What's inside 'the ethnic lens'? Incorporating slum-dwelling migrants in Turin

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Introduction

'Methodological nationalism' (Beck 2000) in studies of transnational migration

(Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) is a well-known phenomenon. More recently, the concepts

of 'ethnic lens' (Glick Schiller et al 2006) and 'methodological ethnicity' (Glick Schiller and

Caglar 2008) were introduced to critically discuss scholars'– typically migration scholars' –

reliance on ethnic groups as units of analysis. The criticism maintains that, although ethnicity

has widely been recognized as a social construction, 'scholars of migration continue to use

"ethnic community" as both the object of study and the unit of analysis in migration research'

(Glick Schiller et al 2006: 613). These reflections brilliantly contributed to bridging Urban

Studies and Migration Studies, by bringing political economy and the city scale debate (e.g.

Brenner 2004; Jessop 2000) squarely in the agenda of Migration Studies. They showed that by

focusing on urban opportunity structures, cultures and resources, rather than 'ethnic/migrant

groups', it becomes clear that migrants' modalities of local incorporation may well occur

beyond ethnic configurations.

However, the 'ethnic lens' as such has not been deeply scrutinized. How does it

function in practice, what is it influenced by, and what kind of shapes can it take? In this paper

my goal is to go *inside* 'the ethnic lens', discussing its constitutive 'material', functions and effects. The 'beyond-the-ethnic-lens thesis' (hereafter BEL) main theoretical assumption is the necessity to avoid the blunt essentialism of approaching research on migration by considering ethnic groups as given realities. As BEL acknowledges, this constructivist, i.e. anti-essentialist, approach to ethnicity and 'ethnic groups' goes back to at least Robert Park and the Chicago School. But why, in the first place, should essentialism be avoided? To borrow from Werner Sollors, one of the acknowledged theoretical references, the reason is 'the sinister implications of the invention of ethnic purity, passed off as natural' (Sollors 1989: xvii). Some of these 'sinister implications' may be found in the use of ethnic categories for political purposes, which often end up producing (i.e. reifying) ethnic groups for political or economic interests.

In Brubaker's (2002) words – another of BEL's acknowledged theoretical references – 'By reifying groups, by treating them as substantial things-in-the-world, ethnopolitical entrepreneurs may, as Bourdieu notes, contribute to producing what they apparently describe or designate' (Brubaker 2002: 166). Brubaker's critique of the idea of 'groupness' can be seen as one of BEL's major theoretical standpoints: migration scholars' reliance on ethnic groups as unit of analysis would be impossible without the assumption that ethnic groups actually *exist* as 'things-in-the-world'. Following a long scholarly tradition (e.g. Amselle 1999; Barth 1969; Jenkins 1997), Brubaker views ethnicity not only as an individually or collectively chosen or accepted characterization, but also as complex field of negotiations and power relations; external powerful actors, such as the state and local authorities, might effectively imposing the ethnic characterizations limiting people's possibilities and livelihoods; moreover, local/national historical legacies may well influence this essentialising process (also Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

If this is true, then scholars' reification of ethnicity never happens in the absence of powerful contingent and historically rooted forms of knowledge, discourse and action. *Categories of analysis* (scholars' lenses) and *categories of practice* (social actors' lenses), to

borrow from Bourdieu's (1976) vocabulary, are tightly linked to each other; they influence one another, and they can be made interchangeable. Following this reasoning, when in a city there are persons belonging to a minority, including migrants, living under highly deprived material conditions, like in slums, we can assume that the external, state-driven, (typically ethnic) characterization of them may contribute substantially to determine their social mobility and possibilities of incorporation, or at least more than in the case of less deprived settings. This means not only that (ethnic) categories of practice may determine opportunity structures that – according to BEL thesis –scholars should look at, in order to avoid ethnic biases (Glick Schiller and Caglar 2013), but also that migrants' material, symbolic and geographical (spatial) marginality may influence significantly both types of categories and ultimately migrants' pathways of incorporation. This does not mean that highly materially and symbolically deprived migrant families and individuals lack any sort of agency, but that their opportunity structures may be restricted to the point of making them relatively unable to go, if they ever wanted to, through non-ethnic pathways of incorporation. What it seems to me BEL tends to overlook is the relevance of migrants' socioeconomic conditions in influencing access to pathways of incorporation, and this occurred – that is my hypothesis – because it considered categories of analysis as detached from categories of practice, i.e. not rooted in situated forms of knowledge and power relations.

This paper is an attempt to discuss this issue by shifting the focus from migrants' experiences through pathways of 'incorporation', to the making of those pathways, meaning to local authorities' ethnic lenses (i.e. strategies, actions, principles and worldviews). My case study is the set of local pathways of incorporation of slum dwellers in Turin; the majority of them come from Romania, and they are all identified as being Roma. The local available pathways of incorporation for those highly socio-economically deprived families are only ethnic. This means a whole system of urban governance including special integration projects, municipality offices dealing with Roma (or "nomads"), police forces in charge only of Roma,

(or "nomads"), and an entire political culture shaped by a media discourse that embraces Roma as the only, self-evident and essentialized category for talking about and acting toward incorporation or integration. My operative question here is how this whole system of governance operates and which kind of 'lens' its actors wear.

After briefly sketching the city scale, I will discuss urban governance processes, and in the final part I will come back to my argument. I conducted fieldwork in Turin over about five months in 2010, with additional visits in 2011 and 2012, collecting twenty interviews with civil servants and NGO activists, as well as a number of ethnographic observations in different settings; I additionally analyzed the 2010 editions of the two most widely read local newspapers.

City scale

Turin has a population of 909,000. Its post-WW economic history is very clearly marked by its industrial character, primarily by the renowned FIAT headquarters (the city was called the Italian Detroit). Following the 1950s and 1960s national economic growth Turin successfully attracted several economically deprived workers from Southern Italy, who became the new labour force for car and manufacture industries. Since the late 1970s the city started attracting so-called 'new immigrants' from the Global South. Their number steadily increased, and in the early 2000s it reached high rates.

From 2004 to 2011 the number of foreigners in Turin more than doubled, and today they constitute 15% of the urban population. The vast majority of them come from Romania (46%) and the second represented nationality is Morocco with 14.2%. As for employment data, from 2008 to 2009 the hiring procedures in employment offices dropped by 16,9% for Italians and 20,5% for foreigners. And while in 2008 the construction industry was hiring 35% of foreigners, in 2009 this figure dropped by 25% going to 10%.

The 2008 collapse of the financial market makes life for those at the bottom of the class structure socially precarious, existentially uncertain and often emotionally unbearable. What happens to those who are the most precarious among foreigners, who according to employment rates are the most disadvantaged? Housing is one of the sectors that have mostly been hit by the recent collapse of the Western financial system, and foreigners paid a very high cost. From 1995 to 2004 the number of non-EU applicants for Social Housing in Turin increased by 26.4%. Opposite to this tendency, financial resources allocated to Social Housing construction dropped by 50% in the 1990s and by 30% in the 2000s.

The data on the last two municipal announcements for public housing (2001 and 2004) show that housing hardship is socially quite widespread, affecting heterogeneous groups, and spatially concentrated in certain areas of the city. This is the case of historical 'working-class neighbourhoods', such as Barriera di Milano, Lanzo and Barca. It is exactly close to those neighbourhoods a relatively small slum, in which about 1,000 people live – the vast majority of them coming from Romania, is located. The shanties appeared in the end of the 1990s, when few families found shelter near the river. The reason why they settled down near the Stura banks goes back to the late 1970s sedentarization policies for Italian Sinti that were carried out by a local pro-Roma NGO. With the late 1960s arrival of the first Romani Yugoslavs, a migratory chain was established. The second flux of Yugoslavian Roma arrived in the late 1970s and they settled down near Stura as well. When Romanian Roma arrived in the end of the 1990s, those who decided to settle down in Turin, did that near the Stura banks. And in 2001 an institutional camp for Yugoslav Roma was built up in the nearby piece of land. The fact that in the end of the 1960s people living there were Italian Sinti shows that this is a highly ethnicized/racialized portion of the space. I'll come back to this aspect towards the end of the paper.

Urban governance

There are three groups of actors actively contributing to the governance of Lungo Stura's slum-dwellers: 1. Social service office in charge of 'Nomadism and Emergency Settlements' (NES); 2. NGOs activists and volunteers; 3. The municipal police organized in 'nomad patrols'; 4. The local media. Firstly I will briefly talk about actions and strategies of state actors (i.e. NES and the police) and NGOs. Secondly, I will look at all four actors' representations of urban marginality in order to discuss their approach and worldviews.

STATE ACTORS

NES works mainly through employment bursaries – 6-month bursary after which the employer commits him/herself to long-term employment. It adopts a managerial approach, meaning it evaluates costs and benefits in selecting those Roma who are most likely to perform well work-wise, and adopts the same logic in selecting the companies with whom to start a partnership. The NES depends from the municipal council's office of social services; in the current economically precarious conditions this fact implies that NES' employees are constantly vigilant about what they do, because it would be embarrassing for the municipal council's office to flag loudly that Turin spends public money for illegally residing slum-dwellers. Moreover, if those dwellers happen to be Roma, this creates even more problems, because the public opinion could raise its voice against the municipal council, which, in turn, may decide to reduce NES funds, jeopardizing the employment conditions of its members. The result of this dilemma is to keep a 'low profile', as NES employees often told me. Moreover, many of NES' projects of social integration are not successful, and the reason project managers give for this is about the recent economic crisis, which cut jobs and opportunities for both slum dwellers and employers.

The nomad patrols' main duty is monitoring the slum. They are organized in 24 people, 4 of whom daily patrol the slum in order to 'Getting to know new comers, searching houses,

cars and general monitoring', as the patrol's head told me. They put numbers on each shack in order to keep track of them and speak with their informants, new comers and whoever may want to give information.

NGOs

NGOs work with different tools, there are those who volunteer doing schooling in the slum, those who have more structured project of building a small block of flat and living together with previous slum-dwellers, and other kinds of projects. NGOs also work side by side with NES following work bursaries, or adopting work bursaries independently from NES. Their approaches are various; there are NGOs, which have a full-time volunteer-based commitment and those who approach the issue through a managerial logic, and those – probably the majority – between these two poles. No NGO has political interests, nor they are worried of possible political implications of their actions, and they tend to be critical towards the local administration and the media in their actions and discourses on slums and slum-dwellers.

REPRESENTATIONS OF URBAN MARGINALITY – what is their standpoint to tackle it, to fight against it. So, what do they exactly fight against? There are two main shared representations. The first is about the reasons why slum-dwellers are living in such precarious and marginal conditions and the second is about dwellers themselves, who and how they are.

1. REASONS why they live in such marginalized and deprived conditions. According to civil servants, these reasons are related primarily to slum dwellers themselves, either because in this way they do not spend money for housing and can save a lot, or because of their 'culture', which facilitates them to live in such deprived conditions. Also, they are attributed to the municipality's interest in keeping these shanties because they provide a stable space in which potential social deviance is confined. For the police, the shanties are there because it is normal that when there is immigration there are people living in this condition – "we had immigration from southern Italy in the 1960s, and there were people sleeping in cars at the station".

7

2. IDENTIFICATION of slum dwellers. To my questions on how they could be sure that a person was Roma or not, civil servants replied to me that it was visible by looking at their surname, their skin colours, and the presence of golden teeth.

3. MORAL POLARIZATION This is the most interesting element, namely the division of slum dwellers in two main categories: on the one hand there are those who want to socially integrate, and on the other there are those who are in illegal business. These two main groups are of course the extremes of a continuum of which in the centre there is the majority of slum dwellers. This representation seems to impact the most their choices in terms of which concrete decisions should be made, etc. For example, one NES employee told me that sometimes they had to ask Romani women to change their clothes before going to a job interview, because they looked too 'traditional'. Also, talking with the municipal police councilman, he did not distinguish between Yugoslav Roma and Romanian Roma – they are the same 'culture'. He distinguished only between Sinti and foreign Roma, because, according to him, Sinti were much more tidy and less violent. In general, both local authorities and NGO activists construct discursively slum-dwellers as a population divided in two groups, those who want to work and those who live at the borders of legality.

LOCAL MEDIA DISCOURSE

In 184 articles that the two main local newspapers (Stampa and Repubblica) published about Roma in 2010, these are the dominant themes:
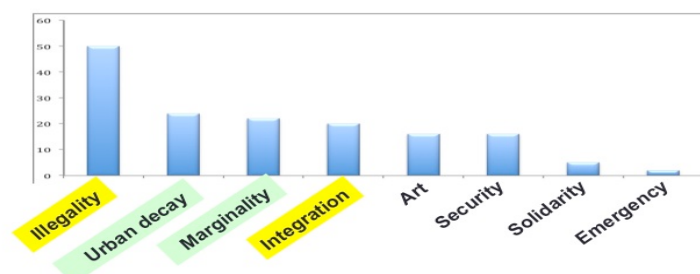
Although not all Roma live in the slum, media mostly talk about slum-dwellers, and certainly in 2010 this was the case because of the increased in media coverage in summer due to Sarkozy's expulsion of Roma, some of whom were allegedly reported to have stopped in

Turin's slum. It can be noted that media representation follows the same polarization that could be found in the case of state actors and NGOs, dividing Roma in two categories, those who commit crimes (the vast majority – theme illegality) and those who want to work (theme integration). In the middle between a majority of criminals and a minority of work-oriented people there is marginality and urban decay.

This moral polarization corresponds to the geographical marginality of slum-dwellers in Turin:

Will to work	Decay	**Illegality**
	Shadow	*Risk, deviance*
	Grey zone	
Proper housing	Slum	Prison
Integration	*Status quo*	*Punishment*

Figure 2. Moral-spatial polarization

Inside the ethnic lens

Categories of practice

As it can be noted, in practice slum dwellers are connoted morally and culturally, and this is the 'ethnic lens' that in practice is used by governance actors to look at them. One of the most interesting evidence of this is that many of NES' projects were not successful and the reason why they were not, according to project managers was because of the current economic crisis and the shortage of companies' employment programs. So, the reason is contextual. However, when it came to explaining why there was a slum and why there were people living there, the answer was always 'because of them!'. So, on the one hand the context is useful for

9

explaining the unsuccessful social integration projects, on the other hand it is totally ignored when it comes to explain marginality. Indeed, marginality becomes in this way ethnicized, meaning totally de-contextualized and perceived as the consequence of 'cultural' predispositions.

However, if we couple this data with the moral-spatial polarization of the representations of slum dwellers, we discover that rather than to ethnicity, the logic through which state actors build their own representations of those dwellers is closer to race. Understood as a relation between body forms (typically skin colour) and behaviours, race often serves as the logic through which the enemy is constructed (Goldberg 2009). Race and threat, with all its repertoire of criminality and in general social deviance, have always been coupled. Thus, it becomes clear that the characterization of slum dwellers as having peculiar ascribed characteristics such as skin colour, surnames and golden teeth, and their being morally connoted lead to a well-known phenomenon, namely racialization. This process is at least in part elicited by the history of that portion of the urban space that, as I showed at the end of the second section, is highly racialized; and this is evident in the perfect jusxtapposition of morality and spatiality in figure 2. The logic through which local authorities approach the social integration of slum-dwellers in Turin seems very much a racializing one. Rather than ethnic, their lenses seem to be fully racial.

Categories of analysis

Scholars working on migrants in slums or slum-like settlements in Italy have tended to wear ethnic lenses. In most of the cases those migrants were Roma, because few other migrant families happen to accept such kind of refuge from local hostility and racism. Identify all of them as Roma means exactly approaching them through an ethnic lens and to explain processes of marginalization by stemming from that form of identification, whereas it has been

10

demonstrated that in so-called 'Roma slums' or 'Roma settlements' in Italy not only Roma live – and this is true also in the case of Turin (Cingolani 2011).

This kind of ethnicizing assumptions are part of a deep-rooted tradition of 'studying Roma' in Italy, cultivating a form of knowledge which is highly essentialist and not without of racist connotations. It goes back to the late 1960s attempts by some pedagogists and sociologists to study Gypsy's alleged 'ethnic character' and 'tendencies'. The highly essentialist logic through which these studies constructed Roma is race, resembling to a certain extent Fascist attempts to re-educate Roma (Bravi 2009). This kind of studies has produced an influential 'ethnicized' heritage not only in academia, but also in policy making addressing Roma (Picker and Roccheggiani, forthcoming).

Conclusion

This paper is a first attempt to discuss some of BEL's limitations. The main conclusion is the that ethnic lens is not a static, de-contextualized object, but a particular prism that is constructed through situated forms of knowledge, assumptions, lay theories that are continually being produced and imposed about particular groups of migrants in particular cities. Looking inside them is noteworthy because these situated forms of knowledge do not only strongly influence the local structures of migrants' opportunity but they also shape, and are in turn mutually shaped by, categories of analysis.

This was the case in Turin, where slum-dwelling migrants in 2010 were addressed by governance actors representing them as either morally good (prone to work and get out of marginality) or morally bad (deviant or potentially criminal) and aiming to help them find a 'normal' place in the local society. That polarization, as I showed, follows a racializing logic, thus it can be seen as the result of wearing a 'racial lens'.

By taking on BEL's important insight of focusing on contextual macro-urban dynamic such as local housing and labour markets, in this paper I showed that when it comes to highly deprived migrants in a socially precarious and economically declining urban context, it is important to include a focus on categories of practice and how they shape pathways of incorporation. The relative lack of opportunities and migrants' conditions of material deprivation might leave them with very few alternatives to ethnicizing and racializing pathways of incorporation. I also discussed the fact that the same process of governance actors' shaping pathways of incorporation exclusively in ethnic and racial terms can be found in works on Roma in Italy that take 'groupness' for granted neglecting not only the urban structure of opportunity, but also state powers' influence in shaping identifications, concrete pathways of migrants' incorporation, and ultimately the very dystopic function of the 'ethnic lens'.

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