

When National Assimilation Policies Encounter Ethnic Resilience: The Case of Western European Roma*

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1. CONSTRUCTING THE 'GYPSY' AS 'OTHER'

The Romani presence in Western Europe dates back to the early fifteenth century. Roma and Sinti encountered almost immediately hostile reactions by official authorities who labelled them as 'Gypsies' and regarded them as alien and undesirable. The ensuing rise of anti-Gypsy policies prevented the emergence of a positive image by failing to recognise their contribution to the European cultural and social landscape. In the attempt to subject so-called 'Gypsies' to state control, non-Gypsy authorities enacted a number of policies that aimed at excluding and ultimately assimilating Romani groups within mainstream European society. Such policies were based on a number of deeply engrained views and stereotypical categories whose legacy is still with us today. This is

* The terms 'Roma' (pl.) and 'Rom' (m.s.) are ethnonyms (self-definitions) used by Gypsy groups, especially in southern/Eastern Europe, while the word 'Gypsies' is a term imposed on the Roma by the non-Roma. In this study the term Gypsy is mainly used in opposition to the Roma's self-definitions; however, the word is also used to refer to Romani groups in general, since there is no umbrella term that is accepted by all Romani people. Other ethnonyms used by Gypsies are Romanichals in England, America, Australia and New Zealand, Sinti in Germany, Austria, central and northern Italy and southern France, Kalé in Spain and Manus in France.

amply testified by chronicles and written sources recording the first arrival of groups of nomadic Gypsies in Italy, Germany, France, the Netherlands and the Iberian states and, later on, in England (Fraser 1995²).

From the outset, official sources depict Roma and Sinti diversity in negative terms. Fifteenth-century chronicles from Italy are a clear example of this. For instance, in the *Chronicon Forliviense* we find the following description of a group of Gypsies who, the chronicler noted incidentally, were said to have come from India:

[In 1422] arrived in Forli some people, sent by the Emperor, who were eager to receive our faith. They arrived in Forli on August the 7th. And, as I heard, some said that they were from India. They stayed here for two days, and *were not moderate people, but [behaved] almost like wild and ferocious beasts*. There were almost two hundred of them, and were going to the Pope in Rome: men, women and children. (PT trans.)¹

Gypsies are here depicted as “immoderate people” (*gentes non multum morigeratae*), behaving almost like “beasts” and “wild animals” (*quasi bruta animalia et furentes*). This animal-like behaviour seems to be a recurrent motif in contemporary historical accounts about Gypsies. They are variously depicted as the “scum of the nation”, as people who “lived like dogs” and had no religion. A coeval text, the *Chronica Bononiensis*, described Gypsies as unclean, savage creatures, and it claims that they were closer to animals than humans (it was reported that they ate “like pigs”).

On July 18th, 1422, there came to Bologna a duke of Egypt, named duke Andrew, together with women, children and men of his country, in number about a hundred. [...] Note that they were the ugliest people ever seen. They were skinny and black, and they ate like pigs. (PT trans.)²

It is worth noticing that the anonymous author of the *Chronica* described the “skinny and black” Gypsies as the “ugliest people ever seen” (“la piu brutta genia che mai fosse in queste parti”, *ibid.*). A slightly earlier text, this time from

¹ Original text in: *Chronicon fratris Hieronymi de Forolivio*, quoted in Muratori 1723-1751, Vol. XIX (1731), 890: “Eodem millesimo [1422] venerunt Forlivium quedam gentes missae ab imperatore, cupientes recipere fidem nostram et fuerunt in Forlivium die VII. Augusto. Et, ut audivi, aliqui dicebant quod erant de India. Et steterunt hinc inde per due dies *gentes non multum morigeratae, sed quasi bruta animalia et furentes*. Et fuerunt numero quasi ducenti, et ibant versus Romam ad Papam, scilicet viri et mulieres et pargoli” (PT emphasis).

² Original text in: *Corpus Chronicorum Bononiensium*, quoted in Muratori 1723-1751, Vol. XVIII (1730), 611: “A dì 18 luglio 1422 venne in Bologna un duca di Egitto, il quale aveva nome Andrea e venne con donne, putti ed uomini del suo paese e potevano essere ben cento persone. [...] *Nota che questa era la più brutta genia, che mai fosse in queste parti. Erano magri e negri e mangiavano come porci*” (PT emphasis).

FIGURE 1
A dark-skinned Gypsy (Colocci 1899, 129)



Germany, the *Chronica Novella*, recorded the passage of a “strange, wandering horde of people” through northern Germany in 1417. According to this chronicle, these people were “very ugly” and “as black as Tartars” (Cornerus 1743, Vol. 2: col. 1225). Ten years later, the anonymous writer of the *Journal d’un bourgeois de Paris* summed up this less-than-flattering portrait by describing a group of Gypsies in the following terms:

[T]heir children – almost all of them – had their ears pierced and wore a silver ring in each ear [...]. The men were *very dark*, with curly hair; the women were *the ugliest* you ever saw and the darkest, all with scarred faces and hair as black as a horse’s tail. (*Journal d’un bourgeois de Paris (1405-49)*, 237).³

In a later text (Spelman 1626, 239), Gypsies were portrayed as “hideously black, burnt by the sun, filthy in their clothing, and dirty in all their habits” (*homines nigredine deformes, excocti sole, immundi veste, & usu rerum omnium foedi*).

Similar examples of official written records stigmatising Gypsies can be found throughout Western Europe. They contributed to establish a negative portrayal based on a range of stereotypical features that persist until today.

³ The original text reads: “[L]es enfants d’iceux [...] presque tous avaient les deux oreilles percées, et en chacune oreille un anel d’argent [...] les hommes étaient très noirs, les cheveux crépés, les plus laides femmes qu’on pût voir et les plus noires; toutes avaient le visage déplié, cheveux noirs comme la queue d’un cheval”.

The first set of features that stands out emphasises the ‘otherness’ of Gypsies’ physical appearance, marked by ‘blackness’ and ‘ugliness’. We know that, in early modern times, colour perception was associated with a complex set of symbols and popular beliefs. At the time, a direct link was established between inner qualities and outward appearances, and physical appearances were thought to be reflections of an internal state. In other words, the darkness of the Gypsies symbolised more than a physical quality: it was an indication of their dangerous and evil nature. Apparently, this is confirmed by the belief that the Gypsies descended from Ham, one of the three sons of Noah, cursed by his father and condemned to wander the earth forever. Gypsies were also accused of “disguising” themselves as pilgrims and many believed that they were “born to be thieves” (Fraser 1995²). From the start, European authorities regarded Gypsies as strangers and outsiders. They were seen as *radically different* from the local population, so different that they were thought to be closer to ‘beasts’ than other humans. The dehumanization of minority groups underlines at least two processes: on the one hand, the symbolic displacement of Gypsies from the body of European civilization; on the other hand, the use of a powerful labeling device through which the settled majority was able to establish a narrative of ethnic superiority vis-à-vis nomadic groups.

There is another unsettling feature emphasized by the non-Gypsies: the uncertainty of their origins, which gave rise to a range of divergent and often misleading ideas about their supposed homeland. This is evident in the two texts quoted above: the first one hinted at an Indian origin of the Gypsies, while the second one pointed out that they came from Egypt. Incidentally, the term ‘Gypsies’, which is still used today as an umbrella term to refer to all different Romani groups, is a contraction of the word ‘Egyptians’.

Why was it so important for the non-Gypsies to establish a precise place of origin for the Gypsies? From a sedentary perspective, a well-established geographical origin is a basic component in the formation of ethnic groups. However, Gypsies seemed to have no strong attachment and no clear memory of a specific homeland. This was regarded with great perplexity by the settled population. And – last but not least – what was unsettling for the European population were the Gypsies’ ‘peculiar’ social habits, and in particular their nomadic economic and dwelling practices. A number of occupations carried out by Gypsies, such as forging, entertaining and fortune telling, were regarded as dangerous and included among the so-called “forbidden trades”, the *negotia illicita* (Le Goff 1980, 59–60). From the sixteenth century onwards, Gypsy nomadism was in itself sufficient ground for a process of othering and punishment.

Nomadic groups of Gypsies were part of a larger group of ‘marginals’ (including day workers, beggars, itinerant monks, and pilgrims), that moved

around Europe during the Middle Ages and the early modern period. In medieval society the wandering habits of these marginal subjects was largely tolerated, and the peripatetic way of life of pilgrims and hermits was regarded as socially and culturally acceptable, as they embodied the ideal of the *homo viator* (Ladner 1967). However, within a medieval *Weltanschauung*, where the communities shaped the individuals' social identity and granted them their value, nomadism was not accepted as a way of life, but was rather perceived as a temporary, exceptional state that could only be accepted for religious motives:

in the social imagination of people of the Middle Ages, the fact of living in one place, of being rooted lastingly in the same locality and in the same community of persons, had a positive value, since people's sense of order and social security was founded on blood ties and neighborly connections. (Geremek 1990, 348)⁴

When Gypsies began to appear in Western Europe, the religious climate began to change (due to the Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation), and the attitude towards pilgrims and the wandering poor became increasingly intolerant (Geremek 1980, 71). A distinction began to emerge between the so-called 'deserving' poor (the old, the sick and so forth), who were worthy of assistance, and the 'undeserving' poor (also called "false" or "sturdy beggars" and "vagabonds") who were able to work, but instead chose to lead an unproductive way of life. The Gypsies were included in this second category and were considered as a threat to society, as they were often accused of bringing disease, criminality and social unrest.

In many respects, the fate of the Gypsies resembles that of other ethnic minorities such as Jews and Moors. In particular, both Gypsies and Jews were non-national minorities; they were a scattered, itinerant and stateless people and they both stubbornly retained their separate identities and refused to abandon their customs. Like other 'marginal' groups, the Gypsies failed to fit into the new political order. Their cultural and social habits, in particular their nomadism, were at odds with the centralising efforts of the emerging European states. It is in this context that Gypsies' diversity was emphasized and conceptualised in terms of 'deviance' from the accepted (aesthetic, social and cultural) standard norm. At this time pre-existing stereotypes and symbolic markers of the 'otherness' of Gypsies (especially those stigmatizing their primitive and canny nature) were reactivated and deployed in the legal domain, to enforce a policy of exclusion of the Gypsies from the body of the State.

⁴ This approach is still at the roots of today's immigration debate in American and European politics: see *supra* the reference to Papazoglou 2019's assessment of the legacy of the 1980s communitarism vs. the 1970s Rawls's reappraisal of liberalism in Stovall's contribution to this volume, Chap. 9: §9 (*Ed. note*).

2. FROM EXCLUSION TO ASSIMILATION: WESTERN-EUROPEAN STATE POLICIES AGAINST GYPSIES

Like other marginal groups, Gypsies were excluded from the state-building process at different levels. First, the construction of national borders was achieved through the banishment of transnational, non-territorial minorities (such as the Gypsies). Second, the creation of a unified administrative system entailed stricter control over its citizens, including their movements, economic activities and social status. And third, the rise of modern nation-states brought with it the need to introduce taxes to raise money (for the functioning of the state, the army, etc.). The Gypsies, because of their nomadic habits and activities, were able to avoid this form of centralised control. Their 'unwillingness' to fit into the new social and political order ultimately led to the outlawing of their whole way of life.

The sheer volume of anti-Gypsy measures enacted throughout Western Europe between the late fifteenth century and the eighteenth century indicates that state authorities were concerned about the geographical mobility of their Gypsy population. They were anxious to bring it under control and tried to achieve this by either forbidding them from entering European countries or charging them to leave under threat of incarceration and corporal punishment.

In Italy, a large number of decrees and legal measures against Gypsies (variously named by local authorities as 'zingani', 'Cingani' or 'Cingari') began to appear at the end of the fifteenth century. An edict issued in April 1493 under the rule of Ludovico il Moro in the State of Milan ordered them to leave immediately and threatened that they would be hanged if they refused to do so. In 1570, an edict issued in the Duchy of Modena went as far as inciting the local population to incarcerate the Cingari, to rob them and beat them. A further edict issued in Milan on 11 July 1657 referred to the Cingari as the "most dangerous people who ha[d] ever entered the state", and ordered them to leave the territory in three days' time, under pain of imprisonment for five years for men and of public flogging for women.

Extreme anti-Gypsy measures were also enacted in the Republic of Venice. For example, a resolution issued in 1558 by the Council of the Pregadi established that, "considering the evil disposition of the Gypsies, and the annoyance, damages, and manifold troubles that our faithful subjects sustain from their intercourse" (considerando la mala qualità dei Cingani, e la molestia, danni e molti disturbi, che ricevono li fedeli nostri dalla loro practica), they should be expelled at once from the territory of the Republic. Crucially, this edict established that "the said Gypsies, both men and women, found in our territories, may be with impunity slain, without the perpetrators of such murders to incur any penalty whatever"⁵.

⁵ Extract and translation of this edict taken from the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* (1), 1 (1890-91), 358-359.

FIGURE 2
 German sign warning off Gypsies
 (Archive Stadtmuseum Nördlingen)



In addition to written bans and expulsion orders, non-Gypsy authorities displayed explicit anti-Gypsy signs and visual warnings. Such warnings were placed at strategic locations such as road crossings, city gates, town halls, church doors, taverns and other public places (Opfermann 2007, 141). They usually included both an inscription and a visual representation of the punishment for criminals and transgressors, to convey more effectively their message to a non-literate readership, particularly the Gypsies.

The figure above is an example of eighteenth-century *Zigeunerwarntafel*, a visual warning aimed at preventing Gypsies, vagabonds and rogues from entering the country. The wooden panel shows gallows on which hangs a Gypsy, while in the foreground a man and a woman are being flogged. As in the case of written texts, the *Zigeunerwarntafeln* targeted Gypsies based on their ethnicity and officially outlawed their nomadic practices.

Similar anti-Gypsy warnings are still in use today. They can be observed at the entrance to urban areas and are used to demarcate so-called 'anti-Gypsy territories', that is, territories declared off-limits to the Roma by non-Gypsy authorities (Piasere 2005², 164-174).

Despite their severity, exclusionary policies failed in removing the so-called 'Gypsy problem'. In fact, the Gypsies' spatial and social marginality largely suited their socio-economic practices, which entailed the provision of goods and services to non-Gypsies in an itinerant fashion.

Once the authorities realised the ineffectiveness of their banishing methods, it became increasingly clear that a radical change in approach was necessary. This led to a major shift in official policies over the following centuries: *policies of exclusion* were gradually replaced by policies of *forced inclusion*, which ultimately aimed to assimilate the Gypsies into mainstream society. It is in this context that existing stereotypes of Gypsy primitivism were invoked once again to validate the official use of education as a tool to 'reform' and 'civilise' them.

The policies implemented by Maria Theresia of Austria were a radical attempt to apply these principles to assimilate the Gypsies. Under her rule, Gypsies were supposed to stop "behaving like Gypsies": they had to leave behind their nomadic life and their traditional occupations, together with their traditional clothes and eating habits (Mayerhofer 1988). In 1773 marriage between Gypsies was prohibited by law. They were also forbidden to speak their own language and had to adopt the language spoken in their host countries. To put it differently, Gypsies had to abandon all the 'aberrant' features that interfered with their full emancipation: in other words, what formed their ethnic identity.

These enlightenment policies were based on the premise that it was possible to reform the Gypsies by forcing them to relinquish their 'unsettled manner of life'. They were also based on the belief that any hope of improving their condition ultimately lay in their successful education, which is why young Gypsies became the focus of special educational measures. All Gypsy children were to be forcibly removed from their parents at the age of five and entrusted to peasant families who were compensated by the authorities for their services. Such measures are by no means confined to the past: the forced removal of Gypsy children from their parents continued during the twentieth century, until as recently as the 1970s, leaving a traumatic mark on the cultural memory of the Gypsies of central Europe (Tauber 2002, 108). Quite ironically, non-Gypsy authorities were doing precisely what Gypsies were traditionally accused of: stealing children.

Policies of forced sedentarisation, manual work and physical punishment signalled a change in the official attitude towards Gypsies. Clearly, compulsory sedentarisation was primarily aimed at controlling nomadic Gypsies and preventing other Gypsies from entering the country. However, the ultimate goal was to *assimilate* them into mainstream society and *suppressing* their ethnic identity altogether. In the end, such policies failed to achieve the expected result: the Gypsies did not relinquish their cultural roots. The assimilationist approach, however, forced them to hide their identity, thus 'making themselves invisible'

to non-Gypsies. Rejected by the majority, the Gypsies have been confined to 'residual' spaces at the margins of dominant society. And while in the past this position might have been fairly compatible with their nomadic way of life, it later became clear that, especially in countries such as Italy, such marginalisation would come at great social cost: the creation of a vicious circle of poverty and the factual segregation of the Roma population in 'urban ghettos'. In fact, the basic logic underlying the creation of 'Gypsy camps' ('campi nomadi') has been unveiled on several occasions: the aprioristic belief that all Romani groups are nomadic, and that therefore they need to be placed in a separate location, away from city dwellers. There is, however, a great difference between these 'nomad camps' and the encampments in the past, which were close to non-Romani villages and cities, allowing the proximity with the non-Gypsies needed to carry out services and other economic activities. The main objective of the 'camps system' is to relegate the Romani population to remote and marginal areas where inter-ethnic exchange is minimal.

3. FROM A PARADIGM OF DEVIANCE TO A PARADIGM OF RESISTANCE

Faced with the constant threat of assimilation and persecution, the Roma have nevertheless been able to preserve their way of life, adapting to their changed conditions, but ultimately retaining their cultural distinctiveness. For this reason, they have been defined as "resistance people" (Asséo 1989).

How can we account for the centuries-old resilience of the Roma? How can we explain what has been called the "puzzle of Roma persistence" (Stewart 1997b)? The resilience of the Romani people is neither mysterious nor fortuitous, but is the result of several concurring factors that need to be understood within the wider context of social relations between Gypsies and non-Gypsies.

First, there are some external factors that help to elucidate the dynamics contributing to the 'survival' of the Roma in a relentlessly hostile environment. Despite the virulence and profusion of anti-Gypsy policies enacted in Europe from the fifteenth century onwards, they ultimately failed to eradicate the Romani presence, let alone assimilate Roma and Sinti into European society. This should be seen partly as a consequence of the unsystematic, sporadic nature of these policies, but was equally a result of the refusal of local governments to allow Gypsies to settle, which gave rise to a vicious circle preventing Gypsies from pursuing their itinerant way of life while at the same time trying to prevent contact with the settled majority. Crucially however, such policies were doomed to fail because the Gypsies understandably refused to abandon their way of life and be separated from their children and families.

It has been suggested that the Roma “seemed to have survived in spite, and perhaps even *because* of persecution by ‘settled Europe’” (Quintana & Floyd 1972, 34; PT emphasis). There is some truth to this statement. Being subjected to the constant threat of assimilation can engender a sense of cultural cohesiveness and even a sense of pride in having been able to stand up and survive against all the odds. Admittedly, the Roma have no state of their own to protect them, no social and cultural capital, no diplomatic weight to exert influence in the political arena. But this does not prevent them from developing a strong sense of “moral superiority” vis-à-vis the powerful but often credulous Gaje (non-Gypsies)⁶. This has less to do with abiding to an abstract set of rules and qualities and has more to do with the performance of *Romanipe*, or Gypsiness, in everyday interactions with the non-Gypsies. Such moral superiority manifests itself in ‘doing things in the Romani way’ that immediately identifies in-group members and becomes the vehicle through which the Roma reassert their distinctiveness from the non-Gypsies. This is also conveyed and reinforced through the oral tradition, within which the Gypsy’s talent for outwitting credulous non-Gypsies appears to be a consolidated trope⁷.

Furthermore, when assessing the resilience of the Romani people, we should acknowledge internal factors, that is, factors that are inherent to their specific cultural and social system. In the case of Roma, survival is the result of ethnic strategies that have proved remarkably successful. These include their great flexibility and ability to modify their habits and cultural practices according to changing historical and social circumstances. According to ethnographic research, such characteristics are particularly evident among itinerant and peripatetic groups (Berland & Rao 2004, Gmelch 1986, Okely 1983, Berland & Salo 1986, Rao 1987).

A clear example of Roma’s adaptability can be observed in the social and economic context, where they have displayed, similarly to other peripatetics, “flexibility and sensitivity to the elements comprising the social and ecocultural environments of those communities among which they maintain themselves” (Berland & Salo 1986, 3)⁸. This has involved Romani groups becoming specialised in a variety of occupations and activities that can be generally grouped within

⁶ On Gypsies’ sense of “moral superiority” as a strategy to distinguish themselves from the dominant group, see Sutherland 1975, Okely 1983, Williams 1993, Stewart 1997a and 1997b, Gay Blasco 1999.

⁷ See, among others, the studies of Giulio Soravia and Jane Dick-Zatta in relation to oral narratives of Italian Roma and Sinti, Jelena Čvorović’s research on Serbian Roma and Diane Tong’s *Gypsy Folktales*.

⁸ Peripatetics are endogamous groups who “employ regular spatial mobility as an economic strategy” (Rao 1987, 1). They occupy a particular peripatetic niche, that is, “a demand for specialized services/goods which sedentary communities cannot, or are unwilling to support on a fulltime basis” (Berland 1987, 248).

the categories of trading, seasonal work, crafts and entertainment (Mayall 1988, Willems 1997).

Traditionally, Gypsies were blacksmiths and metal workers, artisans, musicians and horse dealers. They also took on seasonal jobs and engaged in occasional work when and where it was necessary. And, most importantly, they were able to adjust their occupational skills to the ever-changing social and economic landscape: the advent of the industrial revolution and agricultural capitalism meant that traditional trades had to be replaced by newly emerged opportunities which enabled them to retain their self-employed status.

Most of the occupations carried out by Gypsies filled an economic niche located at the margins of the dominant economy. Like other ethnic middlemen groups and itinerant traders in Medieval and early modern Europe, Roma/Gypsies filled an existing gap between supply and demand. They fulfilled a crucial function in European economy and society, providing a stimulus to the development of local industries and contributing to connecting rural communities that would have remained otherwise isolated (Mayall 1988).

The economic adaptability of the Roma/Gypsies enabled them to respond creatively to technological and economic changes without becoming entirely excluded from or assimilated into a wage- and salary-based economy. Such behaviour is analogous to the economic and social behaviour of hunting and gathering peoples whose survival depends on their ability to successfully adapt to the natural environment. It is also directly correlated to the flexible structure of their social system and the transnational, diasporic character of their communities (Toninato 2009).

As has been remarked, Roma and Sinti do not constitute just 'one people', but a widely dispersed mosaic of groups speaking different dialects of the Romani language as well as a variety of non-Romani languages, and sharing with the surrounding societies a whole range of cultural traits⁹. The fragmented nature of the Romani diaspora is further complicated by a difficult relationship with non-Gypsies and a general lack of integration in their 'host' countries¹⁰. The reason

⁹ The dispersion of the Roma is mirrored in the variety of terms and ethnonyms used by Romani groups in defining themselves. Depending on their geographical location, Gypsies call themselves *Roma* in central, southern and eastern Europe, *Romanichals* in England, the US, Australia and New Zealand, *Sinti* in Germany, Austria, central and northern Italy, and in southern France, *Kalé* in Spain, *Manuš* in France and so forth.

¹⁰ The Roma and Sinti constitute Europe's largest ethnic minority group and are the least represented and the least protected among the other European minorities. Reports commissioned by EU institutions have revealed that the Roma in the European Union suffer severe discrimination and social exclusion in at least four key areas: education, employment, housing and healthcare (European Commission 2004). The report has also revealed widespread anti-Romani racism and recurrent human rights infringements, as well as violations of civil and political rights against Romani minorities in Europe. As the report demonstrates, such violations not only occur in the new

why Roma/Gypsies managed to survive multiple displacements and persecution without the protection of a nation-state cannot be fully grasped unless we are prepared to relinquish a way of regarding identity, and national identity in particular, as inextricably associated with a nation and a territory¹¹. Against any primordialism argument, which contends that nations are original and natural phenomena, the case of non-territorial, non-state ethnic minorities such as the Roma/Gypsies shows that there is no necessary connection between a people, a territory, and a language. Theirs is an example of a deterritorialised multilingual community lacking two key aspects of the classical diaspora paradigm: a direct connection with its original homeland and “the development of a return movement that gains collective approbation” (Cohen 1997, 26).

For Roma/Gypsies, the experience of living in a diaspora appears to be both a permanent condition and a strategy of survival. On the other hand, their dispersion came about as a dynamic adaptation and a diversified response to past and ongoing changes in the social and economic environment. As already mentioned, Romani groups differ widely with respect to their pattern of settlement, their economic and cultural practices, and their language. However, despite the dispersed features of Romani communities, there are powerful centripetal forces and agents that preserve intra-group cohesion and provide them with a sense of common belonging.

In the absence of other strong forms of territorial attachment, the social role of the family is paramount. The Roma’s social structure consists of a ‘web of families’: the extended family and the nuclear family. Families provide protection, education and economic solidarity. In a context of dispersal and social fragmentation, mobility ensures that family ties and alliances between families are established and maintained. In addition, Romani groups rely on strong feelings of solidarity and cooperation among their group members. In fact, their survival depends on “the commitment of each individual and family to his fellow community members”. It is what anthropologists call an “ethics of sharing” which entails “being open to the needs of others” and helping those facing economic hardship (Stewart 1997b, 88-89).

It can be argued that the key to their resilience lies in the very diversity of Romani life (Liegeois 1986) and that the kaleidoscopic nature of Roma/Gypsy cultures has been key to their successful adaptation overtime (Lockwood 1986). Indeed, the wide dispersion of Romani groups and constant interethnic

Central and Eastern EU member-states, but also in older EU member states. The situation of the Roma in Italy is critical. Italy is known in Europe as ‘Campland’, the country of ‘camps for nomads’ (campi-nomadi) which is where many Roma are forced to live.

¹¹ For a critique of national identity as an essentialist construct see in particular Anderson 1983 and Gellner 1983.

contact enabled Romani culture and identity not simply to survive, but to thrive (Silverman 1988, Okely 1997). As Judith Okely has remarked:

[we] have in the Gypsies or the Roma a centuries-old tradition of interlocking cultures between the Gypsies and non-Gypsies variously named Gadzos or gorgios by Gypsies [...]. They are both an example of *culture in the borderlands* and of continuous meaning-making in the face of a dominant encircling system with the greater political and eco power. (Okely 2003, 153; PT emphasis)

As an example of 'culture in the borderlands', Roma/Gypsies need to continuously engage in interactions and exchanges across the ethnic boundary: from this perspective, their survival is based not on isolation and lack of contact with the dominant culture, but on boundary-crossing.

4. CONTEMPORARY RESILIENT STRATEGIES AMONG WESTERN EUROPEAN ROMA

Another key aspect of Roma/Gypsies' resilience analysed in this chapter focuses on their ability to enact a range of strategies which entail not only successful adaptation to changing historical and social circumstances, but innovation and creativity in two domains: the political and literary field.

The first evidence of Romani political mobilisation dates back to the beginning of the twentieth-century in Eastern Europe. In the period following the second World War, especially in the post-Communist period, Gypsy associations have been created all over Europe. In 1971 the First World Romani Congress (WRC) was held in London. On this occasion the congress introduced some crucial symbols of *Romanestan*, the Romani 'nation': a Romani anthem (*Djélem, Djélem/ We travelled on*) and a Romani flag. A few years later, in 1978, the International Romani Union (IRU) was established.

It is only during the past few decades, however, that Romani activists succeeded in giving rise to a coordinated international intelligentsia, whose common aims are to fight discrimination and marginalisation and to give voice to their people's claims. They intend to do so by adopting strategies for the political mobilisation of the Roma on an ethnic basis (Acton 1974 and Acton 1997, Goodwin 2004, McGarry 2010 and Klímová-Alexander 2017). In this context a Romani diaspora discourse started to emerge.

At the core of Romani diaspora discourse is the belief in the Indian origin of the Roma/Gypsies. This belief may be traced back to the late Middle Ages but gained currency only at the end of the eighteenth century and is based on striking analogies between *Romanes*, the Romani language, and Indo-Aryan languages. This linguistic evidence was used as evidence of the route taken by

the Gypsies during their migrations from India towards Europe. The idea of an 'Indian connection' survived well into the twentieth century. Today, most Romani academics and political activists uphold the notion of a Romani diaspora that originated in India and promote the diffusion of a common Romani language. This view is held in particular by the activists of the International Romani Union who argue that the Roma constitute a deterritorialised, stateless diaspora of Indian origins¹².

In 2000, during the Fifth Romani World Congress, the IRU declared that the Romani people constitute a 'non-territorial', stateless Nation. The features of the Romani Nation, a nation that 'does not want to become a state' (Acton & Klimová 2001, 216-217) differ considerably from the European paradigm of the nation-state to the point that, some argue, it stands "in dialectical opposition to the limitations of the nation state, because of its 'trans-national' character and its 'non-territoriality'" (Acton 2006, 27). In their "Declaration of Nation", IRU representatives made no territorial claims, nor did they envisage a nationalist project, but rather appealed to a principle of self-determination in formulating a demand for recognition and political representation of the Roma at the transnational level¹³.

The rise of political activism among the Roma/Gypsies fulfils a number of crucial functions. It establishes them as political actors bringing Romani issues to the forefront of the international agenda. It also enables Roma/Gypsies to regain some form of control over the discourse about their identity, meeting their need of speaking for themselves and of being recognized as a people in their own right.

The emergence of a Romani political discourse constitutes a good example of a resilient ethnic strategy based on an innovative, strategic interpretation of the transnational nature of the Romani population, and "a bold attempt to turn the fluidity in national identities throughout Europe" to their advantage (Younge 2000, 15). If properly grounded on democratic consensus and stripped of any essentialist connotations, claims for the recognition of the Roma/Gypsies as a non-territorial nation may provide them with "legal anchorage" (Pogány 2012), which is "intended to raise the political profile of Roma in international political, diplomatic and legal *fora*" (Pogány 2012, 379). In addition, such claims also complement current efforts to de-territorialise and de-nationalise minority rights and the development of a legal discourse centered on concepts of post-ethnic, post-national citizenship (Kymlicka 2007, 227).

¹² For further discussion of the notion of a Gypsy diaspora see Toninato 2009.

¹³ On the risks and paradoxes involved in Romani diasporic discourse see Willems & Lucassen 2000; Younge 2000.

Another innovative strategy through which Roma/Gypsies gained a voice in the public sphere (Hirschman 1970) while also deconstructing anti-Gypsy stereotypes and prejudices is the use of writing for literary purposes. Despite stereotypes that characterise them as people ‘without writing’, ethnographic findings show that Roma, Sinti and Travellers have developed a deep understanding of literacy (both alphabetic and non-alphabetic) and of its socio-political implications (Toninato 2014). The rise of an ‘autochthonous’ Romani written literature dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century. It comprises a wide variety of genres and is characterised by a linguistically hybrid corpus, mirroring the diasporic features of Romani communities¹⁴.

As a result of historical experience and cultural flexibility, Roma/Gypsies tend to be bilingual or multilingual, and Romani authors tend to deploy a range of multicultural skills in their literary endeavours. Their works do not merely result from adapting to a literate environment, but stem from the creative appropriation and refashioning of a literary space across multiple linguistic and semiotic codes. Writing in more than one language enables Roma writers to challenge and relativise the inter-ethnic divide. This implies a continuous manipulation of linguistic boundaries, also within the text, as can be seen in the following poem by Damian Le Bas:

[...] When I was twelve year old I wrote
 A poem about the sea, and never mentioned boats
 But I did mention ‘Gypsum’: It’s a stone, a frost-white crystal.
 What was Gypsum like? I didn’t know back then, I guessed.
 But I thought it was crystalline, and, like the sea,
 Possessed of a frosty, foamy zest (good guess, I says
 To meself, *ta-divves*- Now, today).
 So that’s what *mandi* wrote:
 ‘The shore receives its cleansing Gypsum glaze’.
 ‘This works, perhaps, a little obscurely’,
 Scrawled the *jinnapen-mush* upon the page
 In *jinnapen-mush*’s (oops, ‘a teacher’s’) *lulli* (ah: ‘red’ ink), so you would think
 He meant it very surely
 I never told him ‘Gypsum’ was a special word for me
 Though it comes from *Gypsos* (chalk, in Greek, you see)
 Especially
 Because it sounded like the English word ‘*Egyptian*’
 (And our special, shorter version, ‘*Gypsy*’)
 That refers

¹⁴ *Romanes*, a language of Sanskrit origins which bears remarkable affinities to languages spoken in contemporary India, is highly fragmented and has been influenced in the course of time by a number of European and non-European languages (Iranian languages, Greek, Romanian, German, Italian and others). This has led to the creation of not just one, but a multiplicity of Romani writing systems.

In ethnic terms
 To me, and to
 My family¹⁵.

This multilingual text can be read as an example of deterritorialisation (Deleuze & Guattari 1986) within which the poet succeeds in destabilising the major language. It does so through code-switching and an etymological word-play centred around ethnically charged hetero-definitions ('Egyptian', 'Gypsy'), which are questioned and reduced to their mere signifier. The result is a cross-lexical interplay that acts as a powerful strategy of cultural criticism.

A further textual strategy used by Romani authors to challenge 'Gypsy' stereotypes is the use of subversive mimicry (Bhabha 1994), a strategy whereby the 'colonized' apparently echoes the colonial images and practices of the colonizer while at the same time retaining their fundamental ambivalence, thus revealing the ambivalence of colonial discourse while at the same time disrupting its authority (Bhabha 1994, 88). In the context of Romani poetry, mimicry operates within hybrid texts through which the author engages with hetero-ascribed images and stereotypes and manages to invest them with a new meaning (Toninato 2004 and Toninato 2014). The poet also manages to challenge the monological structure of fictional representations of Gypsy identity, in which the 'Gypsies' point of view is always absent, by including the point of view of both the observer and the observed, thus retaining the ambivalence of the post-colonial discourse as outlined by Bhabha.

Finally, at the more general level, the emergence of a Romani literary field has played a crucial role in the process of political autonomisation of the Romani people, allowing the Romani voice to enter the public sphere despite enduring social exclusion and lack of political recognition of Romani minorities. From their marginal position, Romani writers have been able to carve out an alternative space of literary enunciation for themselves, by turning their life 'on the borders' into a site of syncretic linguistic and cultural practices that destabilize the monological and monolingual features of the dominant literary field and opens up new discursive spaces for transcultural dialogue.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Looking at the relationship between state authorities and Romani minorities from an historical perspective, we observe that, from the fifteenth century onwards, Western European states adopted policies aimed at excluding the 'Gypsies' from settled society. These measures were based on a binary logic that

¹⁵ From the unpublished poem *Words I Like* by Damian Le Bas; PT emphasis.

regarded them as 'inferior' and savages. These anti-Gypsy policies were marked by violence and culminated in the persecution, the attempted assimilation, and ultimately the marginalisation of Romani minorities throughout Europe.

The assimilationist and segregationist approach to Gypsies' difference, however, failed to achieve its objectives. In the face of relentlessly hostile attitudes, Roma and Sinti groups have shown remarkable cultural persistence, due to a number of resilient ethnic strategies. First, the dispersed character of the European Gypsy population and their flexible social structure – complemented by a strong sense of in-group solidarity – allowed them to negotiate their ethnic specificity while maintaining the Gypsy/non-Gypsy ethnic divide. Furthermore, the flexibility of their cultural and social system enabled them to actively adapt to changing socio-political circumstances without forsaking their ethnic distinctiveness.

For centuries, European societies have defined themselves in opposition to Roma (and Jews), representing them as 'the other within', or, in sociological terms, as 'internal strangers' (Simmel 1908 and Simmel 1950) whose rights to an autonomous cultural and social life have been constantly denied. To this purpose, dominant versions of 'Gypsy' identities have acted as a negative mirror of 'civilized' values, supporting the creation of a model, that of the nation-state, based on territorial closure and relying on a homogenizing, nationalizing logic. The historical evidence, however, indicates that European societies were neither homogeneous nor static, and shows that Roma and Sinti, despite being labelled as 'deviant' and a threat to the settled Europeans, were in fact engaging in a range of occupations and activities that were functional to their local economy and responded to the actual needs of settled communities. Roma/Gypsies' positive contribution to European culture is also evident in their role in preserving non-Romani folkloric and musical heritage (Cotten 1954, Vekerdi 1976, Leblon 2003, Čvorović 2010, Silverman 2012, Tong 1989). Defining Roma as a "pariah" group (Weber 1920, 13) fails to highlight the fact that Roma's marginality and social exclusion is mainly the result of historical, political and social processes imposed from the outside (Weyrauch 2001, 6) and runs the risk of overshadowing the positive (and reciprocal) influences and outcomes of Roma/non-Roma interactions. It also partakes of the dangers of viewing Roma/Gypsies as a mere projection of our age-old fear of the nomad, or as helpless victims of Western European civilization.

It is high time we acknowledged the active role of Roma and Sinti and their positive contributions to European civilization. It has been rightly observed that

the long association and intermingling with other peoples in Europe have indelibly marked their language, their ancestry, their culture and their society. After so many centuries, they have every claim to be considered 'of Europe'. They are indeed among the continent's few pan-Europeans (Fraser 1995², 9).

The diasporic feature of the Romani population and the truly transnational nature of their heritage entails that they “may well have known Europe better and more intimately than many Europeans did” (MacLaughlin 1999, 42). Until this is recognised, we will not be able to fully understand the complex historical interconnections that gave rise to the multifaceted European cultural landscape.

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