

How to empower gypsies? An ethnographic study.

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Abstract

The work focuses on the case of the nomad camp of Palermo, in south Italy, where three groups of “Gypsies” live since twenty-five years, in condition of ghetto. This camp constitutes a world out of the city, better an encompassed microcosm, with sporadic contact with citizenship or public administration, except for voluntaries. This means that there are not interrelations between the camp and the rest of the external space. On the contrary, for the so called host society, the three different groups represent a generic nebulous whole, confined in a green area, surrounded by a high wall. Don’t see them signifies don’t care about them, about their living conditions, about their culture and about their identity. The only interaction between “them” and “us” happens when Romani women exit every morning from the camp and cross the municipal streets: children roam alone, asking for food, some little boy is disguised as a girl in order to provoke more compassion on passing people; young gypsies, instead, prefer traffic lights for begging charity. As known, in local people imagery there is a lot of ethnocentric prejudice, especially in term of marginality and xenophobia. Commonly autochthons think that their occidental urban space is invaded by this unpleasant microcosm that must stay in its boundaries. Inside this ethnic framework, I hypothesize a social intervention through the empowerment approach (Moreno, 2009) and the “street level bureaucracy” (Lipski, 1980) in order to gain a first form of social security cushion in the long way for social inclusion.

Key Words: Roma studies, Gypsies’ empowerment, community psychology.

1. The case-study of Palermo

As in the case of most big cities, Palermo (Italy) has had to tackle the continuous rise in illegal immigration. The Roma/Gypsies add up to a small slice of these immigrants, often leading an irregular existence in tough conditions, and representing the most neglected group in the city. With their children often simply being dismissed as smelly and dirty, it goes without saying that it is difficult to steer clear of racism and marginalisation. Working

with Roma people is not easy: so you could summarize, at times, the spirit of many social workers who deal with Roma community; is often a delicate balancing act in which the construction of the trust is the real challenge. A volunteer, one day, told me that “The Roma, if they can, sooner or later give you a damn”! The truth is that they represent an ethnic minority that has historically been so oppressed and persecuted to the point that they acquired a strong spirit of survival. Elements and strategies that serve them to “adapt” in the host society in which they are guests.

The Roma settlement of Palermo is located in a part of the natural park of the Favorita (the “Real Parco della Favorita” desired by Ferdinand III of Bourbon at the end of 1700), the slopes of Monte Pellegrino, both declared natural reserve since 1995. In this camp three communities cohabited: Kosovars of Muslim religion, the Christian Orthodox Serbs and the Christian Orthodox Montenegrins who leaved the city in September 2008. All families can be considered settled for about 20 years, carrying on only a seasonal nomadism, tied to specific events such as baptisms, circumcisions, weddings, funerals, religious feasts etc., during which the families are reunited. The conditions of degradation, due to environmental, social and family in the war that convulsed the Balkans (Kosovo and Serbia), represent the humus of the departure of Roma communities in Palermo. They live within the same ghetto in three neighbouring areas, well differentiated from each other, respectively inhabited by Muslims of Kosovo, Serbian Orthodox Serbs and Montenegrins. These groups, among which there are cultural and religious differences, coexist more or less peacefully for about 20 years in conditions of extreme environmental degradation in the absence of the most basic structural and social services. Muslims live in little houses with a single elevation, built with bricks, with cover plates or anything else that is useful; Orthodox Christians, however, both Serbs and Montenegrins, live in shacks made of wood, a sloping roof, raised the soil by means of steps. In both types of houses, there is a unique environment, maximum two, with essential furniture, most of the time of recovery and which are concentrated in the beds, kitchen and living room.

For many families, the toilet is nonexistent, as the sewerage system. Therefore, many Roma are ill-suited for outdoor latrines, usually made of recycled material behind the booths, but some small makeshift septic for exclusive family use. The use of water depends on the delivery of the five silos located in the municipal area, from which then the water is collected in bowls or small tanks near the houses. To heat the water they use wood stoves. Upon disposition of the Mayor, in the ‘90s, an ordinance provided for the distribution of the principle services: electricity, water, urban transport, sanitation and epidemiological control of the environment (disinfection, vaccination of children, etc.). The camp, even today, it’s all been a crossroads of power cables that get through the *drustvo*, that is the court on which

children play games and all the members have most of the daily relationship dynamics. This official act is the only one which regulates, in some way, the use of services by the Gypsies. Since the early '90s was not deliberated any other act and the municipalities that have succeeded have delegated almost completely the Roma issue to a group of social promotion in Palermo; in brief, it echoes the demands of Roma or it supports their unstable and difficult processes of social inclusion. During the four year of research, the justification for such an absence of public administration was the illegality of the settlement and the inability to proceed on an area subject to constraint landscape. So the Roma issue has never come back and is currently on the agenda of local policy makers, except the order of 12/02/99 ("Urgent measures and postponed for the elimination of serious health conditions in the gypsy camp of Favorita").

2. Work with the Roma community: between practices and intervention strategies

In the camp of Palermo you can define "community" two ethnic groups, namely Roma Cergara and that Montenegrins Serbs Roma. The first, consisting of about 60-70 members, has the characteristics of a real in-group, self and bound by strong kinship ties. This is also confirmed by the horseshoe arrangement of wooden barracks, where the *drustvo* (the courtyard, the pitch) is a place of meeting, exchange relationships and of participation. If a member wants to hide or not share space with others, the possible option is to not sit with the other components, or to withdraw at home or, again, leave the ghetto to immerse himself in the town of Gage (i.e. not Rom).

This profile, however, is not applicable to Roma Xoraxané Muslims living within the camp. They number about 300, with a significant presence of children. Rather than membership is appropriate to speak of group-ship, since they are an aggregate of small groups among themselves according to the proximity of housing which, of course, is not accidental but the result of a precisely defined choice. The sense of community arises among the members of a subgroup and not in the totality of Muslims. Thus, the relational dynamics take place within more backyards and moving from one to another involves a metaphorical "enter" or "exit" from the context of its *bari familia* (the extended family) in the context of other families. The profile and the declaration of membership clearly emerges when the Roma in all three communities constitute a united and cohesive group against the city. Generally, all Gypsies declare their membership of a supra-category, which is the "Roma people", without geographical or temporal boundaries.

From a preliminary analysis, it is clear that we can focus the predominant issue of what I call the "Roma system". Because of the significantly disadvantaged socio-economic conditions and a low projection of life for the future, the Roma have developed a high level of adaptation

(coping) and have also set up a vicious system of welfare fed by the host society, for basic necessities and more. As known, this system predominates and it always stands out than the way to empowerment. This, in fact, needs time and support in the boot process and strengthened, but often, the emergence of the daily also forces the most willing ones to fall back on the livelihoods of almost total dependence on others. Michael Alexander (2004) developed a pattern of host-stranger relation, that is an interesting theoretical framework proposed; after studying in detail various local action plans towards immigrants in many cities, he has refined two methodological tools applicable to any context, in order to assess the feasibility and the possible effectiveness of local policies.

Labour migrant settlement requires more than just “problem solving” in areas such housing or the job market. It often requires a redefinition of the nature of the city as a local society, based on varying attitudes towards the presence of these Strangers. The local authority may regard labour migrants as a passing phenomenon best ignored, as a threat to stability, or as an opportunity for change in neighbourhoods or in the city as a whole (...). These attitudes and assumptions are expressed by local authorities in often seemingly disconnected such as neighbourhood renewal, vocational training and provision of municipal services. Despite this complexity, I posit that these municipal attitudes or assumptions towards these Strangers (guest-worker migrants turned ethnic minorities) are an important variable in local policymaking towards migrants.¹

According to Alexander, we can distinguish two ordering schemes: *policy domains* and *policy alternatives*. The first cover four thematic areas: legal-political, socio-economic, cultural-religious and spatial. The *legal-political domain* indicates the immigrants or ethnic minorities inclusion in the town. Specifically, it provides migrants’ civic status, consultative structures for migrants and the municipality’s relationship to migrant associations and mobilization. The *socio-economic domain* includes a greater number of local policy areas, such as social services, education and the integration in the labour market. The *cultural-religious domain* concerns policies related to the recognition of the migrants’ otherness. Unfortunately the attitude of local authorities against ethnic minorities, generally ranges from abandonment to despair and, sometimes, to the support. Finally, the *spatial domain* development concerns housing policies and symbolic use of urban space (i.e. mosques).

The second ordering scheme focuses on five types of policy reaction each expressing different attitude or intervention of local municipality, within these four coordinates, towards the migrants. This intersection gives rise to: the *transient* attitude, characterised by non-policy towards migrants; the *guest-worker* attitude, characterised by short-term solutions, in which the presence of the migrant population is acknowledged but considered temporary; the *assimilationist* attitude, immigration is a permanent phenomenon, but the diversity will eventually disappear, discouraging public displays of ethnic and religious difference; the *pluralist* attitude, the otherness of immigrants is recognized, thus ethnicity is considered a positive factor of integration for migrant inclusion and for the city considered as a whole; the empowerment of communities is a goal attained through a process of simultaneous synergy between social actors and native hosts; the *intercultural* attitude, recorded in the last ten days, without regressing in the assimilationist one, the intercultural vision of inclusion stresses the need for the common growth of a multiethnic city. It represents a reaction to pluralist policies, whose risk is to overemphasize the ethnic-communitarian element, perpetuating stigmatisation and segregation.

During the four year of participatory observation, I applied Alexander's model in order to analyse the Roma people condition. After a set of qualitative interviews, I noted that local municipality preferred to adopt a mix between transient and guest worker attitude. In fact, we must underline the important role assumed by the operators of services dedicated to the migrant population. They have to mediate between the institutional arrangements and migrants' multiform needs in their specificity. So, their function is crucial and interpretative.² They are real "social entrepreneurs" (Ambrosini, 2005a), to be understood not only as a responsible for third sector initiatives, but a wider category of players able to move in finding a balance between public service and business logic, between solidarity and professional ethics. Another concept closely connected, in this regard, is that of "street-level bureaucracy" that is the enlargement of that effort and openness of inclusive policies, through the discretionary classification of cases and application choices. According to this hypothesis, operators can operate by applying discretion, interpretive abilities and by reducing the authoritarian profile (Lipsky, 1980). The "immigration practitioners", therefore, form a community capable of providing first, «a network of support and a point of reference for the migrant (bewildered by definition) and the other a sort of "social shock absorber" which contributes to a more fluid and less confrontational insertion of foreign nationals in our social and economic fabric».³ In the specific case of the city of Palermo, as well as other Italian cities, it must be stressed that the nomadism no longer characterizes Roma communities. Another element of considerable importance is that the social inclusion of Roma can not be treated uniquely: we need to analyze not

only the group membership, but the concrete context in which they move. The European Union has defined the Roma People as a priority for action, in defining approaches, policies and lines of financing. We must conceive inclusive practices, starting from an inventory of their needs and their responsibilities by initiating the communities available at job placement and housing (in fact, many areas today are in sad places in the suburbs, near the landfill of waste). Meanwhile, representatives of the community (respecting their hierarchical structure), should be arranged for the right to citizenship accompanied by the duties of any citizen resident: compliance with laws, denial of the theft and of begging as a means of livelihood.

3. The social work

To better understand who takes care of the Gypsies in Palermo I have chosen the metaphor of the vortex. Many entities, public or private organizations and volunteers whirl round the camp, who represent a special reference for members of Roma communities. Of course, a specific role must be recognized to the Social Service Office for the Children (USSM) which since 1993 is coordinating a table of interinstitutional cooperation. From qualitative interviews conducted with some social workers, a lot of interesting points merged regarding the relationship between women doctors or social workers and Roma women. Confirming the theoretical points first mentioned, the question arose of networking between agencies/public services and tackle professional tasks:

Here we are dealing with a special type of patients, with many problems, how can you not bother? ... Through access to Roma camp, twice a week, we have obviously created a relationship of trust between the Roma and us, not only of a medical or preventive kind... (Woman, Doctor. Palermo Immigrants and Travellers Ambulatory).

Doctors or nurses who attend the camp become an interface, in turn, to institutions. The concept of prevention and medical care is not entirely clear yet for Roma women but persons interviewed say it is important that there is an active request and participated by the Roma.

To define the *community profile*, psychologists usually identify strong and weak points of a community. In my research, I adopted this method. What aroused from local stakeholders is very notable. According to them, Gypsies' strength is this chameleon-like ability to receive anyone who come to the camp. They are basically very open and less hostile than the natives. Generally there is no trouble in being accepted by Gypsies. In the ghetto, they have the ability to interplay between inside and out. Another strong point is the great capacity to tolerate frustration: especially the

extended family is the instrument through which they can overcome logistical and economic difficulties. For another social operator, the Roma's toughness represents a strong point: in fact, despite all the vicissitudes and obstructions, they stayed behind as well they are able to achieve small livelihoods, such as carpentry. They have a particularly strong sense of family: their children are loved and not – as people think in general – exploited for begging. They also have an ancient culture, rich of upholding traditions. All respondents stressed the important role played by women within communities and in managing relationships with operators. Over time, in fact, the relationship of trust between the parties was enriched by female complicity. The aggregating power of women within the family has pulled men to be involved in a process, albeit slow, of self-awareness.

Regarding weak points, in the camp there are difficulties in putting together families from different ethnic groups. This tends to exacerbate the operator and create deadlock. Roma are often passive. They have a basic sluggishness, which leads them to be very slow, to be fed in everything they do, without having a stimulus of revenge, pride, perhaps because there are no transmitted traditions or professionalism. The Roma guys, for example, have not what is the origin of their fathers and they tend to lose their traditional belonging. According to a social assistant, the Roma community has the weakness to be little known by citizenship, rather they are known only through stereotypes also fed if they're going to beg or do not send their children to school. Then, in assuming Gypsies at job there are any suspicions; they do not have capital behind them to start small businesses or work, perhaps, in some cases not even have skills; maybe they are not aware of how start a work may be important for their dignity and their promotion.

After the ethnographic recognition of Roma communities, the following step consisted in defining a participatory action research in order to gain the general goal that is the Roma community growth or empowerment. For this reason, I preferred the action-reflection-action model defined by Montero (2009), whose purpose is to link community identity with social construction of citizenship within communities. I noted that in Palermo camp this phase has been yet conducted by social operators and volunteers with small synergy between Gypsies, thus to not enhance the needed metacognitive processes. As known, the empowerment route must allow the community to «increase the individual and group capacity of managing their lives in recognition and awareness of own resources».⁴ To turn values into practice, my proposal is to enable actively the community and to focus on how perceive this aim. As many authors noted, there are some elements to point out to gain intervention policies with Gypsies: coordination between private and social institutions, both in the planning and the subsequent implementation of interventions hypothesized; involvement of Roma groups in the planning and mediations through evaluated forms, taking into account

the specificities of each group. As often happens, even about housing, gypsies are rarely consulted: the non-Gypsies agree with their interpretation and own criteria of judging and the needs they are undeniably different; searching for a confrontation with the resident population, aware that the realization of a field and the arrival of a group of Roma leads to problems that are getting worse if not well managed with information and a constant accompaniment to the knowledge of these people. The conflicts must be prevented; significance for institutions to act in a serious reflection on Gypsy housing which can not be identified with a simple camp (diversification of dwelling Gypsies). Unfortunately, at present, the camp is often expressed as the only solution; we must have found some criteria for its implementation: to avoid mega-fields (more expensive, less comfortable and effective, less manageable), to pay attention to ethnic groups and family members, to avoid the pattern camping (common spaces and services), to provide for the individualization of utilities for its management.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be noted that the accompaniment is a key element in the design process of empowerment. A Roma camp, in fact, is not only made of sewer but most of relations within it and with the urban planning. Encouraging respect of diversity and process of integration takes time and care. The care, patient and sustained over time, is now almost entirely left to the individuals or no-profit agencies; it is often referred to as a mode of intervention by institutions or provides for reduced and intermittent time. The accompanying project consists in continuously supporting the integration processes acting on several fronts, always considering the final awakening of the community: work with children (schooling, animation, integration with peers), with adults (regularization, business orientation), with women (literacy, accompanying services) but also with the territorial context, school, eventual parish, all the people interacting with the camp. Deepening, paternalism is not the right intervention: working with migrants, particularly with Roma people, signifies to involve them in a process of ideation, reflection and progressive realization of strategic action. Very often the principle difficult is to face the fragmentation of the community; at the beginning, to involve all the families is necessary but unrealistic. The best tool is a short, clear and incisive communication. Jealousy could often be a reaction, which takes to adopt the strategy of resistance. While dealing the participatory process, the social operators will assist to a slow change in beliefs, self-representation and daily life, inducted by reflection and awakening. At this moment, the individuals who first achieved good results – in my case-study, Roma Xoraxane founded “Pralipè”, a socio-cultural association – will turn into a positive vector inside the community. Today, managing otherness is a very important matter for all social and human

sciences; as argued, Roma enrolment, Roma participation and Roma consciousness could happen only with a concrete and truth bridging with institutions (at every level), operated by a synergic social action.

Notes

¹ Alexander M., *Comparing Local Policies toward Migrants: An Analytical Framework, A Typology and Preliminary Survey Results*, in *Citizenship in European Cities. Immigrants, Local Politics and Integration Policies*. R. Penninx, K. Kraal, M. Martiniello, S. Vertovec (eds), Ashgate, Aldershot, 2004, p. 63.

² Ambrosini M., *In prima linea. Integrazione degli immigrati, politiche locali e ruolo degli operatori*, in *Costruttori di integrazione. Gli operatori dei servizi per gli immigrati*. Ambrosini M. (ed), Fondazione Ismu, Milano, 2005b, p. 45.

³ Zanetti Polzi P., *Operatori dell'immigrazione: tra solidarietà e professionalità*, in *Costruttori di integrazione. Gli operatori dei servizi per gli immigrati*. Ambrosini M. (ed), Fondazione Ismu, Milano, 2005, p. 112.

⁴ Es Empowerment sociale, *Microcosmi in rete... Comunità in cerca d'autore. Strategie di empowerment e sviluppo di comunità*, Quaderni di ES/14, , Palermo 2005, p. 46.

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