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How Europe’s green transition is reinforcing racial inequality

Environmental sustainability is often framed as universally beneficial — a shared global mission to curb climate change, reduce waste and build greener futures. But what if some of these well-intentioned policies deepen the very inequalities they aim to solve?

That question drives the work of UC Santa Barbara anthropologist Elana Resnick, whose research traces how European Union environmental initiatives interact with — and often intensify — longstanding racial hierarchies. Drawing on two decades of fieldwork in Bulgaria, her new book, “Refusing Sustainability: Race and Environmentalism in a Changing Europe” (Stanford University Press, 2025), offers a rare, ground-level view of how sustainability policies unfold in the daily lives of some of Europe’s most marginalized communities.

Resnick’s work centers on Roma communities, the largest minority group in Europe and one historically subjected to segregation, discrimination and systemic exclusion. “In Bulgaria, Roma comprise more than 10% of the population, yet they’ve been systematically pushed to the margins for centuries,” she said. These exclusions shape nearly every aspect of daily life, from access to education and jobs to political representation.

To understand how these dynamics unfold, Resnick immersed herself in the communities she studied, prioritizing an ethical research approach. For nearly a year, she worked as a contracted street sweeper on a team of 40 Romani women in

Sofia, Bulgaria's capital. "The street sweepers are under constant surveillance," she said. "At first they told me, 'I can't talk to you — my bosses are watching.' The only way I could speak with them without threatening their jobs was to work alongside them."

The job was also dangerous. Workers cleaned multi-lane roads during rush hour and were subject to passersby who would at times yell slurs and throw lit cigarette butts at their flammable uniforms. Despite the risks they faced, the women welcomed her. "They used to say that I was writing 'the book about how much we suffer,'" she said, noting also that their lives were about much more than hardship. "They were very aware of their position in society. But they also joked about whether I was a spy. They eventually decided I wasn't because I could take a joke."

Through her fieldwork, Resnick developed what she calls the waste–race nexus — the idea that people treated as disposable and the waste they handle become mutually reinforcing categories. In Bulgaria's case, EU membership required dramatic upgrades to waste systems, recycling practices and environmental standards. Ironically, Roma communities — long stigmatized as "social waste" — became essential to performing the physical labor that keeps Bulgaria compliant with European norms. "Roma are doing the labor that keeps Bulgaria looking 'European,'" Resnick said. "They clean the streets, sort the recycling and do the work that allows Bulgaria to meet EU environmental requirements. There's a paradox: the same communities considered 'non-European' are sustaining what Europe defines as European."

Despite low pay and dehumanizing working conditions, Resnick found that street sweeping created an unexpected space for political and collective life. The work allowed women to gather, talk, joke and strategize — a rare form of public sociality in a context of widespread racial profiling, police harassment and chronic economic insecurity. These everyday interactions form what Resnick calls "a refusal politics": small acts of solidarity and self-definition that push back against the conditions designed to limit them. "It's not about offering a feel-good story of resilience," she said. "It's about the hard work it takes just to survive."

Though grounded in Bulgaria, the book speaks to global debates about environmental policy and racial inequality. Resnick argues that sustainability, as commonly framed, often hides the labor and sacrifice required to maintain it. "We

often assume sustainability is an unquestioned good," she said. "But many initiatives rest on the labor of unrecognized communities of color and women. This is not natural — it's the outcome of centuries of racial ordering."

Rather than proposing a single solution, the book emphasizes the importance of recognizing the system for what it is. "Diagnosing the absurdity of what's around us is itself a call to action," she said. The book's title reflects this dual emphasis: a refusal of both the dehumanization faced by marginalized communities and the unexamined sustainability structures that depend on their labor. The women at the center of Resnick's fieldwork embody what she sees as everyday forms of possibility — modest but meaningful ways of imagining life beyond the status quo.

"The book is set in Bulgaria," Resnick said, "but it's about global issues of white supremacy, climate change and racism. These women show us how to keep living, and how to seek something else, even in the hardest conditions."

Resnick will discuss the book in a Humanities Decanted conversation hosted by the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center on Feb. 5, 2026, in the McCune Conference Room with Dean of Social Sciences Charles Hale.

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