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*The Case of Roma and Gypsy-Travellers in Wales*

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# Space and Pluralism

**Can Contemporary Cities  
Be Places of Tolerance?**

*Edited by*

**Stefano Moroni and David Weberman**



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# Contested Identities and Spatial Marginalization: The Case of Roma and Gypsy-Travellers in Wales

*Francesco Chiesa and Enzo Rossi*

“The history of modernity is the history of the triumph over space.”

—Terry Eagleton

## 1. Introduction

The European Union has described the condition of Roma and Gypsy-Travellers (RGT) as one of the “most pressing political, social, and human rights issues facing Europe” (European Commission 2004, 10). Human rights issues, or indeed any issue of serious disadvantage, are often addressed with no more than a passing reference to the problem of identity. There are more pressing demands of justice—or so the story goes. However, that is often not the full story: the concept of disadvantage is widely seen as a way to range over debates on the currency of justice, yet many theorists have pointed out how the issues of identity and recognition are often at least as relevant in capturing important dimensions of justice (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007). What is more, taken in isolation, distributive and identity-based accounts of justice often pull in different theoretical and policy directions. In this chapter we would like to show that the disadvantage of RGT can be largely ascribed to a failure of recognition. More precisely, we try to show that the failures of policy makers in the accommodation of the needs of RGT is due to a mixture of hostile interests and the blanket application of distributive principles that are blind to the specificities of RGT identity. So we argue that, in the case of RGT, appropriate recognition should precede and inform distributive policies. Moreover, we aim to show that the particular form of misrecognition that affects the RGT community is largely due to an oppressive social and cultural construction of space.

This chapter is structured as follows. In Part 2 we explore the problem of labeling identities such as Roma, Gypsy, and Travellers, and the confusion around these terms—a confusion existing at the level of public authorities' official documents and statements. This is a preliminary relevant point that needs to be discussed in order to better understand any issues related to the case study, including of course spatial marginalization and housing issues. How are these individuals designated by public authorities? And how do RGT self-designate? What kind of gap, if any, do we find between external ascription and self-designation? What are the terms of identification? What are the relevant national/ethnic/cultural terms? Should we speak of settled, sedentary or nomad communities? In Part 3 we discuss the issue of spatial marginalization as applied to Roma and Gypsy-Travellers in Wales. The relatively small size of Wales affords the opportunity for a fairly detailed analysis, and the issue of spatial marginalization is particularly poignant insofar as the use of space is, of course, one of the central aspects that differentiate RGT identity. We briefly describe the situation (location, facilities, etc.) of the residential/transit/unauthorized sites where these people live. Part 4 outlines an hypothesis we formulate regarding the housing policy in Britain (with particular attention to Wales) and the process of settlement that has been experienced by many Travellers in the recent past. The hypothesis is based on the idea that even redistributive politics conceived with the best intentions—the provision of "traditional" houses instead of sites, in this case—could lead to forms of misrecognition. The fifth and final part briefly elaborates the theoretical foundations underlying that hypothesis.

## 2. Misrecognized Identities

The process of labeling identities is always a delicate one, but in the case of RGT it seems to require additional caution for at least five reasons.

(i) The radical heterogeneity of RGT communities in terms of ethnicity,<sup>1</sup> language, religion, historical backgrounds and cultural values including a nomadic or sedentary way of life.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The several subgroups of RGT communities include Roma, Sinti, Kalderaš, Lovari, Manuš, Romanichels, Kalé, Tshurara, Yenisch, Minceir (Irish Travellers), Nawken (Scottish Travelers), and the so-called New Travellers (people who live a (semi)nomadic lifestyle without belonging to any of the specified ethnic groups—a nontraditional traveling group seemingly unique to the UK). For a general overview on this "rich mosaic of ethnic fragments," see, for example, Liégeois (1985, 13–16).

(ii) External ascription and stigmatization has often played an important role in constructing RGT identities. The name “Gypsy,” for example, comes from “Egyptian”—when the Roma started arriving to Europe in the fifteenth century they were (wrongly) ascribed Egyptian origins. For some now “Gypsy” has become a pejorative term and the 1971 First World Romani Congress rejected the terms “Gypsies,” “Tsiganes,” “Zigeuner,” and “Gitano,” favoring the term “Roma” (O’Nions 2007, 4n21). Nonetheless, among many British and French Roma and Traveling communities “Gypsy” is still a common form of self-identification. The stigmatization targeting these identities explains the reluctance of many RGT to reveal their identity. RGT often fear that self-designating as RGT in interviews or as part of a census would expose them to prejudice and discrimination.<sup>3</sup>

(iii) An ahistorical nature has been often attributed to RGT given the oral tradition that characterizes most RGT communities and that resulted in a paucity of historical documents. This always nourished a mythical attitude about where they came from: it was said they were Egyptian, Indian, Papist spies, “Minions of the Moon,” survivors from Atlantis, one of the lost tribes of Israel, or, also, people condemned to wander forever the Earth for having made the nails for Jesus’ cross (MacLaughlin 1999; Bancroft 2005, 167).

(iv) RGT often are a stateless minority. This becomes relevant in a world where the human rights language used in international treaties such as the United Nations covenants and the European Convention on Human

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<sup>2</sup> The practice of nomadism characterizes some RGT in UK but it is no longer characteristic in other European countries. There is a broad spectrum of situations of being nomadic: some stop for the winter and move on in the spring/summer season. Some move every several years. Many of them move occasionally for fairs and festivals (the Stow and Appleby fares in UK are among the most popular). Others move about in nomadic occupations such as basket makers or coppersmiths never overstepping the boundaries of a British county. However, it seems that even when nomadism is no longer practiced it is still an important self-designating factor for many RGT: “[j]ust as settled people remain settled people even when they travel, so the Gypsy is a nomad even when not traveling. ... So it is really more accurate to speak of sedentarized Gypsies rather than sedentary Gypsies, for the former suggests a temporary condition for people who still consider movement meaningful and vital. Nomadism is a state of mind more than a state of fact. Its existence and importance are psychological more than geographical” (Liégeois 1985, 54). For some to be “Travelers” does not necessarily refer to a traveling lifestyle, but to the notion of dispersal or diaspora (Acton 1997, 166). For a critique of such “romanticized” ideas of traveling cf., for example, Alain Pierrot (2011, 65) or Jean-Loup Amselle on the association of RGT with “Bohémiens” (2011, 47).

<sup>3</sup> This of course makes collecting reliable data extremely difficult. Cf. the Council of Europe Roundtable (2000).

Rights and Fundamental Freedoms stipulates a common definable territoriality as a necessary condition in their definitions of national minorities (O’Nions 2007, 26). Moreover, being stateless is problematic in the conception of human rights for minorities, where any recognition of minorities and of their rights goes through a strictly intergovernmental politics in a way that “nation states make representation to other states when something affects members of their ‘nation’ who live as a minority in those other states” (Gheorghe 1997, 155). This adversely affects the stateless RGT who cannot count on a “protector-state” that would defend their interests in bilateral treaties.

(v) “Ethnogenesis” is the name we can give to the debate resulting from the acknowledgment of these problems (heterogeneity, stigmatization and stateless status) and the consequent need to elaborate (or “construct”) RGT identities capable of playing a political/emancipating role. The Roma scholar and activist Nicolae Gheorghe describes ethnogenesis as the process through which

a social group, previously occupying a despised and inferior position, moving from this position to some kind of respectability with a sort of equality with other social groups in the hierarchy of social stratification on the basis of a revised perception of their identity. The achievement of this movement is a project for us because of Gypsy experience of marginalization, of inferior social positions, of carrying a stigmatized identity in society. (Gheorghe 1997, 158)

According to Gheorghe, the segregating social identity of RGT should be replaced with an emancipating ethnic-cultural identity. In particular, RGT should be treated and qualified as a transnational<sup>4</sup> minority group in order to be effectively empowered.<sup>5</sup> Even those who acknowledge that constructing social and ethnic identities is, to a certain extent, a needed political crutch for having a powerful voice are skeptical about this transna-

<sup>4</sup> Gheorghe (1997) borrows the term *transnationalism* from Leslie Sklair’s sociological theory of globalization, which defines the difference between international and transnational corporations. International corporations work in many countries but have a base in one, while transnational corporations do not have any country base and work beyond the control of any government (Sklair 1995). Gheorghe applies this difference to cultural/ethnic groups, recognizing the peculiarity of RGT in their being transnational.

<sup>5</sup> Gheorghe (1997, 160) opposes the idea of a transnational minority to the national minority’s system that he sees as a “by-product of nation-state-building” and of the nationalist ideology he wants to criticize: “The fact that the nation-states are so generous now with these ‘minorities’ is just one device to reinforce the legitimacy of these states as ethnic states, states which actually belong to an ethnic ‘majority.’”

tional approach. The main problem is that it runs the risk of disregarding RGT heterogeneity and promoting a homogenized newly constructed ethnic identity excluding various subgroups (O’Nions 2007, 7).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, this transnational perspective entails a necessary disjunction between nationality and citizenship. The idea is that someone can be a loyal citizen to the state without any national attachment, but with a transnational belonging. This position has been strongly criticized, among others, by the German Sinti who remind us that the Third Reich’s extermination of RGT and Jews began with the revocation of all citizenship rights among “non-Germans” (where “German” was taken to mean “Aryan”).

The issue of ethnogenesis is, to some extent, unavoidable, and every RGT community in each country will have to construct its own politically emancipating identities. The criticism of the nation-state system along with the idealistic transnational proposal is surely an enrichment of the theoretical debate, but it does not seem to be helpful for addressing injustices suffered by RGT in a world in which, pace cosmopolitans, nation-states are still the main problem and the only solution to that problem: i.e., both the source of marginalization and the effective medium for justice. In the words of Donald Kenrick, “we have to study as it is now, not as it might be in twenty years time. This morning I was at London Airport to try to help a Polish Gypsy woman coming here as a refugee. There would have been no point my saying to the customs officer that this woman is a supra-national and therefore she has got a right to come in.” What he had to show was that she was a legitimate candidate for political asylum qua member of a persecuted ethnic minority. “So long as ethnic or racial or national minority status exists and gives a claim on resources, Gypsies will be proving their right to it” (Acton 1997, 166–67).<sup>7</sup>

These are some of the problems surrounding the characterization of RGT identity. They are problems that always characterize the definitions of collective identities, but in this case they seem to be distinguished by a peculiar complexity that makes the policy makers’ work difficult and often ineffective. RGT identity—like every cultural collective identity—is and will be, to some extent, the result of a social and political construction process (which in this case can be understood as a form of ethnogenesis).

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<sup>6</sup> The problem of artificial top-down social and political constructions of cultural and ethnic identities applies unavoidably also to national state contexts aiming to promote policies for RGT. But when the context becomes global and the minority transnational, such risk seems to achieve much broader and unpredictable potential outcomes.

<sup>7</sup> Think of how Rastafarians or Sikhs adapted their social constructed identity in order to fit the category of “race” in British laws.



Recognizing this should help to avoid the common and damaging stereotype of the “true Gypsy” or the “genuine Romani Gypsy”—an attitude leading to exclusionary processes vis-à-vis those people who do not fit within purified, reified, homogenized and immutable readings of cultural identities. This approach often leads to a damaging deconstruction of RGT ethnic identity, a deconstruction followed by a reconstruction as a socially delinquent subculture. RGT culture becomes a “subculture of poverty” and nomadism becomes vagrancy, a mere public order problem that challenges the legitimacy of the nation state and the private property rights system (McVeigh 1997, 17, 14). Such a diverse world is hard to describe exhaustively through the traditional categories of “minority” and “community,” but that difficulty leads to a downgrading of the cultural-ethnic dimension of their identities, and encourages a view of the condition of RGT as a mere issue of poverty and/or social deviancy. “In this way,” as Robbie McVeigh writes, “the solution of the problem of nomads becomes assimilation, they must become sedentary in order to be helped. ... The denial of ethnicity becomes a central means of supporting liberal assimilationist strategies” (1997, 17, 23).

Jean-Pierre Liégeois also describes how RGT are stripped of racial or ethnic identity for assimilatory purposes: “[t]hese Gypsies—now deprived, by this description, of roots and identity—then represent a ‘social problem’ of ‘re-adaptation’ that must be solved in order to absorb them into the rest of society ... . Gypsies are not defined as they really are, but as socio-political requirements say they have to be” (1985, 139).

Given the heterogeneity of provenience, history and tradition that characterizes Roma and Gypsy-Traveller peoples, it may sound artificial to bring all these peoples under a single umbrella and a single normative political approach toward Roma and Gypsy-Travellers may run the risk of being too general and thus ineffective. But we need to run such a risk to avoid the opposite risk, namely seeking “proper” identity distinctions, “genuine” cultural identity, and “true” ethnic tradition. This insistence on authenticity is widespread among political authorities and some scholars. It is an attitude leading to exclusionary processes for those people who do not fit within purified, reified, homogenized and immutable readings of cultural identity. For example, some social scientists have argued that Gypsies do not really represent one people with a distinct culture, history and identity but that they are a creation of government officials, social scientist and ethnographers. Scholars such as Judith Okely and Wim Willems argue that the labeling of some people as “Gypsy” by authorities and the populace has usually represented the beginning of a process of exclu-

sion, assimilation and persecution. The formation of the Gypsy identity, then, according to this perspective, would have much to do with a reactive process to persecution and with the need to articulate some common response to it (Okely 1983; Willems 1997). Arguments such as those proposed by Okely and Willems with mainly descriptive purposes have been used to manipulate the normative-political debate implying somehow that when a cultural identity is partially the intended or unintended result of politics of misrecognition and stigmatization, it cannot be worthy of protection and special rights in liberal democracies. Usually this approach leads to a damaging deconstruction of RGT ethnic identity, a deconstruction followed by a reconstruction as a socially delinquent subculture.

Some political and social actors also use such discourse about Roma and Gypsy-Traveller cultural and ethnic identities strategically, in order to delegitimize Roma and Gypsy-Travellers' requests. In statements of British politicians, press commentary and popular opinion RGT are often demonized as a pariah out-group. They are described as having no history, no tradition, no culture, no group cohesion apart from shared criminal ways of living; no identity apart from "that required to scam the unwary housedweller, no identity, except that assumed as part of a cunning ploy to claim 'ethnic rights'" (Bancroft 2005, 40). Whoever presents his/her own identity as a Gypsy is often blamed for not being a true Gypsy or a genuine Romani Gypsy but "only" a tinker, in order to exclude and to delegitimize the Gypsy-Traveller identity.<sup>8</sup> This tactic (the dismissal of Gypsy-Traveller (ethnic) identity) is sometimes used among local authorities in Britain who wish to avoid their obligations under the Caravan Sites Act of 1968.<sup>9</sup> They claim they have no Gypsy-Travellers in their area, or that those who are there are not "proper Gypsies" (Bancroft 2005, 42).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In the UK this exclusionary discourse of "genuine" Romani Gypsies as true nomads aims to exclude in particular New Travelers and non-Romani Gypsies, targeted as "tinkers," as the "dropouts of settled society."

<sup>9</sup> The Caravan Sites Act of 1968 required local authorities to provide sites for Travellers and brought in new laws to reduce the capacity for a Traveller to set up a temporary home on marginal land.

<sup>10</sup> According to some social workers and NGO volunteers we interviewed, this kind of attitude is progressively less pursued thanks to the work by charities and NGOs in informing and sensitizing British public authorities about Roma and Gypsy-Traveller marginalization. The dismissal of Roma and Gypsy-Traveller identity is a process well-known by scholars in RGT studies. To mention two examples only, the 1948 and 1955 Northern Ireland Government reports on Travelers "did not allow them an identity except as a social problem, that of itinerancy; [t]he government of West Germany after the Second World War refused compensation to Roma concentration camp survivors on the

The common idea that Gypsy and Roma are people defined more by behavior rather than ethnicity leads to the view that their condition is only a socio-economic issue. In the more sympathetic accounts the view is that those individuals are pushed into a marginalized position with regard to settled society by external group closure. If the account is unsympathetic they are portrayed as natural-born delinquents—people who fail to internalize society's key values. This has been named the “culture of poverty thesis” (Bancroft 2005, 44). Both attitudes are part of a status hierarchy approach “which places Gypsy-Travellers at the bottom” (Bancroft 2005, 44).

### 3. Spatial Marginalization of Roma and Gypsy-Travellers in Wales<sup>11</sup>

While still of part of the United Kingdom, Wales has held substantially devolved powers since 1999, through the establishment of a National Assembly for Wales—which means that in key areas, policy and practice will diverge between this region and the rest of the UK. The Assembly has law-making powers in twenty areas, including housing.

Roma and Gypsy-Travellers (RGT) in Wales are estimated to number around 2,000 people.<sup>12</sup> Most of them are concentrated where there are settled populations along the key transport routes in the north and south of Wales. Public perceptions of RGT-related issues are characterized by a lack of accurate information and the persistence of classical stereotypes about Travellers and their association with crime. Meanwhile, at the political level, we find difficulties concerning how best to identify and characterize the groups in question. As noted above, in public discourse in the UK (including Wales) we find frequent reference to the “genuine” Ro-

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grounds that they had been persecuted as a—delinquent—social group, rather than an ethnic group” (Bancroft 2005, 42).

<sup>11</sup> Much of this section appeared in Calder et al. (2010).

<sup>12</sup> Most of the data presented in this section is taken from Niner (2006), which represents the most comprehensive recent piece of research carried out on the RGT housing issue in Wales. When possible, the reported data have been counterchecked, and where necessary updated. Yet significantly, according to an informal desk-based exercise carried out in January 2009 with local authorities, the total best estimate—albeit still only an estimate—would be around 4,000 GT in Wales. Niner's estimate included only those GT living on sites, while local authorities estimated also around 1,800 GT living in “bricks and mortar” accommodation—see Welsh Assembly Government (2009). Thus we lack a fully reliable statistical account of the RGT presence in Wales. A census has been held in March 2011 including for the first time a “Gypsy-Traveller” tick-box in the ethnic origin question. The results of this census have not yet been reached.

mani Gypsies as the true nomads, in contrast to non-Romani “tinkers” and New Travellers who are identified as the “dropouts” of settled society and subsequently restricted from pursuing a nomadic way of life.

The Welsh Assembly government has recently recognized that Roma and Gypsy-Travellers, even when indigenous to Wales, have long been the most disenfranchised and marginalized group in Welsh society. The Gypsy-Traveller community experiences the highest level of inequality among all ethnic minority groups in Wales (see Welsh Assembly Government 2009). The Welsh Assembly is particularly concerned with the situation of Roma and Gypsy-Travellers’ sites and the standard of living of their residents.

There are at least twenty-nine RGT sites in Wales, providing around 440 pitches. Of these sites, eighteen are owned by local authorities while eleven are privately owned. In addition, there is an unknown number of RGT living on unauthorized sites, i.e., on caravan sites not specifically designated for RGT. To give an overall description of the RGT sites in Wales, highlighting—where it occurs—the spatial marginalization of these people, we will classify RGT sites as comprising: (i) residential sites; (ii) transit sites, and (iii) unauthorized/roadside sites.

(i) Residential sites are those sites intended for long term or permanent accommodation and are the great majority (92%) of the sites owned by local authorities. All sites have water and electricity supplies. Most of the sites are overcrowded: the “doubling-up” of families on a single pitch is common. Sites are likely to be located next to motorways, industrial or commercial land-use. Many of them experience problems of heavy traffic and/or litter/rubbish dumping in their locality and some of them are either on or near landfill sites. This of course often leads to environmental and health problems.

It is common to find RGT sites where no settled housing would be built:

Councils opt to build Gypsy-Traveller sites on marginal land partly due to cost restrictions, but the main motivation is that it is easier to get a planning application for a Gypsy-Traveller site when it is as far as possible from the settled community. ... Each time a site is proposed there is a high level of heartfelt and vocal opposition from the local community. A site proposal is usually greeted by the formation of a residents’ “Gypsy Site Action Committee” to oppose it. (Bancroft 2005, 68–69)

Most of these sites are located on the fringes of towns or villages. Only one site (in Swansea) is within an urban area. All but one of the sites is more than 1 km from a primary school, all but two more than 1 km from a

post office and all but five more than 1 km from public transport. As for sites boundaries, eleven sites (58%) are fully contained by clear fences or other barriers on all sides; eleven have some form of earth bank on one or more sides of the site; fifteen (79%) sites have trees and/or shrubs on the boundary and thirteen (68%) have some form of fence or wall along the boundary. Site residents have different opinions about site boundaries. Some perceive clear fences as tantamount to prison perimeter fences, while others see them as a form of protective screening. The “outside world” itself is often seen as very hostile; in almost every case, indeed, settled local people express resistance toward sites.<sup>13</sup>

(ii) Transit sites are intended for short-term use. The main problem with them is that usually they do not, in fact, fulfill this role. Due to the shortage of residential sites, transit sites end up being used for long-stay residential purposes. These sites are characterized by minimal, poor facilities. In some cases, they may well be defined as “slums,” i.e., according to the UN definition, any space characterized by “overpopulation, temporary or informal habitation, reduced access to running water and toilets and a vague definition of property rights” (UN-HABITAT 2003). What primarily characterizes slums is their invisibility; these sites are very often located in marginal, hidden areas of cities.

(iii) It is difficult to find precise data on the so-called “roadside” encampments. What can be said is that unauthorized encampments have very poor living conditions, but—in the absence of a network of transit sites—they often represent the only available transient accommodation. Most of the people living on unauthorized encampments are families waiting for a pitch on a residential site. Some are families visiting local families for a special family event or a holiday. Others are groups of RGT traveling from place to place for employment reasons. The difference between authorized and unauthorized encampments is even more evident since the issuing of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 which gave powers to local authorities to act against unauthorized encampments. It has been argued that, without the provision of new sites, the 1994 act has effectively criminalized the RGT way of life, due to a lack of legal stopping places (Morris 1999). Evictions are usually carried out so speedily that it makes it hard to get children into schools or to access other services. People living on unauthorized encampments usually live in a state of uncertainty. Often they gain a “month’s grace” to stay, but this itself is

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<sup>13</sup> Typically, RGT will see themselves as a demographic group against whom it is still “acceptable,” in the mainstream, to make racist remarks. See Niner (2006).

entirely at the discretion of the local authority in whose boundaries they happen to have stopped (Bancroft 2005, 54).<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. The Process of Settlement: Forced Assimilation?

RGT are undergoing transformation through a progressive process of being “settled” in permanent sites or housing. Even if affected by this partially forced process of settlement, many RGT families maintain a traveling lifestyle and do travel for certain periods within the year in connection with family or cultural events. It has also been argued that this process of settlement derives from a “sedentarist discourse” that constructs RGT “as a deviant with regard to the moral and social order” (Bancroft 2005, 4). There seems to be a widespread opinion that nomadism per se—an exceptional way in which to live the social dimension of space—does not constitute part of the ethnic/cultural tradition of RGT. In this way, “the solution to the problems of nomads becomes assimilation, they must become sedentary in order to be helped” (McVeigh 1997, 17). What seems to be at stake here is the cultural and social construction of space, a construction that affects marginalized groups. This might be taken as an example of how, as Bancroft puts it, “[m]odernity creates spatial structures in which power relations are implicated” and establishes modernity’s other (2005, 51). Along the same lines, J. C. Scott observed how one of the ways in which the modern state asserts its authority is by making the human and even the natural world “legible” through the prescribed organization of physical space (1998). As the RGT case shows, such legibility is bound up with a drive to impose the state’s authority through a process of homogenization of the citizenry.

With the passing of the Caravan Sites Act of 1968 the viability of a roadside existence was dramatically reduced, with the UK government openly hoping that Gypsies and other traveling people become completely integrated among the settled population. It required local authorities to provide sites for Travellers—few initially did—and also brought in new laws to reduce the capacity of Travellers for setting up a temporary home on marginal land (Project 35 Architects 2010, 40, 43).

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<sup>14</sup> Some local authorities have created set procedures for Gypsy-Travelers while others “deal with it on a purely ad hoc basis. As a result there is a great deal of uncertainty, with Gypsy-Travellers ... commonly subject to harassment and forced movement” (Bancroft 2005, 54).

Some RGT interviewed about the possibility of moving to apartments have expressed the fear that this change could lead to a breaking down of patriarchal family unity with the all network of solidarity and mutual assistance that this involves. Other fears are also present: the fear of entering into close contact with a perceived hostile external world, the fear of losing the all open-air physical space in which they celebrate religious rites and social events and undertake traditional crafts such as metallurgy and the keeping of their animals. According to Cassie Marie McDonagh (an Irish Traveller) “without more suitable sites, even more people will move into houses. The government is removing targets obliging local authorities to provide those suitable sites. There was a time when everyone was together... The children played together, we built fires, sang songs. Soon that way of life may be gone” (Muir 2010, 13).

RGT who must stop by roadsides in UK usually prefer hidden places in order to minimize the reaction of the local police and people they always attract. However, the extent to which they can make use of these places has shrunk enormously in particular since the introduction of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 that asserted a “robust policing of space” (Bancroft 2005, 57) preventing certain gatherings and movements such as fairs and festivals that represent important aspects for RGT social life.<sup>15</sup>

The attempt to sedentarize Roma and Gypsy-Travellers pursued by national and local authorities in Britain has led to a creation of networks of official sites with the intention of bringing nomadism to an end. This means integrating—or even assimilating—them into settled life. These council sites, owned and managed by local authorities, were built for the most part under the auspices of the 1968 Caravan Sites Act, which required local authorities in England and Wales to provide for Gypsy-Travellers “residing in or resorting to” their area.<sup>16</sup>

There was and is an expectation among some government officials that Gypsy-Travellers who have lived on a site for a large part of their lives would move into housing. It was felt that there was no difference between living in a trailer on the same pitch for years and moving into a house. For

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<sup>15</sup> Fairs “are times for exchanging both goods and information, news, taking part in competition and forming and cementing relationships. They renew and revitalize the complex set of social and economic relationships which underpin Gypsy-Traveller society. However, all the Gypsy-Traveller fairs are coming under increasing pressure, mainly from councils who would generally prefer it if Gypsy-Travellers did not occupy their town centres” (Bancroft 2005, 54).

<sup>16</sup> Actually, most of the sites were built a decade after the passing of the Caravan Sites Act when in 1979 the central government introduced a grant for site building.

many Gypsy-Travellers, however, there still was a great difference between the two. They feel that moving into housing permanently it is dangerous for their identity. (Bancroft 2005, 71)

So, although these sites have been considered an achievement by some Travellers, many others are very critical of the British site system, “often expressing their misgivings in terms like “Being here is like living in a house”; “You can’t really travel if you’re in one of these places” (Bancroft 2005, 65). Or again: “The council site is almost as bad as being in a house. When they built it they didn’t think of young folk. It’s boring, ten miles from the city and two miles to a wee village with one shop” (Claire); “It’s not really travelling [living on a council site]. There’s no community, everyone’s out for themselves” (Susan, Scottish Traveller); “It’s almost like being settled” (Pat) (Bancroft 2005, 70).

Feelings of depression and isolation seem to be common experiences among some of those RGT who move to housing. Not surprisingly many of them keep living in houses only temporarily. In the words of a social worker: “The Health Visitors get them into the house, but then their brief ends, but that’s when they need you the most. They get into the house, feel imprisoned, don’t get on with neighbors. It’s a very isolating environment for them. The only solution for them is to go back on the road (‘Penny,’ Voluntary Sector worker)” (Bancroft 2005, 70).

There is enough evidence that RGT have been the object of a number of forces which have restricted their traveling, oppressing them in a way uneasy to address. Perhaps more than any other kind of oppression, this “illustrates the complexity and contradictions of the race/class nexus” (McVeigh 1997, 8). Robbie McVeigh claims that RGT social and political disadvantage depends on the cultural hegemony of sedentarism defined as “that system of ideas and practices which serves to normalize and reproduce sedentary modes of existence and pathologize and repress nomadic modes of existence.” It follows that the very existence of Gypsies and New Travellers challenges this hegemonic equation of “civilization” and “sedentarization,” the idea of History as the victory of sedentarism over nomadism. Thus, sedentarism can be seen as a “specific form of oppression, like racism or sexism” (McVeigh 1997, 9, 13, 33).

As noted above, the denial of the legitimacy of nomadic lifestyles leads to present the problem as a mere “poverty issue” that needs only distributive and assimilationist policies. The recognition paradigm on which these redistributive policies are grounded is arguably that of a low-status ethnic group. So, even if there are many radical differences among RGT, a common experience of marginalization and stigmatization as a



paradigmatic outsider group seems to emerge—a commonality that somehow spans the many differences. In the next part we will briefly outline some of the theoretical underpinnings of such a shift from redistributive to recognition-based responses to the plight of RGT.

### **5. Concluding Observations: Recognition, Identity and Self-respect**

Public recognition of different belongings is surely instrumental for the exercise of individual autonomy, as Kymlicka (1989) has shown. But it is so for the deeper reason that thorough the recognition of their cultural membership individuals acquire self-respect and self-esteem which are the basic components of moral and political identities (Audard 2008, 135–36). This is something that affects the constitution of the self and frames individual personality. Put another way, individual self-respect and self-esteem need “collective esteem” in order to be nourished: “The prosperity of the culture is important to the well-being of its members. If the culture is decaying, or it is persecuted or discriminated against, the options and opportunities open to its members will shrink, become less attractive, and their pursuit less likely to be successful” (Margalit and Raz 1995, 87). Conversely, when this recognition process does not take place “a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves” (Taylor 1994, 25). People who have suffered misrecognition tend to internalize a derogatory image of themselves that affects their self-esteem and promotes disengagement from social and political life.<sup>17</sup> They develop what W. E. B. DuBois called a “double-consciousness,” the attitude of “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (Parekh 2004, 205).

As the personal and collective identity is partially defined against the background of the society in which people live, people living in condi-

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<sup>17</sup> Think of derogatory images (stereotypes, jokes) of RGT that are part of daily informal conversations, or of the fact that in some European schools (Britain included) RGT children are destined to “special,” “separate,” “remedial” classes irrespective of whether they have learning difficulties (see “Council Conclusions” 2012, 7). Surveys have shown that some teachers exhibit low expectations of RGT children, which then “become a self-fulfilling prophecy as students come to view themselves as failures and extricate themselves from the educational process” (O’Nions 2007, 154). The issue of combating poverty of aspiration through education policies is discussed in a recent Welsh Government report (“Travelling to a Better Future” 2012).

tions of marginalization and stigmatization tend to adapt themselves to the available opportunities of the unjust background conditions through cognitive processes such as adaptive preference formation (i.e., preferences formed in response to the unavailability of specific options) and the reduction of cognitive dissonance in order to reconcile themselves with their failures “to accommodate both the fact of victimization and the belief that the world is essentially just” (Sunstein 1991, 22). Some RGT communities have been described as exhibiting a “passive sense of victimization” coming from the dependency trap of an over-reliance on charity help (Felix Exteberria, quoted in O’Nions 2007, 148), or as being the passive recipients of “European money and initiatives rather than as drivers of these initiatives” (O’Nions 2007, 261). In some cases, politicians have justified their inaction on RGT rights saying that these communities had not articulated any particular social or political request and that, hence, they did not need help (O’Nions 2007, 272).

That sort of de facto segregation may become incompatible with equality (Phillips 2000, 97). Cognitive studies show how individuals subject to prejudice and stereotyping can be psychologically undermined and begin underperforming in accordance to the stereotype (see Bagihole 2009, 30). In other words, (mis)recognition forges identity, and the struggle for emancipation has often to pass through a revision of these internalized images (Taylor 1994, 25–26, 66). The challenge, then, consists in giving a voice to fragmented voiceless people and, at the same time, enabling renegotiation and continuous transformations of the groups’ members. The crucial issue is the negotiation of the balance between self-designation and external ascriptions of social and cultural identities.<sup>18</sup>

There are two extremes that should be avoided. One the one hand there is the risk of privileging purified, reified, homogenized and immutable version of culture following the tendency, in Anne Phillips’ words, “to represent individuals from minority or non-Western groups as driven by their culture and compelled by cultural dictates to behave in particular ways ... in a discourse that denies human agency, defining individuals through their culture, and treating culture as the explanation for virtually everything they say or do” (Phillips 2007, 8).<sup>19</sup> Culture should be treated

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<sup>18</sup> Testino (2010, 109) advances the hypothesis that past injustices prevented RGT “from fully developing their own culture and identity” and that, for this reason, it would be helpful to “focus on the arguments supporting actions to enable groups to become minorities” (i.e., having some sort of “cultural” cohesion and political voice).

<sup>19</sup> This concern has been particularly raised by some feminist theorists who denounce the way in which women from minority groups are often seen a priori as “victims without

in a more nuanced way, as we do with class and gender, as “something that influences, shapes and constrains behaviors, but does not determine it” (Phillips 2007, 10). This approach leads to the rejection of naturalistic readings of ethnicity that draw rigid boundaries between ethnic connotations and social and political interests framed by unequal power relations. More specifically, it leads to the rejection of readings of RGT ethnicity that tend to exclude this group from their domain without understanding the interactional dimension of injustice that especially characterizes these marginalized groups.<sup>20</sup> The other extreme to avoid is one which, in order to fight communitarian essentialist and holistic notions of culture that trap people in their identities, ends up trapping people in a reified idea of individual rational agency, and/or in a cosmopolitan “postmodern” praise of hybrid identities (e.g., Waldron 1995).

A multiculturalism aware of these two risks and willing to work within an ongoing balance between self-designation and external recognition will not be interested in culture per se but in the political (mis)use of ethnic and cultural identities and “in turning their negative and stigmatic status into a positive feature of the societies that they are now part of. This means that multiculturalism is characterized by the challenging, the dismantling and the remaking of public identities.” This approach comes from the acknowledgment that the “denigration of a group identity, the pretence ... that a group does not exist, the withholding of recognition or misrecognition is a form of oppression” (Modood 2007, 43, 52). This might be a first step toward a research agenda centered on an idea of multiculturalism embodied in an active and restorative principle or recognition—one that affords identities untainted by stratified patterns of misrecognition and oppression. This would set the stage for a fairer assessment (and self-assessment) of the relative disadvantage of RGT. Only on that basis would it become possible to devise appropriate redistributive responses to that disadvantage.

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agency” (Shachar 2001, 66), highlighting the tendency to attribute all aspects of behavior to culture when dealing with women from ethnic minority groups. Moreover, culture has been invoked in some judicial cases by male defendants to explain and minimize violent crimes against women (see Phillips 2007, 90).

<sup>20</sup> By “interactional” we mean the way in which, in case of multiple disadvantages, the ethnic and socio-political dimension frames each other. The term belongs to the feminist parlance and was introduced with the aim to grasp oppression as something irreducible to one fundamental type, but as different oppressions that produce injustices working together; for example, in some circumstances, a black woman can be victim of both racism and sexism in a way that racism is infected and changed by sexism; and, vice versa, sexism is infected and changed by racism (Bagihole 2009, xvi; 1–5).

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