Locating ‘The Gypsy Problem’. The Roma in Italy: Stereotyping, Labelling and ‘Nomad Camps’

Nando Sigona

Romani camps are to be found all over Italy and host around 40,000 residents. They are known as ‘nomad camps’, implying that their inhabitants are vagrants who do not settle in one place. This article investigates how cultural concepts such as nomadism are employed in Italy to legitimize segregation policy. It also explores the role of space and place in the liaison between the Roma and the Italians. The focus, therefore, is not on the Roma themselves, but on how Italians interact with them and the degree to which Italian public policy and bureaucratic practice form, transform and manipulate their identity. By analysing the circularity of the relationship among stereotypes, labelling and policy, the paper deconstructs the so-called ‘problema zingari’ (‘Gypsy problem’). Finally, it stresses the central role played by the camps as loci of the ‘problem’, both in preserving and reinforcing the status quo and in providing a refuge for people with minimal social and legal rights.

Keywords: Roma; Gypsies; Italy; Camps; Spatial Segregation; Anthropology of Policy

Introduction

A black ghetto is the place to study the defects of white society (Marchand 1979: 239).

Scampia is a deprived northern suburb of Naples (Italy) with over 41,000 residents. It is a recently developed district whose administrative borders were only established in 1987. A distinctive feature of the district is the near-absence of a private housing sector. Compared to the city’s average, the population of Scampia is generally

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younger and the household size larger. There is a high incidence of unemployment, drug use and crime (Amato 1993; Morlicchio 2001). In June 1999 a squad of local inhabitants, armed with wooden clubs and petrol, reacted angrily to a car accident which involved a Romani car driver and two Italians on a motor scooter. For two days the Roma living in Scampia were both verbally threatened and physically attacked by local residents who eventually set fire to several Romani huts. Commenting on the reactions of locals, a Neapolitan journalist noted:

Their invectives sound all the same way. No one seems to be ashamed or worried, no one seems to be sympathetic while watching Romani children and older people getting in the car and running away (Beneduce 1999).

Two out of the five Romani settlements in the area were burnt to the ground. Several overexcited residents watched the events from the windows of the apartment blocks surrounding the encampments, shouting and clapping their hands. By the end of the weekend, hundreds of Roma had packed their belongings in overloaded cars, vans and caravans and had left Naples. Only a small minority of the 1,600 Roma living in the area before the arson attacks stayed in the city. These remaining Roma were supported by a coalition of NGOs although, according to many camp residents, with little protection from the local police. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, the Naples councillor in charge of social affairs visited the camps. Asked about the solution to the conflicts in Scampia, she replied that every effort would be made to guarantee the peaceful cohabitation of residents in the neighbourhood (reported in Marconi 1999). It appears that she already had a solution to ‘the Gypsy problem’: evict the remaining Roma and move them to a place where they would be rendered invisible to the other local residents. The new Roma camp was opened a year later in an isolated area behind the Secondigliano prison (Roma Rights 1999; Sigona 2002).

The aim of this paper is to examine the actors and dynamics involved in what is commonly called the ‘problema zingari’ or ‘Gypsy problem’. These two words, it can be argued, encapsulate the ambiguity and ambivalence of Italian policy towards the Romani minority. What do politicians mean when they declare their will to solve the ‘problema zingari’? Do they aim to address the problems that Roma face or, conversely, the problem that the Roma pose to ‘us’? In reality, politicians probably mean both. This paper investigates this theme and aims to deconstruct the mechanism that allows the political system to achieve these ambivalent goals.

The label ‘problema zingari’, I argue, does not tell us a great deal regarding Roma; it rather sums up the way the majority and its political representatives see and represent them. Several actors take part, in various roles, in the definition of the ‘Gypsy problem’. There are those who are in charge of ascribing and spreading definitions and those who use them. There are those who act in good faith and those who, instead, capitalise on the irrational and at times rational fears held by individuals. Finally, there are those who mediate between Roma and Italians and those who just speak for them.
As already mentioned, the focus of this paper, therefore, is not so much the Roma themselves as the ways in which ‘we’—NGOs, bureaucrats, officials and society at large—interact with them, and the degree to which our public policy and bureaucratic practice transform and manipulate their identity (Zetter 1991). Paying attention to cultural concepts such as nomadism and sedentariness, the analysis shows how, in the Italian context, they are employed to legitimise segregation policy towards this particular minority.

Finally, emphasising the role played by camps in preserving and reinforcing the status quo and in providing a refuge for people without substantive legal rights, I propose an explanatory model of ‘the Gypsy problem’.

Methodology

Based on research carried out between March 1998 and April 2001 in Romani settlements in Naples, Tuscany and Emilia Romagna, this paper builds upon previous work (Sigona 2002) by exploring the spatial dimensions of Roma marginalisation in the Italian context. My first contact with a Roma camp occurred in June 1998 when I began fieldwork for research on Italian policies concerning Roma and Sinti. In parallel with this I became actively involved with a community-based group in Naples called COMPARE (Committee for Non-Ghetto Housing for the Roma) which works in the areas of housing, Roma participation in decision-making and children’s health and schooling. I was, to adopt Bernard’s definition (1995: 138–9), an observing participant. In this context, it is important to acknowledge my dual role as political activist and researcher and the ways in which this role defined both the aims and the objectives of the research. The intertwining of diverse human, political and cultural factors directed my attention away from the Roma themselves to the interplay between them and the rest of the social fabric within the context set by regional laws and the Italian legal and bureaucratic system. From a ‘traditional’ anthropological approach I rapidly moved towards what Shore and Wright (1997) have termed anthropology of policy. The central argument is that policy shapes the way individuals construct themselves as subjects. ‘Through policy’, Shore and Wright (1997: 4) argue, ‘the individual is categorized and given such statuses and roles as “subject”, “citizen”, “professional”, “national”, “criminal” and “deviant” or, as in this paper, as ‘gypsy’. Central government and regional policies in Italy concerning Roma have been explored, particularly relating to policy as a nodal point of intersection and articulation of ideologies, practices, power, and processes of contestation and accommodation. A comparative reading of Italian regional laws ‘in defence of the Gypsies’, together with an in-depth analysis of the political debate which led to the approval of the Tuscany and Emilia Romagna laws, set the context for my own fieldwork. Nomad camps and their exceptionality (Agamben 1998) are regarded here as the more visible achievements of these policies.

Given that the aim of the research was to examine the variegated world circulating inside and around camps, participant observation meant being involved in and
observing how ‘we’ (politicians, aid-workers, scholars, gadje—non-Roma) interact with Roma. A particular focus is the ways in which the legal, social and cultural infrastructure that ‘we’, as a majority, are implicated in, affects and impacts on their lives. As a result, the observing participant status, which was not initially planned, became essential to the overall conduct of my research. Being actively involved with Roma in Naples allowed me to closely observe their relationships with civil servants, politicians, aid-workers and clergy and also to have access to and participate in informal discussions and official meetings. This type of access would scarcely have been possible to an academic researcher, working largely on the outside (Però 1999). This fact also helped me to build a network of contacts in Tuscany, Emilia Romagna and other regions of Italy that were extremely beneficial for my fieldwork. In order to test and develop insights and ideas emerging from the participant observation and the analysis of regional laws and their discourses (Fairclough 2003), semi-structured interviews with Roma, NGOs, volunteers, and civil servants were conducted in the three principle locations. The data which resulted were subsequently presented and discussed in a number of workshops and focus groups with both Roma and gadje.

Romani communities in Italy

Italy is the only country among the EU member-states where the number of Roma stemming from post-1945 immigrations virtually outnumbers the descendants of the important Romani communities who had established themselves there since the late Middle Ages. This brief overview aims to set the context for the analysis of ‘the Gypsy problem’. The heteronym ‘zingari’ incorporates a number of groups and subgroups, ‘a world of worlds’, according to the Italian anthropologist Piasere (1999). The three main components are Roma, Sinti and Camminanti. A further distinction, on legal grounds, has to be made between those with and those without Italian citizenship. Roma and Sinti began to settle in Italy in the fifteenth century: the Sinti reached the centre-north of Italy overland from the Balkan region, and the Roma crossed the Adriatic Sea from the south, settling in the southern part of the country (Karpati 1969, 1993). The origin of the Camminanti is unclear; their community is historically located in Sicily and travels throughout the whole of Italy for part of the year (Sidoti 2002; Soravia 1981). The Roma and Sinti are then divided into a plethora of other subgroups which often take their name from the province or region of main settlement or from their principle economic activity (e.g. Piedmont Sinti, Circensian Sinti, Abruzzo Roma, Napulengre Roma; see Viaggio 1997). In the absence of official statistics, figures on the overall Roma and Sinti population rely on generally accepted estimates, according to which there are approximately 120,000–150,000 Roma, Sinti and Camminanti currently living in Italy. A majority of them (about 60 per cent) are Italian citizens. Among the Sinti, about 15 per cent have an itinerant or semi-itinerant lifestyle connected to their economic activities, whilst the Roma tend to have a more sedentary one. The bulk of the remaining 40 per cent of Gypsies came to Italy in recent times, especially from the Balkans and Romania. They generally call themselves
‘Roma’ but the term assumes slightly different meanings within each community (Brunello 1996; Karpati 1969; Piasere 1988).

Many Roma who fled from war and persecution to Italy are sans papiers (undocumented). They have no legal permits to stay in the country or may simply have been granted short-term leave to remain on humanitarian grounds, an exemption from expulsion which is difficult to renew (Schiavone 1997). An increasing number of Roma children born in Italy to foreign parents are stateless, and face overwhelming obstacles in obtaining any passport at all. About one-third of the Roma and Sinti population—including both Italian and an estimated 18,500 foreign citizens—currently live in authorised or unauthorised camps separated from the rest of Italian society (Brunello 1996; Monasta 2001). As reported by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI 2002), ‘the situation of practical segregation of Roma/Gypsies in Italy appears to reflect a general approach of the Italian authorities which tend to consider Roma as nomads and wanting to live in camps’. Similar concerns were expressed in 1999 by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD 1999) which declared that ‘in addition to a frequent lack of basic facilities, the housing of Roma in such camps leads not only to a physical segregation of the Roma community from Italian society, but a political, economic and cultural isolation as well’. The label ‘nomads’ is applied indifferently to the whole Roma and Sinti population, regardless of whether they are Italian citizens or foreigners, travellers or sedentary people, war refugees or economic migrants. The conflict over the term is a key issue in the ongoing debate in Italy and Europe over the recognition of the Romani minority and its rights, a debate whose effects can also be detected in camps, as the following quote from my fieldwork shows:

Several motivations drove me to change my life: first, the fact of being ‘nomad’, that is from Rom to become ‘nomad’, to become ‘zingaro’ with many prejudices, mainly negative. I never thought of myself as a nomad in my home country, I didn’t think of me as a ‘zingaro’: dirty, tattered, thief. That is why I decided to be actively involved for Romani rights here in Italy. I want to show to Italians that no ‘zingaro’ would call another Rom: ‘zingaro’ (BH, Macedonian Rom).

Analysing the relationship which binds labelling to policy and practice, the following section examines in detail the wanted and unwanted outcomes of the political use of the term ‘nomadism’, specifically as this is applied in the legal framework set by regional laws ‘in defence of nomadic people’.

**Camps and Labelling**

The camp neither improves the situation nor changes it. It doesn’t help the Roma participation in the social fabric, it rather hinders this process. The camp surrounds and excludes its inmates to the point that later people can affirm that these are the
Roma and they will be always the same, they will never change (DM, Macedonian Rom in Florence).

Labels, it has been suggested (Sigona 2002), can be regarded as an expression of the Foucauldian régime of truth. 'The truth', in Foucault's words (1998: 133), ‘is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it and to effects of power which induce and which extend it’. The circular relation linking systems of power and the effects of power in the definition of the truth, which is always ‘official’, also affects legislation. Liégeois’ remark (1980: 28) illustrates this well:

Legislation, for its effects, contributes to feed and reinforce those aspects of the image, which are indispensable to itself. ... The law feeds itself with the image. The image helps to rationalise it. The image is, hence, re-strengthened by it.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, 10 out of the 20 regions in Italy adopted laws aimed at the ‘protection of Gypsies’ and ‘their nomadic culture’. Each regional law defines its target group in a slightly different way. They may refer, for example, to nomads, Roma, Roma and Sinti or zingari. This variety has to be acknowledged because, as suggested by Marta (1994: 249), ‘heteronyms constitute a key element of policy making for those regional and local authorities that develop a strategy of intervention towards Roma’. In order to achieve the goal of protecting ‘nomadic culture’, regional laws enlist a number of tools. By far the most significant of them is the building of camps (see, for example, Law 32/90 Regione Umbria; Law 11/88 Regione Friuli-Venezia Giulia; Law 299/90 Regione Lombardia). By this means the perception that all Roma and Sinti are nomads and therefore should live in camps, isolated from mainstream Italian society, is given the official stamp of approval. As a result, many Roma have effectively been forced to live out the romantic but nonetheless repressive projections of Italians.

The description of Roma as ‘nomads’ is not only used in the service of segregating Roma, but also in order to reinforce the popular idea that Roma are not Italians and do not ‘belong’ to Italy. As such, the existence of local administrative offices for ‘Nomads and Non-Europeans’ indicates that Roma are commonly perceived as foreigners in the eyes of the Italian authorities (Piasere 1991). Prejudices and stereotypes concerning Roma are to be found across the entire political spectrum. As Clough Marinaro’s work on the Roma in Rome shows, despite a well-intentioned initial approach, the policy of the city council was largely based on a set of assumptions which viewed the Roma as ‘inherently nomadic, dishonest and incapable of functioning in a modern society’ (Clough Marinaro 2003: 203–4). In practice, the ‘nomad theory’ is often used to provide a form of cultural legitimation for marginalising the Roma. In regional laws, the link between the protection of nomadism and the building of camps is blatant. It is as if a cause-and-effect relationship exists between the solemn aim of protecting nomadic culture, and the efforts made by local authorities—with the support of regional governments—to build camps. Another element emerging from the regional laws is a very little
information on their actual target group and its needs; conversely, there is a greater emphasis on the ‘real gypsy’ myth and on the measures needed to preserve ‘gypsy culture’. According to Sibley (1995), ‘while they [the Roma] may be considered exotic and interesting at a distance, they become deviant when enmeshed in the social mainstream’. However, as I will argue later, camps also suit a range of other purposes.

Enforcing the separation of Roma from mainstream society through the use of camps is a key factor in the perpetuation of their status as ‘enemies’ rather than ‘strangers’ (Bauman 1990, 1992). The ‘stranger’, because of his proximity to the known and familiar, suggests tangible difficulties for the building and renegotiation of relationships and identities, whereas the ‘enemy’ can be more readily manipulated because of his status as an outsider. The ‘Gypsy’ stands in between these two cases. Despite living in ‘our’ cities, s/he rarely intermingles with ‘us’. Besides, Gypsies are so politically weak that they can hardly dispute the official image of them that we may construct. The ‘Gypsy’, as I have suggested elsewhere, is the ‘inner enemy’ (Sigona 2003). As a consequence of their isolation, Roma do not exist as personae for the majority of Italians but only as stereotypes. This is a more general phenomenon which does not affect only Italy, as Fonseca argues:

> The more exotic Gypsies appear to be, the more ‘genuine’ they are considered and, paradoxically, the more acceptable they become (in the local imagination, if not in the local pub). Whoever best fits the stereotypes wins (Fonseca 1995: 238).


> Where outsiders come into close physical association with the larger society, particularly in cities, the romantic image, the pervasive myth about minority culture, is retained as a yardstick against which they are measured. Experience of the minority at first hand contradicts the myth but it does not explode it. The myth can be retained because failure to meet mythical expectations is attributed to deviancy or to social pathologies that are somehow a product of urban living.

The explosion of the ‘Gypsy myth’ is a nodal point which, as I will argue in the final section, cannot be resolved merely by moving Roma out of the camps. The gatedness of Roma camps is not just a matter of housing. There is a need for a more holistic approach that makes the Roma themselves key actors in policy development and implementation. Calling for an integrated approach which has the Roma, but also civil society, and in particular local inhabitants, as foci, is a way of reminding us of what the promoters of the ‘real Gypsy’ myth tend to forget—that most camps are planned, designed and built by architects, engineers and planners. They are not in this sense a naturally occurring feature of Roma culture but rather an architectonic projection of how Italians view them (Eco 1980). It is a projection which has some very real and dramatic consequences. The vicious circle which results in the building of camps not only affects the daily lives of thousands of individuals but also their expectations, demands and chances of social enhancement (Sigona 2003).
Temporary Solutions

In Italy, Roma settlements are built, or allowed to exist, in areas close to prisons, dog pounds and rubbish dumps—land with a very low economic value (Brunello 1996; Karpati 1999; Però 1999; Revelli 1999; Tabucchi 1999). Roma are ‘a residual population in a residual space’ (Sibley 1995: 68). The choice of location reveals, according to Solimano and Mori (2000: 40), a widespread attitude: ‘Gypsies must be kept apart from the general population, and the general population would do [its] best to keep their distance from them’. Illegal settlements, whose forms remind us of the slums of many third-world cities, are often without running water, toilets and electricity. Their size may vary considerably: in Rome in the 1990s the Casilino 700 camp had more than 1,300 inhabitants, whereas in Scampia the smallest camp had no more than 40 inhabitants before it was burnt down in 1999. Legal settlements are either built *ex novo* by local authorities or started off as illegal camps which are later given the ‘official’ label. They are all commonly called ‘*campi nomadi*’ (camps for nomads), even though in the last few years some local authorities (for example in Naples), conscious of increasing concern about the use of the nomad-camp label, began to introduce a series of new definitions, including *villaggio di accoglienza per Rom* (reception village for Roma). It has to be noted that changing names has only in a few cases resulted in a consistent change of practice. As far as the structure of the legal camps built *ex novo* by local authorities is concerned, they are being presented as temporary solutions which allow local authorities to build according to different (and lower) standards than would usually be the case. Their plan is generally geometric, following the military camp model, with residents allotted a numbered place with a caravan or, sometimes, a prefabricated container. It is an imposed structure with very little attention given to residents’ social networks and family connections. Former illegal settlements, on the other hand, normally maintain their apparently chaotic structure. Public intervention is often limited to installing a few hygiene-related services and, where possible, installing running water or periodically refilling water tanks. A common feature of the two types of legal camp is that they are enclosed: their entrances are under surveillance and the movements of Roma and non-Roma alike are monitored.

Regional laws concerning Roma and Sinti typically enlist principles such as the protection of Gypsy culture, traditional jobs and nomadism. They may also include guidelines for building camps and allocating funding. In reality, however, the actual power to decide whether or not to intervene is the responsibility of local government. City councillors, in the last two decades, have not proven particularly responsive to the cultural arguments presented in the regional laws. They have, in most cases, only intervened when health and security problems in the illegal settlements have come to the attention of the local and national media. In these circumstances, local authorities have found in the camps, not so much a perennial feature of Roma culture, as a ready-made housing solution (at relatively low cost) to what is perceived as a constant state of ‘emergency’. Concerning the involvement of local authorities
and their underlying political rationale, two aspects are rarely taken into account. Firstly, the concept of ‘emergency’ is never questioned. Rather, it tends to be presented as an unavoidable situation whose precise causes remain vague. Secondly, camps, although presented as transitory solutions, have become, *de facto*, the permanent home of thousands of Roma. The notion of emergency can be seen as a central category in the contemporary political struggle. ‘It is not’, Tosi (1993: 32) argues, ‘a rational definition of urgencies and priorities, but rather a permanent construction aimed at defining the boundaries of negotiability of a given issue’. Emergency as a political category allows the complex causes of migration flows and the structural causes of poverty to be largely sidelined in public debate. As a result, political intervention, if and when it occurs, is limited to meeting the most basic of housing needs (Rahola 2003).

**The Spatial Dimensions of the ‘Gypsy Problem’**

The definition ‘*problema zingari*’ expresses in its very wording the ambiguity which permeates Italian policy towards Roma. Such ambiguity expresses itself fully, and is effectively reified in the structure of camps. The interconnection between labels and policy has emerged as one of the key aspects affecting the relationship between Roma and Italians. Nomadism, recognised *by ‘us’* as a feature of the Roma people, is objectified through the law, turning the stereotype into a label. The main consequence of this process is that nomadism, once inscribed in official discourse, becomes one of the two compelling arguments supporting the camp policy. As I have shown, the second argument is based upon a perceived state of permanent emergency.

The model outlined in Figure 1 portrays the actors involved in the ‘*problema zingari*’ and their mutual relationships. Two different, and opposing, structural principles regulate the territory where Roma settle. On the one side, there is the emergency principle, the driving force of most initiatives targeted at Roma, the main attribute of which is precariousness; on the other, there is the stability principle, which represents the world of secure and enduring relationships, of legal rights and entitlements. The interplay between these two regulative principles, and their strict interdependence, has been summed up in the model with the words: ‘permanent emergency’. The outcomes of their interactions materialise in various aspects of life in camps. Looking, for example, at those who intervene and mediate between Roma and gadje (the non-Roma), it is possible to identify two main groups: the first is made up of volunteers, aid-workers and NGOs, the second by the police and bureaucratic apparatus. In the first case, we encounter people who are normally linked to relief operations in emergency situations. Due to the fact that many of these individuals are on short-term contracts, they, too, may be said to fall into the sphere of precariousness. The second group, instead, are more generally related to the sphere of social stability.
The urban margins are the arena in which the relationship between Roma and Italians takes place, shaped by the condition of ‘permanent emergency’. The urban level is where the ‘problem’ is localised and where the space for dialogue and/or conflict can be found. In such a context, the camp becomes a limitation, if not an obstacle, to the relational space, making contact more difficult between groups living in the same community. As shown in Figure 1, there are three main actors involved, even though their names may vary: the Roma/zingari (or the politically correct ‘nomads’), the local authority and the citizens/gadje.

The interplay between these groups is strongly asymmetrical. Local authorities, through drastically sectorialised policy, manage the social fabric. One outcome of this divide-et-impera process is the compartmentalisation of the population into smaller and smaller subgroups. As far as Roma and their needs are concerned, the consequence of this phenomenon is their artificial separation from those living in the same neighbourhood and city. Roma are treated as a special subgroup, occupying a spatial and temporal enclave, thus denying the immediacy of their existence. Their perceived distinctiveness is not based upon the acknowledgement of their specific conditions and needs, but is rather rooted in a lack of knowledge and on fixed stereotypes. Graphically, the split of the local community along ethnic boundaries can been represented through a triangle whose base is constituted by the Roma and the other citizens, polarised in the two corners, and whose vertex is occupied by the local authority. However, the fragmentation of the base is not only the result of local policies. The separation between Roma and other citizens is founded on deep-seated

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1.** The multidimensional relationships of the ‘problema zingari’.
and interiorised disparities in legal and social status. The Italian system makes them legally different and treats them as distinct entities. The Roma represent the weakest corner of the triangle, those with the least power of negotiation. They are relegated to a condition of juridical limbo which, in the case of most foreign Roma, means having more than one expulsion decree pending on their shoulders. The main cause of this condition can be found in the national policy of giving temporary permits-to-stay to displaced people from the Balkans, rather than allowing them to claim asylum according to the Geneva Convention (Schiavone 1999; Vincenzi 2000; Zetter et al. 2002). These temporary permits-to-stay, despite being renewable, are a source of great anxiety and insecurity for their owners—and especially for foreign Roma—who may live for several years under the continuous threat of expulsion. Thus, in practice, their juridical precariousness is often transformed into a state of existential precariousness.

Camps, in such a context, become a refuge, a place to find protection, where alliances and social networks may help to overcome the Roma deficiency in relation to citizenship and social entitlements. Any camp, Giorgio Agamben (2000: 42) argues, ‘is an apparently anodyne place . . . in which, for all intents and purposes, the normal rule of law is suspended’. The very precariousness of their legal status makes any Roma demand appear ‘illegitimate’. The central point here is that the main cause of Roma precariousness cannot be found at the local level but is rather a consequence of a national strategy whose impact is felt at local level. The ‘problema zingari’, therefore, is multi-dimensional, with national strategies affecting local actors and social dynamics.

As far as the national level is concerned, it is important to note the general absence of communication between Roma and the national authorities. While citizens have various tools with which to make their voice heard in the national arena—for example the political election—Roma, like many immigrants, do not have any tools with which to respond to national government. Meanwhile, local authorities are more or less obliged to cope with the Roma and their living conditions because of their visibility and the scale of outcry from the rest of the population. They cannot simply ignore the Roma’s demands for assistance, however ‘illegitimate’ they may be. Turning attention now to how local authorities manage this ‘Gypsy problem’, a crucial feature is the exclusion of the third actor. Reviewing policy and practice in most Italian municipalities that have dealt with Roma, it appears that there is a tendency to systematically exclude either the Roma or the Italians from the decision-making process. Consequently, if local authorities are forced to take action to address Roma requests for assistance, they turn to emergency plans, characterised by low, short-term costs, poor quality of provision and virtually no participation from the local community and the Roma themselves (Tosi 1993).

Camps are therefore the solution to what is constructed as a humanitarian emergency. From an organisational perspective they allow better management of the target group. In camps, service provision and assistance maintain their attribute of exceptionality, stressing implicitly that it is not rights which are being referred to here
but basic needs, which have to be addressed. If citizens ask for more security and protection from the ‘dangerous Gypsies’, the response of local authorities will typically be for more policing in the area. Encouraging public debate or making any attempt to identify the reasons for protest at a local level tends to be scrupulously avoided. Hence, the Gypsy problem viewed from the local authorities’ or citizens’ perspective is mainly an issue of public order and security. As highlighted in the model, the citizens’ demand for security can be seen as ‘legitimate’ because citizens, being full members of the social fabric, are bearers of rights and entitlements. Their demand finds its answer in two types of measure: policing and camps. From this perspective, camps lose their humanitarian veil and appear as places of control, surrounded by material—and immaterial—fences.

As implied earlier, the implementation of local strategies is mainly delegated to the voluntary sector, which has the fundamental task of mediating between local government and the Roma. However, as many failed projects which aimed to improve living conditions and to promote Roma participation have shown, there are two main risks which volunteers and NGOs may incur: firstly, confusing their role of mediator with that of representative; therefore, rather than facilitating the communication of Roma needs, they change roles and begin to speak ‘for’ them; secondly, institutionalising Roma and making them dependent upon the mercy of the host society instead of promoting their participation and mobilisation (see Goffman 1968 and Harrell-Bond 1986 for further exploration of this phenomenon).

In most Italian nomad camps these two processes are clearly visible (Brunello 1996; Sigona 2002). As shown in the model, the missing link is the relationship between the two groups occupying the base of the triangle. The geographical separateness is just one of the factors to be taken into account. Another crucial factor refers to labelling and is stressed in the model by the double definitions: Roma/zingari and gadje/citizens. Are we talking of the Roma/gadje relationship or the zingari/citizens one? ‘Roma’ is an autonym: an ethnic self-definition given by the group itself. The ‘gadje’ label is attributed to those who are not Roma by the Roma. Therefore, referring to the Roma/gadje relationship means approaching the interplay between the two groups from the perspective of Roma. On the contrary, if we approach the two groups from the other perspective, the labels change. On one side, there are the ‘citizens’ or the ‘Italians’, those with full rights; on the other, the ‘zingari’ or ‘nomads’. ‘Zingari’ and ‘nomads’ are heteronyms: ethnic definitions imposed upon a group by someone else. Of course, the actual relationships in the field contain both perspectives. They can in fact be regarded as the result of the competition of the two sets of definitions. Nevertheless, it seems useful to stress the duality of the conjunction based upon the essential incommunicability between the two sides. Their reciprocal knowledge, in the absence of first-hand contact (with the exception of the Roma beggars who are much more visible than statistically representative), is largely mediated by the national and local media, which create and reproduce stereotypes. Volunteers and aid-workers who work on the edge between the two worlds are also active in this process, sometimes facilitating the exchange of information, sometimes obstructing it.
Conclusions

Policies are most obviously political phenomena, yet it is a feature of policies that their political nature is disguised by the objective, neutral, legal–rational idioms in which they are portrayed (Shore and Wright 1997: 8).

The analysis of Italian policy and practice reveals a lack of political will to develop and implement projects aimed at bridging the gap between the Roma and their neighbours. Furthermore, there is also a failure of will to recognise the Roma as full inhabitants of their community and, therefore, to recognise their right to participate in the public life of their territory and in the distribution of resources and benefits allocated to the local community. In deprived areas, such as those where most camps are located, these resources are normally very poor. Local conflicts may arise connected to the battle for the allocation of resources. Nevertheless, considering the already existing tensions between the two groups, the recognition of Roma citizenship would transform rather than increase the potential for conflict. The Roma, from being an irrational and unaccountable threat, would become party to a more accountable and transparent conflict between equal contenders. The ghettoisation of Roma in camps, I suggest, blocks contact between them and the rest of the local inhabitants, thus denying a space for conflict and also for its possible solution to emerge:

‘The space’ is the battlefield on which an increasing number of issues is born; it is where segments of population meet and aggregate around an occasional common interest. The gradual and progressive decrease of collective-based conflicts is contrasted by the proliferation of locally-based micro-conflicts, whose rationale becomes more and more local and sectional, questioning well-established social identities (Solimano 1999: 136).

The polity tends to deal with the spatial dimension of conflict only reactively: guarding the distance between Gypsies and Italians, recognising and representing in public discourse the fear of ‘the other’ in ‘our’ backyard, without attempting to acknowledge it. Choosing the spatial dimension as a starting point permits an expansion rather than a reduction of the semantic and political territory of ‘the Gypsy problem’, which is then not merely a housing issue (the building of camps) but a question of creating a shared space and of providing the grounds for peaceful co-existence. The camp, with its multi-functionality, incorporates and appears to resolve the ambiguity of the ‘Gypsy problem’. It becomes the stage where contradictory policies are played out. The exercise of local polity, by concealing one of the actors, prevents the clash between them. By doing this, it may manage to avoid conflict but it does so without solving it. The end result of this strategy is to postpone the conflict without addressing its root causes, thereby opening up the potential for future conflicts to be played out in other social spheres and at a more irrational level.
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Notes

[1] In acknowledgement of the preference of many Roma who are active in the international and national movements on behalf of Roma rights, and following a widely recognised practice, the ethnonym 'Roma' is also used sometimes in this article to refer to the overall Roma, Sinti and Camminanti population, as a synonym of 'zingari', which is regarded as derogatory. However, the generic use of 'Roma' should not be regarded as an implicit taking of sides in the ongoing international and European debate concerning the making of the Roma nation (see Gheorghe and Mirga 1997; Hancock 1987; Kovats 2001; Liégeois 1994).

[2] This issue was raised in the conference 'Personal Documents and Threats to the Exercise of Fundamental Rights among Roma in the Former Yugoslavia' organised by the European Roma Rights Center in September 2002 in Igalo (Montenegro).

[3] Among the few exceptions is the Tuscany region which, in the last two decades, issued three laws concerning Roma and Sinti. In the latest law, the word 'camp' is banned. The regional government is also trying to develop and implement a new housing policy, but often encounters the opposition of municipalities.

[4] Piasere (1991, 1999) has extensively discussed the proxemics of Roma encampments, emphasising the crucial role played by the disposition of caravans, shanks and huts and the management of space and place both in representing social networks and relationships and balancing and softening tensions.

[5] In Florence, the Poderaccio camp has just 16 toilets and eight showers for a population of 250 persons (see Hasani and Monasta 2003; Szente 1997).

[6] Despite being citizens, Italian Roma and Sinti often face similar problems, finding it much more difficult to benefit from rights and entitlements of which they are formal holders (see ERRC 2000).

References


