

PLACES OF POVERTY, PLACES OF SEPARATION¹

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ABSTRACT: *The plaț is a word frequently found in the stories of the Roma who beg abroad. The term became more and more present in their speech as the begging phenomenon expanded and the number of persons requesting public pity in Western countries increased. The plațurile (plural form, author's note) are empty or marginal sites in (large) West-European urban centres, where the Roma placed tents or caravans for residence. Separate from the areas inhabited by the locals, the plațurile are territorial units as well as settlements specific to the Roma immigrants' culture.*

Keywords: *plaț; campi nomadi; places; Roma; segregation;*

After the fall of communism in the Balkans, citizens of states such as France, Italy, Spain, had to face the appearance of original habitational forms in the urban landscape. Thus, Roma groups living of illicit activities managed to gather in clusters of tents and barracks. Leaving their ex-communist countries, some of them turned begging in the central/most populous spots in the big cities into a way of subsisting. This kind of living generated and got associated with the emergence of new shapes in the urban landscape, difficult to integrate in the locals' culture and mentality.

The studies on the Roma, especially those dealing with their migration to countries like France, Spain and Italy, introduced the phrase *campi nomadi* with reference to the temporary settlements which house them, settlements emerged through the confiscation of vacant lots.

Confronting a phenomenon which has gradually developed, local authorities have to accept that the empty territories are going into the ownership of some new-comers, quite different from the society and culture of the locals.

As a control measure, the raids and searches conducted by the police are meant to monitor the evolution in these camps (an important aspect being the checking of the identification documents).

Sarcinelli (2015, 100-101) suggests a classification of the residence types based on the actors placed on one side or the other of an invisible but nevertheless existing border. "Il existe plusieurs types d'installations désignées par l'expression de *campi roms*: des camps autogérés sur des aires en périphérie des villes, créés spontanément par des familles, qui sont plus ou moins tolérés et font parfois même l'objet d'interventions sociales, jusqu'à ce qu'ils soient démantelés ou régularisés; des camps équipés et situés à des endroits choisis par les autorités locales, soit autogérés, soit soumis à règlement municipal ou gérés par un comité ou une coopérative sociale; des camps gérés par des organismes externes, mais qui se sont organisés au fur et à mesure comme des petits villages; enfin, des camps très provisoires de familles pratiquant encore une relative mobilité, qui sont entièrement gérés par les familles."

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Jon Calame and Thomas Richard (2010, 787), cited by Samuel Delepine (2014, 406) emphasize the group character of the isolated foreigners in the middle of a mass of natives. Although, formally, everyone knows the existence of the areas occupied by the Roma, those areas are separated by the society in the middle of which they were formed. “‘Ces enclaves ethniques officielles, isolées et coupées de la masse des résidents urbains par des barricades physiques et institutionnelles, aident le gouvernement italien à gérer et à contrôler une communauté rom perçue comme congénitalement malveillante et sans valeur économique.’”

Borders become visible not only by skin color, by anxiety about an undesirable group, but especially through the value attributed by natives to unwanted immigrants. Not only do they occupy a territory that does not belong to them, but it also represents an economic problem. “‘Elles correspondent bien à la notion étendue de ghetto ethnique définie par Loïc Wacquant: ‘un outil’ pour appuyer un ‘régime spécifique de domination raciale’, une réponse à ‘des faits sociaux dérangeants’ qui prend pour cibles les parias pauvres’” (Calame & Richard, in Delepine 406).

Nicolae Gheorghe (2012, 10) uses the word “nomad”, which explains the origin of the phrase. In Romania, the term is used about Gypsies only in reference to their ethnic history. In Italy though, the belonging to the Roma people attracts the “nomad” attribute and enforces camp integration. Therefore, in the countries where the Roma immigrants arrive, nomadism is seen as an actual component of their identification and it represents a stereotype with a negative function. “Under these circumstances, one can state that the overlapping between ‘zingari=nomadi’ is imposed, is prejudged, both by means of a popular stereotype and by the laws of public administration.”

Gheorghe (2012, 10) also notices the characteristic of an “exercise of freedom and personal responsibility” in the assumption of

the term nomad. “Looking at it from another angle, the people and their respective families had a certain degree of freedom of choice: I want to dwell and live like this. It is your right! So you have chosen to live like this and then your labeling as a ‘nomad’ is your option too, you cannot say that things are enforced upon you, that you are forced to live like that, that you are constrained by laws and administrative pressure, coming from outside, that you are completely dominated. In Romania, although part of the Roma complain about being discriminated against (by the state and the citizens), they are a recognized ethnic minority with all the rights and obligations derived from this. The choice of leaving to the West brings about a significant change, as the Roma lose the respective status. The establishing in *campi nomadi* means obedience to foreign laws, administration norms meant to regulate the camps, seldom authorized, more often seen as ‘tolerated’ or ‘abusive’.”

One should take into account the fact that N. Gheorghe’s remarks reflect the vision of the Roma activists: the immigrants are not concerned with their (il)legal status, but with the money obtained. Living on *the plațuri* can be tough (most of the times it cannot be seen as a living), still the Roma choosing it see it as worth the effort in hope of the amount of money they will gather.

Media Reflections

Although conditions in camps are extremely poor, the *plațuri* are a living alternative for the Roma. Given the acceptance of the unsanitary conditions in the *campi nomadi*, it is obvious then that the places they had left behind were even less suitable for a living. Poverty affecting a lot of Roma people and the lack of possibility for them to be integrated in the socioeconomic environment in the countries of origin, point the Roma almost unavoidably to begging in the West of Europe. There they manage to accumulate sums of money impossible to

obtain at home, at the cost of surviving in inconceivable circumstances for what we call a normal life.

A series of such cases are from time to time the object of journalistic inquiries. The printed and online media (in Romania but mainly abroad) presents impressive stories of people caught in the trauma of dislocation, between worlds and cultures which differ, fighting for a roof over their heads. The reports are merely pretexts for (rhetorical) debates on the thorny issue of immigration camps, generally of the Roma coming from Eastern Europe, on the necessity to improve the living conditions for the unfortunate. The description of such dramatic experiences undoubtedly touches on the problem of housing: newspapers publish photos of the *plafuri*, of the Roma living in improper spaces, in makeshift lodgings. The comments made by journalists and Roma people are extremely eloquent.

“Angelica is outraged. Only one offspring is left with her in the house on Munca street. It is a girl who worked in Italy milking sheep with her husband. ‘I understood that they are moving the bazaar here and we will be relocated on a field, uphill beyond Valeni village. No one will stay here, Miss! No one! I’ll take my kids, cause that’s all I need, and I’ll go to France.’ There, even if they will live in a shanty patched with rags picked from garbage bins, sheltered from the rain by plastic and cellophane bags, they will receive fried chicken legs from the Arabs and sweet bread from a merciful Romanian.” (Vdovii, 2011)

“The *plaf* they set their tent on was hidden behind some reeds in a park in the French capital. They found out from some Bulgarian Roma that they are about to be expelled and they left one day before. She was with her little girl and her partner. Not for long though: one month later they found their way back and set up another tent. ‘We saw the Bulgarians they was already there so we got back too. Police officers and guards would walk by and made no comments.’ The

new ‘house’ was held up by two sticks supporting bags, cardboard pieces and clothes. ‘We slept on the ground, on a blanket. Rats would jump over us at night.’ They will go back to those rats most willingly. In France, despite not having a proper job, they manage to earn even 30 euros per day. For that kind of money they will befriend even mice. ‘We used to work, but we were made redundant. I was a cleaner at some offices and blocks of flats, but they didn’t need me any longer. How was I supposed to live of 40 lei per month, the child allowance?’ (Vdovii, 2011)

“Torino is one of the favourite destinations of the ethnics from Caras who go to work abroad. Once they arrive in Italy, together with the minors they have in their care, they stop in the enormous *plafes* where they have arranged a provisional house in order to have a roof over their heads. From the stories of the ethnics returning home, we find about the wretched conditions. Rats roam about the place, and the so-called lodgings built from plywood, boards or cardboard pieces are at high risk of being wind swept. The nomad camps are an eye sore for the passers-by and serious hotbeds of infection.” (Bejenariu, 2014)

“A few dozens of Romanian Gypsies were evicted on Wednesday from a camp set at a junction in Creteil, in the Val-de-Marne district, at the outskirts of Paris, where they had been living for about seven months, announced Mediafax, quoting the local press. ‘We are looking for hotels firstly for the families with toddlers and for the pregnant women’, stated Laurent Godin, a member of a committee for Gypsy support, adding that ‘nothing is certain’ for the rest of them. Until late evening on Wednesday, 42 of the evicted Gypsies already had a place to spend the following nights, in hotels in Paris, Saint-Maur, Saint-Maurice, Villepinte (Seine-Saint-Denis) and Essonne. Somewhere around 20 other Gypsies were however left without a shelter.” (Neagu, 2010)

The xenophobic reactions of the majoritarians are projected against the camps especially when some of the inhabitants of *campi nomadi* are engaged in crimes. “The Times writes that in Napoli the locals have lost their patience waiting for the authorities’ measures of deporting the Gypsies to have a considerable effect. People have taken the law in their own hands. Tens of young people on scooters have thrown fire bombs on the Gypsies’ caravans. The newspaper states that some of the arsonists might have been stirred into action by the Neapolitan mafia, Camorra. Hundreds of Roma families are running from the area, taking refuge with their relatives in other regions in Campania or even with some Italian families outraged by the xenophobic outbreaks. The Independent notes that Gypsies have lived in Italy for seven centuries. 70 thousand out of a total of 160 thousand Italian Gypsies have Italian citizenship. But the situation deteriorated after January 1st 2007, when a large number of Roma people arrived from Romania, concludes the Independent.” (Atacuri xenofobe, 2008). Having a really low degree of school tuition and professional training, a part of them turn illicit activities into means of earning, finding a justification in the lack of opportunities in their countries of origin.

“Antoine Wirtz is another mediator for the Gypsy, a Belgian, who sympathizes with the fate of the Roma newly come from eastern Europe in huge numbers: It is tragic that many of them come here from Romania, but have no benefits here, no medical care, no rights and when they get sick they might as well kick the bucket... it’s horrible what they are going through.” (Alexe, 2012)

Therefore, the issue of the camps involves several actors whose interests clash. Besides the Roma trying to survive, the Western citizens want to have a safe and pleasant urban landscape, the authorities – order, and the Roma activists – rights for the people they militate for. Understanding their precarious situation, some Roma people

make efforts to build a good relationship with the locals and the police force. This means taking care of the place where they get shelter for months on end and also for maintaining a homogeneous group inside the camp.

“So we have a *plaf* where we live. So there live only us, people from the village Barghis. We rejected them (other Roma, author’s note). If we accept them, when the police comes, they...us. They ask for our ID, we have numbers at our barracks, they have taken our fingerprints from all of us too. If you told them: we are beggars and just look at these barracks, they are extremely clean, go to those who commit crimes (Roma from other counties, such as Calarasi or Valcea, author’s note), don’t come to us.’ (And what kind of barracks do you have? Who has built them?) - We have. (In the city, near the city?) - No, we are 1 km away from the city. If you have heard of the European Oncological Hospital. (So it is in the outskirts, isn’t it?) - Yes, pretty much outskirts indeed. It is near the entrance in Milan but we are very far from the city. So for us, we take away the garbage from there, we leave nothing there. We don’t burn them either. Cos we used to burn them a while ago and the boss warned us, saying: stop burning it because it’s toxic.’ (What boss?) - There is an owner there who has the land in leasing for agriculture. (So you are living on someone’s land then?) - Yes, it’s the land of the town hall. (How do they accept you?) - So, the town hall accepted us very well. Last year when they demolished the barracks for the reason with Valcea, they asked us, the social workers came and they say: ‘we shouldn’t do this to these boys, to tear apart their barracks’ (Did the carabinieri come to do that?) - No, no. The local police, from the town hall.

(What happened with the guys from Valcea?) - They have... beggars in the streets who make money for them, they’ve got a... (A net?) - Yes, it’s a net doing... (Bad things?) - Bad things. Yeah, that’s

something. (And then they dismantled your places?) - They told us: 'Are you Romanian?' the policeman, the officer asked the social worker: 'If they are Romanians, the car is here, there's nothing we can do. They will suffer (the consequences author's note) too like the others did. If they came, we tear apart everything.' Then we bought small tents like this and even the social worker explained to us: 'let there (pass, author's note) two weeks and return because there will be... an emergency when they cannot ask us to break your barracks again.'

(Emergency?) - Emergency, errr, for the likes of us, errr, who they call nomads. There they call us 'nomads'. Emergency is when outside, the cold comes and rains and stuff. (And then what do you do? Live in tents?) - We stayed for two weeks and then we reassembled the barracks. (So that means you can also live in winter there, right?) - Yes, it's really hot in the winter there, very... We make fire and not from wood. (What do you make fire with?) - With alcohol. Red methylic alcohol. We put a little tin and with two kilos in the winter we'll make fire all night. (Have you come up with this idea or how do you know to do that?) - From our ancestors. You know, also the old ones... (The old tent living Gypsies?) - Yes, people who lived there in tents before us, they invented it. 'Cos when the Russians saw us they would say: 'Hey, how do you drink this? It's got 90 degrees, they says, - You drink this? Hello, are you nuts? If you drink it, you'll die. This is just to make fire, that's all.' (Are there also Gypsies from Russia there?) - Yes, there are Russian Gypsies too. (Do you have connections?) - No. We don't have any business with them, we won't deal with them, because they are really, really mean people. Also the Serbians and the Bulgarians. (Do you mean Gypsies from Serbia or Bulgaria?) - Yes, yes, yes. They have a camp with caravans and such but we never go to them, no... (Do they live better having caravans?) - Yeah, they do live better, but we don't... mingle with them,

'cos they have other interests. (Other interests... How many of you there are from Barghis?) - For now there's 40 people left. (Only tent living Gypsies?) - Yes.'" (A. L., male, interview conducted by Sînziana Preda in Bîrghiş, Sibiu county, June 6, 2015).

This case highlights the better position of a *plaş* compared to others, such as those reported by the media. The explanation is to be found in the characteristics of the group occupying the land: if we are talking about a community formed before the settling on the *plaş*, then the concern for the living conditions is present. Of course, as illegal occupants, tolerated by the local administration, the Gypsies living in tents understood the significance of proper civic behaviour. This is also visible in the appearance of the makeshift dwellings which they strive to maintain (in order to show an acceptable image to the locals or, rather, to the authorities). Beyond such examples though, the territories defined as *plaşuri* and *campi nomadi* continue to be a problem from various angles: legally, socially, economically, racially, aesthetically, urbanistically.

Conclusions

Risen in the urban landscape of Western Europe in the last decades, the *plaşuri* function as spaces of separation and (self) confinement. On the one hand, they are landmarks of Alterity, of the undesirable ones; on the other hand, they mark territories where the Roma live according to their own style, following rules they know and respect.

The *plaşuri* hide the unwanted. *campi nomadi* are not a pretty sight: the less visible they are, the less they will disturb the city-people's view. They must become invisible to the contemporary, highly evolved society of the cities of the future. From an aesthetic and functional point of view, the spaces packed with barracks and tents do not match the city around/next to them.

These clusters appeared near cities or on the vacant lands inside cities, the proximity of the two worlds generating a connection of sorts, rejected by the citizens, yet searched/longed for by the inhabitants of *campi nomadi*.

The feelings of hatred and insecurity generated by a series of actions done by the Roma have a straightforward impact on their residence spaces. The association of the Roma with poverty and crime touches on their living conditions, the *plățuri* being

tagged as insanitary areas, messy spots with precarious living conditions, unacceptable under the terms of the Western European city high standards of living. Poverty and its association with an ethnic group turns the immigration camps (not just for the Roma) into a form of Ghetto. Therefore, the *campi nomadi* bear witness to discrimination (economical and implicitly social), to the fact that they are an emergency solution without integrating of the otherness, of the unwanted ones.

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