

## **Between Surveillance and Exile: Biopolitics and the Roma in Italy**

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*Abstract: This article argues that the recent treatment of the Roma population in Italy can be best understood within the context of international debates on the rising use of biopolitics to govern refugees, illegal immigrants and other undesired groups. The study examines the evolution of Italy's policy of containing Roma in camps since the 1980s and of subjecting them to increasing surveillance, culminating in the drive to collect the fingerprints of the entire ethnically-defined group in 2008 and carry out mass deportations of foreign Roma. It demonstrates that although Italy's centre-right government has intensified official anti-Roma discrimination, these recent events are a coherent progression in a strategy of biopolitical control of Roma which has been evolving in Italy – and especially in the capital – for nearly thirty years. Drawing particularly on Giorgio Agamben's discussions of homo sacer and the state of exception, it is argued here that a campaign is underway in Italy to force Roma to reside in relatively safe but isolated state-run camps in which their private lives are under the constant scrutiny and control of the authorities, or to become internal exiles, bare life in a condition of constant flight from the police and vigilante attacks. The article emphasises that while Roma are increasingly subjected to the two polarities of surveillance and exile, the process of stripping them of their political rights and exerting power over their bodies is still evolving and taking multiple forms.*

Keywords: Roma in Italy; biopolitics; homo sacer; state of exception.

### **Introduction**

In May and June 2008 the newly-elected Italian government headed by Silvio Berlusconi was widely condemned for announcing its intention to collect the fingerprints of all Roma who lived in encampments and to deport undocumented ones *en masse*.<sup>1</sup> On the eve of the seventieth anniversary of the Fascist regime's introduction of racial laws, this was interpreted as a return to the explicit persecution of a vulnerable minority, alarming the Church, Italian civil rights activists and some members of the European Union (EU). It also reminded international observers that Italy is the only country in the EU which has actively promoted a policy of containing the Roma population in ghetto-like urban camps for almost

three decades (ERRC, 2000). Following a series of declarations of concern in the immediate wake of the fingerprinting policy and major arson attacks on Roma encampments in Naples in May, the attention of international organisations quickly receded, leaving the situation of Italy's Roma largely unaltered.

This article argues that, although the discourses and policies of Italy's centre-right government represent an escalation in official anti-Roma discrimination on a national level, these recent events are not an original phenomenon but are instead a coherent progression in a strategy of biopolitical control and gradual stripping of Roma's rights which has been evolving in Italy, and particularly in Rome, for nearly thirty years. The study first presents a brief history of the methods through which Roma have been subjected to forms of exclusion or containment since their arrival on the peninsula in the 1400s, in order to contextualise the contemporary situation and to identify some elements of continuity with the past. It then focuses on the evolution of attempts to manage the Roma population in Rome since the 1980s. The importance of a case-study lies in the fact that there was no concerted attempt to develop a national policy for the Roma until 2008. Moreover, the analysis presented here indicates that the Government's current strategy is largely inspired by approaches developed in the capital. The discussion of local policies is based on fieldwork carried out in 2008 and 2009 in two Roma camps in Rome – an unauthorised one which is slated for imminent demolition and an official one recently built by the city government – and draws on policy documents and declarations by local and national politicians.

The study demonstrates that the current mechanism for dominating Roma through their bodies occurs primarily through pressures for them to live in state-built camps in conjunction with the systematic destruction of the unauthorised encampments in which many have resided in recent decades. While the illegal settlements often involve dire living conditions, many have also provided residents with some stability, integration in local neighbourhoods as well as a degree of privacy and self-regulation. The new camps being created by municipalities such as Rome can instead be considered states of exception; spaces in which the normal rule of law is suspended and the inhabitants are stripped of rights enjoyed by those on the outside, where private and public domains become indistinct. These camps are officially portrayed as spaces of privilege, however, and are only accessible to individuals who have met the stringent bureaucratic criteria for residence there. While many other camp situations involve the elimination of political and citizenship rights (Rajaram and Gundy-Warr, 2004; Seshadri, 2008), these camps require evidence of a formal political existence. Thus, the exclusion from society which living in the camp entails hinges on a prior inclusion in the political system. However, the main privilege which these camps confer, and which ensures that many Roma

willingly move into them, is that they provide protection from what is effectively the only alternative for most individuals: life on the run. The stated goal of Italy's new government is the eradication of all unauthorised Roma encampments and their replacement by a much smaller number of official camps (Governo Italiano, 2009). The many Roma who are unable to provide documentation demonstrating the right to live in Italy face immediate deportation. In order to establish who may stay in the camps and who must disappear, in June 2008 the government initiated a census of camp-dwelling Roma in major cities accompanied by the collection of biometric data. The undocumented individuals who fear repatriation to states where abuse of Roma is widespread, such as Romania (UNDP, 2006; UNHCR, 2008), are now forced to live constantly on the move, hiding from the police, the army, and Italy's rising numbers of vigilantes. I argue, therefore, that Roma are trapped in a dual predicament of rightlessness; confined within the biopolitical space of the official camp or forced into constant flight from violence and, potentially, death.

### Theoretical framework

Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics provides a first step in understanding the forms of state control that have increasingly been exercised over the bodies of Roma in Italy. Foucault argued that modernity brought with it a shift in the way power operates: whereas previously the sovereign's power was essentially grounded in his 'right to *take* life or *let* live' – this was gradually 'replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death' (1976: 138). Thus state power began to focus on 'taking charge of life' (1976: 143), implementing techniques for controlling and administering the physical bodies and lives of the population as a species, monitoring their patterns of fertility, health and death 'through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a bio-politics of the population*' (1976: 139). This ever-increasing management of life does not mean, however, that the power of death disappeared. On the contrary, this biopolitical focus caused states increasingly to involve racism in their mechanisms of power. For Foucault, the function of racism is to separate and establish hierarchies between groups in the population and to link the biological survival of one type of people to the death of another; the more 'inferior' and 'degenerate' people are eliminated, the more the 'superior' group will become stronger and able to proliferate: "If you want to live, the other must die" (Foucault, 1997: 255). In this analysis, enemies are constructed as a biological threat to the population and provide the modern justification for the state to kill in order to defend its society. Foucault stresses, though, that this death need not be achieved through direct killing but also emerges in more indirect forms: 'the fact of exposing someone to

death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on' (Foucault, 1997: 256).

Foucault's analysis clarifies the historical changes in the types of power and punishment exerted on Roma bodies from physical violence to the contemporary administration of their lives. It also enables us to conceptualise the recent collection of racially-defined statistics on the Roma as a biopolitical technique for measuring a group which is increasingly constructed as an enemy of Italian society. As Padovan (2003) underlines, nowadays biopolitics is widely used to underpin the criminalisation and segregation of poor groups whose presence is perceived to threaten the wealth or health of other members of the population. The aim is to provide risk management. The collection of specific data, such as photographs and fingerprints, allows the state to establish who can be integrated into the community of rights and who must be neutralised or segregated: 'on the grounds that it is "very probable" that they will carry out deviant acts it is better to act preventatively and put any such individuals into a situation where it will be impossible for them to act in the first place' (Padovan, 2003: 487). The social order is therefore protected by enacting power over the bodies of those who have been statistically defined as a potential danger.

The Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben has built on the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics, contributing a new and extensively debated framework for analysing the exertion of state power over individuals' bodies.<sup>2</sup> Agamben (1998) argues that the Ancient Roman figure of *homo sacer*, a criminal whose punishment was banishment from the community though the loss of all political and citizenship rights – who could be killed without his death being considered murder – frequently reappears in modern societies. This person who is stripped of his political existence to become nothing but biological or bare/naked life is most evidently reflected in the status of Jews in Nazi Germany, but is also reproduced in contemporary individuals, such as refugees, who find themselves deprived of the rights and protection which citizenship confers. The fate of *homo sacer* is to live constantly on the run since he has no juridical status to protect him from violence or death.

Agamben views *homo sacer* as a paradoxical juridical figure in that his exclusion from the law occurs through his inclusion within it – it is his inscription in the legal framework that establishes his position outside the law. This paradox is mirrored in the role of the sovereign, the person or institution whose position is defined by the law but has the ability to suspend it. The sovereign's main power therefore is that it can introduce a state of exception; it can remove people's legal status, leaving them in a space of indistinction between law and bare life. Agamben argues that all citizens can be stripped of their political status and transformed into bare life at any time. We are all potentially *homo sacer*, living on the threshold between rights and non-rights, between our political lives and our

biological lives. He thus concurs with Foucault that the concept of biopolitics is essential to understanding how contemporary politics rules not only over citizens' legal existence, but over their bodies and lives; human life itself is politicised. He counters Foucault's assertion, though, that this is particular to modern states, arguing that sovereign power has always been founded on the ability to turn citizens into bare life. He also builds on a gap which he identifies in Foucault's work: the fact that he did not discuss camps as key spaces within which contemporary biopolitics is enacted. Agamben points out that when the sovereign constructs certain groups as a threat to the rest of society, they are frequently physically confined to a space where the normal rule of law is suspended. In his view, a camp is any place where people's political and physical bodies are made indistinct, where legality and illegality blur, where bare life is produced. Anything can happen there and 'whether or not atrocities are committed depends not on law but on the civility and ethical sense of the police who temporarily act as sovereign' (Agamben, 1998: 174).

This elimination of basic rights for certain groups occurs particularly in a situation of crisis which can trigger the declaration of a state of emergency. Of course, crises need not be real, perception is enough. As I will argue below, the systematic political construction of a 'Roma crisis' (*emergenza nomadi*) in Italy has provided the justification for declaring the need to contain Roma's bodies in state-created camps where their normal rights and freedoms are suspended in order to protect the population from the threat that they allegedly pose; where their physical lives become hostage to their political role. The authorised 'nomad camp' is in the process of becoming the only space in which the Italian government will allow impoverished Roma to reside legally. Roma are being increasingly forced by law into 'the state of exception' (Agamben, 2005) where they can become bare life at the mercy of the decisions of the police and administrators. Those who refuse or are not eligible to reside in authorised camps are condemned to eternal flight as modern day *homo sacer* through an active abandonment by the legal system which exposes them to extreme physical vulnerability.

Foucault and Agamben's works also contribute to highlighting the role that bureaucracies play in creating nominative categories through which groups of highly diverse individuals can be simplified into a depersonalised and homogeneous mass. The single feature shared by all Roma targeted in recent government policy is the fact that they live in unauthorised settlements because they cannot afford, or are discriminated from, mainstream housing. This condition, however, is enough for the authorities to identify them as 'nomads', implying that their spatial outsider status is determined by a cultural choice (Clough Marinaro, 2003; Sigona, 2005; Bravi and Sigona, 2006). This artificial categorisation is the

main instrument through which the Roma's depoliticisation occurs. By suggesting that they are culturally inclined to living in camps, the creation of expensive, state-run ones can be portrayed, in today's humanitarian political environment, as an example of the authorities' generosity towards and protection of a vulnerable minority. Individuals must earn this privilege, though, since authorised camps are never large enough to accommodate all locally resident Roma. They must demonstrate that they have overcome the many bureaucratic hurdles involved in obtaining a political status in the country as Italian citizens or legally-resident foreigners (Zorzella, 2005; Cerchi, 2009). Since they have always been constructed as outlaws in Italy, they must symbolically display their submission to the gaze of the law. By surrendering their alleged nomadic lifestyle (while continuing to be labelled 'nomads'), they are forced to sacrifice the freedoms and agency which other Italians and documented foreigners enjoy: the ability to earn an income autonomously, go to school, organise their living spaces and move freely. They must submit to the public control of their private lives.

The authorised camp is thus the preferred contemporary instrument of power for containing the threat which the Roma are perceived to pose to Italian society. I maintain, though, that it is only one element in a broader strategy for justifying a drive to make them disappear. It acts as evidence that Roma have the possibility legally to conform, and consequently reinforces the notion that those who remain outside the law do so through choice and must be eliminated by force. The official camp functions to turn those who are outside it into *homo sacer*. However, this article also highlights that the stripping of political protection occurs as a process which affects Roma in a variety of ways depending on their habitat and status; *homo sacer* and fully-protected citizens are two extremes of a spectrum within which lie diverse forms of vulnerability. The findings of the case-study thus concur with some critiques of Agamben's tendency to overlook the many differences and in-between states of powerlessness which can exist (Ek, 2006).

The question remains, though, of what purpose the gradual transformation of Roma into modern-day *homo sacer* serves. I will demonstrate that Italian politicians on all sides have increasingly used the criminalisation of Roma as a significant electoral device, presenting the group's assumed inherent *potential* for crime as the basis for arguing that they must disappear or be punished. Politicians can thus portray themselves as the protectors of the electorate's integrity and security. While Fraser (2001) argues that, in the United Kingdom, the state's provision of authorised camps serves to incorporate Roma 'into the safe and essential confines of the nation state' (Fraser, 2001: 587), I submit that the long-term result in Italy is the opposite: it forces individuals – many of whom desire that very incorporation – into a condition of perpetual nomadic

outsiderness. This then justifies the permanent construction of a state of emergency which enables politicians to demonstrate their ability more effectively to solve the 'threat' posed by the Roma than their predecessors did. The 'Roma problem' must therefore be kept alive; its total elimination would defeat the political utility of fighting it.

### Historical control of Roma in Italy

Very limited research exists concerning the history of Roma in Italy and more extensive work is needed in this field. This article does not aim to fill that gap; however, it is possible to suggest, based on the information currently available, that there are some historical continuities in the tendency for authorities to label Roma as criminals, frequently resulting in the exertion of power and punishment on their bodies. Although Roma are generally viewed as an ethnic group who migrated from northern India over a millennium ago, reaching Europe by the fifteenth century (Hancock, 1987; Kenrick, 1993), Lucassen et al. (1998) propose a less linear interpretation of Roma history, arguing that 'the Gypsies' were largely constructed by stigmatising policies from 1500 aimed at itinerants considered work-shy and criminals. Viaggio (1997) demonstrates that nomadic *zingari* began to be treated as a public danger and subjected to bans throughout the Italian peninsula not long after their first recorded presence there in 1422. He lists 121 laws issued between 1493 and 1785 punishing *zingari* for entering sovereign territories but also simply for existing – *essere zingari* – or because they were accused of causing epidemics (see also Aresu and Piasere, 2008). Thus they were punished for their *potential* to commit crimes, bring disease or disturb the social order and the punishments were enacted on their bodies: whipping, forced labour, torture, death. Their banishment from many states, their lack of political rights and their obligation to remain constantly on the move to avoid legally sanctioned violence against them reduced them to criminalised bare life: *homo sacer*.

The eighteenth century appears to have introduced a move from these violent methods of exclusion and discipline to more modern forms of biopower. In Italy there was a gradual decline in bans against *zingari*, while in Spain and Austria-Hungary drives forcibly to assimilate Roma by forbidding expressions of their culture resulted in children being removed from their families and Roma being prohibited from marrying non-Roma (Viaggio, 1997). While there is as yet insufficient information about Roma in Italy during that period, it is possible that analogous policies were applied in the Italian areas dominated by those two powers. The 1700s also saw a rising trend in scholarly attempts to understand the nature and culture of 'Gypsies' in Europe, which largely served to construct these very

diverse peoples as a homogeneous and deviant group, establishing a view of them which remains tenacious today (Willems, 1997). The Risorgimento and post-Unification periods in Italy, with their uprisings and social upheavals, saw a renewed focus on public order and control, with an inevitable rise in policing of 'vagabonds' and 'socially dangerous' groups like the Roma who were viewed as a threat to stability and legality (Viaggio, 1997; Bravi, 2007). In the later years of the nineteenth century, Cesare Lombroso gave scientific authority to the established view of *gli zingari*, defining them as 'a thoroughly criminal race' (1878, trans 2006: 119): lazy, cruel, vindictive and murderous, opening the road for further racist scientific research in the twentieth century.

Until recently, the predominant analysis of the Fascist regime's approach to Roma in Italy was that it targeted them exclusively as a problem of public order and not as a racial issue, unlike the Nazi regime (Karpatis, 1993). This perspective has been contested, however, by Boursier (1996) and, particularly, Bravi (2007) who argue that there were indeed attempts by Italian scientists to demonstrate the racial causes of *zingari's* criminality and nomadism and to underline the danger that such genetic faults could pollute the rest of the population. The fact that the Roma were not specifically included in the Racial Laws of 1938 and were not defined as a racial issue in subsequent legislation does not, however, exclude the possibility that more racially-motivated laws would have been introduced had Italy not surrendered to the Allies in 1943 (Bravi, 2007).

The unquestioned assumption that Roma represented a threat to public safety was in any case reason enough to persecute them. As early as 1926 the Interior Ministry declared the need to 'purge the national territory of Gypsy caravans which, it is unnecessary to underline, are a danger to public safety and hygiene due to their characteristic lifestyle' (Boursier, 1996: 7 – my translation). In 1940, the Chief of Police ordered the rounding up and internment of Italian and foreign *zingari* in concentration camps around the country (Boursier, 1996; Bravi and Sigona, 2006). Two camps were reserved primarily for *zingari*: at Tossicia in Abruzzo and Agnone in Molise, where the Roma experienced starvation, inadequate hygienic conditions and violent treatment by the guards, alongside attempts to re-educate them to become loyal Fascist citizens (Bravi, 2007). While those who were in Allied occupied areas after the 1943 armistice were released, unknown numbers of Roma and Sinti who found themselves in Fascist controlled areas were deported to concentration camps in Germany. Thus, the proliferation of camps as states of exception during the Second World War directly affected the lives of Roma in Italy. While the Italian camps for *zingari* cannot be compared, both in terms of their methods and final goals, to the Nazi camps such as the *Zigeunerlager* in Auschwitz-Birkenau (Bravi, 2007; Kenrick and Puxon, 2009), they represented the first example of Roma as a group being spatially contained in Italy as a preventative measure



against the inherent threat that they were deemed to pose to the rest of society's safety and integrity.

By the mid-twentieth century, therefore, two interlinked interpretative frames had crystallised about the Roma and informed most political and legal approaches to them: that their nomadism reflected an inherent rejection of sedentary society's rules and, consequently, that they eluded legal control not only through their mobility but because they were culturally (or biologically) prone to a criminal lifestyle. The early post-war decades saw the persistence both of public safety approaches and the introduction of legislative obstacles to nomadism. By the end of Italy's economic and urban boom of the 1950s and 1960s it was no longer logistically and economically viable for many Roma to continue travelling. At the same time, thousands of foreign Roma started to arrive from Communist countries where they had already been affected by policies of sedentarisation. Thus, by the 1980s, most Roma in Italy were no longer economic nomads and they were often concentrated in halting sites and slums on the outskirts of major cities. I would argue that their frequent and very visible poverty was perceived as threatening to the urban communities which were again prospering in Italy's second economic boom. The historical racialisation of Italy's Roma as nomadic deviants thus combined with a drive to segregate and criminalise this group of urban poor, generating a new form of biopolitics which merged the Roma's legal and biological lives: the introduction of regional laws from 1984 enabling the creation of special camps to accommodate the Roma's supposedly nomadic predisposition. This development was crucial for setting the groundwork for today's treatment of Roma. While those first camps cannot be defined as formal states of exception – they did not transgress normal law by requiring exceptional policing or limitation on inhabitants' freedom of movement – they were the first spatial technologies which contained the bodies of Roma based on 'knowledge' that defined them as culturally best suited to life in camps (Sigona, 2005). Initially, these camps were not officially intended to segregate Roma; the regional laws generally stipulated that they should be integrated into local communities and Roma should receive aid in buying a house if desired. In practice, though, funding was rarely sufficient to supply adequate services (in the case of Rome, the regional law of 1985 was not applied until ten years later) and the camps were usually created in isolated locations where they would not disturb local residents and were often subjected to police surveillance (Clough Marinaro, 2003; Sigona, 2005).

The rising numbers of Roma entering Italy since the early 1990s from the Balkans and Eastern Europe has caused a proliferation of spontaneous and unauthorised encampments (Caritas and Migrantes, 2006). Major cities have generally failed to keep up with these developments by providing the

conditions outlined in the regional laws and there has been a notable rise in shantytowns in officially uninhabitable areas such as along river banks, under motorway bridges, in unused parking lots and woodland (ERRC et al., 2008; *la Repubblica*, 7 May 2008). Romania's accession to the European Union in January 2007 has contributed heavily to this phenomenon as an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 (UNIRSI, 2008; Caritas and Migrantes, 2006) Roma have moved to Italy in search of improved opportunities and conditions.

### **Contemporary biopolitics**

Although the Roma population is spread throughout Italy, this section focuses specifically on the capital because it most clearly exemplifies the biopolitical turn which the management of Roma has taken in recent years. It is the city with the highest number of Roma inhabitants – estimates range between 7,200 and 15,000 (Comune di Roma, 2009; UNIRSI, 2008) – and, as the main destination for rising numbers of Romanian Roma, it has been the focus of various media alarms referring to an 'invasion' and 'threats' posed by these groups.<sup>3</sup> Until 2008, no explicit policy concerning Roma existed at the national level and different practices and regulations were applied in different cities and regions. Nevertheless, the discourses and policies which have emerged in Rome have a particular relevance for the national political scene. Since the introduction of direct election for mayors in 1993, prominent politicians have used the mayorship of the capital as a springboard to government or to showcase policies that might be applied nationally. In fact, the two centre-left mayors in power between 1993 and 2008 – Francesco Rutelli and Walter Veltroni – both resigned in order to lead left-wing coalitions in national elections. In 2008, Gianni Alemanno, a key member of the post-Fascist and now defunct National Alliance,<sup>4</sup> became mayor after a campaign which explicitly equated the Roma's presence with a security crisis in the city and promised to halve their numbers (he declared that there were 25,000 Roma in the city, doubling the more realistic estimates) through mass expulsions and forced relocations (Alemanno, 2008).

Many of the criticisms which have emerged since anti-Roma policies escalated in 2008 locate the main cause of these policies in the xenophobic positions of two parties which came to national government in April, the Northern League and the National Alliance (Famiglia Cristiana, 2008; ERRC, 2008). While I do not seek to minimise the direct responsibility of the Berlusconi government in aggravating the violation of Roma rights, I argue that these developments can be more accurately viewed as a linear progression in the systematic intensification of biopolitical control of the Roma which has been evolving since the proliferation of official 'nomad camps' in the 1980s and the rising visibility of Roma in the urban

peripheries. Moreover, the pattern of development of some of the discriminatory policies enacted on a national level since 2008 echoes strategies applied locally in Rome in the last two decades.

As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Clough Marinaro, 2003), Rome city government failed to tackle the increasingly crowded shantytowns until the late 1980s and early 1990s when they became the targets of neighbourhood protests and violent attacks. The first municipal responses aimed less at protecting the Roma than placating an electorate concerned about the reduced real estate value of residential areas near the encampments and the perception of rising crime. The obvious solution was physically to remove the source of the problem by demolishing Roma settlements and forcing their inhabitants to move into other suburbs until tensions rose there and new evictions were required. Thus began the Roma's enforced 're-nomadisation' as it became increasingly difficult for them to settle permanently in much of the city.

In 1993 mayor Rutelli officially recognised the need to provide some Roma with more stable living conditions while simultaneously damming the 'floods' of foreign ones arriving from the Balkans, many of whom were escaping the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. His first initiative was a census of Roma camps carried out by municipal police, which included collecting photographs of individuals who lacked identity papers. This represented the first gathering of ethnic-specific data on the Roma in the capital. Although the results were unreliable because many Roma boycotted the census, the statistics were used to classify them into two categories: those who had clean criminal records and residence documents qualifying them to live in purpose-built or 'tolerated' camps; and those without appropriate papers who had to be expelled so that they would not weigh on the city financially or as a potential public safety problem. As Rutelli's candidacy in the 2001 national election neared, he bolstered his campaign by intensifying his criminalising discourse and repeatedly referring to an *emergenza nomadi* (Gypsy emergency) to justify increasing expulsions from the city. Within the context of a vocally anti-immigrant campaign by Berlusconi's centre-right coalition, Rutelli sought to demonstrate that he too could respond to security threats supposedly posed by groups like the Roma. His strategy clearly conformed to what Padovan (2003) describes as the biopolitical management of criminalised groups: by presenting the Roma as a statistically and ethnically-defined enemy of the city, they could then be contained or eliminated for the benefit of the legitimate inhabitants. Rutelli can thus be considered responsible for having introduced at the local level policies which appear prototypes of those currently being applied nationally: the ethnically discriminatory collection of personal data, the definition of Roma collectively as a 'nomad emergency', and the alternative of living in approved camps or exposure to mass deportation.

Walter Veltroni succeeded Rutelli as mayor in 2001 and was re-elected in 2006 but then stepped down in early 2008 to head the Democratic Party in national elections. A main objective of his mayorship concerned investing in urban renewal in previously neglected working-class peripheries through improving local infrastructures and transforming wasteland and abandoned buildings into parks and cultural centres (Veltroni, 2006). Another goal was to foster positive multiculturalism and respect for minorities through funding intercultural projects and associations. These two aims proved to be contradictory, however, where the city's Roma were concerned. The often unhygienic conditions and overcrowding in the encampments, exacerbated by new arrivals from Romania, intensified local residents' demands that they be shut down. In the run-up to municipal elections in 2006, the Veltroni administration responded by demolishing various camps, publicising these actions as evidence of its commitment to improving conditions for voters in the peripheries and advancing the notion that territory was finally being returned to the local communities to which it rightfully belonged.<sup>5</sup>

Encouraged by the evident electoral success of defining Roma as a major problem for the city, and galvanised by the increasing visibility of Romanian Roma following the country's EU accession in January 2007, Veltroni stepped up the camp demolitions that year, triggering an open letter of condemnation by Roma communities which defined his policy a 'pedagogy of terror'.<sup>6</sup> In May 2007 he unveiled a 'Security Pact for Rome' signed in conjunction with the Interior Minister and Regional and Provincial authorities (*Patto per Roma Sicura*, 2007).<sup>7</sup> The pact proposed to advance the social inclusion of the euphemistically-termed 'people without a territory' by building four 'Solidarity Villages', each able to accommodate a thousand people, and to demolish all illegal settlements which would be replaced by parks and other urban renewal projects. One hundred and fifty extra police officers would be deployed to increase surveillance in the new 'villages' and fight organised begging. The text stated that city residents had a right to security and quality of life which were being undermined by people living in unauthorised settlements. While it avoided specifically naming the Roma, it was clear that they were the cause of the security threat, the enemy that had to be contained. The pact clearly made the racist biopolitical link highlighted by Foucault: the well-being of one part of the population was being jeopardised by the mere presence of a 'degenerate' group. This group therefore had to be removed from view. In Agamben's words, 'the *police* now becomes *politics*, and the care of life coincides with the fight against the enemy' (Agamben, 1998: 147, emphasis in original). Although the text claimed to seek their social inclusion, it provided no guidelines for achieving this. The contradictory goals of making the Roma invisible while advancing their integration became explicit when mayor Veltroni announced that the four 'villages' would be located outside the

city's ring-road where 'we will be able to work on their integration and schooling and where *they will have the least impact on the city's social fabric*'. Meanwhile, the city's Prefect declared that the ten thousand Roma believed to be residing in Rome illegally would have to 'leave the city and act like [proper] nomads' (Vitale, 2007, my translation and emphasis).

Veltroni's strategy of constructing especially Romanian Roma as a security issue and his drive to make them disappear led him to visit the Romanian government in June 2007 to encourage repatriation initiatives and invite Romanian police to help fight crime in Rome (*il Manifesto*, 26 June 2007; *Corriere della Sera*, 27 June 2007). The highly mediated murder of a middle-class Italian woman, Giovanna Reggiani, by a Romanian Rom in November resulted in a further escalation in evictions and police intimidation (ERRC, 2008), reaching a peak of one settlement demolished every two days. One eviction left forty children and three pregnant women homeless for over a week in the winter cold (*il Manifesto*, 21 December 2007; *L'Unità*, 20 December 2007). The murder coincided, on the national level, with the passing of a decree law (D.L. 181) which limited the freedoms of EU citizens by allowing for their immediate expulsion if there were 'imperative reasons of public safety' and which resulted in the deportation of hundreds of individuals, many of them Roma, in the following weeks (Sigona, 2007).

Thus, by the time the April 2008 national elections took place, Rome city government could boast that since 2001 it had evicted fifteen thousand Roma from their homes, six thousand of whom just in the previous year (*la Repubblica*, 7 December 2007). Many of the encampments had existed for twenty years and a whole generation had grown up there. Moreover, some of the camps destroyed had been built by the previous administration at substantial public expense. The fact that both spontaneous settlements and officially recognised camps were targeted indicates that the sole purpose was to eliminate Roma from residential areas. All the demolitions followed the pattern which has been repeatedly condemned by human rights organisations (Amnesty International, 2009; ERRC/OSJI, 2009) and defined as inhuman and degrading (ERRC, 2008: 27): the Roma receive little, if any, warning of the arrival of hundreds of police officers with dogs and bulldozers, usually at dawn. Within a few hours, their homes and personal possessions are reduced to wreckage. Nevertheless, mayor Veltroni repeatedly commended the police for their 'peaceful and humane' handling of evictions, consistent with his rhetoric of solidarity with weak social groups. Indeed, his administration systematically presented these demolitions as benefiting Roma by removing them from their terrible conditions (*Corriere della Sera*, 7 March 2007), but rarely addressed the question of what conditions they faced after the evictions. Homes for approximately 800 people were built, but the vast majority of the fifteen

thousand evictees faced two alternatives: move into overcrowded camps where the already precarious conditions would eventually result in their demolition, or disappear into the most hidden spaces of the city, such as among reeds along riverbanks, where they might escape further police raids on their shacks.

The thousands of Roma who did not reside in authorised camps thus effectively became *homo sacer*. Even those who lived in the previously 'tolerated' camps were subjected to increased police raids, the destruction of their belongings (including crucial identity documents) and potential deportation. In these spaces the police became sovereign, often carrying out abuses with impunity and leaving the Roma with no legal protection. The ERRC (2008) has reported that police regularly intimidate Roma by threatening to demolish their homes and expel them, confirming that the central power of the sovereign is to expose individuals to bare existence and the horror of life on the run. This heightened police presence did not, however, serve to protect Roma from increasingly frequent violent attacks against them by members of the public. For example, residents of the Ponte Mammolo encampment, which had grown due to evictions elsewhere, were assaulted in September 2007 with firebombs, iron bars and knives (*la Repubblica*, 21 September, 22 September). The event highlighted that a cycle was in motion: the mass evictions led to the dispersal of Roma shantytowns, which generated social and media alarms calling for the authorities to eliminate them before local vigilantes did so themselves, leading to further official evictions.

The Roma who were instead afforded the relative safety of a home in an authorised camp were exposed to a more structured form of biopolitical control. Although the four mega-camps planned by Veltroni were not all built, one 'Solidarity Village' was created in 2005 and it will serve as the prototype for future ones. Indeed, the current city government intends to build a further thirteen such 'villages' by 2010 (Comune di Roma, 2009). It is important to examine briefly the conditions in this 'village' both because they reveal the discrepancy between Veltroni's solidarity discourse and the extreme ghettoisation which his policy achieved and because they are indicative of how large numbers of Roma are likely to be forced to live when the new camps are created. The 'village' is home to eight hundred people and is located at Castel Romano, thirty kilometres from the centre of Rome, beside the Via Pontina, a high-speed road with the second highest number of deadly traffic accidents in Italy (*la Repubblica*, 8 February 2008). It takes approximately two hours to reach the city centre with public transport, and the nearest bus-stop is one and a half kilometers away, although Roma residents declare that buses rarely stop to pick them up. The camp is in a nature reserve and is entirely isolated from residential areas, shops and other services. It consists of poorly insulated prefabricated metal huts, laid out in a grid and surrounded by high metal fencing, with

no shade or greenery, or areas for socialising. Large parts of the plumbing and sewage system are defective and there is only one well that provides insufficient water for the needs of all the inhabitants, which they receive for a few hours a day. The water is undrinkable and there have been reports of residents contracting scabies and hepatitis (*Il Manifesto*, 4 November 2008). The lack of water means that the fire extinguisher systems do not work and at least one house has burned down due to an electricity fault.<sup>8</sup>

This 'village' provides a clear example of how the policies of previous left-wing administrations laid the foundations for the biopolitical control of the Roma which the current right-wing city and national governments have since built upon. The camp originated as a space in which to contain the physical bodies of a socially undesirable group, exerting public power over their private lives. From the outset the grid-like structure of the camp has denied any possibility for the inhabitants to lay out their homes according to their extended family networks and to create the flexible and communal living spaces that are typical of self-designed Roma settlements. Although there are official spokespersons for the community, the day-to-day management of the camp is delegated to a non-Roma organisation funded by the city authorities and any logistical issues must be approved by these employees. Thus, the camp drastically limits the possibilities for Roma's agency over their living environment. Moreover, its spatial isolation makes it difficult to maintain regular employment and to take children to school in the city centre every morning. Many of the residents, both children and adults, therefore have few alternatives to spending most of their days in the desolate environment of the camp and this ghettoisation is resulting in increased levels of vandalism and drug addiction. Any protest or breach of camp regulations results in the threat of expulsion which would condemn individuals to the life on the run discussed above. It contains a permanent police station and the residents' personal and vehicle documents – as well as their homes – are regularly checked.

From its conception, therefore, Castel Romano incorporated various features of the camp as the space of biopolitical control: police surveillance, isolation from the rest of society as a form of risk management, limitation of residents' freedom to organise their own space and movement, public control of the private domain. However, it is under the new right-wing national and city governments that it and many similar spaces have taken on the full characteristics of the state of exception. In particular, on 18 February 2009 a new set of rules was introduced for authorised camps – which now all carry the disingenuous label of 'villages' – in the Lazio Region (Commissario Delegato, 2009). It included: twenty-four hour police guards on the perimeter and inside the camps; permission to enter only for authorised residents carrying special identification cards; a log recording all movements into and out of the camps; no guests after 10 p.m.; the

possibility of introducing 'technological devices designed to strengthen surveillance and security'.<sup>9</sup> Permission to live in the camps is granted by the city government and is valid for two years for Italian citizens and foreigners with a valid permit to reside in Italy. Anybody with previous criminal convictions is denied access. Any breach of regulations results in expulsion – with the use of police force if necessary – within forty-eight hours, as does, ironically, a 'nomad's' absence from their allocated hut for longer than one month without the authorities' permission. Those who 'repeatedly refuse to accept employment' also face ejection. With these new regulations, the transformation of Roma 'villages' into states of exception is complete. Based simply on their ethnicised label as nomads, Roma are contained in spaces where the normal rule of law is suspended. Italian citizens and legally resident foreigners who are innocent of any crime are stripped of their constitutionally guaranteed freedom of movement, freedom of association, freedom to choose their own residence, and the inviolability of their homes and privacy (although the text explicitly claims not to discriminate on ethnic or other grounds). Now that only individuals authorised by the police or local government may enter, the possibility for journalists or scholars to document abuses is drastically reduced.

The process by which publicly-built camps in the capital have been transformed into spaces for containing and policing the Roma as a security threat thus began under the left-wing mayorship of Walter Veltroni. His was also the first Rome administration to establish a special agreement with the national government for funds and measures aimed at controlling the Roma. However, since the 2008 elections brought right-wing forces to both the municipal and national governments, the two have developed much more intertwined and mutually-reinforcing anti-Roma policies. The election campaigns of both Alemanno and Berlusconi's coalition continuously focused on the Roma as an *emergenza nomadi* and promised special measures to resolve the alleged crisis if they won. True to its pledge, on 21 May 2008 Berlusconi's new government declared 'a state of emergency with regard to nomad community settlements in the Regional territories of Lazio, Campania and Lombardy'.<sup>10</sup> The declaration gave the authorities extraordinary powers which are usually only admissible in the case of natural disasters, justified simply by the statement that Roma communities cause grave social alarm and are a threat to local security in those areas (ERRC, 2008). The Roma were thereby upgraded, discursively and legally, from a security threat to a security emergency. Based on the declaration, the government passed ordinances which gave the Prefects of Rome, Naples and Milan the role of extraordinary Commissioners for solving the *emergenza nomadi* with special powers to monitor all Roma settlements in the three Regions, introduce censuses and collect personal data including photographs, demolish unauthorised encampments and carry out expulsions of undocumented persons. A month later, Interior



Minister Roberto Maroni announced that the censuses would include fingerprinting all Roma in camps, including children (*la Repubblica*, 30 June 2008). In the following months, thousands of Roma in those regions were subjected to continuous police visits in order to count them and collect their biometric data, in the knowledge that their homes would soon be demolished and that those without documents could be deported.

The process of eliminating all spaces where the Roma escape the control and surveillance of the authorities is now underway in Rome. Mayor Alemanno has declared that by 2010 the only option for 'nomads' legally to reside in the capital will be in thirteen 'villages' like Castel Romano; all other settlements will be destroyed (Comune di Roma, 2009). Moreover, he claims that the city cannot accommodate more than six thousand Roma and the remaining twelve hundred counted in the 2008 census will be forcibly moved to other towns in the Region. This drive to replace all spontaneous encampments with publicly-built and heavily-policed camps is now a key element of national policy (Governo Italiano, 2009) and the initiatives in Rome have been described by the Interior Minister as a model to which other cities should aspire (*il Messaggero*, 31 July 2009). When this final step is completed the Roma will be definitively trapped between two alternatives: the state of exception for those who qualify for official camps, and life on the run for the thousands who lack the necessary papers and elude government statistics.

This evolution of anti-Roma measures entirely conforms to Agamben's (1998) analysis of the processes through which contemporary democracies begin to resemble totalitarian states. One type of 'knowledge' about the Roma – that they are nomads who constitute a major public safety threat – has been advanced by politicians on both the left and right, eclipsing all other potential perspectives. This alleged threat has informed every major policy initiative in Rome since the early 1990s and each successive failure to make the Roma disappear has resulted in an escalation of repressive measures. The recent official declaration of a state of emergency, taken to the national level, is the logical culmination of this trend. As Agamben points out, governments increasingly use their powers to declare states of emergency in order to enact decrees without subjecting them to approval by democratically elected parliaments. The Berlusconi government, acting as the sovereign, has thus circumvented the normal legal process and has granted the local and national authorities extraordinary powers which effectively suspend the validity of the Constitution and other laws in relation to an entire group of people defined as an enemy of the state. Agamben asserts that 'modern totalitarianism can be defined as the establishment, by means of the state of exception, of a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot

be integrated into the political system' (Agamben, 1998: 2). Extreme though the term may appear, I would argue that the Italian authorities have indeed declared a civil war against the Roma. Now defined as a threat to national security, their elimination is carried out through deportation, containment in isolated camps, or being forced into hiding. Those who remain visible risk exposure to pogroms such as the attack on the Ponticelli camps in Naples in May 2008 in which hundreds of local residents, including children, assaulted approximately eight hundred Roma, burned down their homes and hounded them from the area (ERRC, 2008).

### Conclusion

This article has sought to demonstrate that the recent actions of the Berlusconi government cannot be considered simply the result of the xenophobic views of parts of his coalition, but must instead be analyzed as elements of a more systematic erosion of Roma's political rights which has been advanced by left-wing as well as right-wing politicians for over two decades. The implication is that a change in government would be unlikely to involve a radically different and more effective policy approach. While it is widely accepted among activists and scholars that Roma's social exclusion cannot be solved by evicting them from shantytowns and reducing their public visibility, but rather requires a concerted policy to help them integrate into normal housing and the workforce, no representatives of national or Rome city government have seriously attempted such an approach. I argue that behind the apparent determination to make the Roma invisible lies a political interest in maintaining their visibility which inspires the authorities to persevere with blatantly unsuccessful attempts to solve the 'Roma problem'. In a society in which real security threats have become delocalised (Diken and Laustsen, 2006), a tangible, visible enemy is needed against which politicians can be seen to be fighting. Similarly to the treatment of *zingari* from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, the banishment of today's Roma from the city as a threat to the stability and integrity of the dominant society serves to reinforce the solidity of the non-Roma community. What is currently important is not the solution to a problem but the performance of sovereign power.

The brief historical overview indicates that there is some continuity in the political effectiveness of equating 'nomads' with criminals and enemies of the state who must be subjected to special methods of control and prevention. Although today's Roma are generally not nomadic, the tenacity of society's 'hatred against the mobile' (Diken and Laustsen, 2006: 444) is easily evoked by politicians in order to justify the drive to contain them. Moreover, the Roma's history would appear to confirm Agamben's argument that the politicisation of the physical body of certain social

groups is not an exclusively modern phenomenon, but is instead as old as the power of the sovereign to banish people from the political community, to create *homo sacer*. Nevertheless, Foucault's analysis that the methods of the sovereign have evolved from 'taking life' to 'disallowing' it, from putting people to death to less direct forms of exclusion and vulnerability through lack of protection, are visible in contemporary Italy. The state now exerts its power over the Roma as a mass, by collecting biological data about them and creating special technologies of power – camps – to control them as a category. It uses artificial terms (nomads) and generates unreliable statistics in order to produce 'knowledge' which establishes the highly diverse Roma population as one ethnically-defined group from which the rest of the population must be protected. Agamben takes the analysis one step further by highlighting the role that camps play as the spaces in which modern biopolitical control is most effectively exercised. While camps for 'nomads' are not the only type of structure for containing undesirables in Italy (Puggioni, 2006), Agamben's analysis of the very diverse spaces in which law and illegality become indistinct, has proved crucial for interpreting Italy's Roma policy not as a humanitarian one (as national and local authorities claim), but as a fundamental step in eroding the freedom of thousands of individuals.

Yet, this case-study of the evolution in processes for controlling and containing the Roma has also highlighted that the stripping of political rights and the exposure to conditions of physical and legal vulnerability occur in multifarious ways. Rather than defining Roma camps within a single paradigm, it is important to recognise the very real differences that exist in Roma's daily experiences of inhabiting diverse camp situations. While Roma in both unauthorised and official camps are largely powerless to defend and express themselves, and their physical well-being is at the mercy of the 'civility and ethical sense of the police' (Agamben, 1998: 174), there are clear distinctions in the relationship between legality and illegality in those different spaces. As we have seen, in unauthorised settlements Roma are vulnerable to vigilante attacks and the expression of police sovereignty through the destruction of their homes and possessions; however, they also retain some freedom of agency and self-regulation. In state-built 'villages' like Castel Romano, the police's power is exerted through systematic surveillance and limiting Roma's freedoms but residents enjoy safer and more stable living conditions. The discussion of the increasingly restrictive regulations in the official camps and the narrowing of possibilities to survive outside them has consequently demonstrated that the process for forcing Roma into the state of exception is a fluid one which is still developing.

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<sup>1</sup> The term Roma is used here to denote a very diverse population of foreign and Italian groups who define themselves as such or speak a version of the Romani language, or who are defined by the Italian authorities as *rom*, *zingari* or *nomadi*. For simplicity, it is also taken here to include Sinti. There are an estimated 150,000 Roma in Italy; about half are Italian citizens and twenty-five per cent are citizens of other European Union countries (ERRC, 2008). Despite the Italian authorities'

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tendency to refer to them as 'nomads', the vast majority are sedentary and those who do travel for work tend to do so on a seasonal basis.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Ek's (2006) discussion of Agamben's contribution and the analyses and critiques it has generated.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: L. Sisti, 'L'invasione dei romeni', *L'Espresso*, 26 July 2007; A. Ronchey, 'L'invasione dei nomadi', *Il Corriere della Sera*, 29 September 2007; 'Invasione criminale: Ai romeni il record di reati', *Il Giornale*, 28 January 2009.

<sup>4</sup> In March 2009, the National Alliance became a part of the People of Freedom led by Silvio Berlusconi.

<sup>5</sup> For example: G. Isman, 'Villa Troili, via allo sgombero', *la Repubblica*, 17 May 2006; 'Un parco a Tor Tre Teste dove c'era il campo nomadi', *la Repubblica*, 20 May 2006.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.carta.org/articoli/10069>

<sup>7</sup> Rome was not the only city to introduce a 'Security Pact'. Thirteen other cities applied similar ones from November 2006 (ERRC, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> See the study of habitation conditions at Castel Romano by LAN and Iowa State University: <http://www.castelromano-rome.com/> It should be noted, though, that in September 2009 the Rome city government started work to improve the plumbing system in the camp.

<sup>9</sup> The Via di Salone camp was already equipped with surveillance cameras in 2008 (Mangini, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> The declaration initially had a year's validity but it was renewed in May 2009 for a further nineteen months and the emergency powers were extended to Turin and Venice (Governo Italiano, 2009).