

## CHAPTER 8

# From Folk Devils to Modern State Devils

## The Securitization and Racial Policing of the Roma in Italy

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### Introduction

The Roma have long been constructed as folk devils across various European contexts. Their othering has pendulated between exoticization/romanticization, on the one hand, and their construction as criminal, deviant, abject outsiders to European societies and moralities, on the other hand. Their criminalization was buttressed by the nation state project of containing and controlling populations under one national government, but also by the development of capitalism, requiring a moored and disciplined labour force. The durable stigma of the Roma has been connected to the attempts of the state to control the labour force (Lucassen, Cottaar, and Willems 1998; Okely 1983). Roma constructed group identities other than national ones and practised forms of nomadism that ran counter to the two modern projects of the nation state and of capitalism: no wonder, then, in light of the social organization sustaining the development of capitalism in Europe, that their representation has long been, in moralistic terms, as a people in perpetual clash with the law and hence

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outside the realm of morality (Ivasiuc 2020a). Initially tied to their economic practices, nomadism became culturalized, both by some of the groups themselves and by the societies in which they live. However, with some exceptions, nowadays very few groups still practise nomadism.

Notwithstanding evidence that the overwhelming majority of Roma became sedentary, Italian popular culture continues to uphold the stereotypical figure of the nomad. This label is applied to people categorized, with a racial slur, as *zingari*. Some of them migrated from Eastern Europe to Italy starting in the 1960s, in search for better living circumstances, or, later, to flee the Balkan wars. Some others are Italian Roma or Sinti. From the 1980s onwards, the label 'nomad' percolated through state policies, leading to the establishment of *campi nomadi* as unique housing policy for precarious Roma.

This chapter deals with the productivity of the trope of nomadism in the Italian imaginary and traces the construction of the Roma from folk devils to modern state devils subjected to securitization and institutionalized racial policing. I borrow the term 'securitization' from critical security studies (Balzacq 2011; Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka 2015; Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998); however, I depart from the divergent emphasis of various 'schools' on either discourse or practice, and use it loosely to denote the way in which the Roma are socially constructed as a security threat and governed through security measures, apparatuses and practices (van Baar, Ivasiuc, and Kreide 2019). However, my chapter does not deal with Roma *people* but rather with the construction of a *figure*: the 'nomad', a figure crystallized from this group but whose social representation does not overlap, or only partially overlaps, with the real people who call themselves Roma, or any of the denominations usually included under this umbrella term, such as Khorakhané, Dassikhané, Khanjarija, Romà and others.

I understand Stanley Cohen's (2011 [1972]) theoretical contribution on folk devils and moral panics to be precisely about the construction of *figures* rather than about real people. By emphasizing the constructedness of the figure of the 'nomad' as folk devil rather than its overlap with the Roma peoples, I wish to avoid inadvertently reinforcing the centrality of the 'devilish' or deviant attribute to Roma identity. Indeed, many Roma do not recognize themselves in the figure of the 'nomad' in Italy, and they often mock the non-Roma for their ignorance on the matter. However, such narratives undeniably do have a stigmatizing impact on Roma as a whole, and, as I show in the chapter, the racial<sup>1</sup> policing of camp inhabitants certainly impacts their lives and livelihoods. So, the chapter both *is* and *is not* entirely about the Roma; it should be seen as a dialogic move between the figure of the nomad, on the one hand, and, on the other, the impact of moral panics, through institutionalized racial policing, on the real people who inhabit the camps in Italy.

Grounding my argument in ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Rome between 2014 and 2017, I will discuss how the representation of the Roma as essentially nomadic is intertwined with their perception as folk devils, and how

the technology of the camp turned the Roma from folk devils into modern state devils to be subjected to permanent and ever-increasing policing.<sup>2</sup> Drawing upon Mary Douglas's work on 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1991), I will show how the ambiguous imaginary of the 'nomad' was projected on a heterogeneous group of people that Italians did not know or understand, and then, by means of very material things like the *campo nomadi*, how camp inhabitants were produced as modern folk devils subjected to state policies that espoused the ambiguous imaginary of the deviant nomad.

### Fixating Nomadism: The Genealogy of *Campi Nomadi*

First, a note on terminology. Although *campi nomadi* has been translated as 'nomad camps', I choose to keep the expression in Italian; an abbreviated form from 'campi (per i) nomadi', camps (for) nomads, the term *campi nomadi* holds in its very name the ambiguity of the object it signifies. If one takes *nomadi* to be an adjective instead of a noun – as the apposition of the two terms would indicate – the exact translation in English would be 'nomadic camps', thus at once permanent because of their fixed structures, and transient because 'nomadic'. In its singular form, *campo nomadi* sometimes erroneously appears as '*campo nomade*', 'nomadic camp', confirming the linguistic ambiguity of the term in which *nomadi/nomade* is an adjective instead of a noun.<sup>3</sup> But a camp, as a stable and fixed structure, cannot be nomadic, and that ambiguity is often instrumentalized in far-right rhetoric. Consider, for instance, the right-wing soon-to-be mayor Gianni Alemanno, who in his electoral campaign in 2008 played with the ambiguity of the expression and his electorate's wishes: 'Are these nomads or not? If they are nomads, they should take [their things] and leave!' (Stasolla 2012). Similarly, a slogan sometimes surfaces in protests demanding the dismantlement of *campi nomadi*: '*Se sei nomade, devi nomadare*': if you are a nomad, you must 'nomadize'. Likewise, it emerges in the widespread opinion that the camp inhabitants should only be allowed to remain in the same camp for a short period of time, as was once stipulated in the law on *campi sosta* (transit camps), whose history I briefly trace in this section.

The first camps emerged in the mid-1960s as a result of apparently well-intended efforts of non-Roma lobbyists, particularly the Catholic charity Opera Nomadi (Nomad Works). Sensitive to culturalist policy frames, the charity wished to import the French and British models of the equipped transit camps for nomads, on recommendations of the Council of Europe regarding measures to protect the 'nomadic culture'. The latter was essentialized as the particularity of all Roma (Brazzoduro 2015; Colacicchi 2008; Sigona 2002, 2003, 2005; Tosi Cambini 2015; for other European contexts than Italy, see also Fraser 2001; Mayall 2004; van Baar 2011; Willems 1997). However, (semi-)nomadism among certain groups of Roma, Gypsies and Travellers was an economic strategy more than a cultural trait. Livelihoods such as selling self-made goods like

bricks, pots and pans, baskets, and wooden items for the household, providing services of maintenance to household objects, or collecting iron scrap and reusable items, were intimately linked to (mostly rural) economies of scarcity. The demise of those, with industrialization and the economic boom of the 1970s in the West and forced collectivization and enrolment in wage labour in the East also brought with it a reconfiguration of the economies of these once semi-nomadic groups. In Eastern Europe, moreover, assimilationist policies of sedentarization had already drastically reduced nomadism in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>4</sup>

The centuries-long Orientalist imaginary of nomadism exoticized Roma, constructing them in opposition and inferiority to the non-Roma culture, marked as sedentary (Mayall 2004). This imaginary had deep consequences for the politics and policies aiming at managing Roma groups; even though there is little overlap between the figure of the nomad and the camp inhabitants, it is not because the 'nomad' does not exist as such that the policies targeting camps have not impacted their inhabitants. In this sense, the camps have been understood as instruments through which the cross-fertilization of labelling, policies, and perduring essentialist imaginaries 'nomadized' the Roma, imposing a collective oppressive, stereotyped identity (Maestri 2017; Picker 2008; Simhandl 2006; van Baar 2011). For Italians, the camp came to embody Roma identity and culture to such an extent that those living in houses – estimated at three quarters of all Roma and Sinti in Italy – were no longer considered Roma (Clough Marinaro 2003).<sup>5</sup> This conception, subsequently, overwhelmingly informed Italian policies for those perceived as 'nomads,' as well as public attitudes towards them. On the one hand, it suggested the superfluousness of investing in the inclusion of camp inhabitants, if they were to be transient (Pusca 2010). On the other hand, it led to stigma that hindered the resettlement of camp residents in houses: landlords would rarely rent to 'nomads' and banks would never approve credit to those whose address was set in a camp. Consider Mladen, one of the Roma I interviewed. He migrated from Serbia in the 1970s, settled in one of Rome's tolerated camps, and for the previous 20 years had been lawfully employed by one of the non-governmental organizations intervening in camps in Rome. Even though his salary was paid monthly into his account, his bank never approved his repeated credit requests to buy a house, on grounds of his residence in a *campo nomadi*.<sup>6</sup>

The camp encapsulates ambivalently the logic of protection and that of confinement: set up to protect 'nomadic culture,' camps gathered together groups whose presence was undesirable in the urban space. Yet, at the same time, the supposed nomadism of the Roma was also subjected to domesticating interventions within the space of the camp: the projects implemented in camps since the 1960s were increasingly seeking to facilitate, then to impose, stable links with the territory through interventions aiming at promoting and facilitating employment and education (Bontempelli 2009; Daniele 2011; Picker, Greenfields, and Smith 2015). The camps became spaces in which social

engineering interventions combated the very nomadism they purported to protect, in a logic in which the Roma were seen ambiguously as dangerous but also as in need of help, both ‘at risk’ and ‘risky’ (Maestri 2016; van Baar, Ivasiuc, and Kreide 2019). This emphasis on fixating the supposed nomadism of camp inhabitants – but also on containing them – can also be gleaned from the gradual replacement of caravans in authorized camps by what Italians call ‘containers’: prefabricated metal or plastic huts designed to host families (Clough Marinaro 2015; Piasere 2006).

The putative hypermobility of the Roma produces perceptions of inferiority, abjection and danger (Coccia 2012; Hepworth 2012; Ivasiuc 2018; Piasere 2009 [2004]; Sigona 2002, 2003; van Baar, Ivasiuc, and Kreide 2019). They are othered as ‘matter’ ambiguously, yet perpetually out of place, hence dangerous (Douglas 1991): labelled as nomads, but confined in fixed spaces, they live amid European cultures in which spatial belonging and rootedness is a central norm structuring identity, politics and social relations. They are in the ‘grey zone’ of ambiguity where morality and the dominant norms and forms of social organization become dangerously negotiable (see also Harboe Knudsen and Frederiksen 2015 and the Introduction to this volume; Ivasiuc 2020a). Perpetually dislocated, potentially ubiquitous, and always in excess, they embody the epitome of danger to everything that is or should be rooted, fixed and orderly. The ‘hazy and incoherent category of “nomads”’ (Picker 2012) produces camp inhabitants not only as dangerous but also as impostors: the ones who, according to a neo-fascist supporter I interviewed during a protest against *campi nomadi* in Rome, ‘call themselves nomads, but aren’t that nomadic’ (*si chiamano nomadi, ma tanto nomadi non sono*)<sup>7</sup> become immoral tricksters – another recurrent figure in the repertoire of how Italians think of the *zingaro* (Piasere 2011). In this figure of the trickster, the ‘nomads’ acquire devilish attributes precisely through their capacity to question existing norms and seemingly refuse to subject themselves to the majority’s rules, or to any kind of authority, thereby threatening the established order (Ivasiuc 2020a). The inconsistencies and ambiguities that they are seen to embody in the oxymoronic figure of stable ‘nomads’, and their ability to thereby confound and contradict categories, produce an imaginary of wilful deceit.

Initially, the camps came as a response to this ambiguous securitization of the mobility of those perceived as nomads, translated in the idiom of humanitarian emergency (Sigona 2005). As long as – and, more importantly, because – social and humanitarian interventions were focused and embedded in the camp, their positive outcomes for their inhabitants could only ever be meagre and insignificant: ambivalent at best, if not outright detrimental; it is the camp itself that perpetuates the very root cause of its inhabitants’ othering, and often in the security key (Sarcinelli 2011). The depoliticizing effects of the culturalizing narrative of nomadism are the complete obfuscation of structural inequalities and the politics of ‘exclusive inclusion’ (Picker 2012), or, like Monica Rossi

(2014, 123) aptly puts it, 'the oxymoron of proclaiming inclusion while practicing segregation.'

Roughly between 1985 and 1995, a series of regional laws and regulations regarding camps were adopted in Italy. In Latium, for instance, law 82 of 25 May 1985 aimed to 'protect the identity of the Roma and to avoid impediments to the right of nomadism.' The first camps were established in the centre and north of Italy (Piasere 2006), at the margins of towns, in dubious industrial zones generally isolated from residential neighbourhoods, sometimes close to landfills and polluted areas, in an 'urbanism of contempt' (Brunello 1996). Their first inhabitants were Italian Roma and Sinti families, who, due to the chronic lack of housing, were constrained to share the camp space with rival families. Tensions on the spatial economy and political control of the camps amounted to conflicts, sometimes violent, and often mediatized, which further nourished Italians' perception of the camp residents as violent, uncivilized Other. These conflicts constrained the Italian Roma and Sinti groups to seek other forms of housing. Gradually, they left the camps to the groups of Khorakhané Roma from Yugoslavia, incoming from the 1960s onwards. These groups were engaged in a migration project misconstrued by Italians as nomadism, but most of them had most probably been sedentary since well before Communist rule, because of harsh sedentarization policies. In 1973, for instance, only 5 per cent of the Roma population in Yugoslavia still maintained a nomadic or semi-nomadic way of life (Barany 2002, 129), and this lifestyle, as elsewhere, was structured more by the economic activities of certain Roma groups practising forms of ambulant trade and service provision than by cultural underpinnings. A research conducted in Rome in the Casilino 900 camp found in 1998 that over 85 per cent of the Roma from Bosnia had previously lived in houses that had been destroyed during the war (Rossi 2006). Previously sedentary Roma became 'nomads' by residing in camps because other housing solutions were unavailable to them, and it is in this light that the crucial distinction between the *figure* of the nomad and the Roma must be understood.

Although the policy initially designed camps as *campi sosta* (transit camps, following the French and British models for *Gens du Voyage* and Gypsies and Travellers), they soon became permanent fixtures, 'durable socio-spatial formations that displace and confine undesirable populations, suspending them in a distinct spatial, legal, and temporal condition' (Picker and Pasquetti 2015, 681). Spaces of exception, therefore (Agamben 2005), the camps are transformative technologies of citizenship, producing the particular figure of the 'campizen'.<sup>8</sup> Camp inhabitants, denationalized and hyperculturalized through the perduring trope of nomadism, are not citizens but also not non-citizens (Piasere 2006): they are seen as 'imperfect citizens' (Sigona and Monasta 2006), a figure betwixt and between whose belonging to the territory is problematized and constructed as foreign. In the Roman peripheries, but also in other Italian cities, *campi nomadi* became, throughout the 1980s, a matter of concern

(Ivasiuc 2019), one of the main points of contention, and one of the most highlighted topics on the political agenda and in the media.

### From Moral Panics to the *Emergenza Nomadi*

On 21 May 2008, soon after its election, the fourth Berlusconi government declared a state of emergency in the regions of the three largest cities in Italy: Latium, Lombardy and Campania (Consiglio dei Ministri 2008),<sup>9</sup> this time in complete disregard of the legal stipulations that a state of emergency could only be declared in the event of natural catastrophes; no flood, earthquake or other disaster was at the origin of the decree. What was posed as an existential threat demanding extraordinary and urgent measures was the presence of informal ‘nomad’ settlements. The precarity of their condition pushed many of them to improvise shacks in the urban interstices and peripheries of Rome, Milan, Naples and many other urban centres in the country. The declaration of the *emergenza nomadi* posed that these settlements were inherently dangerous: ‘in reason of their extreme precariousness, [they] have caused a situation of serious social alarm, with possibly serious repercussions in terms of public order and security for the local populations’ (Consiglio dei Ministri 2008).<sup>10</sup> Invoking a vague but menacing ‘concrete risk that [the situation] degenerates subsequently’, the minister of the interior requested the adoption of extraordinary measures and the granting of exceptional powers to the prefects of the concerned regions. The issue of *nomadi*, a social problem of precarity, was thereby moved from deliberative politics into the realm of an exceptionalism legitimated by notions of diffuse insecurity ‘for the local populations’ and a sense of impending public disorder.

Tellingly, although these are not the terms consciously underlined in the decree, the state of emergency was formulated as a consequence of the ‘extreme precariousness’ (*precarietà*) of the settlements, and on the grounds of concern for the fact that the ‘nomads’ had ‘durably settled in urban areas’ (*nomadi che si sono stabilmente insediati nelle aree urbane*, my emphasis). The terms used in the decree betray the very contradictions encapsulated in the construction of the nomadic subject as exposed in the previous section: because nomads cannot durably settle, state action is required to remedy the transgression of categorical boundaries. With reference to the ‘particular urban structure of the city of Milan’, cited as the primary locus of concern leading to the *emergenza nomadi* – and, coincidentally, Berlusconi’s fief – the decree also states that ‘the boundaries of neighbouring municipalities reach an area very close to the urban perimeter of the region’s capital’, which makes it impossible to ‘adopt solutions aiming at a sustainable distribution of nomadic communities without the involvement of all local entities concerned’ (ibid.). So, in short, if one is to persist in the use of the euphemistic terms with which the decree is replete, a state of emergency was declared because nomadic groups in extreme



poverty – amounting in Milan to about 0.4 per cent of the city's population – had suddenly turned stable, settling in urban areas and provoking social alarm, which, in turn, was dangerous for the security of local populations. For someone unfamiliar with the ways in which those perceived as 'nomads' have been constructed and governed throughout the last 40 years in Italy, the decree would undoubtedly make little sense.

The emergency, granting more powers to the prefects of Rome, Milan and Naples, and a specific budget to undertake security measures for the containment of the 'nomads', was constructed in relation to their perceived excessive multitude and ungovernability. The measures undertaken were aimed at informal camps as places of insecurity and material embodiment of blight. The term *campi abusivi*, which designated informal settlements, already contained the notion of an abuse, a moral and legal transgression, and the measures produced through the *emergenza nomadi* decree aimed first and foremost at their dismantlement. However, without viable housing alternatives, the groups set on the move established informal camps elsewhere, only to be evicted again after a while. These circular eviction dynamics strengthened the perception of great numbers roaming the city. In the introduction to the third edition of his *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Stanley Cohen (2011 [1972]) notes how metaphors of 'flood' and 'invasion' populate the British media in relation to refugees. Colin Clark and Elaine Campbell (2000) note the same vocabularies applied to Slovak and Czech Roma in the United Kingdom (see also Chapters 9 and 10). In the Italian press, too, reports of an 'invasion' of 'nomads' surface regularly. In 2007, for instance, the press reported a politician's claims that Roma migration from Romania to Italy would amount to a 'veritable exodus' (Ronchey 2007). In Rome, some of the groups evicted from informal camps in 2008 were crammed in already-overpopulated authorized camps beyond the city's ring road, increasing conflicts and spurring many families to leave again; predictably, these created other informal settlements, which were, again, evicted. Through this politics of eviction, then, the Roma from informal settlements were largely 'nomadized' and kept on the move by the state itself (van Baar 2011).

Despite the impression of a rupture in the Roma-related Italian policies, the *emergenza nomadi* episode served to institutionalize and legalize a series of practices pre-existing this legislative act (Trucco 2008). In September 2006, the prefect and the mayor of Milan and the president of the Lombardy region signed a protocol of agreement in view of the implementation of a strategic plan for the presence of 'nomad' settlements, which was already seen as an emergency. The following year, the prefects of Milan and Rome signed the 'Pact for a Safe Rome' and 'Pact for a Safe Milan', stipulating the allocation of a substantial budget in view of combating economic and urban insecurity. The authorities had already undertaken measures against the perceived insecurity caused by 'nomads' and other immigrants prior to the declaration of the *emergenza nomadi*. In fact, in 1994, Francesco Rutelli, the mayor of Rome, already



spoke of an *emergenza nomadi*, and the trope of an emergency related to the presence of 'nomads' resurfaces regularly in the Italian media, in particular after episodes of moral panic.

Two episodes of moral panic around 'nomads' in Italy have been linked to the declaration of the state of emergency (Kaneva and Popescu 2014; Maestri 2019). The first episode, known as the 'Reggiani murder' in Italy, or as the 'Mailat affair' in Romania, concerned the murder of the wife of a military officer by a camp inhabitant from Romania. The story only acquired moral panic proportions once it became known that the victim of the murder was an Italian, instead of a 'nomad' woman, as was suspected previously (Naletto 2009). Initially a short notice in the local news, the event then made it onto the first page of national newspapers, leading to a clamorous debate on 'Romanian criminality' in Italy that elicited reactions from Romanian officials (Wagner 2009). Consequently, Gianni Alemanno, the mayor of Rome, called for an extraordinary meeting of the government, which discussed the possibility of applying to Romanian Roma en masse a decree aimed at facilitating the expulsion of EU citizens on the grounds of security and public order. This contradicted EU regulations on free movement that insist on the individual examination of cases to avoid the collective criminalization of certain citizens. The public debate focused on a zero-tolerance approach to crime, and linked security and public order to collective criminalization, enhancing the stigmatization of Romanians, and of the figure of the 'Gypsy' in particular, as criminal Others. In the days following the murder, the illicit camp in which the alleged perpetrator resided was evicted and destroyed in a performance of cleansing transmitted on television. In Rome, several episodes of violence against Romanians were recorded in the following days (Naletto 2009).

The second episode of moral panic happened in May 2008 in the Ponticelli neighbourhood of Naples, hosting a *campo nomadi*. A teenager girl from the camp was accused of the attempted abduction of an Italian baby. A mob subsequently attacked the camp with Molotov cocktails, following a failed attempt to lynch the girl. Notwithstanding the implausibility of the accusations, as well as the shady links of the affair to economic interests of the *camorra* – the Neapolitan mafia – around the land occupied by the camp, the girl was convicted and given a prison sentence disproportionate to the accusations, but also inappropriate owing to her legal status as minor (Rivera 2009).

The latter episode uncovers an old anti-Gypsy script that periodically surfaces in Italian media. In her remarkable research, Sabrina Tosi Cambini (2008 and 2011) studied 40 alleged cases of attempted child abduction that appeared in the media over a period of 20 years, and found that none was substantiated, and that all the ones in which a 'nomad' girl or woman had been accused led nevertheless to their conviction, solely on the grounds of their group belonging. The 'dangerousness' of the person is inherent to her 'condition of being a nomad', as a verdict would clearly spell out in 2008. This is part of a repertoire

of ‘truths’ upheld by common sense about the ‘nomads’ that goes unquestioned in courts. Yet, when the stories prove to be untrue, the media remains silent.

But the first episode of moral panic is linked to a new fear that builds on the repertoire of danger that surrounds the ‘nomads’ or ‘Gypsies’: the presumed increase of criminality in Italy due to Romania’s accession to the EU and the ensuing westward migration of many of its citizens, including Roma. Both episodes solidified the narrative of ‘Gypsy’ criminality. Yet, moral panic episodes such as the above, manifested through media representations, have outcomes well beyond the discursive dimension. The *emergenza nomadi* has material and institutional repercussions still acting today on the lives of camp inhabitants.

### From Folk Devils to Modern State Devils: Racial Policing in Rome

In this section, drawing on the material collected in Rome, I outline the institutional effects of moral panic around the ‘nomads’ and of the construction of camp inhabitants as criminal deviants in policies surrounding *campi nomadi*. By doing so, I show how the folk devil figure of the nomad is converted into a modern state devil, to be assiduously and ever increasingly policed and repressed.

In Rome, the measures undertaken by the administration of Alemanno with public monies within the frame of the *emergenza nomadi* regarded first and foremost the eviction of informal settlements in the city and the displacement of their inhabitants towards larger camps in the peripheries. Although Alemanno largely followed and intensified the policies outlined by the previous left-wing administration of Veltroni, one of the innovations of his administration was the setting up, in 2010, of a special police unit. Initially under the name Coordinamento Operativo Insediamenti Nomadi (Operative Coordinating Unit for Nomads Settlements), the unit was tasked with all actions of monitoring and controlling *campi nomadi* and carrying out evictions of informal settlements, as well as facilitating their transfer from the camps the administration intended to close towards authorized camps. Later, the unit changed its name to Unità Organizzativa Gruppo Sicurezza Pubblica ed Emergenziale (SPE) (Unit for Public and Emergency Security), which obfuscated the fact that the unit was conceived as a racial police unit, that is, a unit targeting a highly racialized group. That this form of racial policing went unobserved and uncontested testifies to the normalization of the ‘nomads’ as a population to be policed.

Later, the unit took on other tasks as well, such as issues related to unaccompanied migrant minors, or the informal economies of street vendors. Most of the latter are migrants, some of whom reside in Italy without documents and sell often counterfeit merchandise. Following investigations around the issue of illegal waste disposal and processing around *campi nomadi*, the unit also took on the task of inspecting scrap yards, focusing in particular on those which buy

metal scrap from Roma (both those who live in *campi nomadi* and those who do not), and closing down those found faulty in terms of fiscal and administrative regulations. The objective of the unit, as stated by one of the officers I interviewed several times, is to push the ‘nomads’ beyond the metropolitan territory of Rome while disincentivizing the scrap metal trade, an important livelihood on which many inhabitants of *campi nomadi* depend.<sup>11</sup> Finally, on the orders of the municipality, the unit deals with evictions of squatters, who may or may not be migrant. Under the direct command of the local authorities as part of the municipal police of Rome, the SPE is thus the police unit that carries out the eviction orders of informal settlements inhabited mainly by Roma, and monitors the official camps by carrying out regular patrols, but also targets forms of criminality that they associate with camp inhabitants, like pickpocketing in the metro or the scrap metal trade.<sup>12</sup> At any rate, the tasks of this police unit revolve primarily around Roma, migrants and squatters, and their informal economies and illicit settlement.

The unit is composed of 60 police, and some of them have long-standing experience of dealing with the evictions of informal camps (Ivasiuc 2020b). The commander of this unit at the time of my research, for instance, had been dealing with the ‘nomads’ for 25 years.<sup>13</sup> The discourse of the commander is hardly nuanced on the Roma camp inhabitants: ‘we have the problem of burglaries around here. We must presume it’s them [the “nomads”]. ... It’s useless to speak of integration, it’s useless to try and make them live like us Westerners, they live however they want.’ Despite his long-standing experience with the ‘nomads’, the commander confessed that he does not have solutions to solve ‘the problem’, insisting that ‘nomads’ cannot be governed, and that they are by nature and culture delinquent. Many of the policemen and women of the SPE share this opinion and support the claim that the ‘nomads’ are genetically deviant. The ultimate proof of their criminality is nomadism itself, taken, again, as the reified essential trait of the Roma: the police narrative insists that, if they did not have anything to hide, they would not constantly run away from the state’s gaze as they presumably do: ‘why would they want to be nomadic if they didn’t want to run away from the state?’<sup>14</sup>

From 2011 to 2014 most of the official *campi nomadi* in Rome were also subjected to surveillance by means of video cameras installed along the camp fences. The service was provided by a private company contracted by the local authorities to ensure security services during public events. During the same period, the local administration instituted in these camps what was euphemistically called a ‘concierge service’ (*servizio di portierato*): security guards paid by the municipality were placed around the clock in a separate ‘container’ at the entrance of the camp, with the task of monitoring the entrance and exit of camp inhabitants and documenting the movement of visitors. The security guards were also entrusted with maintaining order in the camp, and were expected to signal to the competent authorities any potential issues, establishing a link between some of the public services and *campi nomadi*: they called

the ambulance or the firemen when needed and, first and foremost, the police, with whom they were liaising extensively. The institution responsible with the organization and execution of the ‘concierge service’ was Risorse per Roma, a government business enterprise linked to the municipal administration of Rome, which established the headquarters of its security guards in an office of the SPE unit.

The guards signalled any ‘irregularities’ with regard to the camp. When families tried to swap containers following conflicts between families or shifting social relations in the camp, they were impeded from doing so, and the security guards would report on such movements. Also, any attempts to add improvised structures to the containers such as terraces or covered spaces to stock scrap metal or install summer kitchens would be promptly reported. The security guards would also report on acts of vandalism following which various equipment – the main entrance gate, fences, the ‘containers’, the structures in which took place social activities such as the kindergarten, etc. – needed repair, as well as thefts and the breakdown of amenities. In the event of violent conflict in the camp, some of the security guards resorted to various pacification tactics while waiting for the intervention of the police or Carabinieri, such as cutting off the electricity in the entire camp, which, according to one of the former guards, ‘always worked wonders’ in stopping altercations between families.<sup>15</sup> The cooperation between the security guards and the SPE was very close, and greatly facilitated by the fact that they shared office space. To the dismay of the SPE police, in 2014, the service was halted owing to lack of further funding after the *emergenza nomadi* decree was declared unconstitutional. Since then, the perception of camps as ungovernable spaces became, for the SPE police, but also for Romans at large, axiomatic, leading to ever more demands for repressive action. Noting that the police are ineffective in stopping the phenomenon of burning waste near camps (*roghi tossici*), several neighbourhood committees in the eastern periphery regularly demanded military intervention in camps (Ivasiuc 2019). In February 2019, such demands were granted, and military personnel were posted around the clock in the camp of Via Salviati, the oldest ‘tolerated’ camp in Rome.

### By Way of Conclusion: Moral Panics and Crises

From folk devils and moral outcasts, precarious Roma inhabiting *campi nomadi* progressively became the subject of securitization discourses and practices tackled through repressive state policies, and of outright racial policing in Rome. While conserving some of the old anxieties such as the urban legend of the baby-stealing Gypsy woman (*zingara rapitrice*), the image of the nomad as folk devil mutated into a new figure of deviance, illegality, and criminality to be policed. The institutional treatment of Roma groups followed suit with the decline of social inclusion interventions and the establishment of the racial police unit of the SPE in Rome, which continues the policing of camp inhabitants

unabated, even though the declaration of the state of emergency that made possible its establishment was found unconstitutional. The recent militaristic approach taken by the Roman administration following popular demand is one more move towards the stigmatization of camp inhabitants as permanently ungovernable deviants, proving, in the eyes of the public, that the treatment they deserve is one of repression and exclusion.

I now want to turn to Cohen's work, exploring the places where the story of the 'nomads' in Italy overlaps with the various figures of the folk devil and the social dynamics of moral panics that he describes. In the introduction to the third edition of his book (2011 [1972], vii–viii, emphasis in the original), Cohen writes:

The objects of normal moral panics are rather predictable; so too are the discursive formulae used to represent them. For example:

They are *new* (lying dormant perhaps, but hard to recognize; deceptively ordinary and routine, but invisibly creeping up the moral horizon) – but also *old* (camouflaged versions of traditional and well-known evils). They are damaging *in themselves* – but also merely *warning signs* of the real, much deeper and more prevalent condition.

Indeed, the figure of the nomadic Gypsy is a predictable candidate for moral panics. The omission of this important figure in Cohen's work seems then surprising, even more so because the stigmatization of Gypsies in Britain as anti-social and deviant goes a long way back into the Victorian era and continues unabashed in contemporary British media (Clark and Taylor 2014).<sup>16</sup> The old discursive formula of the *zingara rapitrice* coexists with the more recent figure of the criminal Romanian Roma. As Romanian post-2007 migrant, of course, the figure of the criminal Roma merges with the figure of the migrant that cannot be expelled so easily because of EU regulations. This imaginary feeds into the populist discourse claiming that the EU is an oppressive structure imposing criminal migrants on Western Europe. No wonder, then, that the *emergenza nomadi* irrupted as a legislative initiative in the spring of 2008, after Romania joined the EU: it agglutinated all the fears of loss of sovereignty that the progressive expansion, and, with it, influence of the EU on the national landscape triggered in the West. As an old frame for moral panics, the *zingara rapitrice* trope prefigures fears about the family as traditional social unit of organization, but also about diffuse existential anxieties related to the survival of the nation as a distinct identity holder: if a markedly Other steals Italian children, this endangers the reproduction of the nation itself, and of the 'culture of civility' that it supposedly embodies in anti-immigrationist tropes.

But the view of a marked Other as external to a supposedly homogeneous 'Italian' society is both empirically and conceptually misleading. Camp inhabitants have been part and parcel of the Roman scene for over half a century; many of them have Italian citizenship, and those born in Italy can hardly be

sent anywhere ‘back to where they came from,’ like the far right demands: they *are* Italians. This explains the apparent, hilarious and confounding paradox that the far-right nativist Matteo Salvini, whose well-known political slogan, ‘*Prima gli Italiani*’, demands investment for ‘Italians first,’ was greeted with enthusiasm in the *campo nomadi* of Via Salviati upon his visit in February 2016: its inhabitants are also Italians in need of investment. The camps are places of exclusion, certainly, but also places that unambiguously *belong* to the urban space of Rome, and that serve the purposes of reproducing the social order, of generating political capital, and of serving economic interests related to dynamics of gentrification (Clough Marinaro 2015). Focusing on camps as devices of exclusion and segregation *only* obfuscates their generative capacities in terms of the reproduction of social hierarchies, and strengthens the image of a putatively uniform space from which camps are surgically removed. Likewise, focusing on the dynamics through which a putatively uniform and personified ‘society,’ as in Cohen’s conceptualization, excludes those whom moral panics construct as dangerous and non-belonging misses the point that such processes reproduce a striated social order and its inherent subalternities.<sup>17</sup> The reification of society in Cohen’s conceptualization as an entity that excludes inadvertently reinforces the idea that camp inhabitants, like other figures of folk devils, do not belong to the ‘public.’

The case of *campi nomadi* in Italy and the episodes of moral panic around them also point to another shortcoming in Cohen’s analysis. Focusing on narratives and mental representations loses from sight the material dimension of securitization: the video cameras, the fences around *campi nomadi*, or the continuous presence of police cars at the entrance of camps solidify the image of deviance of camp inhabitants in ways that are just as – if not more – efficacious than media discourses. This points to the productiveness of a theoretical framework that includes non-representational analyses and a focus on the agency of objects as mediators of meaning (Ivasiuc 2019). It also points to the necessity of looking at episodes of moral panic as mere iceberg tips in wider and longer processes through which certain groups are maintained in a subaltern position: the video cameras and the fenced camps did not appear overnight following a moral panic, and the legislative act of the *emergenza nomadi* was passed in a context where ‘emergency’ is a recurrent device of Italian politics rather than an exceptional feature (Thomassen and Vereni 2014).

Lastly, I want to focus on the ways in which moral panic narratives are ‘merely warning signs of the real, much deeper and more prevalent condition’ (Cohen 2011 [1972], viii). It is, for sure, the ‘cultural politics of difference’ (Tremlett 2014) that is played out when Italians construe the figure of the nomad and the authorities subject the camp residents to racial policing. But it is much more than that. To return to the wording of the *emergenza nomadi* decree: precariousness (*precarietà*) can be cause for ‘social alarm’ and may put at danger the ‘security’ of the local populations. Unwittingly, such a formulation exposes the current processes of precarization in late capitalism. Yet these remain largely

obfuscated by the fact that the problem described is effectively transposed into the realm of public order and security. Fear of crime in Latium, it has been shown (Batistelli et al. 2009), correlates with levels of education, gender, economic status and overall involvement in politics. But the most significant factor influencing the perception of insecurity is not the occurrence of real crime, nor any other socio-economic variable, but the recent experience of economic hardship and exposure to precarization. Everywhere in the five urban centres of Latium, while 26 per cent of those who are *not* undergoing economic difficulties at the time of the research find the city rather unsafe or not safe at all, this rises to 41 per cent in the case of those who state that they face economic hardship (ibid.). The deeper condition, of which the moral panic around the ‘nomads’ is perhaps merely a warning sign, is one of growing precarization, paired with a crisis of sovereignty and national identity construction in a Europe that is reconfiguring its boundaries precisely around such issues.

In the last paragraph of his book, Cohen (2011 [1972], 233, my emphasis) intimates:

Ultimately, I am pessimistic about the chances of changing social policy in regard to such phenomena as the Mods and Rockers. More moral panics will be generated and other, as yet nameless, folk devils will be created. This is not because such developments have an inexorable inner logic, but because our society *as presently structured* will continue to generate problems for some of its members—like working-class adolescents—and then condemn whatever solution these groups find.

In the introduction to this chapter, I mentioned how many Roma groups forged for themselves ways of being in the world in contradiction and opposition to the nation state project, but also to the development of wage labour-based capitalism. In light of the racialized representations of the Roma as deviant Others – compounded by the stigmatized figure of the nomad that is imposed on them – and of the effect that policing them has on thinning their livelihoods (Ivasiuc 2020a, 2020b), it appears that we need to connect the dots between the institutionalization of the moral panics produced around the nomads and the emergence of what has been called racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya 2018; Robinson 1983): a process of (re)production of racially grounded social hierarchies accompanied by expropriations to the profit of the society’s dominant groups. That is, for me, the deeper condition that the securitization and racial policing of the modern folk devils of camp inhabitants both reflect and signal.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Following Angéla Kóczé (2018), I consciously use the terms 'racial', 'racialized' and 'racialization' instead of 'ethnic', 'ethnicized' or 'ethnicization' to point out to the constructions of the Roma as deviant others using racial stereotypes of inferiority and deviance, and in so doing to emphasize the racism – often biological – in which such constructions are grounded.
- <sup>2</sup> I have conducted six months of ethnographic fieldwork with a far-right neighbourhood patrol and a police unit. The data collected through participant observation was complemented by digital ethnography, archive research, police documents analysis, and interviews with Roma, mainly women.
- <sup>3</sup> I have sometimes encountered this expression in police reports, and in popular use.
- <sup>4</sup> I do not wish to generalize: in Britain, for instance, or in France, the Gypsy and Travellers, as well as the *Gens du Voyage*, still maintain nomadism as distinctive cultural and social trait. See also note 16.
- <sup>5</sup> In Rome, for instance, many Roma received social housing under the administration of Petroselli in 1981, following the dismantlement of the slums of Mandrione and Villaggio Prenestino, in which a share of the population were Roma (Salsano 2012).
- <sup>6</sup> Interview, 20 April 2015. The name is fictional.
- <sup>7</sup> Interview, 24 May 2015.
- <sup>8</sup> A calque of Piasere's '*campodini*', as opposed to '*citadini*' (citizens) as inhabitants of the city.
- <sup>9</sup> The state of emergency was later extended to the regions of Piedmont (around Turin) and Veneto (Venice). The decree was renewed every year until 2013, when, following litigation by the European Roma Rights Centre, it was abolished for its unconstitutional character.
- <sup>10</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all the translations from Italian are mine.
- <sup>11</sup> Interviews held on 25 August and 8 October 2015.
- <sup>12</sup> Informal camps emerge when groups of economically precarious people, unemployed in their countries and without other accommodation opportunities or the means to access them, settle under bridges and in other urban interstices and aim at acquiring temporary livelihoods, only to return to their countries for the winter. Some of them may be Roma, but others clearly

not; for instance, the Casilino 900 camp also hosted a Moroccan community. This serves to strengthen the point of the lack of overlap between the inhabitants of the camp and Roma background.

<sup>13</sup> Interview held on 17 August 2015. In the meantime, under the current administration of Virginia Raggi of the populist Five Star Movement, the commander was promoted to chief of the municipal police in Rome.

<sup>14</sup> Interview, 20 April 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Interview, 27 October 2015.

<sup>16</sup> It has to be noted, however, that the status of nomadism in the UK is a completely different, in fact almost opposite, story than the invented nomadism that I explored in the Italian case. In Britain, Gypsy and Traveller communities have revendicated the right to nomadism and often base their identity construction on this trait (among many others, see Acton 1997; Kabachnik and Ryder 2013; Okely 1983).

<sup>17</sup> I owe this theoretical point to one of the anonymous reviewers of my chapter.

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