"The Persistence of the Roma Camps in Rome:

the Segregating Effects of Purity"

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E3.1: *The Making and Unmaking of Urban Closures: Scrutinizing the 'Purified' City*

Stream E – Contested cities

The Persistence of the Roma Camps in Rome:
the Segregating Effects of Purity

Gaja Maestri

Introduction

In the early 1990s the city of Rome adopted the policy of Roma camps where to relocate the increasing number of Roma living in informal settlements around the Italian capital. Despite this policy was initially created as a temporary and emergency measure, these camps have actually persisted and are currently often overcrowded, characterised by precarious living conditions, and located far from the city centre. This paper interrogates the persistence of these urban closures by analysing the role played by the symbolical binary pure/impure in the production of policies shaping residential segregation. In order to explain this, the paper adopts a comparative method whereby the case of Italian Roma camps is compared to the French policy of transit estates (*cités de transit*) for (mainly Muslim) migrants living in slums adopted in 1970s. Indeed, both cases consist of emergency accommodation policies for people living in informal settlements, with the difference that the transit estates have been eventually dismantled in the 1980s, while the Roma camps are still in place despite being harshly criticised as segregating.

By comparing these cases I aim to discuss two ways in which the concept of purity has contributed to the persistence of the Roma camps in Rome. First, drawing on the work by Sibley on the purification of space, I argue that purity acts as a logic of spatial distancing whereby the Roma camps are depicted as impure and polluted/ing places (often associated to images of dirt, rubbish, disorder). Secondly, taking on the Agambenian notion of the 'homo sacer', I maintain that the Roma have been contained in Roma camps because perceived as essentially nomads, hence there was the need to –

at least formally – protect nomadism as a cultural feature. Indeed, many Italian regions adopted the policy of the camps to protect the alleged nomadic culture of the Roma. On the contrary, in France the transit estates were not considered as linked to an intrinsic character of migrants. The ambivalent position of the Roma as in-between the pure and the impure exacerbated their segregation through a double purification process: first, Roma camps have persisted because they constitutes the confinement of allegedly polluting groups in order to maintain the purity of the city; second, the idea of a 'real' nomads contributed to present the camp as the natural protective environment for Roma culture.

The paper consists of three main sections. The first situates the paper within the larger literature on the symbolic dimension of segregation, and on the role of the pure/impure divide in human interactions and production of urban space. The second section introduces the comparison of the two cases, i.e. the Roma camps in Rome and the transit estates for migrants in the Paris region. Thirdly, the paper explores the concept of purity as developed by Sibley and Agamben in order to account for the persistence of the Roma camps.

The symbolic dimension of urban segregation: the role of purity

The segregation of unwanted population has received increasing attention in sociological literature (Agier 1999; 2014; Hutchison and Haynes 2011; Schnell and Ostendorf 2002; Wacquant 2008). The literature has mainly focused on two main streams of analysis: on the one hand, on the role of economic and political factors in the production of segregation and informality (Marcuse 2011; Roy and AlSayyad 2004; Yiftachel 2009); on the other hand, on the symbolic dimension of forms of ghettoisation, namely territorial stigmatisation (Wacquant 2008; Wacquant, Slater, and Pereira 2014) and the construction of discursive social boundaries that inscribe the urban space (Castañeda 2011; Jones et al. 2011; Lamont and Small 2010). In this paper I aim to build on the latter by scrutinizing the role of the binary pure/impure in the

making of urban closures. My main goal is to show that this category, that has been object of attention mainly in geography and anthropology of exclusion in the 1980s and 1990s (cf. Malkki 1995; Sibley 1988), can actually be still useful to understand the persistence of urban segregation.

The division between pure and pure, sacred and profane has been an extremely important aspect in human interactions and in the production of social space in history, and it is still today in the urban contexts. The concept of purity plays an important role in the formation of nation states and in the 'anger' towards minorities that are seen as an obstacle to total purity (Appadurai 2006). Arjun Appadurai argues how the idea of purity has been at the base of the most violent ethnic conflicts in history, such as the Jewish Holocaust, or the Hutus and Tutsis genocide in Rwanda (Appadurai 1998). Veena Das (1995) illustrates how the binary purity/pollution played a crucial role in the management of the women abduction after the partition of India, and similarly Martha Nussbaum (2002) uses the notion of disgust – that leads to the violation of the pure – as a prominent aspect in the violent episodes involving Muslim and Hindus, that took place in Ayodhya, India, in 2002.

Purity plays also an important role in the shaping of (urban) space, for instance through the creation of camps for those categories of people that do not clearly fall into the imagined fixed link between place and culture (Malkki 1992). As a consequence, refugees, uprooted people – including the Roma, or the alleged gypsies – are subject to othering practices (Kofman 1995), as well as spatial confinement (Bermann and Clough Marinaro 2011) and containment (Hyndman 2000; Malkki 1995). In the following sections I will illustrate two examples of urban segregation, later analysing the role of purity in the making of these urban closures.

Roma camps and transit estates: understanding segregation through comparison:

Drawing on McFarlane (2010) I conceive of the comparative method in two main ways: as a methodological tool and as a way of thinking that can put into questions certain assumptions that are given for granted. First, I aim to identify differences and

similarities between the Italian Roma camps and the transit estates. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, both cases consist of emergency accommodation policies for people living in informal settlements, with the difference that the transit estates have been eventually dismantled. In this paper the comparison aims to shed light on the case of the persistence of the Roma camps in Rome.

Secondly, I use comparison as a political tool to criticise the alleged exceptionality of the Roma category. As argued by McFarlane (2010) comparison is never neutral, but it often actively contributes to reproduce certain hierarchies, for instance between the global North and the global South. Similarly, research on the Roma often presents comparison between different countries (for instance, Bancroft 2001; Fekete 2014; Sigona and Trehan 2009) but more rarely between the Roma and other groups (among these, see for instance, Fassin [2010], Grill [2012], Sordé Martì et al. [2012]), hence reproducing the idea that the Roma are a separate case. Indeed, Romani studies have been criticised for essentialising the Roma (Tremlett 2009). In this way, research that focuses only on the Roma tends to overestimate the differences between them and other groups (Willems 1998) while actually the Roma face many similar situations common to other categories. Moreover, the fact of conceiving of the Roma as a separate category is at the base of several exceptional policies adopted towards them, which further exacerbate the perception of their difference.

By comparing the case of the Italian Roma camps with the French transit estates for Muslim migrants I not only seek to identify the differences in order to account for the persistence of the Italian nomad camps – for which I argue that the idea of purity has played an important role – but I also aim to show that the situation of residential segregation experienced by the Roma in Rome is also common to other categories.

The Roma camps in Rome

In the early 1990s the city of Rome has adopted the policy of 'nomad camps' (*campi nomadi*) where to relocate the increasing number of Roma living in informal settlements

– most of whom had arrived in Rome as asylum seekers during the Yugoslav Wars. In 1995 the former centre-left mayor of Rome, Francesco Rutelli (1994–1999, 1999–2001), presented the first Nomad Plan for the creation of a special housing programme for Roma people living in informal settlements. The plan provided the creation of ten so-called 'equipped villages' designed to provide better sanitary standards, with a capacity of almost 1,500 people (against a total population of more than 5,000 present on the Roman territory). During the late 1990s and early 2000s the local political debate on Roma housing informality came to be increasingly framed in security terms rather than by a humanitarian approach, prominent in the early 1990s. The former centre-left mayor Walter Veltroni (2001–2006; 2006-2008) increased the number of evictions and the implementation of Roma equipped villages in the periphery of the city (Stasolla 2012). In 2007 the city of Rome presented the First Security for Rome Pact providing the creation of four so-called 'solidarity villages' (with a capacity of 1,000 residents each), and an increase of police surveillance in the informal settlements. Despite pro-Roma NGOs openly criticised the orientation of the Roman administration, this security policy approach continued with the following right wing mayor Gianni Alemanno (2008–2013).

Furthermore, in 2008 the national government adopted the Nomad Emergency Decree (Consiglio dei Ministri 2008) claiming that the Roma informal settlements constituted a threat to public health, order and security. The prefects of the cities of Naples, Milan, and Rome were given extra powers to tackle the situation of emergency, mainly through an increased control of equipped villages and facilitated repatriations and evictions. In 2009 Rome's mayor, Gianni Alemanno, presented a new Nomad Plan entailing the creation of five large equipped villages in the outer periphery of the city to house the Roma evicted from informal settlements in the city centre. Local, national and international pro-Roma advocacy groups condemned this emergency decree, arguing that it constituted ethnic discrimination and that it actually worsened the housing conditions of the Roma rather than addressing their integration.

The Nomads Emergency Decree was annulled in 2011, when the use of exceptional

powers was deemed anti-constitutional given the lack of any actual emergency (Consiglio di Stato 2011; Corte Suprema di Cassazione 2013). The new administration of the city of Rome (elected in June 2013 and led by the centre-left mayor Ignazio Marino) committed to pursue the objectives identified in the National Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti Communities, part of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 (UNAR 2012). Yet, despite these apparent advances, current policies appear to continue to be in line with the former administrations (Associazione 21 Luglio 2014).

Many NGOs and movements denounce the fact that although the Roma equipped villages were created to integrate the Roma, they actually produced a segregating system where Roma are bound to remain indefinitely, living in situations that often present the same poor health and safety standards of previously evicted settlements (Anzaldi and Stasolla 2010). Indeed, people living in these settlements often experience residential segregation and severe housing deprivation, as the settlements often lack of basic facilities, such as access to drinking water and electricity, and are mainly concentrated in urban fringe, and in non-residential and isolated areas far from services and public transport (Clough Marinaro 2009). Furthermore, most of the Roma experiencing severe housing deprivation are practically denied access to social housing policies. As shown by an Amnesty International report (Amnesty International 2013), the Roma living in settlements often fail to gain eligibility for public housing, because for instance they are not tenants or homeowners, therefore lack the correct status needed for a place on the social housing register. For these reasons NGOs in the last years have increasingly insisted on dismantling the Roma equipped villages and on developing alternative social housing policies, such as slum upgrade programmes, access to public housing, self-build projects. Yet, the Roma camps are still there.

The transit estates in the Paris region

The *cités de transit* were temporary accommodations for families living in slums. This

term came to be used mainly after the 1960s, to specifically refer to short-term family accommodations, while there were other types of accommodation for individuals only (mostly the so-called *harkis*, Algerian men who served in the French armies), that were called transit camps, reception estates, or forest villages (Moumen 2012). This policy started in France in the 1950s initially under the initiatives of different christian-based associations (for instance in the 1950s the Foundation Abbé Pierre launched many so-called *cités d'urgence*) and municipalities in order to rehouse and integrate the increasing number of economic migrants living in informal settlements (mainly from Algeria and Portugal). The transit estates were the result of several fragmented measures against slums and for the management of the 'undesirables' (Bernardot 2015). Between 1955 and 1965 the construction of new social housing (the HLM, *Habitation à Loyer Moderé*, Housing at Moderated Rent) mainly housed the upper working class, while the poorest and migrants did not access them. To face the situation of an increasing housing crisis the French government decided to build two different types of social housing, one permanent and the other one for transit (called IST, *Immeubles Sociaux de Transit*, i.e. Transit Social Buildings) (Tricart 1977).

It is mainly in the 1960s that the transit estates as model to accommodate families living in informal settlements became more consistent, mainly because during the Algerian war migration from this country increased further, and also for a higher number of families arriving from Portugal. In the 1960s the SO.NA.CO.TRA (*Société nationale de construction pour les travailleurs*, National Society of Construction for Workers), a mixed company created in 1956 to manage the housing of Algerian migrants, became the agency in charge of the construction of many transit estates (Bernardot 2008). This policy was ratified with a national law in 1970 (Vivien Law, 10 July 1970) that made provisions for the eradication of unsanitary housing (Cohen and David 2012). On 19 April 1972 the French government approved a circular aiming to create a more coherent policy on the transit estates, which restated the notion of transition of these estates (the residents were supposed to stay there up to a maximum of two years) and also the importance of the socio-educational activities as key aspect in the integration process of

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the inhabitants (Cohen and David 2012). These transit estates were aimed to the accommodation of people that experienced severe housing deprivation, while at the same time integrating them through socio-educational activities and familiarising them with the life in houses (Cohen and David 2012). These estates were built in the main centres of immigration in France, such as Lille and Lyon, and in cities that saw a quick increase of migrants mainly during the Algerian war, like Paris and Marseille (Tricart 1977).

Despite planned as temporary, most of the people remained in the cités de transit for more than the two years initially scheduled, mainly because of the lack of rehousing options, as well as the poor economic conditions that the inhabitants were experiencing in times of increasing unemployment rates (Cohen and David 2012). In order to express the decay of the transit estates, Abdallah talks about the 'slummification' of the transit estates (Abdallah 2006), with a deterioration of buildings – that led to the strike of rents in Saint-Denis (Weil 2005) –, an increase in conflicts with neighbours, and growing social problems such as drug abuse and trafficking. The former French President Mitterand officially committed to the relocation of the residents of the transit estates. Despite the formal political engagement and violent episodes – such as the killing of a young man in a transit estate in Nanterre (Abdallah 2006) – the transit estates persisted until the 1980s (Abdallah 2006), and some of them even until the 1990s (Cohen and David 2012).

The pure in the making of segregation I: keeping impure people at distance

As argued in the first section, the pure/impure divide is a very important logic shaping the distribution of human settlements within urban contexts. Sennett (1970) provided a psychoanalytical explanation to account for the division between neighbourhoods in urban contexts: the desire to produce conflict-free relationships would produce, as a result, the formation of self-isolating suburbs and the confinement of the feared other, which in turn reinforces the image of a pure community. Similarly to Sennett, although without mobilising psychoanalysis, Sibley (1988) offers a reflection on the purification

of space as the rejection of perceived and unwanted difference and the securing of boundaries to maintain an alleged homogeneity. Within contemporary capitalist societies there are several processes at work that produce purified spaces as outcome, such as a public salience of individual consumption and interest, and the prominence within the private sphere of family centred relations. Everything that might produce effects that fall outside these aspects is considered as disorderly, hence kept at distance. For instance Sibley (1981) also discuss about the lack of access to the land of gypsies, who, because of their more or less practiced nomadism, are perceived as threatening and disorderly. Hence, the perceived impurity of a group of people can materially affect the redistribution of land and their relegation at the margins.

In both the case of the Roma in Rome and the migrants in the Paris region the pure and impure divide has been an important one in the production and definition of the spaces in which these people were living. The Roma have been for the last twenty years subject to a constant process of confinement in the peripheries of the city of Rome and containment within camps (Clough Marinaro 2009) that has produced a de-gypsified centre of the city (Bermann and Clough Marinaro 2011) through a series of different discourses, from humanitarian one (Clough Marinaro and Daniele 2011) to security and public health (Clough Marinaro 2009). Indeed in the last ten years the city of Rome also started building new Roma villages in the outer periphery of the city, as part of a project aiming to dismantle all the informal settlements in the city and to relocate all the Roma in these isolated villages far from the city centre. Furthermore the image of the 'gypsy' and of the 'gypsy camp' evokes ideas of pollution and dirt. For instance the google search of the term 'campo rom', i.e. Roma camp, produces as results images portraying mainly rubbish and disorder, with clouds of smoke produced by the burning of material to recover the metal. This image of the Roma as dirty and polluted is important in shaping the policies targeting them. For instance, evictions of settlements are usually justified on the basis of unhealthy living conditions (squatting is barely mobilised as a legitimising reason for an eviction) – and this also relates to a discourse of 'saving the children' from unhealthy conditions into which their parents make them live. Other

aspects that underscore this association between the Roma and the idea of impurity include, for example, the location of Roma villages: one of the Roma reception centre in Rome is built right behind the waste disposal and recycling centre of the city of Rome (and the smell in the air is almost unbearable), while another village is located really close to an incinerator of toxic waste.

Similarly for the case of Algerian migrants in the transit estates, the spatial separation of these groups can be read as an effort to maintain the French and the Parisian soil as pure. For instance Algerian migration was openly discouraged in the postwar period, as opposed to more desired migrants, i.e. European ones (Weil 2005), preferred to former colonial subjects. However, during the Algerian War, the number of Algerian migrants arriving to France intensified. Initially France tried to encourage migration of working men by building so-called foyers for single men (Bernardot 2008) but entire families started arriving and living in old and cheap rented buildings or in barracks in informal settlements. In 1967, the French Prime Minister of that time Georges Pompidou, when commenting on a proposal to introduce a tax to build housing for the migrants, stated that this proposal would have been useless as those people were nomads (Weil 2005). In the 1970s the government started taking action vis-à-vis the increasing number of people living in informal settlements in the Western and Northern peripheries of Paris by mainly adopting circulars with measures against substandard housing, mainly from a public health point of view. The solution, as mentioned above, was the creation of transit estates always in the peripheries of the city, that today have been replaced by the HLM, mainly concentrated in banlieues with highly negative reputation (Castañeda 2011). The spatial confinement of Algerian migrants has been shaped by their rejection by French governments, which kept them at the margins of the city by using policies already used in the colonies (Cohen and David 2012) and using temporary housing as a way of educating the Algerians to a sedentary and Western way of living in houses (Clavel 1982).

The pure in the making of segregation II: protecting the 'real' nomads

There is, however, another way purity shapes the urban space and processes of segregation. Indeed, this second way can be inferred by the etymology of the term segregation itself. The term segregation came from the Latin *segregare,* i.e. to separate. It has the same etymological root of the terms 'sacred', which precisely means separated, i.e. neither pure nor impure, but ambivalent. This Durkheimian notion of the sacred as untouched, for either fear of getting dirty or of dirtying it, is elaborated by Agamben (1998) in his conceptualisation of the 'homo sacer'. The sacred man for Agamben is not only excluded and rejected, but is also, in a way, protected. The figure of the sacred man, that he takes from ancient Roman law, is one who cannot be killed nor can be sacrified precisely because of the potential contamination that this person carries. It is an ambiguous position that comes to be spatially separated in a zone of indistinction (that Agamben calls the 'camp') between the pure and the impure.

The image of the homo sacer is really useful to understand the position of the Roma people in Rome. Not because of the camp as the spatialisation of the exception, which has been largely criticised by most part of the literature on the camp for dismissing agency (cf. Isin and Rygiel 2007; Ramadan 2013; Sigona 2014). But because of the notion of indistinction and ambiguity of the figure of the sacred man, and for the relevance of the camp as a threshold rather than sealed exclusion (Giaccaria and Minca 2011). Understanding the position of the Roma (both symbolically and spatially) as ambivalent enables us to understand another powerful aspect in their segregation that might have contributed to this persistence, i.e. the fact that the Roma in Rome have not been segregated only because polluting but also to preserve their alleged essence of gypsies and nomads. On the contrary, in the case of Muslim migrants to the Paris region there is no such intent of protecting any romanticised and essentialised aspects. While, of course, any form of otherness is also characterised by elements of romantic and appealing difference (Sibley 1981), these has been more formalised in the case of the Roma in Italy.

The idea of the gypsy is indeed in between stigmatisation and romanticisation. For instance Halfacree (1996) argues that before being stigmatised, the gypsies had been incorporated in a capitalist discourse on rural spaces, i.e. spaces that escape the logic of exchange, a place of *gemeinschaft*, where the gypsies live in a sort of 'rural idyll'. Also Judith Okely (1983) underscores the emergence in history of the vision of the gypsies as exotic, originally from India, with different customs, traditions, music and dances. As Halfacree, also Okely argues that the image of the gypsy as threatening is rather recent in history, while before they were mainly seen as exotic other – although still excluded. In the 1970 a discourse on nomadism developed at a European level, mainly as an alternative to racialised representations of the Roma (Simhandl 2009). In the early 1990s, the EU discourse on the Roma people changed and shifted more towards an ethnic minority discourse (Simhandl 2009). Yet, in Italy, nomadism as guiding principle and legitimisation of local policies marginalising the Roma has remained prominent until today (Però 1999; Sigona 2003; 2005).

The idea of nomadism has reified into policies and laws. The policy documents adopted towards the Romani community in the last thirty years by the city of Rome clearly reveal how the Roma have been portrayed, and therefore treated, as nomads. For instance, the title of a resolution adopted in 1993 is Regulation of Equipped Halting Camps Destined to Roma Peoples or Populations of Nomadic Origins, which might hint at the increasing dominance of the idea of nomads as guiding concept for policies on the Roma. Also, in 1986 the city of Rome created the Office for Foreigners and Nomads as part of the Department of Social Services, later renamed Nomads Office, part of the Immigration Help Desk. Apart from the brief experience of the Social Local Plan in 2002 acknowledging that the Roma are not nomads (and which has never saw the light), since 1990s most of the policy documents on the Roma mainly employ the term 'nomads'. This tendency has been confirmed in 2008 with the adoption of the Nomads Emergency Decree (Consiglio dei Ministri 2008). The fact of adopting a series of policies and bureaucratic practices for nomads produced a form of imposed mobility and uprootedness for the targeted Roma groups. Despite not nomads, the Roma have

been 'nomadized' (as defined by van Baar, 2011) in a constant circulation between nomad camps at domestic level (and sometimes also at European level) where the Roma are accommodated in caravans or Portakabins instead of houses. Indeed, the discourse of nomadism conveys an idea that the Roma will at one point leave, idea that is used to justify the lack of permanent housing policies. For instance, in 2008 the former right wing mayor of Rome, Gianni Alemanno, publicly stated during his electoral campaign that, since they are nomads, 'they should pack and leave' without staying for years in 'our neighbourhoods'[1]. While aiming to protect the nomads, the Roman administration actually confined non-nomads Roma people in persisting temporary camps. Many Roma advocacy associations and scholars identify the misinterpretation of the Roma as nomads as one of the crucial reasons for the development of this patchy and enduring accommodation system for the Roma population.

Conclusion

This paper has presented an initial investigation of the role of purity in the formation of urban closures. Although purity and is a notion that received more attention in the past (Malkki 1995; Sibley 1988), I aimed to show how it is still useful to shed light on the symbolic dimension of current forms of segregation. More precisely, I attempted to do this by bridging the literature on the purification of urban space with the literature on the camps stemming from the work of Agamben (Agamben 1998). Indeed, while in the former literature purification is seen as a process that keeps things apart, the work of Agamben points to the ambivalence of this process which produces indistinctions, rather than clear distinctions. As illustrated in the paper, adopting this integrated understanding enables us to identify some of the processes that contribute to the persisting segregation of the Roma in Rome: not only their exclusion is made with the intent to keep the city pure from the polluting presence of 'gypsies', but also with the formal goal of protecting their purity as 'real' nomads.

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1 Gianni Alemanno al Brancaccio - i campi nomadi a Roma, April 2008 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_dcdZUd3O4> Retrieved on 8/12/2013.

Needless to say that this does not aim to be an exhaustive explanation of this enduring phenomenon. There are many different factors that exacerbate this segregation, namely the political aspects of emergency measures, and the broader economic aspects of the Roma exclusion from the formal labour market – some of which I investigated elsewhere (Maestri 2014). However this paper has underscored the importance of the idea of a purified city from a 'pure' nomad in the formation of racial segregation in Rome.

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