IV. ENCLAVES

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Living in Urban Interstices: The Survival Practices of Excluded Gypsies in Italian Borderlands

Abstract

The paper focuses on the case-studies of nomad camps in Italy, especially referring to Palermo, a city in Southern Italy, where three groups of "gypsies" have lived for thirty years in ghetto conditions. The nomad camps, regular or irregular, generally constitute a world out of the city, as an encompassed microcosm, without contact with citizenship or public administration, except for voluntary associations. They represent a borderland or a grey zone in front of the rest of the external urban space. Not physically seeing Gypsy communities signifies not caring about them, about their living conditions, about their culture and about their identity. The only interaction between "them" and "us" happens when the Romani exit every morning from the camp and cross the municipal streets: children roam alone, asking for food or going to school, some little boy is disguised as a girl in order to provoke more compassion amongst passing people. Adults, instead, prefer traffic lights for begging for charity (*manghel*). And so gypsy children are seen as abandoned, while adults are considered unemployed, who do not want to search for a job and are always "producing" children. Within people's imagery there is a lot of prejudice in terms of exclusivity: first of all the idea that their occidental space is invaded by this unpleasant microcosm that must stay within its boundaries. Roma people, instead, develop a capacity to survive in urban interstices in order to create an informal support network with Italian habitants, that is the *gage* (or "non Roma people"). These practices often consist of unusual welfare forms of material help for day by day survival, while living in a condition of human rights negation by the majority of society members.

Key words: Roma/Gypsies communities, anthropology of migration, anty-Gypsyism, borders

Introduction

This paper intends to focus on EU-Roma citizens living in Italy in marginalized conditions inside urban contexts, daily facing the autochthonous dominant Italian groups and their legal forms of exclusion. Recent studies show that the new European geo-political order, over the past thirty years, has been accompanied by affirmation of the principles of neo-liberal doctrine, the redefinition of the political and ideological map of the continent and with new forms of racism and xenophobic tendencies, in particular against Roma citizens or Gypsies/Nomads (anti-Gypsyism). Among the consequences of these changes, there is the increasing marginalization and impoverishment of population groups who, for various reasons, are considered unable to

adapt to the new socio-economic system: among them, millions of Roma, for whom chronic unemployment and poverty have become the norm (Sigona, Trehan 2009, 2011). The perception of Roma/Gypsies/Nomads is extremely negative in all European societies, especially if compared to that of other minority groups.

So, Gypsies/Nomads/Roma communities often are able to retail an informal practice of survival in urban interstices, activating selected acculturative practices, not absorbing the dominant group culture as a whole.

Recently, literature on cosmopolitanism and borders, that has arisen from geographical and sociological studies, has developed very quickly, with many interesting contributions. As Mignolo has pointed out, *exteriority* means "the outside that is needed by the inside. Thus, exteriority is indeed the borderland seen from the perspective of those «to be included», as they have no other option" (Mignolo 2000, p. 724). He observed that "Today, silenced and marginalized voices are bringing themselves into the conversation of cosmopolitan projects, rather than waiting to be included. Inclusion is always a reformative project. Bringing themselves into the conversation is a transformative project that takes the form of border thinking or border epistemology – that is, the alternative to separatism is border thinking, the recognition and transformation of the hegemonic imaginary from the perspectives of people in subaltern positions. Border thinking then becomes a «tool» of the project of critical cosmopolitanism" (Mignolo 2000, p. 736–737).

In this perspective, Roma citizens continuously cross dominant groups' borders, both physically and metaphorically, in a future critical and dialogic cosmopolitanism. Being obliged to live as refugees in Western societies, due to their ethnicization, Roma people constitute the marginalized group *par excellence* to exclude or to colonize. In fact, "Religious exclusion, national exclusion, ideological exclusion and ethnic exclusion have several elements in common: first, the identification of frontiers and exteriority; second, the racial component in the making of the frontier as colonial difference (linked to religion in the first instance and to nationalism in the second); and third, the ideological component in the remaking of the imperial difference during the third historical stage (liberalism versus socialism within the modern/colonial world). Ethnicity became a crucial trademark after the end of the Cold War, although its roots had already been established in connection with religion and nationalism" (Mignolo 2000, p. 740).

Retrieving Michel Foucault's "heterotopias" concept (1963) and Homi K. Bhabha's "third space" (1990), we can assert Roma/Gypsies live like suspended particles with their belonging culture continuously experimenting transculturality. This new social space is very close to the "space of flows" conceptualization (Castells 1996), to be intended as a "new spatial form characteristic of social practices that dominate and shape the network society […]". We can consider it as "the material organization of time-sharing social practices that work through flows […] with purposeful, repetitive, programmable sequences of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions held by social actors" (Castells 1996, p. 412). Instead, Zygmunt Bauman underlines that "the sources of the present-day insecurity are located in Manuel Castells' space of flows and cannot be accessed, let alone dealt with, as long as the measures undertaken to cure or mitigate that insecurity are confined to" (Bauman

2000, p. 82). Moreover, "in the frontierlands, agility and cunning count for more than a stack of guns. In the frontierlands, fences and stockades mark intentions rather than realities" (Bauman 2000, p. 83). "[...] The sacrosanct division between *dedans* and *dehors*, that charted the realm of existential security and set the bridgeheads and targets for future transcendence, has been all but obliterated. *Il n'y a pas du « dehors » any more [...]. We are all «inside», with nothing left outside"* (Bauman 2000, p. 83). Bauman invites us not to ask where the frontierland is, because it is all around, in our town, on the streets we walk. In fact, "frontierlands, at all times, have been known as, simultaneously, factories of displacement and recycling plants for the displaced" (Bauman, p. 84).

More specifically, concerning border zones, borderscape, mobilities, boundary crossing and borderland studies, of increasing interest for networks and mobilities are reflections on the changing nature of borders. As Chris Rumford pointed out, "It is necessary to distinguish approaches which draw attention to the changing role of political borders in a globalizing world (for example, as revealed by shifting the focus of sociology from the nation-state to the globe) from others that attempt to theorize the changing relations between borders and society. It is the latter approach that interests us here: theorizing borders also involves an attempt to understand the nature of the social" (Rumford 2006, p. 155).

As Étienne Balibar affirms, "Borders are being both multiplied and reduced in their localization and their function, they are being thinned out and doubled" (Balibar 1998, p. 220). Using Rumford's words "[...] borders abound but they are frequently encountered as non-boundaries and so for many people they are much easier to cross. Alongside this diminution in the importance of borders as physical barriers (or mental boundaries) is the awareness that «hard» borders still exist at the edges of nation–state territories, brimming with security controls and state-of--the-art surveillance technology, although they are largely unable to prevent (and we have lost confidence in their ability to control) the movement of illegal immigrants, terrorists, traffickers in people and drugs or whosoever is deemed to represent a threat at any particular time: those beyond borders are no longer in awe of them" (Rumford 2006, p. 156–157).

It is important to consider that borders are not experienced in the same way by all people. This is the case of Roma/Gypsies in Europe and especially in Italy.

Ethnography in Urban Camp–Ghetto

With regard to intercultural pluralism and dissimilarities as urgent contemporary society issues, I have focused my ethnographic research on the Montenegrin Roma Cergara and Kosovo Roma Xoraxanè in Palermo (Southern Italy), from 2005 to 2009, firstly in order to study their negotiation of identity with local people when they leave the camp–ghetto and interact with the Italian autochthons called *gage* (a non-Roma individual); secondly, in order to understand how these ethnic minority groups may start a self-determination process to ameliorate their human well-being by recognizing human dignity, legal rights and a way to socio-economic inclusion and a better quality of life. Referring to this second aim, the academic

debate about conceptualising well-being, especially in Europe, has moved from the idea of poverty or multiple deprivation (both defined with objective criteria and self-perception) as a static, distributional condition or outcome. More recently, poverty encompasses multiple issues strictly linked to marginalization, both social and economic. According to Wolfgang Beck, social quality must be considered as explicated in four ontological conditions of the social: (i) socio-economic security with a fairer distribution of wealth; (ii) inclusion in political and economic systems referred to the enhancement of the rights of citizens; (iii) cohesion which implies an interdependent moral contract and solidarity; (iv) empowerment, that is the realization of human competencies and capabilities in order to fully participate in social, economic political and cultural processes (Beck et al. 2001, p. 317). Many authors argue that the interrelationship of these elements can be set at a supra-national level but it is necessary to interrelate them at the community level too. This last, in fact, is "the elucidation of difference and unique self-identity" (Berman, Phillips 2000, p. 347).

During my observation and participation both inside and outside the camp–ghetto and in urban streets following Roma/Gypsies, I found that on the one hand local people have ethnic prejudices towards Gypsies but, on the other hand, Gypsies have prejudices towards non-Roma subjects due to historical persecution. They are also more friendly once they know a *gage* more deeply. This double representation remarks the frequent closed attitude on the part of Roma communities, when local administrators and policy makers tend to ignore their needs (Di Giovanni 2011). The anthropological observation of Roma people did not include children at school, and I also did not interview teachers, because I was not interested in the educational aspects of a Roma child. Instead, it was more relevant to talk with Roma women in the camp in order to reveal their considerations about Italian school seen as a formal educative institution compared to the informal educative practices in the camp, ones typical of Roma culture. Moreover, the women allowed me to go around the city with them, also if they did not understand well why I was interested in their movement in the city or why I could be interested in staying with them on the streets, when Roma women were "at work".

Social Mimicry in Urban Spaces

From this theoretical framework, I focused on what happens when a gypsy comes out from the camp of Palermo, both going out with women and youth in the urban context and gathering non-structured interviews in the camp or at sets of traffic lights. Two different behavioural issues arose. A Romani woman usually goes out alone, to reach her begging area in the town: a set of traffic lights, a church, an entrance hall, etc. Otherwise we can see one or more gypsy women going together to collect clothes or food in front of a supermarket, with their children. Many gypsy women go individually for *manghel*, that is charity or begging.

During the observation at the traffic lights, a Gypsy woman often tends to create a little network of social relations with local people. Usually, these natives are native ladies who inhabit the zone. After a period of observing the Gypsy, they

finally contact her. From the interviews it emerged that Roma feel confident in the camp (obviously) and in their begging area, but not during the journey, because it often happens that they are stopped by the police. The neighbourhood area they create for their social and informal economic relationships has informal borders. Going out from this metaphorically delimited area means for them to lack referencing borders.

On the other hand, there is a remarkable difference with regard to young Gypsies, aged 14–20. They were all born in Palermo and they tend to leave their cultural heritage to absorb the main cultural traits of the host society. For example, young Roma girls do not want to marry as young as their mothers did and they consider marrying a local man too, not only a Roma; they do not want to have so many children. They state their desire for a job and not to go for *manghel*. Gypsy boys and girls usually have public spaces of socialization in the town, where they meet their native peers. Their social interactions are based on masking their ethnicity. Their social mimicry strategy consists of not declaring themselves to be a Gypsy in order to avoid social stigma with autochthonous peers. On the contrary, they specify to social operators not to reveal it because this could interrupt their social inclusion process arising out of their new friendship. They say they feel confident on the journey from the camp to downtown and in every zone within the urban context.

On the one hand, Gypsy women do not try to hide their ethnicity; on the other hand, Gypsy boys and girls seem to interrupt their inculturative process. This confirms that the border depends on how different people feel it. Women maintain their ethnicity, youth operate a dynamic of social mimicry. The continuous fluctuation of young Roma as suspended particles in their attempt at social inclusion is based on masking their original culture. They do not openly refuse their original heritage or their "ethnicity" but they look for a different way of inclusion. Very often they express this vital need of acceptance by the incorrect process of assimilating consumer lifestyles, adapting themselves within the dominant society by performing an identity strategy of transition. In conclusion, the Roma social inclusion in the host society is hard and far off in realisation. Although they are EU citizens, diffused anti-Gypsyism and contemporary xenophobic phenomena push Roma societies to take refuge in urban interstices, crossing back and forth imaginary borders and borderlands inside Western towns. Due to these dynamics, Roma groups experiment transculturality.

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Streszczenie

Artykuł stanowi studium przypadku obozów nomadów we Włoszech, głównie w Palermo, gdzie od trzydziestu lat istnieje „getto" zamieszkane przez trzy grupy Cyganów. Obozy koczowników, regularne czy nieregularne, tworzą własny świat poza granicami miasta. Jest to zwarty mikrokosmos, nie utrzymujący kontaktów z urzędem do spraw obywatelskich czy administracją publiczną, z wyjątkiem niektórych stowarzyszeń. Są one pograniczem, szarą strefą w stosunku do pozostałej zewnętrznej przestrzeni miasta. Nie mieć Cyganów w polu widzenia oznacza nie dbać o nich, o ich warunki życiowe, kulturę oraz tożsamość. Jedyna interakcja pomiędzy „nimi" i „nami" ma miejsce, kiedy każdego ranka Romowie wychodzą z obozu i przechodzą przez miejskie ulice: dzieci włóczą się same prosząc o jedzenie czy możliwość pójścia do szkoły; zdarzyło się, że chłopca przebrano za dziewczynkę, by wzbudzić więcej współczucia u mijających go ludzi. Dorośli natomiast wolą żebrać o jałmużnę (*manghel*) pod światłami na ulicach. Stąd cygańskie dzieci uważa się za zaniedbane, dorosłych zaś za bezrobotnych, którzy szukać pracy nie chcą, ale wciąż „produkują" dzieci. Ludzkie wyobrażenia zawierają wiele uprzedzeń z motywem wyłączenia – przede wszystkim ideę, że ich odwieczna przestrzeń jest okupowana przez ten nieprzyjemny mikrokosmos, który musi pozostać w obrębie jego granic. Romowie natomiast rozwijają zdolności przetrwania w miejskich niszach tworząc nieformalne sieci wsparcia z włoskimi mieszkańcami (tzw. gadziami – „nie-Romami"). Praktyki te często polegają na nietypowych formach pomocy materialnej Romom w ich codziennej walce o przetrwanie, mimo że jednocześnie żyją oni w warunkach pogwałcenia praw człowieka przez większość społeczeństwa.