WHEN ETHNIC IDENTITY BECOMES A PRISON: THE CASE OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY IN ITALY

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Abstract: *The essay is composed by two surveys carried out almost twenty years apart about the Roma (i) communities living in Milan and its hinterland. The essay is divided into two parts: the first one presents the Italian situation and the historical context. It offers an analytical study of the origins of the Roma communities living in the country and the path to the current situation; the second part deals with questions such as identity and integration.*

Key words: *Roma communities, identity, integration.*

1. Introduction

In these pages I will summarize two surveys that I carried out almost twenty years apart, the subjects of the surveys being the Roma communities living in Milan and its hinterland [1,2] (ii)

This essay is divided into two parts; in the first part I will describe the Italian situation, recalling the theme of the origins and the presence of the Roma people in the country and describing the stages of the process that led to the current situation – a story about urban segregation and the absence of social policies.

In the second part I will focus exclusively on issues that specifically address the themes of identity, recognition of the other, integration, and coexistence in multiethnic and multicultural societies.

2. Italy: the past and present

They call us the children of the wind, but it has been a long time since the wind stopped blowing (Rom Havati) (iii)

The presence of the Roma in Italy has several origins: the Sinti, from central Europe, who worked as carnies, arrived in Italy in 1400; the Havati Rom, whose name in Slavic and Romani means *Croatian*, mostly came to Italy after the Second World War, fleeing Istria and gaining Italian citizenship through the Treaty of Osimo. They were traditionally dedicated to the craft of horse grooming and the gathering of roots and herbs. The Khorakhané, bearers of the *Khorà* - the Koran, came from Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia and arrived in Italy in two waves: in the '60s due to the economic crisis that hit those regions and then fleeing the war that devastated the former Yugoslavia in the '80s. These are still illegal immigrants, as are their children and their children's children. Then there are the Abruzzesi, who fled to Italy after the battle of Kosovo in 1382, the Lovara

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Roma, whose origins are Danube-Carpathian, whose name derives from *lob*, which in Hungarian means *horse*; and there are the Romanian Roma, who, until the mid-nineteenth-century were slaves in the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia. (iv)

The stages of the process that in Italy has led to the current situation can be summarized in four phases. The first spans the years following World War II to the years of the economic boom. During this period, the Roma people wandered the backstreets of an Italy that was still backward and largely rural, carrying out their traditional jobs and living in small nomadic communities. They maintained their habits, rituals, cultural traits and values, tradition-bound in a regime of complete autonomy from the world of the *gadje*: justice, marriages and relationships were regulated from within the community and according to ancient customs. Social ties coincided with blood pacts: pacts that were cemented or inaugurated during annual events like fairs and festivals. The patriarchal family was the core, the very heart of the community as a whole, and respect for the elderly custodians of memory and tradition characterized the relations between generations.

Times have changed and we can't go back. Even with children it was different. There was a time where if you had a piece of bread, it was the smallest child who had the first piece, and if I said something to my mother, something disrespectful, it was shameful, and you felt ashamed in front of the others who thought badly of you. To show a lack of respect towards an elder, or towards a parent was a very shameful thing, and we were so overawed that we would rather have died than suffer that shame! Children were closer to their fathers, maybe because their mothers were out trying to sell things, reading palms, looking for work, doing odd jobs… I mean,
that's the way it was and the children spent much more time with the men, who looked after them more than their mothers did. The women usually went out, and the men stayed in the camps; working with the horses, the grass, cutting wood, because there was no gas at all – or water – it wasn't like now that there is a fountain. Children respected their parents and respect is everything. If you take away the respect between parents and children, then what's left?

There was a time when white was white, black was black, and words meant only one thing. But now that the elders are dead…the gypsy is lost. (Rom Havati)

With the economic boom that developed in Italy in the '60's and swept away the legacy of a largely rural economy, there began a second phase which occupied the next two decades: the work and services traditionally offered by the Roma became useless and obsolete and they were forced into the outskirts of the big cities in search of new resources. Thus began the process of settling that irreversibly altered the traits of Roma culture. It was during these years that a game was played out by both sides, the effects of which are still suffered today: if those who at that time tried the path of integration (school and instruction) had received adequate responses then they could have represented, for all the Roma, a positive example to follow and they would have led the way to successfully managing change, becoming citizens capable of resisting the draw of criminality and restoring meaning to their cultural traditions. But things have gone in a very different way: because of our prejudices and the blindness of institutions, their choice, in the eyes of the other Roma, was a poor one, a choice that was not to be repeated, one that exposed them to humiliation and harassment and led them into no man's land: outsiders not only to the Roma, but also to the gadje.

I have always worked. At first I travelled around with my carousel, and then I settled here in Milan. I would have liked to continue to travel around, it still moves me to think about it, but I gave it up because if I had continued to travel then they wouldn't have accepted my children at school. And even as it is, it has been difficult. They've given me a lot of trouble. In those days there was no room for gypsies! It wasn't easy to get into those blessed schools. You'd go there and they'd turn you away - "Gipsy!" It was the same with work: "Gipsy." Do I believe in destiny? If I hadn't believed in destiny and I had believed that I would have had to suffer trouble, wickedness, hunger and humiliation, I would have said "I'm going to kill myself". If someone sees their own life ruined by stupidity, racism, ignorance, all of these things, either he will kill or will be killed. I said "you can see that it was fate".

The third phase, which reached the threshold of the new century, was one that would lead to a point of no return. At the end of the '70s the process of settling, accelerated by the constraints placed on nomadism, had reached completion and camps sprung up on the outskirts of the city on unusable land, often near landfill sites, cemeteries and overpasses. These were places that lacked services, unclaimed areas, left to their own devices, atrocious parodies of those which in the past could have been the improvised camps of a nomadic people. Places that, instead of being temporary solutions, preparatory to real living situations, become deep-rooted and institutionalized on city land. Some of these settlements are authorized and equipped by the municipality; others are illegal and are therefore subject to regular evacuation orders, which are followed by new occupations in a sort of tacit and ambiguous practice. Meanwhile, the occupants lose their jobs; improvised,

precarious jobs, but jobs nonetheless: activities related to car parts, the collection of cardboard, glass and scrap metal, etc. In this situation the Roma learn to access the few resources made available to them by state relief and the voluntary organizations which in this way nurture a completely passive and dependent relationship with the world of the gadje. The elders lose their authority, and some of the youngsters turn to criminal enterprises: theft becomes "work" and begging a habit. Not for everyone, of course, but for many.

It's the fault of the camps: it's like a sickness; if you stay there you'll catch it. The camps are underworld establishments much like prisons: it's difficult to get out of them. They are like asylums used to be; you went in and you never came out. The camps are close to the city's worst neighbourhoods, which are a bad influence. The camps are like honey; they attract bees and they attract scum. They were wrong to set up the camps and they continue to be wrong. They should offer job opportunities and rent out small plots of land, and charge for everything, to give responsibility, like you do with young boys when you want them to become men. Giving charity is worse than doing nothing. (Rom Havati)

They put all the gipsies together. They forced them into the camps. They'll be fine, they'll have everything, but I wouldn't have done it that way. It ends up being like the tower of Babel; they were building it together and then at a certain point they could no longer understand each other. They were divided and the tower collapsed. It's the same with the Rom, they don't understand each other anymore. (Rom Havati)

Into this already deteriorated context, beginning in the '80s and with a significant acceleration in the '90s, came a large influx of immigrants, first from the war zone of the former Yugoslavia, then from

Eastern Europe. Few of those who fled the war were given the status of refugee: coming from countries that no longer exist, they find themselves in a paradoxical legal position and they, along with their children and their children's children, can be considered stateless.

...they say "Go back to your country!" I am Serbian, my wife is Croatian. I can't go to Croatia, she can't go to Serbia. We have been in Italy for more than thirty years; we have eight children and they were all born in Italy. They don't speak Serbian-Croatian, they speak Italian, they feel Italian, they went to school in Italy. What do I do, leave them here? Go to live in Serbia alone, without my children, without my wife? Who do I live with? Who will bury me? Should I live alone with eight children? All my children went to school, but what use is that? Who are they? They are neither Serbian nor Croatian, nor Italian nor Bosnian. Who are my children? Just gyspies, rom, nomads! (Rom Kanjiaria)

The last phase, the current one, demonstrates the results of these dynamics. A situation made worse by a final, recent wave of immigration from Romania which began in a trickle in 2000, and was then facilitated by the country's entry into the European Union. The extent of their presence now exceeds that of all the other groups and permanently disrupts the precarious balance that up until today had existed only as a kind of game of parts. Over time, in fact, institutions have substantially intervened in two ways: trying to regulate the presence of Roma in the territory - by setting up the camps and putting into place tentative local welfare policies; or pretending not to know and not to see and then intervening when the protests of the citizens become more pressing, or when the elections are drawing close or when the land occupied is needed for other uses. This for the rom means

eviction, moving, new jobs a little further away. In the meantime, bit by bit, some manage to escape the situation – the children go to school, the adults work, but the climate has now deteriorated, the institutional interventions are frequently repressive and among the Roma, those who commit crimes render those who are, and those who would like to be honest, invisible (v).

Over the course of research done in the late '80s, I had identified four coping strategies, by which I mean ways of life, types of behaviour which were an expression of various projects that prefigured different outcomes. I was referring to adaptation strategies in order to emphasize non-integration (vi), or integration that was difficult, denied, or misunderstood.

I had called the first model "the most difficult choice", referring to the way in which some Roma had made a conscious decision to engage in a context in which public policies oscillated (and still continue to oscillate) between repression and welfare (I believe that repression and welfare are two sides of the same coin, because both deny equal status to the Roma). It was the choice of those who had decided to break with their own world, to move away from the camps and to seek citizenship through work and education.

Why move away from the camps? Because even at that time they already recognised the camp as a ghetto that mortifies identity and breeds criminality. It was the most difficult choice, because it meant no longer feeling entirely Roma, and, obviously, not feeling entirely gadje either, with the pride of keeping alive their own memories, traditions, and customs. It was a relatively rare condition (only a few had made this choice) that revealed a new form of cultural ambivalence (vii) [3] [16]: in a context that confronts antithetical and normatively strong cultural models, the

choice is to detach oneself, though not completely, from one's own cultural identity, to question it, to face the cultural identity of the other. The challenge is to be Roma *and* gadje, to simultaneously have the specific characteristics and values of both cultures, even if, or because, they present themselves in terms of an irreconcilable opposition. It is a difficult exercise, because it means inventing oneself a new identity, accepting the challenge of the contrast, the risk of the mixing, the uncertainty of contamination and doing all this with the courage of those who agree to question themselves and their own certainties, presenting themselves in an interlocutory manner, open and available to others, but without selling their soul, without betraying themselves, indeed, in order not to betray themselves.

The other gipsies, when they found out that I sent my children to school, asked me "But what good is it?" My children said the same. But I answered "You do need this, you have to be able to read a letter, a signature, a document. You have to be able to help your own children with their homework". But no one understood. The same went for work. A lot of people used to say to me "Do you really have to work and send your children to work?" I have always been very isolated and I was afraid for my children, I was afraid they would be brainwashed because they were young. "Well, are you going to work?" their friends would say to them, as if to mock them. I rented a small plot of land and I took them away for fear that they would learn to steal." (Rom Havati)

We have always lived by ourselves, always alone. We don't want to be in a camp. I prefer to be alone with my family, my children, my relatives … not with people that I don't know well, because if one day or another a fight should happen, I don't like it! It was always like this; since I got married I've always detached myself

from the Roma, always alone. They were different. They said, "But these are like villains, they are villains! Why do you have to send the children to school, they become ignorant! They'll end up ignorant, don't send them to school!" Even now in Milan, all the Roma judge us to be different from them, they judge us badly, badly, because they say: "Why don't you come here, what are you doing? Do you do as the villains do, do you live like them? Even now, you pay for your electricity, you pay for your water, you pay rent…why do you have to pay, are you stupid? Pay for nothing! Come to the camp, settle here, here you don't have to pay for anything." But we … we are like that. (Romni Havati)

The other type of behaviour that I had found, I called "separation and subculture". It referred to, in its essential and exemplified characteristics, a group of Rom Lovara that, strong in their belonging to the Pentecostal church and a job that guaranteed their economic autonomy (blade sharpening), had decided to live in a regime of separation, using work and religion as a resource for identity and living - characteristics that legitimized them in the eyes of the gadje.

I called the third group "extraneousness and deviance", which exemplified the choice of those who, still in a regime of separation and non-confrontation with the gadje, made a living from illegal activities (mainly theft, handling stolen property, usury), remaining closely linked to the more archaic tradition.

The fourth group "ghettoization and the loss of identity", consisted of the poor and the very poor who lived in the camps. They were masters in the art of getting by: the women and children begged and the men worked odd jobs that allowed little more than survival.

This was the situation twenty years ago.

At the time I was convinced that if policies towards the Roma were not changed, that is, if they could not escape the two-pronged problem of repression and welfare, and if the Roma people didn't accept the challenge of confrontation and of contamination we would find ourselves in a state of social emergency in a few short years, with a culture that was in danger of being lost to the threat of a criminal subculture, a subculture that betrays both our culture, and the traditional culture of the Roma.

Unfortunately, I was proved right. Faced with a policy of non-acceptance on our part, of refusal of comparison, the Roma have become increasingly closed within their family groups and the camps have become ghettos in which the criminal subculture has spread, wiping out tradition, memory and culture. This, of course, does not apply to all Roma people, but certainly to many of those living in the camps.

Today, with more conviction than before, I maintain, and I am certainly no longer the only one, that the camps should be closed because they represent areas of social contagion. It is of the utmost urgency that housing policies should be drawn up; that policies to facilitate pathways into employment for adults should be established and, above all, that there be investment into the education of Roma children (scholarships, tutors… all the way up to higher education) not only because education gives the right to citizenship, but because it is only through education (and thus the socialization to the norms, values, and knowledge of a society in general) that the Roma can retrieve and preserve the specificity of their culture and their tradition. Because memory and tradition are tools that become a resource only within a process of coexistence, of continuous discussion, otherwise they are a constraint.

With respect to the four models identified at that time, today three different trends emerge. The number of people who embark on the process of social integration and cultural mediation - which means neither approval nor assimilation, but rather cultural ambivalence in the sense explained above - has risen. I found it in schools; children who are caught between two worlds, who no longer feel they are one thing or the other, and this is their challenge. Rhetorically put, they are nobody's children, but perhaps, indeed, the children of a newer and better world. I have found this especially among women, in the camps, where there is poverty and neglect. Women, often alone or with their husbands in prison, struggling, are putting themselves in opposition to family culture, to give their children a different fate.

…I was the first to wake up from this nightmare, because, I think, going out to steal is a nightmare. You go and you don't know if you'll return to your children…you go and maybe they'll catch you. I decided to stop and to find a job…and they looked at me badly, because stealing is normal, but a woman who goes out to work… because we are used to this, to living dangerously, dangerously and free. But it's a crappy life. I have four children and one of them is seriously ill with cancer. My husband is in jail since two years and three months ago and he still has to serve another four years. If I hadn't met a lady judge, a mother who understood my situation and gave me housework to do, I would be in prison too. And my children, what would have happened to them? If it weren't for that judge who I thank with all my heart, where would my children be? I feel like dying just thinking about it! Now social workers from Opera Nomadi are helping me, and the cancer institute give me boxes of food and clothing. With Opera Nomadi we did a dressmaking course here at the camp to help us begin to work, I

managed to convince the other women: we pack things that are then sold outside the camp. I want to put a lid on it and they have to have a different life than mine. Enough cops and robbers! (Romni Kanjaria)

At the beginning my husband didn't want to, we had an argument about it, but then I won. He didn't want me to go to work in the gadjes' houses. But then when he saw that nothing was going wrong and that I was happy, he was happy too. I go every morning, from nine to twelve to clean. I clean the windows, the floors, everything. I also clean the stairs of apartment buildings. I earn ten euro a day. Even my husband has found a nice Italian man who gives him work on construction sites and pays him for it. But before…dishonest people…he would work and then at the end of the month they would throw him out without any money. I have four children. The oldest is fourteen and she is in junior high. Now she wants to do a professional hairdressing course. I always beg her, I say to her "even if you see the other girls getting married at thirteen, at fourteen, please be careful, in the space of just one day you can find yourself married, but I beg of you, don't do that, you go to school, get a job, that is more important. Don't think that because you see that those girls are married that you must get married too. You have to study, you have to marry a nice Italian man who has a house and a job. You have to make a different life for yourself." (Romanian Romni)

On the other hand there is a rampant criminal subculture that, as such, is opposed to both the traditional Roma culture and the culture of the majority. It has raised the bar: drug dealing and prostitution are the new livelihoods and those who twenty years couldn't speak a word of Italian now organize internet scams; they have modernized, and built villas illegally. Those who participate are part of criminal organizations, which are generally family-run, and rarely a true racket.

The "extraneousness and deviance" model refers to fewer and fewer Roma because today, criminality is no longer connected either to the extraneousness from the majority culture, or to the attachment to the habits and values of the traditional culture, which is the most archaic and capable of closing the group in on itself.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to live according to the model of separation and subculture which is slowly disappearing (economic resources have run out which has undermined the subcultural values based on separation) in conditions that lead either to criminality or to the path of social integration and cultural mediation. What remains are those who live in conditions of marginalization, cultural deprivation, and poverty in a tragic chain of exclusion and petty crimes. Then there are the truly desperate, those who have nothing, absolutely nothing, not even a camp in which to live.

It is under these conditions that, among the Roma, a sort of social stratification has emerged. If we take economic resources as an indicator, what emerges is a sort of pyramid which is flattened at the bottom and has those who belong to criminal organizations at the top, in the centre we have those in the minority- those who have the security of a job and a house - and at the bottom we have the majority, those who live on the margins of legality and at the edge of survival.

3. Time, clocks and identity

When I first started working with the Roma at the end of the '80s, I had documented the existing literature, which was purely of an anthropological nature which described an archaic reality: a

strong, vibrant, fascinating culture. But when I began to visit the camps, I saw nothing of what I had read about in the books; in the camps I saw despair, exclusion, marginalization, loss… and I understood that in my sociologist's "toolbox", I lacked the correct tools to read, understand and decode what I was observing.

When you begin to do research, you do so solicited by a question that you feel the urge to answer; my question was "In what exactly does the diversity of the Roma lie?"

Why have these people remained within their own "cultural diversity"? And although they are all so different, on what basis do they recognise themselves as "we"? And us, on what do we base our perception of "them"?

I kept stubbornly and perhaps stupidly, asking everyone "What is the difference between you and us?" When, at a certain point, a Rom said to me "it's the same different between time and a clock", and then he explained to me "We gipsies are like time, in the sense that today it's raining, but then the sun might come out and then it might be warm, but you never know…you, on the other hand, are like a clock: every hour is the same, in every season they are same, every single year they are the same, after 7 o' clock comes 8 o' clock, after 8 o' clock, it's 9 o' clock and so on, always the same."

In that sentence lay the answer to my question: that which defined the core of the cultural diversity of the Roma, the heart of their ethnic identity, was a perception of time and space that was different from the one we all share (like children of the process of modernization that has crossed our societies and has transformed them with the advent of capitalism). My hypothesis was that, having been nomads for a long time [5], and in any case, even if they were settled, having lived in conditions of social separation, of substantial social marginalization and exclusion from the labor market, such a situation would have bound them to a use of time and space, and a cognitive representation of the same, very similar to that which, in our culture, was that of the pre-industrial societies.

In a nutshell, we can say that while for us "modern" people, the present is the place where past experience becomes future planning, in pre-modern societies, which were static societies, the past was not experience and history but tradition that was immutable; the present was the significant time of one's life and the future, in terms of planning, didn't make sense because it was defined by their destiny at birth. This leads to a view of life in which there is much fatalism and where it is destiny, luck and misfortune that determine the stages, a life that one hopes is marked by the reassuring repetition of acts and habits that are always the same where tradition and blood ties define the identity of each person [6], [15].

If this was true – and this was confirmed during the long interviews that I did in those years – that is, if there was no planning and they lived from day to day, if it really was the tradition to prescribe, generation after generation, certain values and habits, if it wasn't the clock which precisely determined the order of daily activities, then that meant that these people were navigating a territory - our territory - which had profoundly different rules of space and time, with the wrong map. And we know well that individual identity is constructed through the experience of time and space: there is a clear sense of continuity between temporal experiences and the attitude towards reality and the ways to define it and to symbolically build it; that the identity of a group is organized around the ability to draw together continuity and change. The normative

force of the social representation of time is very difficult to define, no matter who violates it, even out of the moral world, in a territory marked by deviance or insanity.

Their cultural diversity, which is said to be worthy of preservation and development, in reality was at risk of being their downfall, because it trapped them in a prison of identity which, because of the exclusion policies, would lead to the marginalizing reality of the camps.

Different conclusions seem to have been reached by numerous anthropological studies that describe the Roma people as a resilient people who would find reasons for the survival of their identity in their dispersion among the non-Roma (the gadje), in the lack of commitment of their institutions, in their own purification rituals to the world view where there is a clear distinction between that which is pure and that which is impure.

In other words, the gipsy identity – which is collective and transverses the various groups – is the result of a continued mixing of the gipsy races, that is those who are not non-Roma, and some elements of the host culture that can be used without running the risk of questioning and undermining the autonomy of their own identity. It follows that the political, religious, economic and cultural institutions of the non-gipsy society are excluded from the horizon of the Roma culture, even if, as now, they use some of the functions instrumentally, in a relationship that Piasere defines precisely as disengaged and casual.

But they are not only a resilient people, they are also a peripatetic community [12]. In this prospective, the nomadism that characterized their history in alternating periods should be read as a strategy of dispersion necessary for economic survival since either they take advantage of the surplus of the production system of the gadje (hence activities such as begging, fortune telling, their presence at local festivals…), or they occupy the productive niches that have been slowly left unattended because they are marginal, disadvantageous, or irregular [9].

Survival strategies and resistance strategies therefore coincide in a daily practice made up of rituals that mark their distance from the non-Roma (tabooed beings, contaminated beings), and eclectic economic activities. These strategies can be characterized by the firm intention not to extend any relation to the world of the gadje that could be understood as dependence and subordination. (viii) Hence the strength and the vitality of a cultural identity capable of producing within itself –through *instrumental contamination-purification rituals* – the antibodies necessary for their survival.

But isn't identity, be it individual or collective, a result of contamination? And isn't contamination the vital element that allows us to encounter the other, that which is different from us, openness to the world and experiences? [13,14] Identity, that is, the knowledge that we have of ourselves, of what we are and what we don't want to be, of our feeling part of a chosen community but at the same time unique and unrepeatable, is built on comparison and is much stronger than it is capable of challenging its own certainties. For this reason, the isolation and marginalization in which the Roma live exposes them to the risk of cultural deprivation, memory loss, abandonment of traditional values, and derived identity (by this I mean a collective sense of self struggles to find strong shared symbolic anchorings).

For there to be a collective identity, and that is a group that has perception and awareness of themselves as they are and its continuity over time and those characters that identify it from within and distinguish it from without, there must be a collective

memory on which this can be based and which provides meaning to those behaviours that have to do with tradition. Memory is a dialogical construction that continuously polls the present in order to interpret and reconstruct its own past [8].

Collective memory walks the fine line between history and myth. But the Roma have never written, nor – with the exception of the educated few – read the books that reconstruct their history and the elders have only hazy memories of the events they have lived through (the Second World War, the holocaust, etc.). Few remember the gypsy myths and legends and the traditions, and so, above all for the young, they have become faded customs. Only fragments survive; the remains of memory to give meaning to the present. And if there are only fragments of memory, does this mean that there are only fragments of identity? It is clear that it would be wrong to say that the Roma have lost their identity; identity cannot be lost - it just changes, and memory and oblivion are the dynamics that constitute the process of transformation [7]. It is therefore about reasoning on the forms, the direction and the outcomes of this process and to understand the role that memory, tradition and history play in this regard. The starting point has to be this: identity and culture are two entities in continuous transformation in the flow of time; open to change, enlivened by contamination.

Of course it is necessary to contextualize the clash within the power relations that subsist between minority - in this case the Roma - and majority. It is clear that if this clash is defined as mutual rejection, then all mediation becomes impossible. If, in other words, the outsiders declare their extraneousness to the institutions of the insiders and consider any contact with the insiders that isn't purely instrumental to be a threat to their own survival (in the deepest sense of the term and therefore a threat to their symbolic identity), and if the insiders, in turn, don't recognise the outsiders as legitimate interlocutors worthy of equal dignity and equal opportunities; if both define the terms of the relation in reciprocal denial, then the game of reconciliation is lost before it begins.

However, I don't think that things are that way, for a number of reasons. Firstly, because the migration processes that Europe is involved in are seriously calling into question the ethnocentric perspective of those who want to erase the diversity of the other and rather prefigure, although still uncertainly, the need to open negotiations on the principles that must regulate intercultural and interracial societies. Secondly, because even though the clash between the majority and the minority has always historically been played out within the highly unequal power relations, unless the strongest side decides to physically eliminate the other, it has always resulted in a reciprocal change.

If it is true that the core of the Roma identity lies in the border drawn between them and the world of the non-Roma, then the inherent flaws of this boundary begin to come to the fore, of which the schooling of children is the most obvious example. The threat to the Roma identity has already materialized in its own criminal subculture, because, in the end, a culture that is based on separation, that considers contact with outsiders a contamination, threatens its own survival and runs the risk of becoming a simulacrum of itself. Even more so if, in the face of the long since finished process of settling, this ends up as an impractical strategy. Under these conditions, identity becomes a prison that inhibits freedom, change, contamination and cultural ambivalence.

And that goes for everyone.

Notes

(i) The term "Roma" is widely used to include Rom, Sinti, Kale and related groups in Europe, including Travellers and the Eastern groups, Dom and Lom.

(ii) The methodology of the two surveys was the same: field observation and in-depth interviews – about a hundred personally conducted. In some cases I was able to meet the same people that had been interviewed almost twenty years before. The purpose of the second interview was to understand what changes had occurred over the period of time that had elapsed between the first and second interviews.

(iii) Quotations in italics in the texts are from interviews conducted by me.

(iv) These brief references are only to give an idea of the variety of backgrounds and cultures. For those who wish to explore the question: R. Dragutinovic, Kaňjarija, The Real History of Dasikhané Roma Community in Italy [4]; L. Piasere, "Il sistema di parentela dei Xoraxané Romà" ("The Kin System of Xoraxané Romà") e "Terminologie della consanguineità" (Kin Terminology"), entrambi i saggi si trovano in Piasere, Dumping Ground People. Anthropological Essays[11]

(v) There are no official statistics for the Roma population in Italy: up until the mid '90s, the estimated number was 90-120,000, of whom more than half were Italian citizens. Today the number has risen to around 150,000: of these 80,000 are Italian citizens. They are a very young population: around 40% are younger than 14. Life expectancy is still much lower than the national average. Italian Roma are for the most part Catholic, some of those who came from the former Yugoslavia and from Romania are orthodox Christians, while the Bosnians, the Macedonians and the Kosovans are generally Muslim. (Data supplied by Opera Nomadi, Milan). In Italy, like in the rest of Europe, these communities are not recognised as linguistic minorities: the Roma were excluded from the law of 15 December 1999 on linguistic minorities with an entirely specious reason: they

cannot be ascribed to a particular territory. It should also be noted that there are no national laws that regard the Roma, if not circular to the Ministry of the Interior on matters primarily of public policy.

(vi) The concept of integration is an ambiguous one, especially when contrasted with the equally ambiguous concept of assimilation. Without going into the merits of the situation, I just want to note that integration should be simply understood as participation in the educational and working institutions of the country in which one lives.

(vii) When I speak of ambivalence, I refer to those situations in which any social actor (a person, a group, a political party) has to answer to two commands (representative of values, desires, impulses, or personal aspirations, social norms or socially shared cognitive models...) which are opposites but have equal weight. It is then impossible to choose between the two courses of action and two interdependant and opposing values as both are either essential to the integrity of the individual or unavoidably consitute the very context of the action. Within this opposition, making a clear decision – if this is possible – harms the actor because it deprives them of something which is vital.

(viii) A summary of these positions (represented by authors such as Piasere, Dick Zatta, Silverman, Kaprow) can be found in Piasere [10].

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