The Rise of Italy’s Neo-Ghettos

Introduction

Over the last three decades, different levels of government in Italy – municipal, regional and national – have collaborated to generate a unique and continuously evolving system for warehousing the Roma minority in special, ethnically-segregated urban camps.¹ The legal status of those camps and the concrete conditions experienced by those who live in them have been widely discussed (Picker 2011; Sigona 2011; Hepworth 2012). What is often lacking in this literature, though, is an attempt to develop a theoretical framework for understanding how the camps originate and function as systems of social control profoundly tied to their local political and economic contexts. The camps are mainly seen as a manifestation of a general escalation in anti-Gypsyism in Italy, manipulated by a discredited political class which has increasingly resorted to fear-mongering in order to acquire legitimacy and support at election time. While these points are certainly important, they do not go far enough in explaining the complex relationships that exist between the camps and the urban environments that spawn and transform them. The prevailing view that they are spaces of exclusion, that serve to push out and hide society’s unwanted and “excess” population, does not conceive of them as “pieces of the city”; functional, integral and dynamic components of urban social relations that serve concrete political and economic purposes.

In order to explore the functions of Roma camps in Italy, I draw on Loïc Wacquant’s theoretical framework for understanding the constituent elements of ghettos past and present (2009; 2012). Both in the media and academia (de Zulueta 2009; Calame 2010a), some links have already been made between the original Italian enclosures for Jews and today’s camps. Indeed, Wacquant himself (2012) has viewed the increasing relegation of Roma in isolated ethnically concentrated neighborhoods in much of Europe, and particularly Italy’s coralling of these groups in state-run structures, as a move towards renewed ghettoization. However, these discussions have not systematically dissected the connections – and the distinctions - between the ghettos of the early
modern period and today’s camps. This article debates whether a genealogy can indeed be identified between these two structures for containment that is both historical and functional, focusing on how they operate as devices; complex mechanisms capable of modulating closure and porosity, oppression and self-determination. While it is widely recognized that Jewish ghettos were not simply manifestations of anti-Jewish feeling, but were reactions to local social, political and economic pressures (Coppa 2006; Hutchison and Haynes 2012; Sennett 1996; Stow 2001), there is a need for a similar analysis of how state-engineered Roma camps have evolved over time as technologies for managing a minority perceived as problematic in the urban environment. The study concentrates on the city of Rome, which had the longest-lived Jewish ghetto in the Italian peninsula (1555-1870) and is now home to the country’s largest Roma population, contained in over three hundred camps of different types. The choice to restrict the analysis to a single city is rooted in the view that any urban institution is the product of the specific spatial conditions and power relations of its time. While an overarching “ghetto system” (Calame 2010a) emerged in the Italian early modern states, each ghetto was inseparable from its immediate political and commercial context; it would be reductive to disentangle Rome’s ghetto from the papal power that created and exploited it. Equally, while Roma camps exist throughout Italy, those of Rome have a special symbolic and political status tightly linked to the city’s recent drive to assert itself as a modern, global capital.

Italy’s camps policy has been condemned for infringing human and civil rights (ODIHR 2008; ERRC/OSI/OsservAzzone 2009; RAXEN 2009; Amnesty International 2012; CERD 2012; ECRI 2012) and for being economically unjustifiable and unsustainable (Associazione 21 Luglio 2012a). Yet, successive municipal governments in Rome both of the left and right have, for three decades, persevered in developing and refining this system of containment and there is no indication that a radical change in approach will soon emerge. Paradoxically, Italy has recently drawn up a National Strategy for Inclusion of Roma (PCM 2012), responding to the European Union’s call to Member States to actively tackle anti-Gypsyism in all its forms. This contradiction between the national agenda and a local practice which appears economically and politically self-defeating can, I argue, be
best understood by de-ethnicizing the issue, identifying what interests lie behind the perpetuation of this system in Rome. In order to fulfill the twin aims of analyzing how Roma camps function as devices of control and how the fine-tuning of these devices is interlinked with social and economic change in the city, the article is structured as follows: It first explains why Roma camps can more usefully be compared to ghettos than to other camp forms, and then highlights the most relevant features in the functioning of Rome’s Jewish ghetto. These elements are subsequently applied to the contemporary panorama of Roma camps in the capital, stressing where there is continuity and break with the past. I suggest that today’s camps can be defined as neo-ghettos, which are both rooted in and move beyond their historical prototype. The final section contextualizes these developments within recent neo-liberal approaches to governing the city.

The discussion presented here is based on fieldwork which began in one Roma encampment in Rome in 1997 and has since extended to eight other camps, covering the main typologies which currently exist in the city (illegal micro-shanties, historic encampments slated for demolition, and three state-run mega-camps). This has allowed me to observe first-hand the impacts of public policy on camp residents during a large part of the time period discussed in this article. The fieldwork has involved participation in everyday life activities and important family events within the communities in which I have built close relationships; I have also been present during two forced evictions. Inevitably, our conversations have concerned a wide range of issues in the Roma’s private and public lives; however, the importance of living in adequate and stable environments has meant that municipal policies regarding camps have been a frequent focus of discussion. In the state-built camps in which visitors must receive permission from the authorities to enter and where there is intensive surveillance, I have held semi-structured interviews with residents, official community representatives, and members of the NGOs who manage the camps. I have also been a participant observer in various public meetings and demonstrations. My analysis of the evolution of social policy instead compares the official documents and statements issued by the municipal authorities with my observations of their application in practice, complemented by reports by activists and NGOs working in this field.
Lessons from the Ghetto

Scholars have tended to discuss Italy’s Roma camps in terms of their relationship with other, similar modern structures for containing unwanted groups of people; primarily the concentration camps of the late 19th and first half of the 20th Century and camps for refugees and other “superfluous populations” (Bauman 2004) of the contemporary world (Piasere 2006; Rahola 2006). Although a number of connections do exist, there are also notable gaps which justify moving beyond the camps paradigm. It is difficult to generalize about the multitude of different forms of concentration camps which emerged in different periods around the globe to separate and isolate people somehow considered a threat to the dominant political order (Kamiński 1997). The herding of Roma into ethnic prison camps in the last years of Italy’s Fascist regime as well as their mass murder in Nazi concentration camps, makes it tempting for some observers and some Roma themselves to view today’s camps and related policies as a first step towards history repeating itself. The spatial and social isolation, high fences, constant policing and grid-like layout of many Roma camps (formally known as “villages”) appear to visually reinforce the similarities. Yet, two obvious differences make the other resemblances reductive: while today’s “villages” do indeed concentrate and isolate an ethnic minority, their inhabitants have some – although not complete – freedom of movement into and out of the structures and they are coerced to live there not through violence but through a lack of alternative, economically accessible, housing. Despite the discomfort, many Roma actively seek to live in them. Moreover, while the camps have operated a gradual erosion of Roma’s rights, they do not set out to strip people of their identities in order to transform them into “bare life” as the Nazi camps did (Agamben 1998). On the contrary, as I will argue later, today’s Roma “villages” selectively provide some rights in ways that are strategic to their functioning.

The proliferation of humanitarian camps for refugees, stateless persons and other vulnerable populations since World War 2 and particularly in the last two decades presents some rather more convincing overlaps with Italy’s Roma camps. The ambiguity in many refugee camps between the declared goals of sheltering politically and economically weak groups, while often restricting their
freedoms in order to protect those on the outside (Rahola 2003; Agier 2011), reappears in the Italian situation. The management of Roma “villages” is increasingly articulated through the terminology of humanitarianism despite the fact that Roma in Italy arguably do not need humanitarian protection (Clough Marinaro and Daniele 2011): they are predominantly citizens of Italy or other EU member states, except for those who migrated from former Yugoslavia between the 1970s and 1990s but who have been unable to naturalize or successfully apply for asylum due to Italy’s restrictive and shifting legislation. The economic and social problems faced by the Roma are to a large extent caused, not solved, by living in camps. The strongest link that ties these structures to real humanitarian camps is the fact that, like many protracted refugee situations, Roma “villages” exist in a state of permanent temporaneity; they are clearly unsustainable in the long-term, but no effective solutions are proposed to move beyond them. Meanwhile, entire generations are born and grow up within their spatial, legal and social limbo. There is, nevertheless, a fundamental distinction between the two camp forms. Humanitarian camps are usually the outcome of a crisis which has occurred elsewhere; they involve an escape from an external situation and they are thus rarely the product of the urban context in which they are located. In contrast, as will be demonstrated in the second part of this essay, today’s Roma camps are among the mechanisms which have been devised by local and national authorities to manage power relations within the city.

It is worth turning to the Jewish ghetto, therefore, to explore whether it offers more useful elements for dissecting the origins and functions of Roma “villages”. The Jewish ghettos which were created in many towns and cities in Northern and Central Italy from the early 1500s onwards shared a number of obvious features; they all made strategic use of, and often incited, fears that this religious minority morally, physically and economically endangered the rest of the population. The threat had to be reduced through physical separation while simultaneously keeping this commercially and politically essential group geographically close. Despite their similarities, though, the very diverse socio-political contexts within the different Renaissance towns in which ghettos were created suggests that they were not all of the same mould. In the specific case of Papal Rome, the creation of the ghetto in 1555
must be understood in light of the social and political upheavals generated by the Protestant
Reformation and the consequent drive to revive and reform the Catholic Church from within. As
Stow underlines, the primary goal was to accelerate conversions to Catholicism thereby “validat[ing]
not only Christianity, but the claims of the Catholic Church to exclusive religious truth” (2007, 46).
The need to enact a renewed sense of Christian piety and purity intensified the stigmatization of the
Jewish population which for centuries had been viewed as polluting and which now had to be
physically isolated to avoid spiritually contaminating the Catholic majority. The grave conditions of
overcrowding, lack of hygienic facilities, imprisonment within the ghetto walls from sunset to sunrise
and a range of other restrictions on their freedom of movement and activity served a dual goal:
asserting Catholic power and authority at a time of political weakness and holding up the Jews as a
close and constant reminder of the consequences of failing to join the Catholic flock. In the Papal
State, spiritual, political and economic matters were closely interlinked and the targeting of the Jews
for symbolic purposes was accompanied by various forms of financial exploitation. High taxes, fines,
restrictions on a wide range of professional activities, and the ban on Jews owning property all
served to fill the church’s coffers at a time of considerable financial strain, while also protecting
Catholic businesses from competition and guaranteeing a continuous source of rent to Catholic
institutions and families. Meanwhile, though, the Jews could continue to serve their crucial role in
the heart of Rome, both as producers and suppliers of important goods and as money lenders to
Christians, without which urban commercial activity could not have functioned effectively.⁴

As a contraption,⁵ therefore, Rome’s ghetto was highly sophisticated, for it simultaneously isolated
Jews from Christians while also ensuring the maintenance of social and business relations. It served
to conserve the Jews’ status as “intimate outsiders” (Stow 2001, 56), and the continuity of daily
interactions with other Romans resulted in their lifestyles and customs remaining closely tied
throughout the three centuries of segregation. This ambiguity was also evident in the Church’s
justification for the ghetto’s creation, which coupled its punitive function with one of paternal
protection from anti-Jewish mob violence (Coppa 2006); it “constituted an intermediary space
between exile and citizenship” (Hutchison and Haynes 2012), providing Jews with a refuge from persecutions occurring elsewhere in Europe. Jews were also allowed to preserve their rites and internal organization, with a large degree of autonomy to run themselves. Although no pope ever entirely freed the Jews from the ghetto, the latter’s repressive functions were intensified or relaxed depending on the political moment and the relative tolerance of each individual pontiff. Its importance to papal power was such that it was twice reinstated after its abolition during the Roman Republics of the 18th and 19th Centuries.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this brief discussion which will later help to establish comparisons with Roma camps as similarly multifunctional devices. Rome’s ghetto was a very elastic device for constraint and ethnic enclosure, able to accommodate various only apparently incompatible polarities. It enforced Jews’ stigma but gave them special privileges; it isolated them and yet maintained symbiotic and porous relations with other Romans; it constructed Jews as a single mysterious and defiling entity, and enabled a highly heterogeneous population to survive and resist; it contributed to the city’s wealth while reducing the majority of the ghetto population to dire poverty. Its mutations over time demonstrate that it was malleable enough to adapt to the political pressures and ethical norms of different historical periods. Rather than a system aimed exclusively at domination, we can consider it a technology of government which, in structuring the Jews’ “possible field of action” (Foucault 1982, 341), at least in part recognized their subjectivity. It was also the materialization of a paradox in the Church’s exertion of pastoral power which was extended to Jews by affording them particular protection, while simultaneously constructing them and punishing them as a defiling enemy from which the Christian body had to be shielded.

In his discussions of ghettos past and present Loïc Wacquant (2008; 2009; 2012) has strongly argued that the term “ghetto” continues to be widely and inaccurately applied to a broad variety of contemporary situations of urban segregation and poverty, thereby analytically obscuring the profound distinctions which exist between different forms of social and spatial exclusion. Drawing on the original Jewish ghettos, he provides a framework for identifying which elements are essential to
and constitutive of a ghetto and which are instead potential derivative features, arguing that very few of today’s spaces of relegation function as the historical ghettos did. Of the various aspects of the Roman ghetto discussed above, the components which correspond to Wacquant’s list of structural features of any ghetto are: the containment of a highly stigmatized group; enforced residence in a space which is exclusive and segregated; and the development of community organizations, solidarity networks and activism. This last point is particularly important because it moves away from the common-sense view of ghettos as exclusively negative spaces, underlining the active forms of identification and mobilization which often occur within them. In his analysis, poverty, unemployment and geographic isolation are not constitutive elements of the ghetto although they do often accompany it. Most usefully, Wacquant recognizes that ghettoization is a multi-dimensional process, allowing us to analyze configurations that do not perfectly fit the archetype and to identify the mutations underway. This enables us to de-ethnicize the issue of Roma’s spatial segregation and poverty, moving away from the traditional view of Roma camps as somehow detached from other urban processes, instead providing a lens through which to read the different phases in the evolution of the camps as a device for governing a section of the population within the context of broader political, economic and spatial dynamics in the city.

Evolution of Roma Camps in Rome

Whereas Rome only ever had one, geographically very specific, Jewish ghetto, there are currently over three hundred very diverse Roma settlements in the city. Their number and locations are in a state of constant flux, making it impossible to generate exact data. The most recent official figures provided by municipal government put the Roma population at around 7,000, living in one hundred camps of different types (Comune di Roma 2009). The municipality has acknowledged that there are also numerous illegal settlements, but it has not mapped them and has no clear idea how many people they are home to. NGOs estimate that they bring the real Roma population to between 12,000 and 15,000 (Amnesty International 2012). The main reason for this lack of clarity is that over the last decade the authorities have pursued a policy of repeatedly evicting and bulldozing illegal
encampments, forcing their residents to scatter and recreate their makeshift homes in ever more hidden and precarious places. Thus, Roma camps form a broad spectrum ranging from shacks hidden among bushes and housing a few families, to shanties of over a hundred people, to state-run “villages” which often hold close to a thousand.

Within this apparently muddled scenario, we can discern discrete phases that constitute a linear progression in the exertion of state power to manage the Roma population over the last forty years. Three main typologies of camps - generically labeled campi nomadi (“nomad camps”) - exist in Rome. As a result of Italy’s economic boom and massive urbanization of the 1950s and 1960s, slums developed on the outskirts of the city, home to Italian migrants including Roma. While some of the Roma families benefitted from the expansion of public housing in subsequent decades – or were able to consolidate their shacks into permanent homes – many others remained on scrubland, to be joined by growing numbers of Roma from Yugoslavia from the 1970s onwards. Initially, these settlements were mostly ignored and tacitly accepted by the authorities; however, in 1985 a Regional Law to protect “nomad culture” was introduced to formalize them and provide some basic services. Piasere (2006) argues that these agglomerations were conceived by the authorities as part of the semantic notion of camps as spaces of freedom, close to nature, appropriate for people deemed less modern and urbanized than the rest of the population. Intrinsic to this concept of freedom was the assumption that Roma – considered to be inherently nomadic - would move on. This culturalist labeling underpins the discriminatory way in which public policies and practices concerning them have since developed (Clough Marinaro 2003; Sigona 2005; Picker 2011); indeed, the authorities use the myth that they are nomadic to justify failing to facilitate their access to standard housing. Most of the Roma, both Italian and foreign, living in those camps had little reason to leave and thus remained, often joined by other friends and relatives. A number of such self-created and self-managed encampments continue to exist in Rome although the trend in recent years has been towards their elimination, especially since 2009 when these once-authorized or “tolerated” settlements were declared illegal.
Piasere views the mid-1980s as the turning point in how Roma camps were conceived in Italy; at the same time that the regions were incentivizing the creation of formal camps, rising numbers of foreign Roma were arriving, especially during the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s. Homes were no longer mainly caravans and shacks but often self-built wooden chalet-style houses, soon to be joined by “containers” – prefabricated plastic and metal huts provided by the authorities – establishing the permanent temporaneity of the sites. For Piasere, this move from the caravan to the container marks the moment in which Roma camps transitioned from the semantic area of camping and nature to that of camps for concentration and containment; the moment when “the ‘nomad’ was definitively included among the ‘superfluous populations’ of late modernity” (2006, 11 my translation). In Rome, a new generation of specially-built legal camps (now defined as “villages” by the municipality) equipped with containers, washing facilities, public lighting and fences was spawned. The infrastructural investment involved, and the much clearer legal status of the sites, meant that the authorities were no longer willing to allow Roma to manage their living environment themselves; municipally-designated NGOs were instead paid to do so. The last decade has seen the fine-tuning of these externally designed and managed camps. Regulations dictating who may reside within them and under what conditions, and the rules for communal living to which Roma must adhere, have been intensified and refined by city government, culminating in the recent introduction of 24 hour armed guards, video-surveillance, special ID badges and a ban on visitors not expressly authorized by municipal officials (Commissario Delegato 2009). The physical structures have also been perfected: located in ever-more isolated spaces, containers positioned in easily monitored rows, guards’ booths and electric entrance gates installed.’ In Piasere’s terminology, these camps are “reservations that have the whiff today of concentration camps” (2006, 14 my translation). I argue below that they reveal more solid parallels with the ghetto.

The building of these formal “villages” for Roma was accompanied by a radical intensification of forced evictions from other settlements, carried out first by a center-left administration which just in the years between 2006 and 2008 expelled more than 15,000 people from their homes. The right-
wing municipal government that came to power in 2008 further intensified and formalized this in 2009 with its “Nomad Plan”: the city’s new housing policy for Roma. The Plan declared that all Roma encampments would be progressively shut down and 6,000 people housed in thirteen authorized “villages”. Where the approximately 6,000 remaining Roma would live was not addressed. In practice, the Plan has not been completed yet because the authorities have not identified adequately isolated and low-cost sites on which to build three projected new “villages”. Consequently, they continue to cram Roma into already overcrowded existing ones while nevertheless persevering with mass forced evictions. For example, in the Via di Salone camp, homes have been pushed dangerously close together to create additional space for families who were originally supposed to be moved to new camps; similarly, overcrowding is evident in the Cesarina ‘village’. Posters for the Mayor’s re-election campaign in 2013 boast that the city has carried out 1,075 camp clearances since 2008.

As a result of continuing evictions, a third and growing category of settlements are very small, hidden and fleeting shanties in Rome’s interstitial spaces which are mostly created by new arrivals from Eastern Europe who have not found room in the city’s “villages”. It is these small, illegal encampments under bridges, hidden in wasteland and along riverbanks, that are the most intensively targeted by municipal clearance campaigns and which are often rebuilt immediately afterwards by the Roma who have few alternative sites in which to create their homes. As Cervelli argues (2013), this marks a strategy of control which instead of confining and isolating marginal groups, imposes state power by continuously “chasing” them around the city. A final, related, category of recent development in Rome is what we might call “legal overflow spaces”; disused buildings, such as a former paper factory on the via Salaria (Associazione 21 luglio 2011), where the authorities house some of the “excess” Roma for whom they cannot find space in “villages”. Conditions in these structures are so inadequate (leaking roofs, overflowing toilets, blankets hung to create privacy) that they closely resemble the illegal encampments that they are supposed to replace, but with none of
the autonomy of those self-built settlements. They represent the closure of a circle: the formal production of shanties by Rome’s city government.

The drive in municipal policy to replace self-managed encampments with state-engineered and externally-run “villages” and the systematic reduction in the number of areas accessible to Roma in the last two decades is evidenced in maps based on the municipality’s own data (Figures 1-3). The balance has clearly shifted from the majority of Roma living within the symbolic boundary represented by the ring-road, to their concentration outside the main residential and business areas. While the number of camps acknowledged by the authorities more than halved from the original 50 in 1995, the number of people they accommodated in 2008 had remained static, leading to serious overcrowding. These maps represent the situation as it was formally recorded until 2008. While not all the self-managed camps have yet been bulldozed, their numbers are shrinking as the city government attempts to move towards its ultimate goal of 13 “villages” (Figure 4). In contrast, Figure 5 depicts the reality that the policy has spawned: the proliferation of hundreds of precarious illegal shanties.

Despite the great variety of living conditions in these different camp forms, they are all exclusionary and substandard, and they all violate Italian and European housing rights standards and legislation (RAXEN 2009; Associazione 21 luglio 2010 and 2012a). This is irrespective of the fact that many of them have been created by successive municipal governments with the declared goal of fostering integration. On the surface, they would all seem to conform to common-sense definitions of ghettos: they are all located in distinct and stigmatized spaces where other city dwellers fear to venture and where living conditions are dramatically inferior to those of the rest of the urban context; the vast majority of their inhabitants are poor and unemployed. However, this does not help us to conceptualize the differences between them and, especially, it does not account for the role of the state in their creation and management.

Roma Camps as Neo-Ghettos
Having outlined the main phases in the state-orchestrated evolution of Roma camps from spaces of self-management to specially constructed “villages”, we can now apply Wacquant’s ghetto framework to analyze whether this evolution can be read as a process of increasing ghettoization. Wacquant’s first constitutive feature of the ghetto is the spatial relegation of a stigmatized group. Roma’s age-old stigma as dirty, parasitic and criminal outsiders has played a central role in their residence in marginal urban camps throughout the post-war period. However, the creation of specially designated “villages” in the last two decades has been accompanied by public discourses by Rome’s leading politicians which have justified the expense of building official camps as a means to better monitor groups essentialized as both criminal and polluting, in order to protect the rest of society. The Roma’s traditional stigma has thus been strategically amplified and channeled as part of a political drive to visibly isolate them through means that are strongly reminiscent of the stigma attached to Jews in Renaissance Rome as morally and physically tainted. The consequence has been a significant intensification of constraint experienced by Roma in camps. While they were financially constrained to build their own encampments in Rome due to excessive housing costs and discrimination from landlords in mainstream accommodation, the city government’s ruling in 2009 that Roma may only live in state-built “villages” introduced a dramatic curtailing of their freedom of movement and choice. In the self-managed camps, Roma are able to move in and out according to their economic interests and for family reasons, in a complex intertwining of mobility and rootedness (Solimene 2009), whereas, as we have seen, such flexibility is impossible in the “villages”. The intensification of Wacquant’s third component of the ghetto – segregation – is evident in the maps shown above. The new “villages” have been built to eliminate the porosity which characterized the location of Roma’s self-built camps and which enabled the communities to maintain social and business relations with non-Roma in their neighborhoods. Roma who have been relocated to the “villages” now find themselves often unable to reach basic services such as public transport, schools and hospitals in a system which activists are beginning to define as “apartheid” (Associazione 21 luglio 2012b). This is particularly the case for elderly people, children and women who do not have
access to a car, many of whom have told me of their increased isolation and reduced independence since they were moved into their “village”.

It is on the issue of *ethnic homogeneity* that developments in the spatial control of the Roma start to deviate from Wacquant’s framework. Whereas he argues that homogeneity is often present in a ghetto situation, the herding of Roma into “villages” has in fact resulted in culturally and socially diverse groups and families living together in ways that tend to be avoided in self-built camps. These camps are generally made up of extended kinship groups and the very nature of their self-management ensures that there is a certain level of harmonious co-habitation and solidarity among residents. If conflicts arise, these are usually resolved through one of the parties moving away. While this does not mean that the encampments are necessarily homogenous (some are also home to non-Roma immigrants and Italians as well as friends or partners from outside the kinship group) or that tensions do not exist, the spatial and social flexibility of the camps ensure that they can be managed through internal diplomacy and geographic and symbolic reorganization. The “villages”, with their pre-arranged and immovable rows of huts, allocated by the authorities according to their own criteria and for non-negotiable periods of time (two years, with the possibility of extension for a maximum of six years) force together Roma with very different histories, religions, legal statuses and social and cultural practices. Tensions and sometimes overt conflicts exist in many of the “villages”; in one, Castel Romano, a fence and a “no-man’s land” geographically and symbolically separate two sides; in another, La Barbuta, a group of Sinti live outside the camp’s fence, having refused to move into the camp which is, in turn, divided into distinct zones for families of different origins. With far less leeway for diffusion of tension, a sense of mistrust and hostility between different groups characterizes many of these “villages”. This is crucial because it connects to the next component in Wacquant’s framework: the *community solidarity* that often emerges in ghetto situations.

Wacquant sees the ghetto as a Janus-faced contraption: while for the outside it is a tool of domination and control, for those who inhabit it, it functions as a protective shield, fostering active forms of identification, resistance and mobilization from within. The ghetto thus theoretically
contains the seed of its own destruction (Wacquant 2009, 170), allowing for the emergence of
outright rebellion or less overt tactics for circumventing the oppressive effects of its punitive power.
It is this feature of the ghetto that allows us to best identify the innovative forms of control that are
being introduced and refined by replacing Roma’s self-built camps with “villages”. It would be wrong
to romanticize the self-managed camps as inherently egalitarian and harmonious; indeed internal
power and decision-making dynamics often marginalize weak groups and produce forms of
governance that reflect the interests of certain families over others. While the possibilities for self-
determination and collective identity-building within them are contingent both on internal relations
in each individual camp and on the broader political and social context (when an encampment is
threatened with demolition, the sense of protection it offered evaporates), at the very least the
camps provide “a protective buffer that creates a distinctive Lebenswelt within which the
subordinate can breathe, away from direct contact with the dominant” (Wacquant 2009, 170). I
argue that the state-created “villages” are instead strategically designed to undermine the
development of such forms of potential resistance and escape by fomenting tensions and creating
obstacles to weaken internally-recognized power structures and solidarity networks. While ghettos
are generally marked by a low presence of state institutions in daily life, the state’s penetration in
these “villages” is extensive. This serves both disciplinary purposes – through extensive regulations,
surveillance, armed guards, and the constant threat of expulsion for bad behavior – and a form of
governmentality that manages their daily lives with the purpose of molding them into “good
citizens”. Residence in the “villages” is conditional on sending children to school, accepting
participation in employment projects, keeping the “village” clean and tidy, eschewing all forms of
crime. Often, a few inhabitants are selected for paid employment in the “villages”, fostering further
resentments and competition over resources. The provision of services within the “villages”
discourages Roma from interacting with the world outside (eg by taking their children to school,
going to a family doctor, making potential business contacts), pushing them towards a condition of
passivity and dependence.
Although the regulations also call for elections of Roma representatives to participate in managing the “villages”, in practice elections have only taken place in two structures and significant doubts have been raised about the legitimacy of electoral procedures, the true representativeness of the candidates, and their effectiveness in advancing the Roma’s concerns with the authorities (Clough Marinaro and Daniele 2012). In various “villages”, instead, forms of patronage have emerged in which certain individuals have developed personal relationships with institutional representatives charged with managing Roma affairs; the former obtain favors such as preferential treatment in the allocation of huts and guards turning a blind eye to the violation of “village” rules, as long as they exert pressure on their own and other families to acquiesce. Indeed, a very interesting feature of these structures is that their regulations are applied selectively and ambiguously: rules are more rigid in some “villages” than others, and they are applied to some inhabitants while others are able to carry out unauthorized activities undisturbed.15

What has been outlined, therefore, is a gradual, multidimensional move closer to the ghetto system, with the new “villages” producing intensified forms of stigma, constraint and segregation compared to earlier generations of camps. We are not dealing here with absolute constraint (indeed, some Roma actively seek to live in the “villages” since these provide more stability and better hygienic conditions than the self-built camps – see Clough and Daniele 2011) or with absolute segregation: Roma are free to continue interacting with the city of Rome if they are willing and able to overcome the spatial and infrastructural obstacles to doing so. It is this element of ambiguity, the functioning of the “village” as a contraption that modulates freedom and constraint, protection and control, subjectivity and state imposition, that suggests a close relationship with the ghetto. Yet these new forms of ghetto are a refinement of the original; they work to eliminate the main weakness of the ghetto system: its capacity to strengthen a sense of community and solidarity among the people it aimed to humiliate and disempower. These “villages” are thus better defined as neo-ghettos:16 they learn from and build on past experiences but are very much functional to the present and projected towards the future. Similarly to the Jewish ghetto, they are complex devices that are instrumental to
governing the city. It is worth therefore briefly exploring what their specific political and economic functions in Rome may be.

The “Village” and the City

The development from self-built encampments to today’s “villages” is closely interlinked with broader social and economic changes in the city. Roma settlements were largely ignored by Rome’s authorities until the mid-1990s when a center-left administration came to power under the first directly-elected mayor, Rutelli. His main political goal, subsequently taken up by his successor Veltroni, was to project Rome as a multicultural modern city, breaking with the capital’s image as an economic and cultural backwater marginalized by processes of globalization. The left pursued a rhetoric of protecting and empowering weak social groups and stimulating intercultural initiatives, while simultaneously liberalizing the housing market. This resulted in massive price rises, gentrification in much of the center of town as well as in many previously peripheral areas, and a consequent inevitable rise in homelessness. While the rhetoric also claimed that urban renewal was occurring in the most disadvantaged peripheries, in practice the outward movement of low-income residents, among them growing numbers of migrants often living in highly precarious conditions, was perceived by many Romans to be producing rising crime rates, an erosion of their sense of community and social protection, and a reduction in access to public spaces (Ilardi and Scandurra 2009; Tomassi 2010). To address the complex reasons why a growing proportion of Rome’s residents felt abandoned by the political elites (problems resulting from unplanned urban growth, lack of adequate educational, health and other services in the peripheries, accusations that local politicians were more interested in courting big business and media attention for their own national ambitions), would have required substantial reform of municipal management systems, priorities, institutional cultures and use of funds. Within a national and local political context in which the right wing was increasingly resorting to securitizing discourses, Rome’s left-wing leaders instead chose to compete on the same issues, seeking to prove their own success in making the city safer for its citizens. The creation of Roma “villages” which increasingly concentrated and segregated a group traditionally
stigmatized as criminal served to demonstrate – through highly mediatized demolitions of illegal camps and equally publicized inaugurations of the new structures – that a social problem in the city was being managed, thereby distracting attention from the fact that the more profound reasons for tensions and inequalities in the city remained. It can be argued that this dual approach of playing on local security fears, while simultaneously cultivating insecurity and fixedness for camp-dwelling Roma, reflects part of a broader “dialectic between safeguards and uncertainty, security and insecurity, keeping safe and being subject to risk” which Molé (2012, 4) identifies in the Italian workplace but which appears equally pertinent to the management of urban fears and frustrations.

The securitizing strategy of the left was not ultimately successful and it lost the 2008 municipal elections. Nevertheless, the post-Fascist mayor who came to power, Alemanno, persevered with it, formalizing the policy through his “Nomad Plan” discussed above and intensifying both the disciplinary aspects of the “villages” as well as their protective, “humanitarian” dimension. Despite having won largely due to the frustrations of voters in the peripheries, his administration has failed to address the housing shortages (there are approximately 8,000 homeless in the city – Polchi 2012), urban blight and lack of services experienced there, resulting in widespread dissatisfaction and the ever diminishing likelihood that he will be re-elected in 2013 (Fittipaldi 2012).

While the ghettoization of the Roma has not succeeded in creating a long-term sense of improved living conditions and social harmony in the city, it has allowed administrations of both the left and right to generate political capital by claiming to “solve the nomad problem” while simultaneously keeping that “problem” alive through the continued existence of illegal encampments. The various stigmas attached to Roma thereby remain available for politicians to activate in future should they need to galvanize in-group solidarity by constructing a threatening “other”. The functions that Roma serve as the city’s perennial “outsiders within” are thus very similar to those of the Jews in the ghetto era; in both cases their punishment for being “outsiders” is accompanied by claims to protect their culture by providing them with privileged spaces, ensuring that their outsider status is constantly dramatized and reinforced.
A further link to the Jewish ghetto are the economic motivations which can be glimpsed behind the more evident political utility of claiming to “solve the Roma problem”. On the surface, the “villages” policy in Rome makes little economic sense: one NGO estimates that the city government spent over one hundred million euro (around 132 million US dollars) to implement the “Nomad Plan” between 2009 and 2012. One of the most dilapidated “villages”, where heating and electricity are provided intermittently, walls and windows leak, and toilets and showers are barely functional, costs the city 1,360 euro (approximately 1,800 USD) per family per month (Associazione 21 luglio 2012a). In a city with a massive shortage of public housing, the expenditure of such vast sums of money to accommodate a few thousand individuals in structures which are temporary, inadequate, and require continuous maintenance would suggest that there are hidden economic factors motivating the authorities to persevere with such misspending. The liberalization of the real-estate market since the 1990s has resulted in intense commercial competition over spaces that until recently were considered low-value or wasteland. One striking example is the on-going regeneration of the former slaughterhouse complex in the newly-gentrified central neighborhood of Testaccio. A group of Italian Roma inhabited the space for over twenty years but were evicted in 2008 to a parking lot near an out-of-town mall once business interests identified Testaccio’s economic potential. A similar process occurred with real estate developments connected to the expansion of the Roma Tre university, which resulted in the removal of over 800 Roma from a nearby camp in 2005 to the distant “village” of Castel Romano. The rising value of land throughout the city has meant that the most economically viable spaces to warehouse the Roma today are in locations that remain unappealing to commercial speculators because they are unsanitary or distant from urban infrastructures. At the same time, the “villages” have the potential to generate economic advantages for various interest groups. There has, for example, been speculation that the positioning of the Castel Romano “village” in an isolated nature reserve is a step in a long-term strategy to re-zone the area for residential or commercial use (Rai 3 2008). Moreover, since the management of Roma “villages” continues to be outsourced to NGOs who thereby provide jobs to their members (in a city where unemployment among middle-
classes is rampant), the system creates potential for funds to be allocated to organizations close to
the ruling political grouping of the day.\textsuperscript{19} Given Italy’s long-standing political culture of public works
contracts being assigned to companies with strong political connections, the “villages” also raise
concerns about a lack of transparency regarding which businesses may be commissioned to build and
furnish the new structures.

Conclusion

What emerges from this discussion is that despite evident historical factors that distinguish Rome’s
Jewish ghetto from today’s Roma camps (different notions of the role of the state, different rights
and norms and a different arsenal of tools for exerting power over citizens), the concept of a ghetto
as a multidimensional device for managing social relations in the city is useful for understanding the
apparent chaos and contradictions in Rome’s contemporary camps. Wacquant’s view of
ghettoization as a multilevel process allows us to go beyond a one-dimensional view of Rome’s new
“villages” as spaces for simply isolating and confining an unwanted ethnic group and to focus instead
on the ways in which they function to serve diverse political and economic interests. The ambiguous
nature of the ghetto – its ability to both exclude and include, to provide rights and privileges while
removing autonomy and freedom, to recognize subjectivity while objectifying, and its ability to
intensify and relax these features according to the political moment – is reflected in the evolution of
Roma camps. Ghettos and neo-ghettos are not total institutions but rather malleable devices which
selectively make use of a stigmatized group for purposes that are largely external to the group itself.
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The term Roma is used here to refer to a very diverse population of Roma and Sinti groups of different origins. Although the term helps to simplify a highly complex situation, it is problematic for the same reason. Nevertheless, it is the name most widely used in the EU and by activists and NGOs. In Italy, Roma are often referred to as “nomads” because many Italian Roma communities were nomadic until WW2 and Italians widely believe that they still are, although in reality very few groups continue with this practice today. As the article shows, Roma camps take on many different forms. I refer to them generically as camps but where appropriate I also indicate their legal official status (illegal, tolerated or official/authorized). In the last decade state-built camps in Rome have been labeled “villages” (sometimes even “solidarity villages”) by the municipal authorities and I use this term, in inverted commas since they share none of the organic development of real villages, to refer to the camps that are formally labeled as such.

See for example a speech by Auschwitz survivor Pietro Terracina at the American University of Rome’s conference on Racism in Italy, Past and Present, November 2008. See also Gad Lerner’s article “Un altro censimento: 70 anni dopo” in la Repubblica 5 July 2008. On various visits to the Castel Romano “village” in Rome, the author was told “this is Auschwitz” by residents.

My fieldwork interviews with Roma living in formal and unofficial camps revealed a wide range of perspectives concerning the kinds of housing that are considered appropriate or desirable. Some Roma, including various community representatives, feel that the homogeneous, kinship-based, and protective environment that exists in some of the camps is preferable to breaking up and dispersing family groups in potentially high-risk contexts such as public housing projects. From this perspective, the priority is to improve conditions and freedoms in the official camps, allowing Roma themselves to decide on their layout, management, membership and regulations. For many other Roma, though, the camps and their related stigma are the primary obstacle to creating social networks with non-Roma, finding work, having an adequate income and accessing the material goods they aspire to. For them, leaving the camps and living in mainstream housing (especially independent homes rather than apartments in large complexes) is a key goal. These diverging perspectives are due in large part to the Roma’s personal histories and geographical origins. For example, recent arrivals from Romania have no family history of living in camps, having resided in standard housing for
generations. Views are also strongly affected by their current housing conditions: those who live in stable camps primarily made up of extended family have much less desire to leave them than those who live in camps where tensions between different groups are high. Many Roma whose settlements have been targeted for demolition in recent years have applied to be given homes by the municipality in the official camps as a preferable alternative to living in a constant state of precariousness.

4 By the 1700s, though, heavy taxation and other restrictions bankrupted many Jewish families, paradoxically defeating part of their financial function in the long-run (Stow 2007).

5 I use the term contraption here and elsewhere in the text to echo Wacquant’s (2012) use of the term in his discussion of the ghetto, but also because it conveys effectively the idea that we are dealing with complex, deliberately planned, and strategically manipulable devices of social control.

6 The ghetto received frequent arrivals from abroad and the community had five different congregations formed by Jews of very diverse origins. Despite the Catholic treatment of Jews as a single, homogenous group, Stow’s (2001) history of Rome’s Jews points to a far more complex reality.

7 For visual examples of such camps, see Calame 2010b.

8 On 21 May 2008, the newly elected right-wing national government declared “a state of emergency with regard to nomad community settlements in the Regional territories of Lazio, Campania and Lombardy”. This was followed by ordinances which delegated responsibility for solving the “emergency” to a Commissioner for each of the regions, with special legal powers to take censuses in the camps, intensify surveillance and police presence, destroy the illegal settlements and expel their inhabitants, and, where appropriate, build new legal camps.

9 In late 2011 the Council of State, Italy’s highest consultative and juridical body for overseeing the legitimacy of government measures, declared that the “state of emergency” concerning Roma was unfounded and thus that the entire legal framework upon which the “Nomad Plan” was based was unlawful, also rendering illegal the censuses in camps, forced evictions and the creation of new official camps. This did not, however, result in the immediate freezing of all the plan’s provisions; indeed, works to revamp the La Barbuta “village” continued well after the judgment was issued. In early 2012 the national government under Prime Minister Monti appealed to the Supreme Court against the Council of State’s ruling a final decision has yet to be reached.

10 This boast is also made in his campaign website: http://www.alemannosindaco.it/i-miei-5-anni/
11 Roma are by no means the only groups to inhabit Rome’s interstitial spaces. The city’s dramatic shortage of affordable housing means that many people, primarily foreigners, are forced to live makeshift homes.

12 Residents of one of my fieldwork sites have been formally warned of the imminent demolition of their homes four times in the last five years, creating a strong sense of insecurity despite the fact that their eviction continues to be postponed.

13 See for example Mayor Alemanno’s statement concerning the closure of the Tor de’ Cenci camp: “Nomadi via da Tor de’ Cenci Alemanno: ‘Riparte il piano’”, La Repubblica, 16 July 2012.

14 The informal encampments in which I have done fieldwork have all been laid out in ways that geographically reflect alliances, tensions and kinship relations within the community. While there is rarely an official ‘leader’ or representative of the whole camp, certain individuals or families have emerged as the most internally powerful or most active in interactions with the institutions. While this is also the case in one, fairly small and homogeneous official ‘village’, the others are divided into ‘sectors’ according to areas of origin, but the Roma have much less say in who they live near and cannot organize their social spaces to reflect their relationships.

15 Whereas I have been able to easily obtain permission from guards to enter three of these ‘villages’ I have been refused access to two others despite prior requests to the authorities. Equally, while CCTV is operative in most of the villages, in at least one of them, the surveillance exists but is rarely used. Complaints that guards and institutional representatives treat individuals and groups in different ways have been made to me in private by residents of three of the ‘villages’.

16 My use of the prefix ‘neo-’ follows Wacquant’s strategy of signaling linguistically how other urban contexts deviate in significant ways from the original ghetto, particularly in his discussion of hyper-ghettos and anti-ghettos (Wacquant 2008).

17 This estimate includes 34 million euro spent on special interventions following the declaration of the “state of emergency”, to which is added a further 20 million per year for ordinary maintenance costs, and 7 million for forced evictions since 2009 (Associazione 21 luglio 2012).

18 It should be noted that real estate businesses are widely considered among the most politically powerful lobby groups in the city, as an article by an association for protecting consumer rights underlines (ADUSBEF 2008).
In a country where youth unemployment is currently over 36% (ISTAT 2012), and is especially high among graduates, many seek work in the NGOs to whom the state outsources a large proportion of social services. While many of the individuals who work in Roma camps do so for reasons of solidarity and a desire for social justice, others do so primarily to earn a living (Jannello 2012).