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« Roms roumains respectables recherchent une maison ». Politiques du logement
et politiques de l'identité parmi les Roms et les non-Roms à Turin en Italie
«Roma rumanos respetables buscan una casa». Políticas de vivienda y de
identidad en población roma y no roma en Turín, Italia

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“Good Romanian Gypsy Looking for a Home”: Housing Policies and Politics of Identity among Roma and non-Roma in Turin, Italy

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A tradition of migration studies interprets the living conditions of migrants and their choices through the filter of cultural differences. Immigrants have often been studied as members of a community with specific practices and customs that make them special and different with respect to natives and also compared to other immigrant groups. In this regard, Brubaker (2002) speaks about “groupism” when referring to the tendency to take discrete and bounded groups for granted in the study of ethnicity and in social analysis in general. Barth (1969) was the first to propose a boundary-making perspective, more recently further developed and applied to empirical research by Brubaker (2004 and 2010) and Wimmer (2008).² According to this approach ethnic distinctions have a relational nature and they may (or may not) coincide with objective cultural differences.

This “methodological ethnicism” has meant that the “bridging social ties” (Putnam, 2000) which cross ethnic boundaries have been little studied empirically, as highlighted by Moroşanu’s analysis of Romanian immigration in London (Moroşanu, 2013).

To overcome this lack of studies, the best option is to avoid pre-clustering individuals into ethnic groups since the existence and the configuration of groups is instead part of the research findings (Brubaker, 2002; Wimmer, 2004). Intergroup representations and behaviours in fact do not develop following general rules but rather vary according to the local context, socioeconomic status, time, and ethnic hierarchy that migrants meet in the new country (Craciun, 2013).³

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2 See also: Lyman and Douglass (1972); Poutignat and Streiff- Fénart (1995); Amselle (1996).

3 Many studies on Roma strongly emphasize the differences between Roma and non-Roma, and attribute the diversity of behaviors and choices more to cultural than to social and material conditions, creating a priori an ethnic difference. Much research has therefore focused on “the Roma in Italy,” “the Roma in Madrid,” etc.

If we consider the Roma population, although some attempts have questioned the homogeneity of this group, there have been rather singular and only recent attempts to go beyond binaries and to propose a third-space categories for understanding the politics of belonging and identification of Roma people (Tremlett, 2009; Bunescu, 2014). There are few ethnographies in which the interlocutors of the researcher are, at the same time, Roma and non-Roma⁴; a work of this kind is certainly long and complex because it requires that the ethnographer has significant relationships with each one, and knows how to cross symbolic and social boundaries that are often distinctly marked.

There are definitely some exceptions. These are multi-sited ethnographic works in which researchers have been able to position themselves strategically on the ground. Solimene (2011) carried out an in-depth ethnographic study on the relationship between Romanian and Bosnian Roma and non-Roma in the popular Magliana neighbourhood of Rome. The author highlights the fact that, in contrast to the image constructed by social workers as well as by some researchers, the Roma do not perceive themselves as a cohesive ethnic group. For example, in their daily dealings the Romanian Roma favour Romanian non-Roma, whereas their interactions with Bosnian Roma become a form of competition and widespread distrust. The scholar concludes that between Romanian and Bosnian Roma reciprocal involvement was always partial (Solimene, 2011: 647).

In Romania, Engerbringsten (2007) undertook a long study in a Transylvanian village where there are two communities – Roma and non-Roma – which engage in daily contact and collaborations as well as forms of competition and avoidance. The anthropologist, in order to deconstruct the rhetoric and public representations, and to immerse herself in the daily micro dynamics, was temporarily hosted by a non-Roma peasant couple, and later lived in a small house in the Roma neighbourhood of the village. Engerbringsten was thus able to explain the social and territorial circumstances in which bridging social ties develop between Roma and non-Roma and when the ethnic category “Roma” is exploited in social relations. There is a strong variety of Roma identifications that challenges the necessity as well as the adequacy of policies targeting Roma as a homogeneous ethnic group.⁵

The process of Roma identification must be observed at different analytical levels: the local, the state, and the transnational. These levels should not be considered reified categories, but interdependent areas; there is a collective identity formation that could be studied in local communities; a political mobilisation at the state level, in various European countries; and an international collective identity project promoted by European institution and international

4 In this article I use the term *Roma* as an analytical category; *Roma* is also the self-ascribed term by the majority of groups generally ascribed as Tsigani by the majority populations. I use the term *non-Roma* to signify *the other* from a Roma perspective. This distinction is meant only as an analytical term without clearly defined and fixed boundaries in practice.

5 Romani scholars agree that cultural similarities most recurrent among different Roma groups are a shared code of defilement, the *Romanipe*, a shared history of discrimination, and a non-territoriality imaginary. These elements represent the marker of belonging to the group and distinction from non-Roma.

NGOs and carried out by Roma activists at the European Union level (Bunescu, 2014).

In my study I focused attention mainly on the local level; I tried to understand how the boundary-making process takes place in certain Romanian Roma migrant groups, in Italy and in their native lands. In the study I analysed what networks supported the Roma during their journey and upon arrival and what networks they lean on in everyday life in Italy. I also explored the institutional discourses and the interconnection between public housing policies and the processes of self-representation within the Roma population.

The boundary-making perspective I adopted is consistent with an approach that gives particular relevance to the specific features of places: in my case neighbourhoods, each with its socioeconomic profile, urban texture, social history, and identities which all contribute in providing a setting and stake for social interaction.

The main research questions are as follows: how do housing policies implemented at the local level towards the Roma population affect the processes of identity representation and create boundaries between Roma and non-Roma? When does an ascribed Roma ethnicity become an instrument of claim and when is it irrelevant?

The article is organised as follows: the first section discusses the main housing policies towards the Roma population, with particular attention to the city of Turin where the research study was carried out. In the second section I present the context of departure in Romania and the relations between the Roma and non-Roma populations. In the third section I describe six stories of Romanian migrants, four Roma and two non-Roma. I present their social status and living conditions in Romania and in Italy and I discuss the processes of identity construction. In the fourth section I analyse the empirical data, with reference to policies – the individual representations nexus, and negotiations between the individual and the institutions.

Methodology

In my field research I tried to deepen analyses of the social and housing conditions in Italy and also in Romania, by connecting the housing experience in the country of origin and in the receiving country through the analysis of the biographies.

Italy, with almost a million Romanian immigrants, is the first destination of emigration from Romania. The Romanians have chosen Italy for several reasons: the linguistic similarities; geographic proximity; few bureaucratic constraints upon entry; strong social networks for support; and a large demand for unskilled work in agriculture, construction, and caregiving. Migration has been mainly concentrated in the large metropolitan areas of northern Italy and Turin is the city where the presence of Romanian citizens, in relation to the total population, is highest. For these reasons I decided to carry out ethnographic research in Turin. I adopted a multi-site perspective (Marcus, 1995; Bachis and Pusceddu, 2013), which connected the city of Turin and several locations in Southwestern Romania, where I carried out my fieldwork between 2009 and 2011.

As a first step, I met and interviewed Roma and non-Roma Romanian immigrants in Turin; in a second step I chose some Roma families and, following their migration networks, I arrived in the District of Caras-Severin, in the Banat region. In the field research, I conducted participant observations and interviews in four locations: ten interviews with special observers (community leaders, public administrators, association and NGO directors) and eighty in-depth qualitative interviews, twenty for each locality. In each location I interviewed both Roma and non-Roma citizens, being careful to diversify the sample by gender and age.

The people interviewed in Romania belong to the same social group as the people found in Italy and are involved, directly or indirectly, in the phenomenon of migration. Some of them are part of an “unmatched sample”, as they are not directly connected, others are a “simultaneous matched sample”, as they are part of the same family (Mazzucato, 2009). Over the course of the research, different people changed their migration plans with regard to changing economic realities and local policies. Several families were split, or they reunited, or they chose to migrate to new destinations in Europe. There are families who now live divided between Italy, Romania, and other European countries such as France, Germany, and England. Because of constraints of time and resources I could not follow all the branches and family interconnections, although comparisons between different national contexts often emerged in the narratives of the people, linked to their personal experiences.⁶

This multisited methodology, for which I have gone back and forth between Romania and Italy, has allowed me to understand how the processes of identity construction are complex, nonlinear, and within transnational social fields, often related to policies both in countries of origin and in countries of arrival.

Public Policies and Processes of Housing Segregation among Roma in Italy

In the analysis of policies targeting Roma in Italy, scholars have devoted some attention not only to the types of actions promoted, but also to the cognitive categories that directed the actions of the institutions. These categories have built the public perception of the Roma and have also influenced the daily interactions between the Roma and the non-Roma (Vitale and Legros, 2008).

The policies have “constructed” the Roma people for whom interventions were made. This process of framing has led to a static and immutable definition of identity, to the drawing of a clear and impermeable boundary between cultures. The anthropologist Amselle (2008) speaks of this process when referring to French multiculturalism: “Whether it is to preserve the cultural identity of the groups or to blend them with the French population, such groups must first be defined and therefore built as such [...] making them exist and making their classifications an integral part of who they become” (Amselle, 2008: 37).

⁶ In the various European countries Roma immigrants are confronted with different socioeconomic realities, but also with sometimes very similar policies. Consider, in this regard, the similarity between the policies towards the Roma in Italy during the Berlusconi government and policies in France under President Sarkozy (policies of spatial segregation, expulsions). See in this regard Demossier (2014).

Ambrosini (2009) shows how all Roma are defined by the institutions as “nomadi” (nomads) and “zingari” (gypsies), and how this ends up steering many of the public choices: “The processes of naming and framing [...] develop the cognitive schema for reading and interpreting reality, which prepares the ground for specifically political choices” (Ambrosini, 2009: 319).

According to Sigona (2008), in recent years Italian policies have reframed the Roma issue exclusively in terms of emergency and public security. And these representations have developed especially in relation to the arrival of Romanian Roma in Italy since the last round of the EU enlargement in January 2007. At the end of 2007 the centre-right national government voted for an emergency law (No. 181/2007) which authorised extraordinary police measures in order to carry out a census of the Roma presence in Italy and to allow for the expulsion of Roma found in an undocumented situation (Sigona, 2011).

All these policy measures have been supported by the media and fuelled a strong confusion in Italian public opinion: the terms “Roma” and “Romanian” have become synonymous, used carelessly, often with an exclusively negative and denigrating connotation. In the same period several local institutions also obtained funding to develop projects in support of newcomers. In these projects the beneficiaries were often infantilised and the opinion of the Roma community in Italy itself has been rarely heard when it comes to making decisions that affect the improvement of their own conditions (Caruso and Vitale, 2009). This approach has not only had the perverse effect of creating attitudes of dependency among beneficiaries, but in some cases has also unleashed a feeling of hostility among the non-Roma population, reinforcing the image of the Roma as social parasites.⁷ Many of these interventions share some characteristics: an undifferentiated use of the category “nomad” to define a population with large internal differences; emphasis on the differences rather than on the similarities with the non-Roma population; and the attribution of an ethical connotation to these differences (Caruso and Vitale, 2009: 268).

Several public policy interventions have been focused on dwellings.⁸ In the great majority of cases they did not respond to the real housing needs of the beneficiaries and do not have the goal of integration into a broader territorial context. Many of the interventions undertaken in Italy seem to be designed to create exclusion: Roma are supposed to be nomads and thus to want to live in traveller camps. Traveller camps have often been built by the government in non-places, physical spaces emptied of any social meaning, outside of the mental maps of the inhabitants, easy to keep hidden and forgotten.

7 These different visions are not contradictory; they are often complementary. In fact, exclusion, containment, and assimilation are not mutually exclusive (Liégeois and Gheorghe, 1995).

8 Housing deprivation can have serious consequences on other dimensions of the life of an individual (Olagnero, 2003). Good housing integration is not limited to having a roof over one’s head, but also corresponds to a dimension of housing security, i.e., the ability to retain permanent, adequate housing with respect to the family-life plan, including residential integration, or a good assimilation into the broader territorial context. The Roma population often goes through a situation of fragility with respect to all three of these dimensions, and represents an emblematic case of housing exclusion.

The Turin Situation

Turin is a city of 900,000 inhabitants. The Romanians are the first immigrant community and the Roma of Romanian nationality number about 1,500 (3% of all Romanian immigrants). The Roma Romanians make up 50% of the entire Roma population in the city. In addition to the Sinti, groups with Italian citizenship who have been present since the 15th century, there are other Roma immigrants who arrived in Turin beginning in the mid-1970s, mostly from the Balkans (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro).

The Roma Romanians in Turin are not a homogenous group but are divided according to their places of origin. The Roma from the Caraș-Severin district use different terms to define themselves: "*vatrari*" (from "*vatra*", the hearth in rural homes, since many were farmers), "*romanizat*" ("*Romanized*" who are strongly assimilated into the population majority), "*Banateni*" ("from Banat," the Romanian region of origin).⁹ These Roma have been living for a long period of time in strict connection with the majority population, practicing either agricultural or ethnically nondistinctive economic activities in urban areas. Many of them lost their native language and not all share the common code of defilement.

In Turin about 30% of the Roma are located in equipped camps and about 40% in unauthorised areas. The Piedmont region has adopted laws for the "protection of nomadic cultures" and defined rules for the construction of traveller camps. Currently there are four authorised settlements, to which other spontaneous settlements have been added. All these settlements are on the outskirts of the city where the cost of land is low. These settlements are poorly connected to the public transport network and far from services. One camp is located in front of the municipal dog pound, another at a short distance from the municipal landfill. Roma from Caraș-Severin live in a large shantytown which grew up in the late 1990s along the banks of a river (Cingolani, 2012b). In the camp there is no running water or electricity, there are no toilets, and garbage is piled in smelly heaps behind the shacks, in the warmer seasons attracting a great deal of mice. The presence of this ghetto, arising within the territory that is already fragile in terms of socioeconomic development, creates fear and, in some cases, can give rise to explicitly racist acts.¹⁰ Contacts between the Roma and the rest of

9 Anthropological studies show that the Roma feel more closed to their neighboring majority population than to Roma belonging to groups other than their own (Blasco, 1999). Group identity is rather characterized by territorial autochthonism (Olivera, 2010) than by feelings of belonging to an encompassing Roma ethnic group. The study *Romii in Romania* (Zamfir and Preda, 2002) accounts for forty different groups of Roma living in Romania. The criteria by which such groups are identified mix occupational characteristics – such as for the groups of *Calदारari* (cauldronmakers), *Caramidari* (brickmakers), *Lingurari* (spoonmakers), *Lautari* (musicians), *Ursari* (bear tamers), etc., – with forms of habitat – *Cortorari* (tent-dwellers), *Tigani de casa* (house dwellers) – but do not take into consideration diachronical transformations inside the same occupation-based group or the transgression of such groups imposed by broader economic transformations undergone by Romania, which ensured adaptations of the occupations to the needs and demands in different periods of time.

10 In December 2011 there was a racist attack against Roma population in another Turin shantytown, in the Vallette district. Following a false accusation of rape by a young Romanian Roma from a local girl, some residents set fire to the shacks (Osella and Francese, 2012).

the district population are rare, and there are often conflicts (Pastore and Ponzo, 2012). In this neighbourhood Romanian Roma have become the scapegoat and they are also opposed by the Bosnian and Serbian Roma. They emphasise that they are true natives of the district while the Romanians, the last to arrive, cannot integrate.¹¹ This example clearly shows the mechanism through which “otherness” is constructed: the differentiation is based on the time of arrival in the neighbourhood.

The city of Turin has not only built authorised traveller camps but has also implemented some measures for housing inclusion. There are also some housing programs to help Roma families to enter the private market. Turin Municipality has provided landlords with a guarantee fund equal to eighteen months of rent, and there is intercultural mediation with the other tenants. These measures were aimed primarily at the Bosnian Roma and there are only a few families of Romanian Roma involved.

Another line of action has been to promote social inclusion through self-construction. In Settimo Torinese, a town of 50,000 inhabitants in the first belt around the Turin metropolitan area, some Romanian Roma families have been involved in self-construction. I carried out ethnographic observations in a public housing block where some Romanian Roma families are involved in a socio-housing integration project (Membretti and Vitale, 2013). Roma families were selected from among those living in unauthorised settlements in Turin and they took part in the renovation of public buildings. When the work was finished, the families signed a contract of solidarity in which they undertook to manage the apartments according to a set of shared rules, for a maximum period of three years.

The presence of Romanian Roma in the building does not arouse apprehension on the part of neighbours; their children attend local schools and take part in recreational activities in the neighbourhood sports centres as well as in the parish Sunday school.

In this area the arrival of the Romanian Roma in 2008 was not experienced as a threat and therefore caused no social alarm.

Roma Housing Conditions and Neighbourhoods in Romania

In order to understand the relationships and representations of the identity of this group of Romanian Roma living in Turin, it is necessary to place these relationships within transnational social spaces. I wondered what their experience in Romania was like, whether their housing and social conditions have changed, and what kind of emotional and material relationship they maintain with their relatives in Romania.

¹¹ In the aforementioned case of Solimene (2011), Bosnian Roma in the Magliana district of Rome place the Romanian Roma and non-Roma in a single macro-category, and they say that their behavior has “ruined” Italy.

In fact, the Roma population in Romania is economically heterogeneous. Similar to the ethnic Romanian population, the ethnic Roma occupy the complete spectrum of the economic hierarchy: from poverty to affluence. Scholars have shown that the economic situation that characterises different groups of Roma reflects the peculiarly uneven economic development of the particular regions they inhabit rather than an ethnic characteristic (Olivera, 2010).

In Romania there are housing contexts where there is a lot of segregation but there are also contexts where there is little social distinction between the Roma and non-Roma (Fleck and Rughiniş, 2008).

In these situations there have always been many practices of exchange between the Roma and non-Roma and ethnicity counts little in daily relations. In these circumstances there is a considerable internal cohesion within the Roma community, but at the same time there is also inter-ethnic cooperation and a low level of conflict between groups. In general, this cooperation occurs in places where there are few social inequalities and non-Roma and Roma alike have good living conditions (Kiss, Fostzó, and Fleck, 2009). In these places the social relations between Roma and non-Roma after 1989 were also important for organizing migration and integration into foreign countries. Conditions of social peace have increased the opportunity for Roma to emigrate and have made the emulation of successful strategies between Roma and non-Roma more frequent.¹²

Even at the housing level, in these areas there is no marked difference between Roma and non-Roma. The residential conditions are safe and adequate to the needs of the inhabitants. People live in ethnically mixed neighbourhoods, and Roma children attend the same schools as the non-Roma and socialise with each other.

There are other communities where the Roma population has few forms of exchanges and cooperation with the non-Roma. At the residential level in these communities the Roma are highly segregated from the rest of the population. They live in blighted urban neighbourhoods, with poor infrastructure, a low level of security, and inadequate living conditions in relation to the needs of the inhabitants. The Roma children socialise exclusively within their group, reproducing the social marginalisation of their parents.

Caraş-Severin is located in south-western Romania on the border with Serbia. It is a largely agricultural district which, with the end of the communist regime, experienced a dramatic economic decline (Cingolani, 2012a). The social and economic change in the landscape is noticeable: the impoverished countryside, urban centres which have lost their power of attraction because they are emptied of productive capacity and have not found a new economic role, an aging population, falling birth rates, and continuous population decline. Many Roma in Turin come from two localities, Răcăşdia and Resiţa. In the city of Răcăşdia 20% of 2,300 inhabitants were declared to be of Roma origin in the last census. In Răcăşdia Roma and non-Roma live alongside each other, with no form of housing segregation. Since 1990, approximately 15% of the population

¹² Pantea (2013), referring to Romania, has called these communities “migration rich.”

has emigrated from Răcășdia, both Roma and non-Roma.¹³

Resița, sixty kilometres from Răcășdia, is the capital of Caraș-Severin County. Its 2012 population was 85,000. During the socialist era Resița was a major centre for the metallurgical industry, with more than 10,000 workers in this sector. Today, with privatisation and the loss of competitiveness in the local industry, the demand for labour has dropped to fewer than 1,000 people. In Resița the Roma population lives mainly in a city suburb, in large, deteriorating buildings. These buildings were built to house the heavy-industry workers as well as the many commuters who were progressively urbanised.

With the deindustrialisation many residents have left this neighbourhood and returned to live in the countryside, while the Roma, without resources or property in the countryside, remained in the town, gradually increasing in numbers until today they constitute about 8% of the urban population.

Unemployment rates among the Roma are among the highest compared to non-Roma and emigration to Italy has been one of the few solutions. The city has a number of projects to reduce school dropout among Roma children and to create employment among women, but the conditions continue to be those of a ghetto, with strong social and residential segregation.

The Politics of Identity. Six Life Stories Compared

These four localities in Italy and Romania (Turin, Settimo, Răcășdia and Resița) are the space within which I have tried to reconstruct the trajectories of work and migration of some Romanian Roma and non-Roma families. In this article I will offer six real life stories which are at the same time representative of different ways to use the categories of identity in response to local housing policies.

I will try to connect families' strategies to residential conditions and social networks in Italy and Romania. Among these stories, four concern Roma migrants and two of them are about non-Roma migrants: the boundaries between these two groups, however, continue to be renegotiated and this plasticity highlights the risks inherent in methodological ethnicism.

From a Mixed Neighbourhood to a Shantytown

Banu was born and raised in Răcășdia, a community characterised by a high level of social cohesion; he finds himself living in a Turin shantytown, an unfavourable context, resource-poor, with little contact with native Italians. This condition has also led to situations of juxtaposition and conflict with other Romanians which did not exist in Romania.

Banu is almost fifty years old and comes from a settled family that never practiced nomadism. He met his wife and raised six children in Răcășdia. Banu calls himself “*romanizat*.”

13 In the early years after the 1989 revolution there was a cross-border mobility to neighboring Serbia, then people went to Germany, and finally, at the end of the 1990s, migrated to Spain and Italy.

In Romania Banu was a professional violinist; he played in a group together with two fellow non-Roma, a singer and a trumpet player. This activity led him to have frequent contacts with non-Roma, for whom he played for weddings or baptisms. Music was always one of the strongest points of cultural contact between Roma and non-Roma, producing rich forms of hybridisation, loans, and exchanges.¹⁴ Thanks to his earnings as a musician Banu built a large house in the centre of the town, alongside non-Roma houses.

In 2007 Banu, like most of his neighbours, decided to leave for Italy. However, he did not find an affordable housing solution, and struggled to make a living playing music in the street. Banu was labelled a “Gypsy” by a Turin social worker and received from the City Council a prefab house in the regular nomad camp. He describes his entry into the camp in this way:

“They met me on the street, they told me that as I am a Gypsy there was a place for me in the Gypsy camp, where there are many Roma Bosnians. But I’m very different from them.”

Due to a difficult relationship with the neighbours Banu has abandoned the regular camp and has built a cabin in the nearby slum along the river.

Inside the slum he maintains exchange relationships with other Romanians, Roma and non-Roma. For example he buys electricity from the generator of one Romanian, or sells and buys old iron from another one. In all these relationships ethnicity has no relevance.

In the city, outside the slum, Banu is accustomed to presenting himself as a professional musician, without ever emphasising his belonging to the Roma community. He believes that this strategy will guarantee better success in finding a job.

“Why should I say I’m Gypsy? I play all types of music, not just Gypsy music, even the Viennese Waltz or O Sole Mio, and I do not want the Italians to think ‘There’s that Gypsy who plays Gypsy music.’”

Banu also hides the fact that he lives in the shantytown, a space strongly stigmatised in local public opinion.

From a Mixed Neighbourhood towards a New Inclusion

Ion is a forty five-year-old with a young wife and four children. Ion says that he is a “romanised rom”. Like Banu he grew up in the centre of Răcășdia, with his parents and four siblings. In the socialist years he worked for the collective agricultural cooperative (CAP). In the 1990s Ion had several experiences of seasonal migration, especially in Serbia where he went during the agricultural harvest. When he got married, Ion went to live in a small house not far from that of his father, surrounded by non-Roma neighbours.

¹⁴ In Romania mostly the Roma *lautari* practice as musicians; this art is based on an informal education, passed on from generation to generation. In musical repertoires there is music that is specifically Roma, popular songs of non-Roma culture, and hybrid musical genres like “*manea*” which represents a blend of Roma, Balkan, Oriental, and Occidental effects (Beissinger, 2001).

In Răcășdia, Ion had never been afraid to declare his ethnicity. In his network of relationships and friendships there were many non-Roma people. With the help of Vasile, a non-Roma neighbour who lent him money, Ion managed to get to Turin in 2004. After living for a year in an abandoned house, he was selected by social workers for the inclusive-housing project in Settimo. Ion collects iron and used items from garbage cans, and then resells them on Sunday in a large outdoor market. Ion has never known nomadism in Italy or in Romania, and often jokes that Italians call him a “nomad.” When reflecting on his identity, Ion points out:

*“I am a Roma ... a true Roma and not a nomad. Why I am Rom?
Because I speak the Romani language, that’s all.”*

Ion left from a “migration rich” community and came to an inclusive environment. Considering Ion’s current situation, one can speak of a double assimilation. Ion travels frequently between Italy and Romania, where he has renovated his house with the earnings from Italy and where he dreams of returning permanently, as soon as possible. The children attending the school in Settimo, however, keep him tied to Italy and they continually make him postpone the date of return.

When Ion met with social workers in Settimo he said he was Roma and for this reason he was selected and has been included in the social housing project. The building where Ion lives is fully included in the neighbourhood and he has no problem declaring his Roma identity, both to Italians and to Romanians. Ion is therefore party to a social and living situation in Romania much like Banu, but he came to live in a totally different situation in Italy due to the housing project in which he was included.

From One Ghetto to Another

Victor comes from the city of Reșița, from a neighbourhood where thousands of people live in poor housing complexes. Victor has a situation similar to many other Romanian Roma: a double absence, since he is neither accepted by the receiving community, nor recognised by the community he previously lived in.

In Romania Victor was unemployed and survived by his wits and meagre social benefits. His relationships with the majority population were also very tense because the Roma in his neighbourhood were considered the cause of all the social problems of the city.

Victor left the city of Reșița in 2010 and settled in the shantytown in Turin. His passage from an urban ghetto to another urban ghetto appears seamless. In Turin Victor spends most of his days begging; he is perceived as a Gypsy although he is careful not to identify himself as Roma in the public sphere.

Similar to other cases, for Victor it is difficult to imagine a return to Romania, because he does not have the money to renovate his apartment and maintenance costs are too high. In Turin the likelihood of having significant contact with the natives is quite low – one can speak of an encapsulated urban existence – and this also explains the difficulties of consolidating useful, trusting relationships outside of the camp. Victor is invisible to the Italian authorities and social workers:

*"I prefer not to meet the social services because they have nothing to give me.
I manage alone as I have always done."*

To Settimo, to a Better Life

The story of Maria, a Roma woman aged forty years, is different and represents one of the few cases in which immigration has been an opportunity for a Roma to seek redemption and social improvement.

A resident of Resița, in the same neighbourhood as Victor, in recent years Maria managed to support her children thanks only to meagre social aid disbursed in exchange for volunteer hours cleaning for the Municipality. Public officials tended to discriminate against those who came from her neighbourhood. For this reason, Maria was inclined to hide her address in Romania:

"I did not tell anyone I live in the station area, because that is the neighbourhood of the poor Gypsies and I did not even tell people that we are Gypsies. Because if I had told, everyone would have looked at me poorly thinking that I steal, I'm a criminal. Unfortunately in my neighbourhood there is no help, everyone thinks about themselves, even among siblings."

Arrival in Italy has meant a definite improvement in Maria's life conditions. Mediated by a Catholic volunteer association she has found a home with her husband and their children in Settimo Torinese, in the same neighbourhood as Ion. In addition to the house she has also gotten a job as a janitor at a day care facility in the town.

Now she feels respected by her neighbours, and the fact of being considered Roma is not a source of shame, but rather an element of pride. While in Turin there were frequent acts of intolerance towards the Roma population, the climate in Settimo is totally different:

"For me it is very strange to see this curiosity in Italy about my traditions. In Romania I was used to conceal where I lived in order to avoid problems with the police! But whoever is in the shacks in the camp in Turin does not live safe and quiet like me; they are always afraid of being thrown out."

Mimicry and Keeping Distance. Two Stories of Romanian non-Roma

These last two stories are about two Romanian migrants, Violeta and Ionel, whose lives cross paths with those of the Roma with very different outcomes.

Violeta is originally from Răcășdia; the daughter of peasant parents, she grew up in a house not far from that of Ion. She emphasises the fact that she is not Roma, although in Romania she had many daily relations with Roma women. Following the dismissal of her husband from a car tire factory, in 2009 Violeta decided to come to Italy alone to help her children continue their studies. Thanks to Ion's acquaintances and intermediation she arrived in the town of Settimo and was introduced to the social workers. During the interview she declared herself to be Roma. She was assigned an apartment as part of the social services project.

In Italy, she decided to mimic some of the social behaviours of the Roma, especially with regard to their economic strategies, such as the begging they practice every day in front of the church entrance. Violeta, who in Romania always seemed to firmly deny being Roma, began to beg in Turin, reproducing a behaviour that Italians consider “Gypsy.” This has allowed her to be welcomed and protected by some of the wealthy parishioner families. These families are drawn to assist the underprivileged according to an ethic of Catholic charity.

“People believe that I am a Gypsy. And I do not do anything to change their minds. Because it is not true that all Italians are bad to the Gypsies. Some think that I am very poor, I need help, and this is true.... In Romania I never panhandled in the village, mamma mia what a shame! But here in Italy, no one knows me.”

Violeta, “Romanian” in Romania and “Gypsy” in Italy, shares the dream of many immigrants to renovate her house in Răcășdia and to be reunited there with her children at the end of their studies.

Ionel is a man of fifty, who left Răcășdia in 2009. He now lives in the shantytown along the river. In Romania Ionel lived in a mixed neighbourhood and worked in a small fruit processing factory, along with several Roma colleagues. There was strong trust within the work groups, which continued outside the factory. Proudly, he recalls how he was chosen as the godfather of the son of a Roma colleague.

Today, in Italy, as in many other places, he prefers not to declare to anyone where he lives, afraid of paying the costs in terms of discrimination. Networks and contacts with the Roma in Romania, which mattered so much, have lost value in Italy, especially in Turin. Here he has not built any bridging ties with Romanian Roma immigrants, even if they live their daily lives in the shantytown. Explicitly questioned by me, he replied:

“I ended up in the camp because for me it was the last resort. I have no shame in saying that. I’m not a Gypsy and here I have nothing to do with them, however the ones in Romania were another thing.... When they come here they change; they take advantage and shine a bad light on all of us Romanians. In my language we say: in each forest there are dead branches.”

Analysis

The six stories I have presented help to reflect on the complex nexus between policies and individual representations. There are two dimensions that are interconnected: the vertical dimension – more focused on institutionalised representations of the Roma and category construction; and the horizontal dimension centred on self-identifications within the ethnic group and between groups.

Roma identifications are contextual and could become political tools for negotiating a better standing vis-à-vis other actors encountered in the process of social interaction. These identifications can be further divided between ascribed and self-ascribed; instrumental and felt; performed and denied; extrovert and introvert (Bunescu, 2014). The collective identity of Roma results in a dynamic puzzle of discursive practices employed by the Roma and non-Roma alike.

The most common representations of public institutions have constructed the Roma as nomads, as a social group with specific characteristics and very different from the majority of the population, which therefore requires special housing accommodations.

Roma who have been settled for generations in Romania, in Italy have been construed as nomads by housing policies, and many projects have been designed to respond to the needs “imagined” by Italians, rather than to the real needs of the recipients (Clough Marinaro and Sigona, 2011).

The “Gypsy camp” was designed on the basis of these representations. Those who were identified as Roma in Turin were then placed in camps, as in Banu’s case.

Life in the camps is highly segregated, and a solution designed by policymakers to address the needs of a marginal social group has in the end had an even more segregating effect. The camps are isolated from the rest of the city and do not encourage meetings and exchanges.

Life in a shantytown limits the opportunities for contact and meaningful exchange with the natives and thus also limits the possibilities for building bridging ties, ties that go beyond those of belonging to the group.

From the point of view of the processes of identification, although the shantytowns do not exclusively house Roma, non-Roma tend to hide their identity and thus confirm the stereotypes of Italians that those who live in the camps are exclusively Gypsies. For example Ionel claims to have arrived in the slum only by necessity and not by choice, differentiating himself from his Roma neighbours.

There are other housing policies that do not consider the Roma as a “category” with special needs and promote ordinary housing solutions. The case of Settimo Torinese that I have analysed is a good example. Apartments there are renovated through the work of the beneficiaries. This choice of the local administration to promote housing solutions has challenged the widespread stereotype that Roma do not work and that they take advantage of social assistance, and supports the bridging social ties between Roma inhabitants and their neighbours.

What effect did this housing project have on the processes of representation and self-representation of identity?

One of the conditions for access to the project was to declare oneself Roma, as Violeta and Ion did. Violeta declared herself to be Roma because she understood the benefit. Ion used his self-ascribed ethnicity as a resource, as a source of social capital, and thus he made it public. Once in the project, the beneficiaries are fully included in the socio-residential context and ethnicity becomes irrelevant in their daily relationships.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have shown that ethnic stereotypes – in the case of the “Gypsy,” which is a label that directors and public administrators often resort to superficially, and to which specific attributes are connected (first and foremost nomadism) – rarely match reality.

Many Romanian Roma share with their non-Roma fellows the same precarious employment, housing, and social conditions. They have the same needs and the same dreams, which often focus on the well-being of the family, building a home, and returning to Romania. This similarity is particularly evident for those Roma who have been living for a long period of time in strict connection with the majority population, practicing ethnically non-distinctive economic activities, and in some cases have lost their native language.

What distances the Roma from non-Roma, especially in Italy, however, are often the housing conditions. The space and the housing conditions, as we have seen, affects relationships and social perceptions. The fact of being unable to meet the housing needs of security, continuity, and integration into the territory has a negative impact on the settlement paths. Even when in Romania the Roma and non-Roma live alongside each other, with little social distance and everyday cooperative relationships, upon arrival in Italy in a context which is as strongly segregated as that of the shantytowns, they end up distancing themselves and competing against one another. When they instead reside in an inclusive neighbourhood in Italy, they have the opportunity to develop good relations and bridging ties with other immigrants and natives.

A new critical and complex phase is opening for the Roma living in Italy. In 2012, after the Nomad Emergency was declared unconstitutional, the Italian government had to develop a national strategy for the inclusion of Roma and Sinti, in response to directives of the European Community. Among the key points of the program is the solution of housing problems, with the closing of all “nomad camps.”¹⁵

The city of Turin is at the forefront in Italy on this point, and in 2015 it will have to allocate economic resources for the social inclusion of more than 1,000 immigrants living in the shantytowns along the river. The choices that will be made are sure to change the lives of Banu, Ionel, and Victor, but also, indirectly, of those living in more stable situations, such as Ion, Violeta, and Maria. And all of them, once again, will find themselves renegotiating with the Italian authorities their identities as “Gypsies,” “nomads,” and “Romanians.”

15 With Communication no. 173 of 5 April 2011, “EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020,” the European Commission has affirmed the need to permanently overcome the situation of economic and social exclusion of the Roma in Europe. In this context, on 22 May 2012 the Italian government developed the National Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Travelers, to which the European Commission has responded positively. In the National Strategy four pillars of action have been identified: education, work, health, and home. On the home front, the text also indicates a priority of “Increasing access to a wide range of housing solutions with a participatory approach, in order to definitively overcome the emergency approaches of large-sized mono-ethnic settlements, while paying due regard to local opportunities, family reunification and a strategy to be based upon the principle of equal distribution.”

In overcoming the reality of the nomad camps policymakers need to think of solutions that take many aspects into account. First of all, they should think of a pluralisation of solutions, overcoming the idea that there is only one housing model for a group: the possibilities are many, from micro-settlements, to public housing, to supporting entry into the private market.

One of the more complex principles it is important to respect in policies towards the Roma is the balance between specific measures, which serve to protect a socially fragile group, and ordinary measures. The bridging social ties are an important resource that should be valued and supported in policies aimed at the social inclusion of migrants.

I have shown how in Romania in some neighbourhoods Roma and non-Roma share the same housing conditions. In these neighbourhoods bridging social ties are the basis for cooperation and also an antidote to xenophobia. In other localities housing policies have been much more segregating. Scholars should document these housing practices in mixed neighbourhoods more frequently and encourage policymakers to transfer them to Italy.

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Pietro Cingolani

❖ **“Good Romanian Gypsy Looking for a Home?”
Housing Policies and Politics of Identity among
Roma and non-Roma in Turin, Italy**

A strong tradition of anthropological studies highlights how institutions tend to produce classifications and put in place a process of framing in which immigrant groups are identified in advance and are therefore constructed as objects of policy. These framings direct social interventions and shape the public perception of the Roma. This article is the result of ethnographic fieldwork conducted among Roma and non Roma Romanian immigrants in four neighbourhoods in Turin, Italy and in Caraş-Severin, their departure region in Romania. Research brought to light complex dynamics by examining some illustrative life stories. In response to the attitude of the institutions, the protagonists of these stories make strategic use of cultural features, exacerbating the difference, or hiding it with processes of mimicry. Some rediscovered their ethnicity, benefitting as “nomads” from special housing projects; some dealt with the features of identity in a “segregating” form; some, despite not having Roma ancestors, in Italy define themselves as “Gypsy”, adopting the distinctive economic survival strategies of the Roma. This research study has shown how, in Italy and in Romania, the boundaries between identity categories are constantly negotiated.

❖ **« Roms roumains respectables recherchent une maison ».
Politiques du logement et politiques de l’identité
parmi les Roms et les non-Roms à Turin en Italie**

Une forte tradition d’études anthropologiques souligne la façon dont les institutions ont tendance à produire des classifications et à mettre en place un processus d’encadrement dans lequel les groupes d’immigrants sont identifiés à l’avance et sont donc construits comme des objets de politique. Ces cadrages dirigent les interventions sociales et façonnent la perception publique des Roms. Cet article est le résultat d’une enquête ethnographique menée auprès de Roms et d’immigrés non roms roumains dans quatre quartiers de Turin, en Italie et à Caraş-Severin, leur région de départ en Roumanie. La recherche a dévoilé des dynamiques complexes en examinant certains récits de vie illustratifs. En réponse à l’attitude des institutions, les protagonistes de ces histoires utilisent stratégiquement des caractéristiques culturelles, exacerbant la différence, ou la cachant avec des processus de mimétisme. Certains ont redécouvert leur appartenance ethnique, bénéficiant en tant que « nomades » de projets spéciaux en matière de logement ; d’autres traitent des caractéristiques de l’identité d’une façon « ségrégationniste » ; d’autres encore, bien qu’ils n’aient pas d’ancêtres roms en Italie, se définissent comme des « Gitans » et adoptent des stratégies économiques de survie propres aux Roms. Cette étude montre comment, en Italie et en Roumanie, les frontières entre les catégories identitaires sont constamment négociées.

❖ **«Roma rumanos respetables buscan una casa».**
Políticas de vivienda y de identidad en
población roma y no roma en Turín, Italia

Una fuerte tradición de estudios antropológicos destaca la manera en la que las instituciones tienden a producir clasificaciones y poner en marcha un proceso de encuadre en el que los grupos de inmigrantes son identificados de antemano, por lo que se entienden como objetos de la política. Estos encuadres dirigen las intervenciones sociales y dan forma a la percepción pública de los romaníes. Este artículo es el resultado del trabajo de campo etnográfico realizado entre unos inmigrantes romaníes y no romaníes en cuatro barrios de Turín, Italia y Caraş-Severin, su región de salida en Rumania. La investigación trajo a la luz la dinámica compleja mediante la examinación de algunas historias de vida ilustrativas. En respuesta a la actitud de las instituciones, los protagonistas de estas historias hacen uso estratégico de características culturales, agravando la diferencia o escondiéndola mediante la imitación. Algunos han redescubierto su identidad étnica, beneficiando como «nómadas» de proyectos de viviendas especiales; algunos han lidiado con las características de la identidad de manera «segregacionista»; algunos, a pesar de no tener antepasados romaníes, en Italia se definen a sí mismos como «gitanos», adoptando las estrategias de supervivencia económicas distintivas de los romaníes. Este estudio de investigación ha demostrado que, en Italia y en Rumania, los límites entre las categorías de identidad se negocian constantemente.