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The challenge of defining the object of study

The case study of a group of bosnian roma

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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

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One of the challenges of investigating social groups is combining the necessity to define the object of study with the need to report its complexity. This issue will be discussed by exploring how the Roma involved in my doctoral research elaborate their perspective on the Romani world and their own identity. These persons belong to a group of so called Gypsies (*Zingari*) who migrated from Bosnia to Italy in the period between 1960s and 1990s¹. In the Romani studies these Roma are known as *xoraxané romá*²—where *xoraxané* means Turkish and thus Muslim, while *romá* means men. My aim is to show the distance between the ways in which the *romá* and the non-Roma conceive and handle Romani identity. Although it may be appealing to categorize individuals on basis of nationality, ethnicity, or religion, *romá* and non-Roma conceive and use such categories in surprisingly different ways.

Gypsies, Roma, nomads, immigrants...

My frequentation of families of so-called Bosnian Roma living in Rome dates back 1999; between april 2007 and may 2008 some of these families were involved in extensive ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the frame of my doctoral studies in anthropology. The persons I encountered during my fieldwork are generally defined by Italians as Gypsies (*Zingari*), Roma (*Rom*), and/or nomads (*nomadi*). These three terms form a sort of semantic chain wherein “Gypsies” is a colloquial demeaning word used in everyday life conversations, and “Roma” and “nomads” are instead the supposedly politically correct forms - the former is considered a self-designation, the latter instead refers to the widespread but incorrect assumption that the Roma carry on a nomadic lifestyle.³

Scholars (Narciso, 1990; Piasere, 1991, 2006a, 2006b; Todesco, 2005) outlined the ambiguity and polyvalence characterizing Italian collective imagery about the Roma. Mainstream discourses insist on the incompatibility between Romani traditional lifestyle, working activities and culture, on the one hand, and (post)modern society on the other. Unwilling (or unable) to change and adapt, the majority of today’s Roma is presented as a degenerate version of the noble but anachronistic Gypsies of the past: outsiders refusing integration and resolving to parasitical existence within Italian society. The resulting stereotypical images portray the Roma as wild and dangerous nomads, idles and criminals, victims of themselves and their own culture. This imagery would be confirmed, many Italians claim, by the fact that the Roma carry on borderline economic activities and dwell in overcrowded shanties infested by health

¹ Many *romá* arrived between the second half of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, in concomitance with the emergence of the conflict in Bosnia and the turbulent years preceding it. Some families, however, have been living in Rome since the 1970s.

² Note about spelling: *ɛ* is pronounced like the *ch* in church; *e* as in *ts*; *g* like the *j* in jam; *ʃ* like the *sh* in shut; and *x* like the *ch* in the Scots word loch.

³ For a critique of this assumption see for example Piasere (2004) and Sigona (2002).

problems (skin diseases, hepatitis, pests, and parasites) and social diseases (unemployment, alcoholism and drug consumption, illegality and violence)⁴. The same imagery backing negative stereotypes of the Roma also nourishes a series of positive images based, as Liégeois (1985/1994) noticed, on the folklorization of the Roma. Being without a homeland, and rejecting a fixed abode and wage labour, the Roma would be romantic and passionate rebels living unaffected by the strictures and shallowness characterizing contemporary society. Symbol of freedom and spontaneity, Romani life would unfold in a mysterious world full of travels, exotic traditions, music and dances around the fire.

The ambiguity characterizing Italians' collective imagery about the Roma often results in ambivalent attitudes on the part of the non-Romani population (Piasere, 2004; Pontrandolfo & Trevisan, 2009; Solimene, 2009); consequently, relations between Roma and non-Roma take the shape of - to paraphrase Asseo (1989)- forms of individual integration accompanied by the collective rejection of the Gypsies. If we consider, instead, the attitude of Italian authorities, the ambivalence surrounding the Roma serves almost invariably as legit of discourses (in Foucault's meaning of the term) of rejection, neglect and/or assimilation. Indeed, the Roma arise interest only when the need comes to find of a public enemy or a national scapegoat; and the authorities' response to the social threat posed by the Roma - the so called "nomads emergency" (*emergenza nomadi*)- are repressive measures such as evictions, expulsions, confinement, and police raids (Brunello, 1996; Clough-Marinaro, 2003, 2009; Colacicchi, 1996; Petronio, 2008; Saletti-Salza, 2010; Sigona, 2002, 2008; Simoni, 2005). Also the few institutional attempts to deal with the Roma by the means of non-repressive approaches (such as for example in the field of education) are nevertheless framed within the assimilationist idea that, in order to be accepted within majority society, the Gypsies have to renounce to their "Gypsiness" (Piasere, 1999; Saletti Salza, 2010).

The persons I met on my fieldwork fall under the bureaucratic and juridical categorization of Gypsies/Roma/nomads, and of immigrants (because on paper they are Bosnian or at least non-Italian citizens⁵). As Gypsies, they are exposed to the blend (above mentioned) of discrimination, repression and neglect.⁶ As immigrants, often illegally present within the Italian territory, they are exposed to what the Italian sociologist Dal Lago (2004) called Italy's "double juridical regimen"⁷, and thus risk becoming "non-persons" in both juridical and social terms. In other words, for being categorized as Gypsies/Roma/nomads and immigrants, the persons I met on my fieldwork are subject to a double process of discrimination and marginalization within Italian society: denied of their basic rights, human qualities and needs, they are relegated at the margins of the legal state and yet targeted by the exceptional measures adopted to tackle the "nomads emergency".

⁴ Several works (Brunello, 1996; Clough-Marinaro, 2003, 2009; European Roma Rights Centre [ERRC], 2000; Piasere, 1991, 2006a; Sigona, 2002) instead demonstrate that the life conditions of the Roma in Italy are product of the blend of rejection and indifference characterizing the attitude of Italian authorities towards the so called "Gypsy problem".

⁵ Many romá, especially among the young generations, have no document at all.

⁶ For the situation of the Roma in contemporary Italy, see for example Clough Marinaro (2009), Clough Marinaro and Sigona (2011), Costi (2010), Sigona (2008, 2010), Sigona and Monasta (2006), and Solimene (2011a, 2011b).

⁷ Roughly speaking, Italian legal order does not apply the same protocol to migrants and Italian citizens (see also Giubbini, 2005; Veltrone, 2011). Just to cite one meaningful example, migrants can be deprived of their freedom and put in houses of detention called CIE (*Centri di Identificazione ed Espulsione*) simply because under suspicion of a crime (often their illegal presence within Italian borders) or for their alleged social dangerousness.

In the next pages, I will question the validity of categories –such as those above presented- filling bureaucratic taxonomies and other systems of classifications, on which the State grounds its discourses of power (Bourdieu, 1992; Foucault 1966/1994; Handelman, 1998; Herzfeld 1987, 2001). As I will explain further on, indeed, these categories conceal important aspects of the reality they are instead supposed to explain.

A sketch of Romani identity

The previous discussion highlighted that Italy's mainstream discourses treat the Roma as a compact group -though some minor differences between subgroups (or ethnies, as they are often called) may be acknowledged- clearly separated from the outside, and whose members allegedly share a series of core socio/cultural traits. This perspective, I contend, is hardly sustainable once we put the Romani world under the looking glass.

The Gypsies/Roma/nomads are a perfect example of what Snow and Anderson (1987) called “attributed identity”, because the most appropriate definition of this group seems the following tautology: they are those falling under the category of Gypsy/Roma/nomads, imposed by those not considering themselves as such. Indeed, it is extremely difficult to define the group the so-called Gypsies/Roma/nomads are supposed to constitute on the basis of characteristic features and composition. Therein we find persons who share no common origins, call themselves in different ways (*Rom*, *Roma*, *Romá*, *Řoma*, *Sinti*, *Manuš*, *Kalé*, *Gitanos*, *Cinganos*...), and have no common language (Romani language, *Romanés*, comprises various different dialects, and some groups do not speak it) nor religion (among them are Catholics, Orthodox, Muslims, Pentecostals...); as well, working activities, social structure, lifestyle and living conditions are extremely heterogeneous among the Roma. Complexity is enhanced by the fact that each group constructs itself as a “centre producing its particular values as universal” (Asseo, 1989, p. 124), develops its own idea of “Romani-ness” and elaborates its own perspective on the Romani world (Asseo, 1989; Piasere, 1991, 2004). Also, borders between groups are blurred by inter-group marriages, and groups change continually socio-cultural traits, lifestyle, economic activities and dwelling strategies (Piasere, 1991; Williams, 1995).

Such an internal variety is continually underlined by the Roma I encountered, who explain it by recurring to a metaphor: “We are like the five fingers of a hand: we are different, yet belonging to the same hand”. But then, one quickly discovers that the size and characteristics of the hand and the fingers vary according to the speaker and the context.

Sometimes the definition of the hand reflects a sort of ethnic criterion: the hand stands for the Roma people. These discourses are elaborated especially by Roma intellectuals, activists and political movements, whose critique of the demeaning stereotypes of “Gypsies” and “nomads” is accompanied by the promotion of a positive image of the Roma. This latter insists on the idea of a Stateless people united around a socio/cultural core (Romani language, Indian origins, and common cultural heritage) and a general condition of marginality, oppression, and discrimination. As Okely (1983) already noticed long ago, this form of “strategic essentialism” (Spivak, 1987) is constructed to meet the expectations of the non-Roma, gain recognition and credibility at the political level, and thus support the struggles for the recognition of Roma rights. But outside the political arena, this definition encounters scarce recognition in the Romani world. This is especially true among the *romá* I know, who avoid engagement in politics and despise its rhetoric (Solimene, in print). Not that the *romá* never refer to large semantic containers such as Roma. For example, to answer

the silly question -only *gaḡé*⁸ ask- “what does Roma mean?” they almost invariably reply with a translation in the language of the *gaḡé*: “Roma means Gypsies [*Zingari*], nomads”. This answer is a way to come to common terms, but the translation is not perfect: it is hard to find a romá considering himself a Gypsy; and if the romá call themselves “nomads” in front of the Italians, it is not because they adopt strategies of mobility, but because Italians call them “nomads”, approve laws concerning the “nomads”, and confine them into ghettos called “camps for nomads”; and noter that, in any case, the romá do not feel particularly close to groups like the Spanish *Gitanos* or the English Traveller Gypsies - apart from being categorized as Gypsies/Roma.

The hand that the romá invoke to define their identity stands often for the category “*xoraxané*”. It is generally accepted that the *xoraxané* group embraces different subgroups professing Islamic faith;⁹ but are the romá I met on the fieldwork Muslim? They call God “*o Del*” and not Allah; they do not frequent the mosque and they make oaths by putting a hand on the wall of Catholic churches; they do charity and some romá try respecting the Ramadan - sometimes and/or partially - but many do not even know when this starts; they do not imagine pilgrimages to Mecca; they drink alcohol and eat pig meat - although avoiding plainly piggish meat such a steak or sausages; finally, they do not read the Koran, though they might have one in their caravan, or hang in their shack some drapery reporting the Prophet’s verses - next to a statuette of the Virgin. Thus, to refer to a Muslim identity in a strictly religious sense would not actually explain much of the romá; and indeed, the members of Fikret’s family had good relations with Ahmed, an Egyptian kebab seller, “because –they asserted- he is Muslim like us”; but they generally felt closer to Italians than to other Muslim such as Moroccans or Egyptians (even though sharing with these latter also the label of immigrants).

Note, besides, that the world of the *xoraxané* is extremely various and its composition is unclear. Each Roma group (Muslim or not) produces its own idea of what and whom the *xoraxané* are - so that a group may be comprised within the *xoraxané* by some groups and not by others (see on regard, Uhlik, 1955/2004, 1956; Lapov, 1999, 2004; Saletti-Salza, 2003; Piasere, 2004). As a result, relevant differences between *xoraxané* subgroups are continually highlighted by the *xoraxané* themselves; the romá I know, for example, distinguish between the “*Šiftarja*” (Albanians¹⁰), “who live like beasts in filthy shacks and trailers” - the romá assert; the Bulgarian romá, considered dangerous, uncivilised and exotic; the “*Cernogorcuri*” (Montenegrin) who, the romá claim, are “dirty, superstitious, rough, and wild because they lived up in the mountains”; and the *Bosniaci* (Bosnian), as the romá are.

This example shows how the hand, which the romá refer to when explaining Romani identity, may be defined also in geographical terms. The romá define themselves as Bosnian because many were born in Bosnian villages and some grew up there (before arriving to Italy); and because Bosnia, a place described in melancholic and mystifying taints concerning food, women, lifestyle, and supernatural events, is the land of their fathers. The romá are Bosnian also because as such they appear in their passport (if they have it), in the expulsion orders they collect, in a police file, in a census. And yet ambiguities characterize the Bosnian identity of the romá: the villages they once dwelled are today situated in Serbian territory and/or occupied by war refugees; many romá have no Bosnian document and some are not even registered as Bosnian citizens; as well, they also feel Italians and Romans, because “after all –they

⁸ *Gaḡé* means non-Roma.

⁹ Opinions in the Romani studies seem to converge around Uhlik’s old assertion (1955/2004, 1956), according to which *xoraxaj(a)* means Turk(s), and *xoraxané* -or *kor(h)ané*- romá would thus mean the Roma of the *xoraxajá* - of the Turks, or Turkish romá.

¹⁰ The name recalls Albania’s flag, the two headed eagle (*šifla* means ‘eagle’); note that Kosovo’s romá are called *Šiftarja* too.

explain- we have been living in Italy since decades...we are used to live here!"; moreover, the romá are called "Serbians" (*Srbi*) by Romanian Roma, "Slavic Roma" (*Rom Slavi*) by Italian Sinti and "Italians" by the Bosnian *xoraxané romá* who live in Bosnia.

Note besides that the definition of "*amén*" (that is, the *romaní*¹¹ word for "us") or "*amaré romá*" (our romá) acquires a sharp character when related to local (rather than national) geographical determinations. A Bosnian identity is invoked to mark a difference with other Roma groups –especially when talking to Italians (Solimene, 2011a); much more frequently, however, the romá call themselves *Vlasenicakuri* and/or *Bijeljincuri*. These appellatives refer to the villages they once dwelt in Bosnia (respectively Vlasenica and Bijeljina) and are used as markers to distinguish from other Bosnian and/or *xoraxané* groups. Together, *Vlasenicakuri* and *Bijeljincuri* constitute a group they define as the "*amaré romá*", because of familial linkages and past and present experiences of cohabitation; and yet, the group's internal differences in terms of lifestyle, values, and even language, are continually highlighted by its members. Complexity is enhanced by the fact that romá from Vlasenica and from Bijeljina exist also outside this group; as well, by the fact that the distinction between *Vlasenicakuri* and *Bijeljincuri* is fuzzy: some *Bijeljincuri* once lived in Vlasenica, and thus, although defined exclusively as *Bijeljincuri* by the *Vlasenicakuri*, sometimes they consider themselves also as *Vlasenicakuri*, at least a little bit.

It is important underlining that religious and geographical criteria cannot fully explain the identity of the romá, as this is constituted by several other dimensions. An interesting example is the category "*čergarja*", which clearly exemplifies the ambiguity surrounding the Romani identity. The term "*čergarja*" is used by non-Roma and several Roma groups living in the Balkans (or of Balkan origin) to refer to the Roma with nomadic lifestyles, and usually implying allegations concerning lack of hygiene, culture, proper traditions, language, parental abilities (Karpati, 1994; Lapov, 2004; Piasere, 2004; Saletti-Salza, 2003; Uhlik, 1955/2004,1956).

According to the *Vlasenicakuri* and *Bijeljincuri*, the "*čergarja*" are all those romá who, independently from their place of origin or present dwelling territories¹², "do not remain in the same dwelling place, but rather roam around continually". *Čergarja* are different, it is explained, because "they always live in trailers and tents...they are used to it", "they are dirty and uncivilized" and "really want to live like beasts". *Čergarja* are therefore the "other romá" (*averé romá*) even when they belong to the circle of the *amaré romá* (be this the *xoraxané*, the Bosnian, the *Vlasenicakuri* and/or the *Bijeljincuri*). Generally interpreted as somewhat pejorative, the label of "*čergarja*" is vigorously rejected by many romá I know; yet there are some (such as some *Vlasenicakuri*) who have no problem in defining themselves as, and being called, *čergarja*. Detached from the general demeaning connotations, being *čergarja* marks an identity that is even displayed with a hint of pride, "because it is our tradition, the way we used to live in the old days".

The category "*čergarja*" is therefore semantically ambiguous. It may have positive and negative connotations, and its extension varies according to the context and the interlocutor. Besides, being *čergar* may be a partial attribution. I will explain myself with an example. A rom may be defined *čergar* "because he roams around in a trailer", but some romá might instead maintain that he is not properly a *čergar*, but "just a little bit" because he is just living "as a *čergar*". Once he leaves the trailer and begins a more stable existence, the same rom may cease being *čergar* (or considered living as such); yet, he might still consider himself a *čergar* "because –he might assert- it is part of my

¹¹ *Romaní* (fem) and *romanó* (masc) are the adjective meaning "proper of the romá".

¹² *Čergarja* are indeed present within several *xoraxané* groups spread all over Europe.

tradition”; and/or he might be still considered *čergar* by other romá “because he still lives surrounded by filth and leaves his children neglected”.

I might go on discussing the importance of experiences of cohabitations and/or working collaboration, of the role of familial linkages and the relevance of gender in the construction of group and individual identity among the romá. If I stop here, it is because to peel the Romani identity like we peel an onion in search of its core is a quest doomed to failure: this core simply escapes any firm grip. The hand the romá appeal to when explaining who they are assumes different configurations according to the interlocutor and to whom the romá need to take a distance from (or to underline vicinity with). Fata, a woman belonging to my adoptive family among the romá, will prove this assertion. Fata is a *Šiftar* original from Beograd (Serbia), but her family moved to Germany during the war in Kosovo. There she met Meko, a rom belonging to a family of *Vlasenicakuri*. After marrying him, Fata followed Meko’s family back in Italy. Depending on the context, whom she is talking to and for which purposes, Fata assumes different identities and provides different visions of the Romani world. For example, talking to Italians about “us” (*noi*), she uses the terms: “Gypsies” (*Zingari*), “Roma” (*Rom*), “nomads” (*nomadi*), “Muslim” (*muslimani*), “Bosnian”, “the Gypsies living in my settlement”, “the Gypsies of my family”. In *romanés*, she uses the term “*amen*” (us) or “*amaré romá*” (our romá) when referring to: the Roma, the *xoraxané*, the *Šiftarja*, the Bosnian (*Bosniaci*), the *čergarja*, her father’s family, her husband’s family, her domestic unit. Note, besides, that talking of the “other [*averé*] romá” she can intend: the *Šiftarja*, the Bosnian (*Bosniaci*), the *čergarja*, other families of romá dwelling in her settlement, her husband’s family.

In the mesmerizing structure of the Romani identity, several dimensions intertwine, overlay, and cross each other in ambiguous ways. Of course, by putting all her self-definitions on paper Daniela might fall in evident contradictions; but each definition is sharp and true in the precise context in which it is asserted. Contradictions arise only in what Herzfeld called the logic of the “strict definitions” operated by bureaucracies, statist ideologies, political discourses and academic accounts too (Herzfeld, 1987). Far from the arrogant idea (and ideology) that social reality may be reduced to, and encaged within, systems of clear, univocal and comparable categories, the *romani* identity seems transcending the principle of non-contradiction (according to which A is A and cannot be non-A) and add that each attribution of identity may even be partial. Thus, in the *romani* perspective, A can be A and, at the same time, a little bit C –as the case of the *čergarja* clearly proves.

Conclusions

To define the group of persons involved in my fieldwork - in other words, my object of my study - is a difficult task. Indeed, these persons hardly constitute a clear, compact and homogeneous group; and each time I try to define their identity, this escapes any firm grip; some analytical instruments, such as Roma people, create a chimera; some, such as Muslim or Bosnian, conceal things more than revealing them; others are just extremely ambiguous and elusive.

The usage the romá make of identity in different contexts, to different interlocutors, in different languages, and the ambiguous and fuzzy character of their categories, might prove a lack of identity. It is true, the romá lack our non-Romani kind of identity, our systemic forms of classification, our formally comparable, definable, relatively homogenous categories. The ones that we find in a census of the Romani population, in a police file, the report of a social worker, or newspapers articles; the ones we find in a social scientist’s research.

I am not asserting the impossibility to use terms such as Gypsies, Roma, nomads, immigrants, *xoraxané*, Bosnian and so forth; I just used them, and the romá do it continually as if playing with them. Rather, my point is that such categories should be treated with care by social scientists at least and never be taken for granted. To refer to an identity based on nationality, ethnicity, religion, or lifestyle, by simply transplanting it from the complexity of the social usages to a scholarly account may prove pointless: the risk is remaining entangled in the strictness of a Western and non-Romani perspective. And, perhaps worse, by inscribing the people we are studying within clear and already-made boxes (like those provided by bureaucracies and other systems of classification) we might end up resembling and confirming the nationalist and racist ideologies social sciences aim to deconstruct.

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