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# Territoriality and Social Conflict in Urban Roma Communities in Portugal: Mechanisms and Policy Insights

by Tommaso Vitale

A close examination of Alexandra Castro's book reveals its distinctive and significant contribution to the fields of urban studies and the study of mobility and ethnicity.<sup>1</sup> It represents an important advance in the knowledge that has been available to us until now. The dynamic and relational approach allows the author to shed light on the underlying mechanisms of mobility, integration and stigmatization, and more specifically on the mechanisms *for attributing a meaning of territorial reference, the "unlimited" recourse to the territory and identity distinction*. In other words, this book contributes to our knowledge of the cognitive, relational and ecological mechanisms that interact to understand the mobility of the Roma. Forced mobility, as the author makes sure to show. Forced mobility which, however, does not imply total subjection or automatic, determined and predictable reactions. Alexandra Castro has written a great book on urban sociology and mobility, in which various social mechanisms allow us to understand the value of *agency* and the Roma's capacity for strategic and creative action in the face of the political and economic forces with which they interact (Borghi, Vitale, 2007). Alexandra Castro's book tells a great story, not so much of resistance and adaptation, but of the capacity for action and the construction of interdependence.

Alexandra Castro does not discount the harshness of the local contexts. Her narrative clearly highlights the processes of institutional discrimination, but also the processes of diffuse and systematic stigmatization. But the description doesn't stop there. The book doesn't just feed discouragement and empathy with a logic of denunciation. The data collection method is robust and the author uses it to systematically discuss content rather than conflicts between scientific paradigms and theoretical schools. This text follows a logic of discovery and, chapter after chapter, is accompanied by experiences that are crucial to understanding the relational dynamics of territorial belonging and identity transformation.

One thing makes this book unique and precious: the ability to handle and combine different types of variables. Obviously institutional and relational variables, but also, and above all, spatial ones. Space in this book is there, it counts, it makes a difference. Space is always present, it is not only the place where relationships are inscribed, but also the main focus where conflicts emerge and where actors confront each other. Alexandra Castro has a rich vocabulary for understanding space, much more precise and multifaceted than that usually used in the social sciences, namely anthropology, geography and sociology. The materiality, configuration and mutability of space are present in this book, page after page. They are not a separate chapter,

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<sup>1</sup>This English text is a translation of Vitale (2018).

which functionally delimits one of the issues at stake. To understand mobility, stigmatization and integration of the Roma, the spatial dimension is crucial (Maestri, Vitale, 2016). A performative space that produces effects. A structuring space, not just a structured one. But certainly structured (Vitale, 2015a). A spatial dimension that allows us to understand and apprehend mobility and conflict. Alexandra Castro's contribution is once again innovative.

In their own way, about ten years ago, several research studies in various European countries tried to analyze the social and economic condition of Roma groups, articulating mobility and conflict in space. These studies, however, had a rather superficial conception of space. If I can be self-critical about my work, just to give an example, my tendency was to consider the spatial dimension in merely demographic terms, as a place characterized by a certain social composition, using references to the segregation or miscegenation of the population within certain limits (Vitale, 2009a). A container space, characterized by rates of concentration and diffusion, malleable despite the inertias that run through political negotiations, funding structures and strategic plans (Vitale, 2015b).

In relation to this approach, which is fruitful but still immature and reductive, the work I have the pleasure of introducing here is a real step forward. Space is a container of population, but it is a physical place of opportunities and resources and is characterized by the presence of buildings and material objects that, with their aesthetics and symbolism, intervene in the collective identity and capacity for action of individuals. What's more, space affects not so much the social capital of individuals, but the symbolic dimension of this social capital (Cousin, 2014).

The book is factually rich, very enjoyable to read and full of theoretical implications. And on these issues, theoretical precision and the contribution to prioritizing concepts, facts and arguments are certainly important, particularly to avoid erroneous and false premises in the design of public policies (Vitale, 2009b). But also to avoid the reproduction of biased stereotypes that weigh on the lives and life chances of the Roma.

In this sense, an important feature of this book lies in the quality of the ethnographic writing. When social scientists, educators and human rights activists talk about the Roma, they are often slightly embarrassed. Sooner or later some racist slip emerges. Small signs, but when you start saying that the Roma have a culture... you always end up with generalizations that have no empirical basis, which are extremely dangerous when it comes to framing policies and have long-term consequences in terms of legitimizing stereotypes (Aguilera, Vitale, 2015). There is no trace of any of this in the book. The ethnographic writing is extremely attentive. This is extremely important not only for discussing the Roma or any other human group, but also because the book explicitly discusses the problem of visibility.

In the case of Roma, we are witnessing a paradox of visibility, a structured regime of disvisibility (*aviscuality*, in the sense of van Baar, Vermeersch, 2015) in which anyone is made visible in a way of remaining, yet is not seen for what they are, in other words, the relationship and the face of the other is never given, it is hidden in the way it is

spoken of: "All signs lead to a vision, but at its destination nothing is seen (Lippit, 2005, p. 32). The Roma are hyper-visible, they have been present in the daily press of large and medium-sized Italian cities for years. The visibility of the Roma is only on a deictic-referential level, it doesn't allow for reciprocity and mutuality of gazes, it isn't social, it doesn't allow for a process of recognition, but simply reifies them, sees them and considers them as objects, things (Vitale, 2008a).

At the same time, over the last 15 years, the Roma have become very visible in all European countries. Two mechanisms have intersected in producing this process of media and political overexposure.

Firstly, in the beginning there was a new, small wave of migrations and people without migratory networks. In the beginning, almost no family had any precedent of belonging to a migratory chain. This means that all those who arrived in Western countries had no family solidarity to support them in entering the labor market and the real estate market. They were the first. As always happens when there are no well-established migratory chains, the first arrivals pay a higher cost: they have no one to give them information, economic support, contacts and relationships to access opportunities and also services. They become disoriented and, in the first few years, often live in very precarious conditions, are highly exploited at work, are often part of the informal economy and have huge barriers to accessing decent housing. This happened in the countries of new immigration (Italy, for example) at the end of the 1980s with the new migrants from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa. The same social mechanism was repeated with the Roma from Eastern Europe at the end of the 1990s in Western Europe, including Portugal. The great difficulties of integration and a medium-term migratory project, with the aim of accumulating resources to invest in the country (or, more precisely, city) of origin, pushed them into very precarious forms of housing, the shacks on the urban fringes. Poor living conditions, but also very visible and with great effects in the countries of immigration, which thought they had definitively overcome the phase of extreme residential poverty.

A second mechanism, which has played a major role in producing the visibility of Roma migrations, is based on the fact that all the countries of immigration have a presence of different groups of "gypsies" (Roma, Manouches, Gitanos, Yemish, Travellers, etc.), and the groups of new immigration are inserted within national dynamics that are already very tense. It is impossible to summarize in a few lines the very different situation in the various countries of Western Europe. It is important to note that each European nation had embarked on its own path of recognizing and not recognizing these groups with different instruments and results and the presence of new groups, with different languages, has reopened the debates, highlighted the inconsistencies of the regulatory provisions, and revived the field for polemics and instrumental interventions.

Together, these two mechanisms meant that the Roma issue initially became a major issue at the local level, where the problems of precarious housing became more visible, and then also at the regional or national level when some political entrepreneurs wanted to exploit local facts to launch racist campaigns against the

"gypsies", easily tapping into a heritage of negative stereotypes formed in the 18th century, during the period of the constitution of nation states.

Thus, over the last fifteen years, the presence of Roma groups has gradually become a central issue in building electoral consensus. Important political games have been played over the presence of these groups. Despite the centrality of the issue on the agenda of local and national governments, there has not been a strong increase in the quality and appropriateness of the policies implemented at local level. In the absence of an evaluation of the consequences of the instruments adopted, many public resources were spent. Important international reports have denounced, in a calm and technically argued manner, the inadequacy of many public policies implemented in European cities. Concern about the "failure" of local initiatives has led the European Commission to launch important initiatives in recent years and at the beginning of April 2011 to launch a "European Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020" [COM(2011) 173].

It is better to explain precisely where the empirical data converge and what they reveal. The essential point is that the main representations about the Roma profoundly influence public policies. These representations create strong deadlocks, contributing to inefficiencies and the waste of welfare state resources.

So even though there is a lot of talk about the Roma in Europe, especially in local newspaper reports, and more generally in local political debates, this discourse does not produce pluralism, reflection, critical knowledge. It doesn't produce moments of contact, opportunities for interaction and interpersonal knowledge. In this context, the contribution of the social sciences is also lost, it doesn't find channels for transmission and popularization. When we talk about the Roma, we have to deal with this level of debate, with the categories we use, with the history of stereotypes, with the emotions they arouse, with our organized ignorance. The problem is not so much that we know little about the Roma, but that what we do know is not systematically subjected to criticism. And here we come back to the importance of Alexandra Castro's book.

Many Portuguese cities seem unable to offer housing alternatives to the Roma who live with extreme housing problems: shacks, precarious occupations or in extremely segregated *welfare* institutions, such as the so-called "nomad camps". After fifteen years of systematic research in Europe on the main problems of local policies towards these groups, this book attempts to go one step further by analyzing the interactions between mobility, *agency* and structural contexts of opportunity. These are the fundamental cognitive premises for being able to develop *expertise* and administrative knowledge capable of mediating conflicts and neutralizing the worst effects due to the inadequacy of non-segregation measures (Vitale, 2010). The book is very effective in leading to a more pragmatic approach to territorial governance, not hiding the complexity of the spatial dimensions when looking at the factors, not only economic, but also political, for the viability of projects and medium-long term interventions (Polizzi, Vitale, 2017).

It is not trivial to explain why demagogic policies persist at local level in dealing with the Roma. The term demagogic is used here in a technical sense, proper to political theory, and certainly not in a polemical sense. A policy is demagogic when it is constructed in the absence of evaluative evidence about the consequences of its actions, and when the consequences are not openly discussed by the responsible executive (Prasad, 2006). Empirical information and data are ignored or even modified to support local government options and achieve voter consensus. The problems remain open and largely unsolved, through cyclically repeated measures and with a strong presence of local decision-makers in places of maximum visibility of marginality and misery. The "end of pragmatism", i.e. the reduction of attention to the consequences of the policies implemented, corresponds to long-term changes in local politics, not only in Italy, and obviously not only in relation to issues of social inclusion and support for minority rights. The tendencies towards a policy that pays little attention to the consequences of the actions implemented are great, and they don't just apply to initiatives aimed at the Roma. They are rooted in profound transformations in the structure and organization of political parties. They are rooted in the double face of local power, which is careful to do things, but also not to do things, in order to avoid decisions on controversial issues, in the sense of Bachrach, Baratz (1962). The poor suitability and resolvability of policies in dealing with the Roma is therefore not exceptional.

Despite these arguments, it must be acknowledged that there is a specificity to the case of the Roma. As part of an important trend, well known to sociologists and political analysts, they constitute an extremization and, in a certain sense, also a deep radicalization. The *extreme* level of ineffectiveness and inefficiency of local policies, well documented in various research reports (among the most recent, see above all Bartlett, Benini, Gordon, 2011), begs to be taken seriously. Against common tendencies to act demagogically, "local democracies" have encountered several more or less decisive antibodies.

The media, civil society organizations and new citizen activism have, in a different way, forced the irresponsibility of local politics, raising issues that are artfully avoided by decision-makers, suggesting and creating *accountability* systems, calling for transparency and evaluations (Trounstone, 2010). In part, this is happening, albeit in a context of great social fragmentation, where economic interests are almost irrelevant and those directly concerned are rather weak, both in terms of their electoral weight and their ability to influence public opinion. However, there has been a certain activism in favour of Roma rights, which has even led to talk of a kind of social movement for their rights, and despite the direct involvement of key players with a significant organizational structure (trade unions, the church), the capacity for *lobbying* or explicit pressure has been very low.

In short, how can we explain the low effectiveness, high inefficiency and even very low effectiveness of local policies in the approaches to the Roma in Western European countries? As a field of research common to both political sociology and political science, public policy analysis aims to explain certain phenomena in social life in terms of public policies. Many authors emphasize the model of the three "I's": Institutions, Interests and Ideas (Palier, Surel, 2005). Their thesis is that the weakness

of these policies can only be understood by considering these three types of factors together.

In institutional terms, the main problem in many countries is the absence of precise regulations that frame the issue in terms of minority rights, establishing a system of guarantees and responsibilities for the different levels of government that bind public action and protect the rights of the individual. This absence has heavy effects: it leaves the city alone, without coordination and without frameworks to guide local policy objectives and instruments (Le Galès, Vitale, 2015).

Considering the second "I", i.e. the games of interests, it is clear that the interests of the Roma carry little weight. In any case, we're talking about groups who are not recognized as having the capacity to represent themselves, if not explicitly denied it. There are, of course, organizations that support them, but they are often very dependent on public funding and have little ability to confront the representation of Roma interests with force and in general terms (Jacquot, Vitale, 2014). The interests of those who don't want to have groups in their territories (whether temporary, such as groups of travelers, or stable, such as groups who want to live with their extended family) are quite strong: they defend the value of the real estate rent nearby and have the capacity for alliance and strategic pressure. They are also the interests of those who want to "stir up troubled waters": fear-mongers who seek to gain consensus from statements and initiatives and are not very attentive to the consequences they produce, particularly in terms of consensus and impact on public opinion.

Finally, there is a third family of factors explaining the weakness of local policies. It is only cognitive in nature: it is made up of ideas and representations, more precisely, stereotypes. Stereotypes are not produced within the political field. They have a long history, spanning centuries. They are not constructed at a local level, but are reinforced or combated explicitly through public communication initiatives or implicitly through public policies which, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, also have cognitive effects on individuals' representations.

One result of this book, not least, is to dismantle some of the stereotypes that confuse many of the readings of the Roma. This is really important. Let me elaborate on this point. Even among people who have cosmopolitan values and a strong openness towards foreigners, negative representations of the Roma weigh heavily. The Roma are the least loved ethnic group in Europe, although with different percentages depending on the country. When talking about Roma, Sinti, nomads and gypsies, most people react with an emotion of fear, sometimes also with a feeling of anger and aversion (strong terms, but unfortunately encouraged in so many surveys). A small part of the population, mostly attentive to values of solidarity and welcome, reacts with feelings of compassion based on an imaginary of extreme poverty. The Roma are represented as thieves or as miserable people who are extremely homogeneous across the ethnic group and there are very few opportunities for contact and knowledge, calling into question this representation in terms of hyperdiversity. We know, however, that with the same level of ethnocentrism, the simple fact that there is contact and personal knowledge of the Roma immediately reduces the level of hostility. But contact with the Roma tends to be considered

shameful and most people prefer not to be involved. Public policies regarding the Roma also suffer from consolidated prejudices, both in their design and implementation (Vitale, 2008b). Faced with so many stereotypes, this book poses the main questions to be considered - about administration, territorial governance and the way municipalities work - while avoiding any reification of the culture of the groups in question.

The dilemmas of ethnic categorizations implicit in interventions relating to a single group (Maestri, 2016), but also the time horizon of these policies, which require long-term interventions, often over two generations, are issues that emerge with great clarity reading the third part of the book. The problems of periodically reviewing these public policies also emerge, in a context such as Portugal's, where citizens tend not to trust the strategies implemented by the public administration. They are also related to problems of building political consensus, due to the hatred suffered by the subjects in question and the easy instrumentalization of pragmatic interventions by political parties, not just right-wing parties. Finally, they are related to the hard side of housing intervention in the face of very heterogeneous and very disparate situations. Implementing policies with regard to the Roma in highly precarious housing conditions means confronting and "inhabiting" strong contradictions, while not immediately leaning towards one of the poles of the contradiction. It's not that choosing one of the polarities of the contradictions in question is wrong on the ethical level of conviction, but looking at the empirical cases, it proves to be counterproductive on the consequentialist level of the ethics of responsibility. In this direction, a non-negligible institutional variable is related to the variety of public policy instruments (Halpern, Lascoumes, Le Galès, 2014): rethinking the cases illustrated here shows how important it is for the local government to have a certain variety of public policy instruments, so that it can deal with different situations, without having to force all of them to correspond to a single policy solution

The complexity of the Roma issue is therefore related to this multiplicity of conditions and belonging, which, once denied, leads to inadequate treatment. A plurality of legal conditions, a plurality of housing conditions: more generally, *variety* is the fundamental issue to reflect on in order to tackle stereotypes, positive or negative, about the Roma. The Roma are a composite minority on a social level. The key is political and administrative. On a political level, we need to think about building coalitions between Roma associations, social promotion associations and anti-racism groups: broad coalitions that do not replace the direct political participation of the Roma, but which tackle the problems of building a political consensus, given the hatred of the subjects in question and the easy instrumentalization of interventions in their favour by political parties, not just right-wing parties. On an administrative level, a lot depends on the training of decision-makers and technicians (Laino, Vitale, 2015)

Castro's book finally seems to highlight another challenge, thanks to its constructivist, dynamic and relational approach. The challenge of accumulating a cognitive heritage of experience and reflection based on cases of conflicts that emerge in the territories. A lot is at stake. But not many people care about it. Most people think it's a waste of money, or simply intellectualism.



The point, however, is to create opportunities for discussion between the parties present in a territory, and to exchange not so much good practices, but difficulties, direct and indirect strategies, acquisitions or just ideas. In order to promote processes of social integration, to avoid the most destructive forces of competition between civil society organizations, it is also appropriate to discuss the problems of consensus around the dignity, well-being and rights of the most disadvantaged and segregated populations. For the most disadvantaged, the weakest part of the population, territorial spaces are important. In this sense, Castro's work shows the importance for politics and the world of education of learning from and giving a voice to the inhabitants of a territory, reorienting itself in the course of action, able to listen and seek out issues, needs and resources. In this sense, projects that renew the foundations of sociability in a territory, creating places of protagonism in which services open to all citizens are designed, are crucial. Projects designed for all citizens that provide a welcome and renewed sensitivity even for the most stigmatized and contrasted populations.

In this sense, I would like to highlight one last implication of Alexandra Castro's book: recognizing the *agency* of the Roma in their relationship with space, territory and territoriality leads to a different way of thinking and designing interventions to support them. It is precisely their territoriality as the most important dimension of a difficult integration, given the conditions of stigma, that should be the starting point. In this sense, ethnic-based interventions with a specific *target* could be superstructural (not concrete). On the contrary, Alexandra Castro insists on *agency* and territoriality as very important principles to always bear in mind. A sectoral logic is not appropriate, nor is a strategy focused exclusively on needs (shortages) and, in particular, on individual needs. The problem is to reorient action towards the social cohesion of territories.

The territoriality of the Roma is made up of needs, but also of institutional discrimination, conflicts, resources and the ability of the Roma themselves to act. All these elements must be part of a policy if we are to take the recommendations in this book seriously. The visibility and territoriality discussed in the book are also made up of *potential*. It's not just a question of meeting needs, but of intervening to recognize and grow the potential resources of territories and restore diffuse solidarities. Faced with the level of conflict discussed in the book, there are not only social cohesion interventions with a *target* that is directly intervened upon, but services that work on cohesion and well-being for all, know how to mobilize to mediate conflicts and produce results for the most disadvantaged, encourage the creation of spaces of sociability and mutual sociability groups. In other words, they accompany and promote (they don't assume that economic incentives are enough).

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