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ROMA MIGRANTS IN THE PUBLIC ARENA: BETWEEN MEDIA COVERAGE AND POLITICIZATION

The Roma migrations to France and other European countries that have intensified since the early 2000s and again since 2007, when the two major source countries, Romania and Bulgaria, became members of the European Union (EU), are prominent in public debate and the political sphere. Even though Roma migrants are limited in number (between 15,000 and 20,000 people according to recent estimates), they have received visibility and overexposure in the public arena through the issues of urban circulation, squats, precarious living conditions of both adults and children – issues that the traditional mechanisms of protection and solidarity have proved unable to curb. Identified as Roma or more traditionally as Gypsies (*Tsiganes*), they have become the focus of polemics and sharp political tensions as well as major mobilizations on the part of charities and activists locally.

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They have mistakenly been assimilated to the French “Travellers” (*Gens du voyage*), an administrative category subjected, among other things, to bureaucratic “de-ethnicization” since the 1960s. However, unlike the “Travellers”, these migrants from the East are often represented as a group and community, which reveals that ethno-cultural and ethno-racial considerations are at work and play an important role. In this paper, we analyze the way in which representations and social and political relationships to these groups and individuals are constructed – this also includes the Roma collective figure, the “Roma question”, the “Roma issue”. In so doing, we explore the hypothesis that *ethno-racial markedness* is assigned to the Roma in the public sphere by political debate and media coverage both explicitly and implicitly, and in parallel by the different forms of public intervention in their favor alternating between initiatives of integration and access to rights and a repressive policy of control and expulsion.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONSTRUCTIONS

Roma-related issues caught the media’s attention and became the focus of political concern in the early 2000s or even earlier, following the collapse of communist regimes and the ensuing liberalization of population movement regulations (1). However, they became the focus of an ever more heated debate fraught with memorable controversial and electoral overtones when the source countries joined the EU in the late 2000s – a time when national and European immigration policies were strengthened. The development of European institutions would have had contradictory effects on these issues. On the one hand, Europe would have conferred a common identity to these populations and communities. On the other, it would also have contributed to a process of *racialization* of the Roma (who thus would have been incorporated in an emerging “European apartheid” framework in the same way as non-EU nationals and possibly their children) and conjured up the specter of an “enemy from within”.

Even though the Roma are EU citizens, their migrations have in fact been registered in official expulsion statistics as of the mid-2000s, accounting for about a third of the number of expulsions in 2008, for example. While European law circumscribes the possibility of expelling them within strict limits, France has adopted several measures and provisions aiming for a better control of Roma communities as of 2006, and, in this case, making their expulsion easier. No equivalent measures had been taken at the time of the 2004 accession of new Member States. This suggests that a hitherto implicit targeting process was at work, operating *de jure* against Romanian and Bulgarian nationals and *de facto* against Roma migrants. Starting in 2010, an additional step was taken in this logic of *producing* and *ex-*

(1) In this regard, the 1993 case of the “Nanterre Gypsies” represents one of the first occurrences of the “unauthorized settlements” issue in the media and political sphere.

pulsing illegal aliens when a definition of incriminated populations was explicitly formulated. Target figures concerning evictions from “unauthorized settlements” – “with priority given to Roma settlements” – were set by the administration. In the summer of 2010, deportation charter flights riveted French public opinion and gave a striking image of France abroad. This xenophobic and repressive policy was little questioned by the alternate majority government that came to power in 2012. After a short reprieve marked by the – rarely applied – circular of August 26, 2012, providing for social support whenever informal settlements were dismantled, the left has had no qualms pursuing or even systematizing and accelerating the repressive policies initiated by its predecessors, particularly as concerns the destruction of settlements. The recent “Leonarda affair” and Manuel Valls’ statement after the 2013 summer recess that “they do not wish to integrate” are a clear illustration of this.

Examples of targeting and othering also appear in the media coverage of these topics and populations, inasmuch as here, the media act as a bridge between the political sphere and public opinion (2). The concept of social markedness developed by Wayne Brekhus can be used to define those practices, understood as “the ways social actors actively perceive one side of a contrast while ignoring the other side as epistemologically unproblematic”. Socially marked individuals are generally categorized by “problematic” identity attributes. In discourse, the use of specific phrases highlights targeted populations against the backdrop of a majority considered neutral and generic. As Colette Guillaumin argues in her classic study on racist ideology, majority groups have a wide range of identity choices whereas minority groups are denied that and are construed as “that which they cannot give to themselves”. The Other is not conceived as just a mere being, but as a being having specific features because he/she belongs to a group distinct and often excluded from the “us”.

A study of the press and general news media brings to the fore two operators materializing the representation of an essentialized and *racialized* otherness: systematic affiliation to a territory and use of gender as an ethnicity marker. The media’s discourse often associates these populations, which it designates as Roma, more rarely Gypsies, with specific territories – a settlement, a “caravan site”, or an “integration village”. Its depictions locate the Roma only inside these restricted “zones”, described as different from the rest of the national territory and situated on city outskirts on the fringes of urban space, between the railroad tracks and the highway exit. One must also point out the role played by representations of gender. As with other minorities, they outline and actualize the boundaries between social groups in the public sphere: the construction of “deviant” gendered identity (submissive women, macho or violent men) turns gender into a powerful identity marker determining and strengthening otherness while essentializing and naturalizing behavior.

(2) See in particular M. Dalibert, M. Doytcheva, “Migrants roms dans l’espace public: (in)visibilités contraintes,” *Migrations Société* 152 (2014): 75-90.

LOCAL INTEGRATION POLICIES

So-called *integration* policies have developed locally following a logic of resistance to repressive and exclusionary national policies. Initiated in 2007, they advocate relying on the legal and political resources of European citizenship to accompany migrants on their way to integration. According to observations that we carried out on several emblematic operations in Parisian suburbs, this accompaniment included a particular focus on “access to autonomy” in terms of work, housing, as well as family relationships. Electoral and political considerations, notably opposition to the national action carried out by the right, were also a major driving force behind the initiatives taken by local authorities. However, the latter nonetheless experience great difficulty going beyond carrying out *temporary* and *exceptional* accommodation actions within the framework of public aid, *outside the common law limits*, and likely to lead to local, peculiar, forms of othering and the assignment of specific duties and obligations.

According to censuses by the Romeurope National Human Rights Collective, some 650 people were accommodated in specific structures in 2010 thanks to the assistance of civil action groups involved in shelter management, specialized education and prevention and the fight against exclusion and poor housing. *The integration village (village d'insertion)* scheme promoted during this transition period (2007-2013) (3) became the focus of abundant criticism. In actuality, it involved several plans of action and practices meant to palliate the main drawbacks associated with it: selection of families, control and normalization mechanisms such as “surveillance” (security, visitor screening), or the physical aspect of these fenced-in and off-center installations. Though the “village” appellation confers a positive character on these installations, it cannot but raise the specter of a closed in, assigned identity and cause professional and civil society actors to voice concern about the institution of specific and segregated places as a way of dealing with Roma migrants.

Meanwhile, both dismantlement and eviction policies have been continued locally by the same authorities (locally elected and state officials). In 2011, France submitted its “National Roma Integration Strategy” report, as required by the European Commission from EU Member States. The report denies that public authorities allot these accommodations (i.e., *integration villages*) to a specific population category and emphasizes France’s Republican indifference to ethnic origins. In actuality however, it turns out that few other “publics” – migrants, precarious and under-housed people – benefit from these policies.

(3) During that period, Romanian and Bulgarian migrants were subjected to various restrictions on access to work and conditions of stay.

Amnesty International's 2013 report – *Told to Move on: Forced Evictions of Roma in France* – shows alarming eviction figures for that year, the highest since 2010. Out of the nearly 10,200 evicted persons during the first semester of 2013, only a few dozens were offered alternative, often temporary, housing solutions. The re-housing mission entrusted to the shelter provider Adoma has left many observers wondering. What will happen to migrants who, yet again, will not be able to break through the barriers of administrative selection and these spiral-like *minorization processes*? Will they be classed as a supernumerary population, as is already the case for Gypsy populations in general? What about the gateway logic put forward by these specific sheltering and housing plans? Building *temporary* (but most likely to last) accommodation centers may turn into a permanent way of dealing with these populations, as has been the case in the past with other social groups in France (refugees, migrants from the South, post-colonial migrants).

IMPERFECT CITIZENSHIPS

Research recently conducted in Italy on Roma and Sinti integration on the local and national levels highlights two points: (1) the number of generalized discriminatory practices, even on the part of institutional actors, is growing; (2) there is denial and general lack of knowledge about the discriminatory nature of these practices. These studies apprehend the situation in terms of “imperfect citizenship”, defined as a feeling of uncertainty about one’s status and rights paired with a deformation of one’s very perception of discrimination. These results echo the French situations briefly mentioned above, which can be read and decoded as tension and ambivalence between a demonstrated commitment to emancipate and provide access to rights and equality on the one hand and repeated attempts at control and assignment of difference and resemblances on the other. The numerous and at times deliberate parallelisms in the perception and handling of these migrant populations and the treatment of French “Travellers” can serve as an indicator here.

Local policies targeting “Travellers” have been analyzed in France in terms of public hospitality: namely, if moral and political obligation requires that a host be hospitable, the incoming stranger is in turn requested to adopt an *authentic* or *authenticated* behavior. Hospitality requires boundaries and presupposes insiders and outsiders. It is an unstable system, not unlike Mauss’s gift principle, that promotes recognition. However, one wonders to what extent this form of recognition can be applied in a democratic system without challenging the latter’s foundations and principles. Though these questions are relevant to the emblematic situation of the “migrant Roma”, they involve intricate processes of representation, ideological overlap, and projections in which fundamental principles of contemporary democracies related to the issues of citizenship, solidarity, belonging and mobility are at stake – within a Europe aspiring to be without borders.