 1500). A consequence of this focus on recreating the pre-communist nation is that "forms of marginalisation and second-class citizenship among ethnic minorities persists [sic] despite access to formal citizenship" (Dumbrava 2017, 1494). A clear instance of this, analysed by Kaneva and Popescu, is a poster by the Noua Dreapta (New Right) political movement showing a family of "Roma" and one of "Romanians" pictured side by side. While the Romani family has "visibly darker" skin and is pictured next to a "wire-fence [and] a low-cost, concrete apartment building", the family of "Romanians" are all "dressed in white shirts and blue jeans", all "have fair complexions", and are "all blonde" (Kaneva and Popescu 2014, 512). A black arrow points to the Romani family, while an arrow in the colours of the Romanian flag (blue, yellow, and red) points to the (non-Romani) Romanian family, with the caption "Gypsies (Rom) and Romanians are two different peoples!"

Although the "Romanians in Europe" campaign is not as explicit, it is nonetheless most convincingly read as manifesting the same pattern of constructing Romani alterity out of anxieties over the

3 The French original: *"Les Roumains ne veulent pas être confondus avec les Roms, les Tsiganes chapardeurs de ferraille au sein de la conscience collective."*

acceptance of Romanian identity abroad. The campaign, which led to an overall increase in the number of Italian and Spanish people holding positive attitudes towards Romanian migrants (Kaneva and Popescu 2014, 513) and earned the Saatchi & Saatchi team multiple PR awards (Tabacu 2009, cited in Kaneva and Popescu 2014, 514), seems to be characterised by overpowering depictions of whiteness. Not only are people with dark tones absent from the campaign's clips, but literal whiteness is emphasised. Nadia Kaneva and Delia Popescu provide a critical analysis of the campaign's travelling pavilion called "Casa Romania", which aimed to showcase a "typical" Romanian apartment. The model house consisted of "[w]hite walls, a white couch, white tables, chairs, and bookcases, a white television set, a white stereo, and a white, blonde hostess, wearing a white shirt" (Kaneva and Popescu 2014, 517).

Kaneva and Popescu convincingly read the campaign as akin to the reaction of the New Right poster's aim to "impose a correct image of Romania in Europe" (Noua Dreapta 2007, cited in Kaneva and Popescu 2014, 511) by delineating a Romanian identity distinct from negative stereotypes associated with Romanian Roma. The depiction of "Casa Romania" as dominated by literal whiteness gives a visual representation "the complete opposite of mediated images of squalid Romani camps and their dark-skinned inhabitants" (Kaneva and Popescu 2014, 517). While the aim of creating a visually striking separation between white Romanians and non-white Roma was never expressed this bluntly, other outlets commenting on Romania's nation-branding campaign, such as the France24 news channel, also noticed:

> It's easy to work out what the Romanian government is doing. […] The government can neither say that Roma people are not Romanian, nor that all Romanians, Roma included, are respectable […] so they are saying that "most Romanian citizens are respectable." What that means is that some Romanian citizens are not respectable – search them out! (Dacheux and Campinez 2008, cited in Kaneva and Popescu 2014, 517).

This decades-long eagerness to "dissociate the (white) Romanians from the (nonwhite) Roma" (Dumbrava 2017, 1502) in the face of unflattering representations by other EU member states provides further evidence that the stereotype propagated by the *Charlie Hebdo* caricature should be understood as ethnically marked. In line with other attempts by politicians and state institutions to demarcate (non-Roma) Romanian identity and Romani identity as clearly as possible by using the term "Tigani" (Gypsies) in official documents as early as 1995 (Rostas 2010), we can read the insistence that the stereotype depicted refers to Romani people as part of national and international processes of othering Romani identity. Although it does not depict any Romani persons, the cartoon nonetheless conjures up an image of destitute scrap metal collectors, which is read along ethnic lines both in Romanian media, and in the context of anxieties over how Romania is depicted abroad. But what (if anything) makes propagating this stereotype in a satirical French publication morally wrong? As we argue below, the answer has less to do with the accuracy or inaccuracy of the stereotype, and more to do with the power dynamics behind devaluing the practice of recycling when this practice is ethnically marked.

3. Why Is It Wrong To Propagate the Stereotype?

A compelling reason for rejecting the stereotype of Roma as scrap metal collectors is to argue it is empirically false. This aligns with voices saying the "racist portraying o[f] Roma" should be scrutinised (rroma.org 2018). Finding mismatches between empirical reality and stereotypical portrayal would show the stereotype does not apply to Romanian Roma, just as it did not apply to Halep. An analysis of empirical reality might serve to put an end to the stereotype altogether. This strategy would be in alignment with early approaches to stereotypes that regarded them as inaccurate, rigid generalisations (Lippmann 1922/1991) or hyperboles with small "kernels of truth" (Allport 1954/1979). This view has influenced legal practice, for example, with Canadian courts when striking down practices excluding non-citizens from practicing law by invoking false stereotypes about non-citizens being less knowledgeable and trustworthy (*Andrews v. Law Society of British Columbia* [1989] 1 SCR 143, cited in Moreau 2016, 289). Relying on facts seems a powerful and long-standing tool in combating stereotypes as inaccurate generalisations (Bargh and Chartrand 1999).

However, insisting on the (in)accuracy of stereotypes is insufficient to capture the power relations behind them. Power asymmetries render the accuracy-centred approach inadequate for two reasons. First, even factually true stereotypes might be morally wrong if what makes the stereotype true results from discrimination, subordination, oppression, and other forms of power exerted over the stereotyped group. For example, stereotypes about ethnic or racial minorities being less educated, or women dropping out of the labour due to the child-care market might be true, but often this is the result from prejudice, discrimination, and lack of access to child-care or education. What matters more than the empirical accuracy or inaccuracy of the stereotype are the structural power relations which produce and re-produce that reality (Richard et al. 2003; Lockenhoff et al. 2014; Basu 2018).

With respect to the stereotype of Roma being scrap metal collectors, this critique of the accuracy-based approach prompts us to consider the racism, deprivation, social exclusion, and socio-economic conditions that might make it more likely for Romanian Roma people to practice scrap metal collection as a form of subsistence. Even if the generalisation had some "kernel of truth", we would argue that it would still be wrong to propagate the negative stereotype because it is not true of everybody. Generalisations do not apply to individual cases, and not all Roma are scrap metal collectors. Individual Romani people can rightly claim fairness requires that each of them be given an individual assessment (Moreau 2016, 290). Propagating the stereotype presents the effects of unjust treatment of a group as a negative characteristic of the victim-population, adding insult to injury.

Another possible explanation of the wrongness of the stereotype relies on its demeaning message. Stereotypes are wrong because they deny the equal standing of the targeted groups or individuals, painting them as less worthy of esteem than others. In a survey article on the wrongness of stereotyping, Anita Bernstein writes that many stereotypes are reductive and demeaning (Bernstein 2013, 659). When stereotypes claim members of targeted groups manifest undesirable or criminal characteristics, they reinforce demeaning prejudices and cement an inferior status for the members. The difference between the inaccuracy approach and the demeaning approach is that the latter focuses on the attitudes and

selective presentation of information by oppressors, not the victim-population. The key point is how the population entertaining the stereotype maligns members of the target group by obscuring their individual agency (Eidelson 2015).

In the case of scrap metal collecting, propagating the stereotype is wrong on this view even if more Roma than non-Roma are engaged in it, because the stereotype interacts with background racial injustice. It furthers negative perceptions towards an already stigmatised ethnic group and demeans its members by presenting them as inescapably manifesting the group's alleged characteristics. It is wrong to say individual women are not reliable witnesses in sexual assault cases because of psychological or emotional dispositions (Moreau 2016, 294) and similarly wrong to say individual Roma are prone to scrap metal collecting based on group generalisations. This approach explains why stereotypes add insult to injury even when true, which the accuracy approach failed to do.

However, this second understanding does not fully explain the stereotype at issue either. Although it engages with some aspects of background injustice, the demeaning approach does not question how practices attributed to a minority group by a stereotype come to be painted as deviant or commendable. It takes the negative connotations of the stereotype as given instead of questioning why even a beneficial practice can be depicted as negative if it becomes associated with a devalued identity. While the approach forbids propagating negative prejudices about criminality, poverty, and disregard for public goods, it does not engage with the positive environmental contributions that scrap metal collectors, Roma and non-Roma alike, make through the practice. The positive nature of these contributions to the environment points to a need for a more ambitious diagnosis of what makes these suggestions wrong.

4. Scrap Iron Collection and Insights *from* Ecological Citizenship

How can we find an independent standpoint, untainted by negative mainstream attitudes, which would allow capturing the environmental benefits of scrap metal recycling and the hazardous work of scrap iron collectors as a positive contribution? A compelling proposal is to employ Andrew Dobson's notion of ecological citizenship as a framework that incorporates ecological concerns as well as duties towards one another globally as citizens (Sagoff 1988; van Steenbergen 1994; Smith 1998; Dobson 2004, 2006; Dobson and Bell 2006).

Ecological citizenship focuses on what we owe one another as "dwellers on the land [and] natives of the Earth" (Reid and Taylor 2000, 452). In contrast to the dominant paradigm of social citizenship, largely inspired by T. H. Marshall (1950, 1964), which focuses on relations between human beings who make up the current body of citizens, ecological citizenship highlights the duties that fall to currently existing citizens once we recognise obligations towards the environment and future generations. Since our actions have ecological implications beyond contemporary people (and beyond our co-nationals), ecological citizenship indicates that we have duties to all who will be affected by our actions. From this, Mark Smith draws "a new politics of obligation" that can

include "animals, trees, mountains, oceans, and other members of the biotic community", taking us beyond the three dimensions of civil, political, and social citizenship (Smith 1998, 99; see also van Steenbergen 1994, 142). Most importantly, actions that affect future generations fall within the remit of our current citizenship obligations, since "today's acts will have implications for tomorrow's people" (Dobson 2004, 106).

According to defenders of ecological citizenship, once we adopt a wider view which includes animals, plants, the environment, and future people, we see that the focus on reciprocal duties for currently existing people ("generationism") is in fact "as indefensible as racism or sexism" (Roche 1992, 242; Dobson 2004, 107). In this extended, ecological conception, citizenship takes on a dynamic dimension and refers to a "continual process of creation and transformation of both nature and society" (Gilbert and Phillips 2003, 319). Ecological citizenship "converts relationships we had thought to be 'Samaritan' into relationships of citizenship" (Dobson 2004, 98). Such obligations regard duties for pursuing the common good, sometimes at costs to personal self-interest, and are therefore similar to standard citizenship obligations (Sagoff 1988, 8). For example, practices previously regarded as supererogatory – such as reducing our ecological footprint, collecting waste, or recycling materials – are regarded as morally binding duties.

The duties we have as ecological citizens are, moreover, non-territorial (Bourban 2023). Dobson's notion is meant to reflect the materiality of one's ecological footprint, or the amount of material or space one takes or uses. This puts relations of impact and sustainability at the heart of ecological citizenship, instead of state or political ties. Because such relations cut across state borders, ecological citizenship is not defined in terms of membership in a pre-existing political community but constructed "in a new political space that overflows the boundaries of discrete nation states" (Latta 2007, 381; see also van Steenbergen 1994). Dobson can be said to endorse a "post cosmopolitan model" of ecological citizenship, where "the material relations of the ecological footprint" take precedence over pre-existing political ties (Latta 2007, 389).

A critic might be concerned that practices of scrap metal collection do not evidence ecological citizenship because, intuitively, citizenship involves actions which integrate citizens into public processes and deliberation, with voting being a prototypical example. Finding, selling, and recycling scrap metal does not seem to obviously relate to citizenly activities or to public processes. However, Dobson is explicit that, since actions that appear on their face to be private have impacts on our and others' ecological footprints, those impacts are enough to generate duties in line with ecological citizenship. This can be true even of actions taken in the most private sphere, in one's own home.

Regarding scrap metal collectors and their interlocutors as ecological citizens re-frames group relations in terms of environmental activity – as opposed to power relations in general. Viewed through the lens of ecological citizenship, scrap metal collectors – Roma and non-Roma alike – are acting in commendable ways by reducing the impact of (metal) materiality of others, and thus their environmental footprints, in a concrete way. Collecting, selling, recycling, and upcycling scrap metal reduces demands on material inputs in a way that is relevant to ecological and sustainable processes. Scrap metal and other waste collectors reduce the material footprint of others., and this benefit must at least be weighed against any potential negative consequences. Unadulterated public denigration, therefore, undermines an example

of ecological citizenship – in a context where much of the ecological work would otherwise have gone undone. Since leaving scrap metal by the wayside is not a fact of life we should just accept but a failure of ecological citizenship, those who dump the scrap metal are the ones violating their citizen duties. Conversely, scrap metal collectors are the ones who fulfil their ecological duties and benefit others, and this benefit should be mentioned when the practice is discussed.

Additionally, ecological citizenship can serve as a basis to interrogate how attitudes towards reducing material footprints are portrayed through stereotypes propagated by authoritative sources. In contrast to promoting ecological practices through monetary motivations or other sanctions, ecological citizenship implies a "politics of attitude change" (Latta 2007, 379) through the "recognition that sustainable development requires shifts in attitudes at a deep level" (Dobson and Valencia Saiz 2005, 157). When media outlets, politicians, and other citizens propagate stereotypes that consistently present discarding scrap metal as normal or respectable, and collecting scrap metal as deviant or shameful (as in the case of the Halep caricature), they are going against the recommendations of ecological citizenship for attitudinal change. Just as dirt was defined by Mary Douglas as "matter out of place" which implies "a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order" (Douglas 1966/2000, 36), so the people who handle waste are consistently portrayed as "people out of place" who contravene ordered relations, instead of participants in a socially commendable, and indeed necessary, process.

Finally, ecological citizenship allows us to explain why it is wrong for French media to propagate negative stereotypes about Romanian scrap metal collectors. The non-territoriality of ecological citizenship means the perpetuation of the negative stereotype is wrongful – even beyond the borders of the state an individual or group occupies. Since ecological citizenship takes action at a distance seriously when it impacts material relations underpinning the ecological footprint, it helps explain why it is problematic for the contributions of citizens of one country to be erased by stereotypes disseminated in another. The fact that *Charlie Hebdo* perpetuated a negative ethicised stereotype in France so gratuitously – and without the excuse of, in this instance, condemning an illicit form of collection – can thus be said to violate obligations stemming from ecological citizenship by painting waste collection practices *in themselves* in a negative light.

5. Scrap Iron Collection as a Racialised Stereotype: Insights *for* Ecological Citizenship

The ecological citizenship analysis can explain why it is wrong to overlook the positive contributions of scrap iron collectors and propagate overwhelmingly negative stereotypes regarding the practice – and why it is wrong to do so even across borders. Yet it does not engage with the *racial* dimension of the stereotype in question. Can ecological citizenship explain the wrongness of the racialised portrayal of Romani people as scrap metal collectors? The short answer, which we elaborate below, is that ecological citizenship itself is amenable to including these concerns, but only if we were to extend the concept beyond Dobson towards a more democratic inclusion of subaltern voices and a more transformative understanding of the meaning of citizenship.

The notion of ecological citizenship presented above captures the wrongness of propagating negative stereotypes by drawing on the importance of caring for the natural environment (and those who will be impacted by depleting it in the future). Focusing on the direct impact of the actions of scrap metal collectors on the natural environment solves the difficulty of diagnosing the stereotype by taking material footprints as starting point for defining citizenship obligations. Yet this focus on the material aspects of ecological citizenship risks overlooking what Alex Latta calls the "politics of nature" (Latta 2007, 388). As Latta puts it, ecological citizenship does not develop independently of political conceptions of nature and its role in human life but is underpinned *by* "substantive human–human relations that engender highly differentiated experiences of citizen duties and agency" (Latta 2007, 385). Overlooking the way political and social contexts shape ecological citizenship binds the notion to an apolitical image of citizenship – which was at stake in the case of the stereotype in question.

The first oversight in taking human-nature relations as primary in conceptualising ecological citizenship is that it *operates with a mistaken view of virtuous ecological citizens* – one that, as we shall see, also affects the stereotype of Romani scrap metal collectors. Latta convincingly argues that ecological citizenship operates with an allegedly neutral model, whereas in fact the image is geared towards currently privileged citizens. The expanded obligations of ecological citizenship are understood to pertain to the powerful – not subaltern or marginalised people. Model ecological citizens "have the duty to right injustice, but never appear to be the sufferers of injustice" (Latta 2007, 384). The key protagonists are "[t]he economically (and ecologically) powerful", with obligations to help, the sufferers of injustice who are their "silent" and "passive counterparts" (Latta 2007, 384). This oversight of the politics of recycling practices can also be highlighted in the case of gender, where – as Sherilyn MacGregor argues – there is little acknowledgement of the disproportionate number of "green" tasks that are associated with traditionally female domestic work (2006, 119). Model ecological citizens are therefore poised to reproduce, in the ecological space, the main economic and gendered cleavages that mark the current political arena.

In the case of scrap metal collecting, this tendency to take privileged agents as model citizens can be evidenced in Dobson's discussion of what it means to be a virtuous ecological citizen. Dobson seems to think that for recycling activities to have merit for ecological citizenship, they should stem from virtuous dispositions rather than monetary remuneration. An ecological citizen is virtuous when she "does the right thing not because of incentives, but because it is the right thing to do" (2004, 129). If we took stories of the kind distributed by *Digi24* at their word, it would indeed seem that financial incentives are important, especially in contexts where scrap metal collection is a primary source of income. When this is the case, it is safe to assume that those who engage in scrap iron collection are primarily motivated by pecuniary interests –such as ensuring their survival – instead of intending primarily to contribute to sustainable processes. In Dobson's account such motivations render the collectors unvirtuous.

Yet it is the very possibility that some might practice iron collection for a living should give us pause before concluding that disadvantaged people in this situation are thereby violating their duties as ecological citizens. Insisting on non-pecuniary motivations risks reproducing existing social hierarchies as hierarchies between well-motivated, economically powerful citizens and financially-motivated, economically weak citizens. Ecological citizenship needs to aim to guard against the possibility that second-class citizens will become second-class *ecological* citizens in a social context rife with economic

inequality. When recycling becomes a livelihood, the insistence on pure, non-financial motivations risks (re)producing significant social inequalities since middle-class, full-time employees (for example, in creative industries) will typically find it easier to discharge the duty of recycling "because it is the right thing to do" compared to more deprived citizens. Criticising the motivations behind recycling practices to make sure they are not tainted by pecuniary incentives risks subjecting the actions of poorer citizens to increased scrutiny, exacerbating social suspicion.

Ecological citizenship therefore carries a dual risk: first and most directly, a risk of replicating unjust social relations in which the Other's misgivings are rendered salient, while the question of what others owe to (Romani) scrap metal collectors is not considered. This oversight might run against a crucial recommendation of ecological citizenship, the recognition that scrap metal collectors are reducing the (metal) materiality impact of others. Second, the alleged neutrality of insisting on non-pecuniary motivations risks perpetuating strategies to de-contextualise the practice from wider elements pertaining to systemic inequality and socio-economic conditions. This second risk affects the racialised form the stereotype takes. We can read the oversight in the context of a more general tendency to ignore wider structural factors that produce a "class to race cascade" in perpetuating racialised poverty for Romani people (McCombs 2018) or a view of begging as a practice divorced from socio-economic inequalities (Breazu 2024). Similar to these cases, by ignoring the wider factors that shape motivations and classing financial motivations as wrong places the responsibility for forming correct motivations on Roma themselves.

To avoid this devaluation of the ecological practice of scrap iron collecting we need to be sensitive to "the substantive human–human relations that engender highly differentiated experiences of citizen duties and agency" (Latta 2007, 385). In the case of gender, this means politicising the image of the model ecological citizen by allowing feminist perspectives to challenge dominant assumptions underpinning the division of recycling responsibilities (MacGregor 2006). In the case of including Romani voices, this means challenging the wider socio-economic context in which the practice takes place and the way it conditions incentives to participate in the practice – pecuniary or otherwise. It also means questioning our assumptions of who takes part in the practice, and under what conditions, rather than responding to negative stereotypes of scrap metal collecting through counter-examples – since combating stereotypes through counter-narratives can still be essentialising (Tittel 2021).

So far, we have discussed the socio-economic issues that a purely nature-focused approach to ecological citizenship would take and argued that these fall along racialised lines. Yet the overlooked human-human relationships also include more direct ways of (re)producing racialised or ethicised hierarchy formation. In line with hierarchical definitions of race or ethnicity as categories which mark "locations of privilege and disadvantage in a set of power relationships" (Mills 2015, 76–77), we can read the very image of the destitute Romani scrap metal collector as part of racialised hierarchy formation meant to "construct a hierarchy of peoples for differential treatment" (Heng 2018, 27). Some recent constructionist approaches have emphasised the fact that such processes are ongoing and subtle, as mainstream society "weav[es] hierarchical relations and differential norms and expectations into the fabric of social reality through seemingly unrelated combinations of actions and interactions" (Popescu-Sarry 2024, 899).

In the case of the stereotype of Romani scrap metal collectors, we can highlight such hierarchical elements in the "seemingly unrelated combinations" of various depictions, reactions to them, omissions (of the duties of white people to recycle and the benefits of the practice), and active othering in the process. The implausible choices of two-thirds negative stories mentioning scrap iron collecting by *Digi24*, in a context where only the ethnicity of Romani people is mentioned creating a racialised association, add a distinct racial angle to the violation of the ecological citizenship duty of promoting recycling practices. Just as, according to Roger Brubaker, the meaning of ethnicity in the phrase "ethnic conflict" is given by the way the actors and institutions involved in it "position themselves *as ethnic*" (Brubaker 2002, 170, original emphasis), so the way diplomatic institutions, national and international media, sports commentators, and ordinary citizens position themselves in respect to the *Charlie Hebdo* caricature constitute it as a racialised negative stereotype. The active portrayals, passive omissions, othering Romani identity through the reactions of non-Romani Romanians, and so on match a dynamic of depicting Romani migrants as a criminal threat in media outlets in ways that legitimise structural domination (Cortes Gomez 2020).

A distinct solution to diagnose and combat such depictions is to rely on forms of solidarity that arise out of the shared position as occupants of the earth and duty-bearers to future generations. Instead of focusing on what follows from obligations towards nature and future generations for citizenship, we could rely on the fundamental equality of citizenship to question inequalities in the ecological vulnerability that existing social groups face. In other words, instead of taking nature as primary in defining citizenship obligations, we could start from equal status as citizens to challenge hierarchical depictions of fulfilling citizen obligations to re-define ecological citizenship as "a continual process of creation and transformation of both nature *and society*" (Gilbert and Phillips 2003, 319, emphasis added).

In the case of the stereotype of Roma scrap metal collectors, insisting on the equality implied by ecological citizenship also helps to push back against the way differential ecological vulnerability is shared along ethnic, gendered, or racial lines. By insisting on the solidarity inherent in the idea of a shared ecological citizenship, the notion might be aligned with the progressive potential of citizenship ties to blur "the boundaries between allegedly homogeneous communities" and "challenge the production of difference through differential inclusion" (Van Baar 2017, 154). The standpoint of equal ecological citizenship is particularly useful for contesting "middle-class normality" in ascribing deviant behaviour to racial groups (Becker 1992, 288) by recognising that the extant value system protects the interests of dominant groups. The contestation can take two forms: a factual route of contesting the attribution of the devalued practice to Romani people, or a value-based contestation of framing the practice as deviant. As in the case of the criminalisation of the allegedly Romani practice of fortune-telling (Meier 2023), combatting the stereotype can point both towards factual inaccuracies in attributing the practice to Romani people and towards unjust criminalisation of a non-harmful practice.

An expanded notion of ecological citizenship is therefore able to uncover three distinct ways in which current depictions of scrap iron collection as a negative racialised stereotype are wrong: First, it can explain how framing scrap iron collection as a negative racialised stereotype perpetuates narratives of Romani deviance, amplifying the stigmatisation of an already disadvantaged group. Second, painting the

Romani minority as associated with a practice that is characterised as itself primarily deviant, instead of useful, contributes to constructing Romani identity as being 'out of place' from everyday citizenship practices. And finally, insisting on the material contributions of scrap iron collecting is only a partial solution, because the racial underpinnings of the negative stereotype of scrap iron collection make it necessary to adopt a more inclusive and solidaristic view of ecological citizenship itself.

6. Ecological Citizenship and the Struggle against Environmental Injustice

We have argued that the standpoint of ecological citizenship allows for capturing the wrongness of the way the stereotype of (Romanian) Roma as illicit scrap metal collectors is portrayed in some influential media outlets in both France and Romania. Nonetheless, the concept of ecological citizenship does not capture many other forms of ecological injustice that Romani people encounter. Relocating evicted Romani children and adults to rubbish dumps, taking advantage of marginalisation to expose Romani communities to dangerous substances, and the associated health hazards that compound pre-existing inequalities in healthcare are more direct ways that the lives of Romani citizens and their families are affected by the neglect of ecological responsibilities.

The notion of ecological citizenship is not meant to replace these other dimensions of environmental injustice but to inform and hopefully complement struggles against them. First, ecological citizenship complements approaches to ecological injustice that focus on rights and the environment. Demands for a safe and healthy environment can be justified in terms of protecting already recognised human rights, since a safe environment can be seen as a pre-condition for exercising one's "rights to life, personal security, health, and food" (Shelton 1991, 105). Regardless, the rights approach faces difficulties when it comes to identifying "the degree of accuracy necessary to support legal action against specific alleged polluters" (Hayward 2000, 564) due to the highly complex and unpredictable nature of environmental problems (also cf. Meyer 2013). Ecological citizenship helps solve this problem by drawing attention to (not just) rights violations but also to *whose obligation it is* to act so as to ensure those rights are respected. Focusing on what polluters owe to current and future members of society ensures more visibility for ecological hazards by broadening the scope of potential stakeholders.

Second, focusing on obligations to reduce the materiality of our ecological footprint helps uncover the currently exploitative nature of ecological practices. On the expanded, more inclusive, interpretation proposed above, ecological citizenship would guard against the possibility that second class citizens become second class *ecological* citizens in a social context rife with economic inequality. Studying the social egalitarian aspects behind compliance with our duties as ecological citizens would reveal differences in how worst-off and better-off members of society might negotiate between selfless ecological acts and financial motivations in fulfilling their ecological obligations. Studying such social egalitarian aspects would also bring into focus the economic aspects of ignoring the contributions of worst-off members of society and highlight the discrepancy between the high value of their actions and the low (monetary and attitudinal) recognition received for their efforts.

Ultimately, adopting the perspective of ecological citizenship recovers the position of populations who are the victims of environmental breakdown and economic injustice as a privileged and even revolutionary site. It does so while avoiding the influential concern that ecological citizens are expected to do more (political) work while also engaging in (private) ecological choices, since Dobson's ecological citizenship theory is determined solely through material contributions (MacGregor 2006). In situations when the breakdown of ecological processes and economic conditions leading to them become plain, communities suffering from economic injustice become one of a decreasing number of social positions from which one "cannot escape the contradictions that are reaching the explosion point" (Reid and Taylor 2000, 455), which renders the experience of such communities a privileged site of "potentially revolutionary resistance" (Reid and Taylor 2000, 454). Ecological citizenship hence reveals both the unacknowledged contributions of Romani people engaged in scrap metal collection practices, and how the current situation of Romani people as disproportionate victims of ecological injustice can become a site of empowerment.

Conclusion

The privileged role that the media plays in society gives media outlets the power to reinforce stereotypes and fail to express appropriate sympathy or care for subjects. In this instance, we believe that there are a variety of issues that might apply to the coverage of Roma in certain European media. Not only are such stereotypes often inaccurate, as the ratio of negative to positive stories about a recycling practice in the *Digi24* archive suggests. Even when accurate, such stereotypes can wrongfully disrespect groups. And even when respectful, they can reify or reinforce existing power relations.

We hope to have shown that there is a more theoretically and normatively interesting problem in the context of Roma and metal scrap collecting, namely that media depictions of scrap metal collection as incompatible with success (as in the Halep caricature) might be failing to act in an ecologically citizenly way. In the context of a racialised stereotype this amounts to failing to recognise the ecological citizenly way Roma are acting according to the depictions.

Second, we hope to have showcased some advantages of ecological citizenship as a tool for diagnosing the issues addressed in this paper, while also exposing some underexplored shortcomings. The strengths of the concept are that it is not dependent on national boundaries and that its focus on material footprints is a suitable basis for highlighting the benefits of a devalued practice. However, some understandings of the concept risk exacerbating existing social inequities, some which fall along distinctly racialised lines. We hope the above analysis has demonstrated both the high adaptability of ecological citizenship which makes it a ripe concept to incorporate into Romani studies, but also how employing the concept to account for a racialised practice shows the need to expand it in more inclusive and democratic directions.

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