How Can a 'Nomad' be a 'Refugee'? Kosovo Roma and Labelling Policy in Italy

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ABSTRACT

Ethnic categories in Kosovo as well as in Italy have been shaped and reshaped according to public politics and local power relations. Focusing on the treatment of the Roma minority, this article examines the complexity of the relationship between labelling and policy in two different contexts: Kosovo and Italy. It highlights the impact that bureaucratic and institutional actors have on the process of identity building of the Roma/Gypsies community. Labels not only contribute actively to the definition of collective identities, but, as instruments of a political system, they express and summarize its structure. The article concludes by emphasizing that labels and policies not only play a role and, in some ways, create the objective of their action, but once they define a group of people as a community, through the allocation of resources, they actually create a community: from 'nomads' to nomads.

KEY WORDS

Gypsies / Italy / Kosovo / labelling theory / refugees / Roma

Introduction

> The Gypsy is not described as he is, but as he needs to be according to the dominant socio-political paradigm. (Liégeois, 1980: 9)

This article focuses on the complexity of the relationship between labelling and policy and on the role they both play in the building of bureaucratic identities, through which the political system manages and categorizes 'the other'. The aim is to explore, in Zetter's words (1991: 40), 'how an identity is

formed, transformed and manipulated within the context of public policy and, especially, bureaucratic practices'. Focusing on the Balkans and the Kosovo conflict, the article will also highlight how ethnicity and identity discourses are shaped and reshaped in relation to political and geopolitical projects.

Another central aim is to discuss the different elements involved in this relationship and to highlight what impact Italian bureaucratic and institutional actors in charge of Roma and refugee issues have on the process of identity-building of the Roma community. Labels not only contribute actively to the definition of collective identities, but, as instruments of a political system, they also express and summarize its structure, providing a picture of the internal dialectics and conflicts among institutional and non-institutional actors. Labels, I will point out, can be in conflict and can consequently produce conflicting out-comes, both conceptual and political. The frequent and widespread use of the label 'nomads' in Italy exemplifies this process. As soon as Kosovo Roma flee-ing from the war approached the Italian coasts, they were labelled 'nomads'. One of the consequences of this ascription was that they were not treated in the same manner as other Kosovo displaced people. How can a 'nomad' be a 'refugee'? Semantic conflicts are dramatically real in their effects and influence policies as well as our attitude towards the groups of individuals objectified by our definitions. A brief overview of Italian housing policy for Roma and Sinti neatly illustrates the circularity of the labelling process.

The paper concludes by emphasizing that labels and policies not only con-tribute to and, in some ways, create the objective of their action, but once they define a group of people as a community and consequently allocate resources to them, they actually create a community: from those labelled 'nomads' to nomads.

Defining the Gypsy: the Inner Enemy

> They are neither neighbours nor aliens. Or, rather – confusingly, disturbingly, hor-rifyingly – they are both. Neighbourly aliens. Alien neighbours. In other words, *strangers*. That is: morally distant yet physically close. (Bauman, 1990: 24)

There are several different models which describe the concept of the Stranger. The first to appear was that of Simmel (1971[1908]: 322) in 'The Sociological Significance of the Stranger', where he argues that the Stranger represents the 'union of nearness and remoteness' and is therefore a potential threat to received orthodoxies and taken-for-granted social practices.

As Simmel has noted, the dialectic between *freund* (friend) and *feind* (enemy) is a founding constituent of any nation-state. The necessity of creating the 'enemy' is a crucial factor in the making of a feeling of shared belonging, which is associated with the need for protection within the in-group.

National identity, therefore, is defined by its relation to the Other. For Bauman (1992: 687), this takes two forms: the *enemy,* who is clearly marked as

outsider and the *stranger* who is 'alien in our midst'. The latter is the more indecipherable and therefore more threatening to the integrity of the nation.

Following Bauman (1990), friends and enemies stand in opposition to each other. Their relationship is only apparently symmetrical, because it is the friends-group that defines the enemy and controls its classification and assignment. The two opponents are subjected to the same principle of structuration and knowledge that makes the world intelligible. The stranger, on the other hand, calls the bluff of this 'cosy antagonism', which pretends to provide a complete *mappa mundi*, including all differences and leaving nothing outside itself. Being at the same time both inside and outside, near and far, the stranger breaks the archetypal (binary) opposition, but without ever constituting a third term and without leaving room for any form of superior synthesis.

Coming to the *Gypsy*, (the italics stresses the heteronymous character of the definition and its categorical meaning), he personifies the *inner enemy*. The *Gypsy* appears, therefore, as a social construction grounded in the differential capacity of social groups to impose official labels. The truthfulness, weirdness or improbability of the construction are all minor details.[1]

According to Okeley (1983: 38), 'in every continent there are people classed as, or similar to Gypsies. In every continent non-Gypsies have notions about them and encounters with them'. The otherness of the Gypsy thus can be configured as in the middle between the enemy and the stranger, as defined by Bauman. The Gypsy is an enemy, but living within the dominant society. He is the one that assumes, despite his proximity, various shapes according to the political expediency of the majority. A key tool for preserving this situation is the physical separation of the Gypsies from the mainstream society, which is obtained in Italy, as I will point out later, through the building of camps.

The archetypal value of the Gypsy in European culture and society seems to be supported also by the origin itself of the heteronymous '*zingari*'. The generally accepted etymology of the Italian '*zingari*' and its equivalents in other European languages (*Tsiganes*, *Zigeuner*, *Cigani*, *Zigenare* and so on), indeed, dates them back to *athiganoi*, the name of a heretic Gnostic-Manichean sect of the seventh century that spread in western Anatolia. The sect name appears to stem from the ancient Greek *thinganein* ('to finger-touch'), meaning 'untouchable'.[2] Hence, more than any ethnic connotation, it is the untouchableness which seems to distinguish and characterize Roma people since the time of their arrival in Italy; the fact of being, at the same time, both intimate and separate.

In the refugee field, Wong (1991: 152) has developed the concept of the Stranger in the context of refugee identity and adaptation. The Stranger is 'a shift away', she argues, 'from the socio-psychical characteristics of the migrant in the direction of the nature of the encounter engendered by the circumstances of political migration'. This approach has been further developed by Griffiths (2002: 17), who suggests that:

> refugees (along with a spectrum of other migration categories) may be said to exist between two sets of social relations but not to be exclusively defined by one or the

other. In this respect, the figure of the Stranger neatly codifies the experiential ambiguity which may be commonplace amongst refugees.

Following these arguments, the Kosovo Roma represent, therefore, a double threat in being both Gypsies and refugees. This ambiguity makes it even more difficult for those who exercise power to label and deal with them.

Kosovo: the Good, the Bad, the Ugly[3]

The war in Kosovo has had many narratives: the purpose of this section is not to suggest a new or an alternative one. Instead, I will try to trace a brief portrait of the 'unknown' Kosovans and to highlight those aspects that seem to characterize their presence in the region.

The attempt to deny Roma identity is neither a contemporary prerogative of the West, nor peculiar to it. In Kosovo both Serbs and Albanians have denied, hidden, forcedly removed and then recalled the Roma whenever required by their political needs. This process, which aimed to deny Roma identity and the Roma community as a political subject, did not start with the war: it was a rooted and methodical public policy and practice which was developed to handle Kosovo inter-ethnic relations.

As Galjus notes (1999), Turks, Serbs and Albanians working in former socialist or communist administrative departments in Kosovo not only used to enter 'official' Albanian and Turkish-sounding family names in registers of births; but they also used to manufacture the names of almost all registered Roma citizens.

Generally, it was not simply a matter of using the Roma for the purpose of creating more Turks, Albanians, or today's old-fashioned Yugoslavs. The aim was to attack the Roma in order to break down their identity in the region, dividing Roma families in the same way as the non-Roma families were divided by the daily creation of further nations and nationalities within Kosovo.

One of the most effective political games which was intended to destroy Roma identity occurred in Prishtina in October 1990, when the inaugural meeting of the Association of Egyptians of Kosovo was held. The principal goal of the newly constituted association was to watch over their national identity and, in particular, to protect it from Albanianization, a process to which its members had been subject over the years. The Yugoslav government and press supported the initiative and the Egyptians gained a certain degree of official recognition. In the 1991 census it appeared that there were about 100,000 'Egyptians' in Kosovo.

Besides the 'creation' of the so-called Egyptians, which can be traced to a willingness on the part of the authorities to both split and reduce the number of Roma, the Milosevic government enticed quite a few Roma to join its party and championed them as Roma representatives.

From the 1960s, the ethnic and national communities' role in the proclaimed 'brotherhood and unity' of Yugoslavia was based on the results of

periodically taken censuses. They provided the 'ethnic keys' to the allocation of leading administrative positions, especially to regional and local levels of the state administration. This was implemented by creating ethnic quotas for manipulating resources such as jobs, scholarships, apartments or key positions in the administration, which were then proportionally divided among different nations and nationalities, depending on their individual national percentage.

The Roma adapted and consequently identified themselves with the dominant Turkish–Albanian culture. In censuses most Roma were registered as Albanians. Since 1990 the appearance of the Yugoslavian 'Egyptians' has partially interrupted this process.

Labels at War

In August 1999, during a brief visit to Sarajevo, President Clinton surveyed the result of Western statecraft in the Balkans and pronounced himself satisfied. 'Across most central and south-eastern Europe', he was reported to declare, 'the progress of open societies and open markets has exceeded our most optimistic hopes'. As Bacevich (1999: 34) has argued:

> ... with little sign of democracy, tolerance or respect for human rights, with one NATO army of occupation propping up the precarious partition of Bosnia and a second bearing witness to the ethnic cleansing of Serbs by vengeful Kosovo Albanians, such a rosy assessment may seem misplaced.

Clinton was just telling his particular truth, 'the one that most Americans happily endorsed'. As Mertus (1999) makes clear in her work on Kosovo myths and truths, Clinton's myth-making forms part of a longstanding Balkan tradition.

The Kosovo conflict, viewed from the perspective of the Roma minority, unveils the trick behind the so-labelled *humanitarian wars*. The Roma can be regarded as one of the paradoxes of the NATO humanitarism. Despite the massive presence of Western journalists in the region, very few people were interested in understanding who the others were: those who were neither Serbs nor Albanians (see Peric and Demirovski, 2000: 83–96). They were the forgotten Kosovans, those who were denied the right to be recognized as victims. As it was difficult to label them, to find a collocation for them within the dichotomy good–bad – Albanians–Serbs, their existence was denied *tout court*. According to Kiuranov:

> The international media packaged NATO's attack on Yugoslavia as an armed humanitarian intervention on behalf of an oppressed minority. This attitude would suggest a heightened interest in everything local that had to do with human rights violations, especially related to ethnicity. Nothing of the sort occurred. The 'ethnic' interest went only as far as covering the cleansing of ethnic Albanians from Kosovo. (1999: 57–8)

The number of Roma who fled from the violence-affected province to other parts of Serbia is estimated to be in the thousands. Throughout the Kosovo crisis, the

Roma have been rejected and harassed by both Serbs and Albanians. They have been treated as second-class refugees among the Kosovo Albanians and pushed back to Kosovo by Serb authorities after the end of the bombing, when they were fleeing towards Serbia in order to escape the rage of the returning Albanians. They were forced to choose a side in a conflict in which there was no Roma side (Cahn and Peric, 1999).

As a result of the Kosovo war, the weakest ethnic group in the region became even weaker. Efforts by international troops at protecting the fundamental rights of Roma were risible (see Human Rights Watch, 1999; OSCE, Council of Europe, 1999). The media covered the 'third way' of Kosovo refugees more as a local curiosity than as a human rights catastrophe.

> Obscure ethnic idiosyncrasies replaced the clear military and political reasoning. The object was to look for the original causes, the 'reasons' for Albanian abuses of Roma. (Kiuranov, 1999)

During the Kosovo crisis, the international community seems to have treated the Roma no better than the macro-societies of the states in which they currently live. That treatment is marked by a lack of opportunities for Roma to make themselves heard in the formulation of national policies affecting them and to participate in the public life of their state administration and the judiciary; racist violence and high levels of negative prejudice and denial on the part of respective macro-societies.

'Nomads' in Italy

Conflicting labels: nomads or refugees?

In July 1999, in a talk show on the Kosovo conflict, an army general was questioned about the nature of the new flow of displaced people from Kosovo. He replied, warning the Italian audience: 'On those boats', he said, 'there are bogus refugees who want to take advantage of our generosity. They pretend to be Kosovans but they are nomads!'

The General's warning sums up well the Italian approach to Roma people. As Szente (1997: 51) has noted:

> In Italy, the issue of Roma is reduced to an issue of nomads. This means that the question that the wider populace, the authorities and most of the activists dealing with Roma alike constantly pose themselves is 'how to deal with this socially un-adapted, nomadic population whose traditional, indigenous lifestyle is incompatible with conditions set by a modern, European society'.

For the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC, 2000: 12) the 'nomad' theory 'is used time and again as the justification for excluding the Roma from the responsibility for decision-making normally afforded adult human beings. I may suggest two more points implied in the general's statement. Firstly, it is implied that the Roma, being nomads, cannot be refugees due to some sort of

structural or logical consideration. Following this 'logic', I would argue that the term 'nomad' implies, by definition, being without a homeland, or a stateless people of no fixed abode. If that is the case, how can nomads be refugees, given that the idea of refugeehood is linked to the forced migration from one's own home?

The second element that seems to emerge from the army official's statement is a sort of unquestionable truth that all TV viewers would glean: the fact that nomads are liars. It is clear that the same old stereotypes are in operation. But what does not seem to be taken into sufficient consideration in Italy is the linkage of these stereotypes to public policy and practice.

In roughly the same period as the talk show, the Italian Minister of the Interior dispatched a note to all local police divisions and border checkpoints, stating that the Prime Minister's Decree 'Extraordinary Measures for the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia's Citizens' Reception' was no longer applicable due to the fact that the war was officially over.

It is estimated that about 10,000 Roma arrived in Italy during the spring/summer of 1999. Most Roma who fled from war and persecution in the Balkans possess no legal status in Italy. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI, 2002) report says they 'have benefited comparatively less than other groups from the various opportunities for regularization'.

About one-third of the overall Roma and Sinti population of Italy – including both Italian citizens (predominantly Sinti) and non-Italian citizens – currently live in authorized or unauthorized camps separated from mainstream Italian society. As reported by ECRI (2002) recently:

> … this situation of practical segregation of Roma/Gypsies in Italy appears to reflect a general approach of the Italian authorities which tend to consider Roma as nomads and wanting to live in camps. The label 'nomads' is applied indiscriminately to the whole Roma and Sinti population, without any distinction made between Italian citizens and foreigners (mostly war refugees).

Labels in Practice

The circularity of the relationship between label and legislation has been pointed out by the French sociologist Liégeois. He argues that:

> Legislation, for its effects, contributes to feed and reinforce those aspects of the image, which are indispensable to itself. Legislation makes the gypsy live in instability and then it says he is unstable, it makes him live in uncertainty and out of balance and then it says he is unbalanced. The law feeds itself with the image. The image helps to rationalize it. The image is, then, re-strengthened by it. (1980: 28)

Art. 1.3 of the Regional Law of Lombardy (299/89) states: 'We define as nomads those who belong to ethnic groups, traditionally nomads and semi-nomads'.

By custom Roma and Sinti issues are the responsibility of regional authorities. However, since the early 1980s, one province and ten out of 20 regions have passed laws regarding them. Local authorities haphazardly attempt to

regulate what happens in the rest of the country. A key role is played both locally and nationally by non-governmental organizations and charities which, in many cases, act as Roma representatives. An unintended outcome of such fragmentation of policies and practices is the difficulty for the Roma to be politically organized and to have their requests heard.

The regional laws – 'in defence of Gypsies', as their titles state – solemnly guarantee the right of 'nomadism'. Each law defines its target group in a slightly different way. There are *nomads*, *Rom*, *Rom and Sinti*, *zingari*. Despite this variety, all laws agree with the measures for achieving their aim: building camps.

Italian policy has been condemned by several international agencies in the last few years. In 1999 the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD, 1999) expressed concern 'at the situation of many Roma who, ineligible for public housing, live in camps outside major Italian cities' and stated that:

> ... in addition to a frequent lack of basic facilities, the housing of Roma in such camps leads not only to a physical segregation of the Roma community from Italian society, but a political, economic and cultural isolation as well.

The segregation of Roma and Sinti in camps can be regarded as a key instrument to keep them as 'enemies', not 'strangers'. The stranger, because of his proximity, would imply several problems of building relationships and renegotiating identities, while the enemy can be easily controlled and manipulated by the in-group.

As a consequence of their isolation, Roma do not exist as individuals for the Italian public but only as stereotypes. *Mainstream* Italians (the connotation serves to distinguish them from those such as the Sinti who, although Italians, are not treated as such) never refer to them as individuals but always as a group. A major outcome of Italian housing policy is the fact that many Roma have effectively been forced to live out the romantic, but repressive, projections of Italians.

Analysing the impact of housing policy on refugee adaptation strategy in Cyprus, Zetter (1991: 45) argues that 'labels may not only be the consequence of, but also the cause of further policy development, institutional activities and demands by the labelled group'. Moreover, he points out that one unintended outcome of this process is that refugees may themselves mobilize on the basis of their ascribed identity, perpetuating dependency while at the same time seeking to challenge it.

Labels, I would suggest, can be regarded as an expression of the Foucauldian *régime of truth*. 'The truth', Foucault (1998: 133) argues, 'is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it and to effects of power which induce and which extend it'. Taking these arguments further, I would argue that placing people within camps, thus physically segregating them, serves to reinforce and legitimate the public image of Roma. In this respect it is interesting to highlight how public opinion on Roma is based on merely a third of them, those living in camps. The corollary of this process is that this distorted image and the public practice and policy that takes it as a

model, helps to build Roma identity, in turn shaping Roma attitudes, behaviour and demands towards the majority.

However, the situation of Kosovo Roma can be regarded as even more complex and difficult. Their vulnerability was increased by the lack of a proper national asylum seeker and refugee reception system. Upon reaching Italy, the only possibility of survival they were given was to find support from their relatives and friends, most of whom were living in camps around the major cities. The only way to live in Italy, for them, was to become 'nomads'.

Some conclusions

As I have shown in this article, ethnic categories in Kosovo as well as in Italy have been shaped and reshaped according to public politics and local power relations. In Kosovo, the ethnicization of the public administration led to the co-optation of the Roma within the main minorities. The success of this policy had, as side-effects, the fragmentation of Roma identity and, consequently, the impossibility for the Roma minority to legitimate itself as a political actor. But, as the war events made evident, once the assimilation of the Roma was no longer crucial, due to the break-up of the Yugoslav system, the imposed ethnic labels collapsed and they returned to being simply Roma, harassed and vexed by both Serbians and Albanians.

The shift of focus from Kosovo to Italy has given me the opportunity to observe how the Roma adapt to changing legal and cultural contexts. Labels constitute, for those labelled as well as for those who label, the conceptual framework in which one's own possibility of action in the given society lies. They are the key instruments used by the majority to deal with and rationalize those perceived as strangers. And, at the same time, they trace the boundaries within which those labelled can play the political game and build their demands and their chance of social promotion.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1   'To an external invention of gypsies based on stigma, nevertheless, corresponds an internal construction, or an unarticulated ensemble of internal constructions, based on the sense of belonging, of sharing common linguistic and cultural codes. Roma identity, in turn, builds itself on the invention of *gadje*, the non-gypsies' (Piasere, 1999).

2   Discussed, for example, in Groome (1899: *xxii–xxiii*) and Starr (1936). This
     etymology has been questioned by some researchers (see Soulis, 1961: 146):
     however, that it has been considered reliable for more than a century is, per se,
     a relevant fact.

3   The title of the famous spaghetti western film, directed by Sergio Leone in
     1966, has been quoted in the heading of this section because it seems to sum
     up the Kosovo situation, as it was portrayed by the Western media during the
     conflict. Their coverage systematically denied the existence of one of the actors
     on the Kosovo stage, the ugly one. Of course, the bad and the good were
     Serbians and Albanians, not necessarily in this order, as Europe and the USA's
     earlier friendship with Milosevic suggests; but who exactly is the ugly one is
     easily understood: the Roma.

     A further motivation for quoting Leone's film lies at a different level, which
     takes me back to Bauman's connotation of the Stranger as irreducible to the
     binary opposition friend–enemy. Whilst Albanians and Serbs were enemies,
     being therefore logically homogenous (the Good and the Bad), the Roma,
     although physically right in the midst of the action, were not part of the oppo-
     sition, just as ugliness is not categorically comparable with goodness or
     badness.

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