Stain: Undesirable Subjects and the Spectacle City

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This talk looks at two contemporary instances of urban cleansing in cities offering themselves for global spectacle: the eviction, expulsion, and segregation of Roma (“Gypsies”) in Marseille, and the deportation of beggars from Delhi’s streets. I engage these cases to consider whether historical conditions have generated both a certain common prototype for the unwanted, undesirable subject who allegedly requires purging, on the one hand, and a certain type of spectacle city, on the other. What is shared between these two disparate settings? What conditions bring them together? By comparing two (or more) examples, it becomes possible to ask both whether patterns are emerging across cultures in the kind of person that can be deemed dispensable, expendable, or expellable in the neoliberal spectacle city, and whether the spectacle city is emerging as a kind of thing. Drawing on royal edicts, law, public texts, and years of ethnographic work, I will interrogate how globally-inflected campaigns of authoring cityspace are translated into the daily and lived experience of those whose lives, under such regimes, are deemed dispensable, and how, in turn, they push back, in part by occupying unclaimed zones, thus defying the power being exerted over their living space. I will conclude with the discussion of an interesting place where these two historical threads come together: in the proposed removal from Delhi of groups that came to be labeled “Gypsy” under European administration, but with whom certain European Romani groups also identify.

Jonah Steinberg is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Vermont. He received his BA from Swarthmore College, and his PhD from the University of Pennsylvania. His first book, Isma’ili Modern: Globalization and Identity in a Muslim Community, was awarded the biannual Citizenship Book Prize from the Center for the Study of Citizenship. His more recent projects, funded in part by the NSF, explore both the journeys of child runaways in postcolonial India and emergent responses among European Roma to racism and segregation

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