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Gypsies in south Portugal: space, place, strategies and institutional politics.

This paper aims to suggest some ethnographic frames of reference in the context of my current postdoctoral research in anthropology, taking place among Portuguese Gypsy families – or *ciganos*, as they are called – in the small city of Vila Real de Santo António, in the geographic region of Algarve (the southernmost region of Portugal). The issues raised in the following analysis relate closely to the lives of the people *I have been staying* with during these first few months of ethnography, and are built on and interlinked with the kinds of relationship I have slowly developed with them on a daily basis. The main core of my analysis will draw primarily from the experience and points of view of a specific Gypsy family, based on which I shall try to describe particular modes of “staying” and dwelling in a given urban context – not unlike sketching a map of the movements, responses and strategies they use to cope with the implementation or absence of institutional policies.

Before introducing ethnographic data, I shall start by briefly introducing the local context of my research. Vila Real de Santo António is a small city of about eighteen thousand inhabitants (according to the last census in 2001). The city is located in Eastern Algarve, whose boundaries extend from the city of Faro on the left to Vila Real at the far right tip. This small city faces the Guadiana River, standing as the natural “fluvial” border between Algarve and Andalusia (Southern Spain).

Gypsies living in the city amount to between one and two hundred people, thus representing a significant percentage (about 1%) of total local population. The field of existing Portuguese literature on Gypsy studies is paltry, and it disregards Algarve despite the fact that the Faro District, to which Vila Real belongs, displays one of the highest national percentages of Gypsy presence. In particular, the cities of Loulé and Lagoa host about 400 and 900 people, respectively; followed by Silves, Portimão and Olhão; and finally Faro, São Brás and Vila Real de Santo António, with between 100 and 200 *ciganos*. Regarding Portugal as a whole, a quantitative inquiry by the *Centre for Territorial Studies* (CET) of Lisbon in 2005 has estimated Gypsy population to amount to 34,000 people, representing 0.4% of the country’s population.

The situation in Vila Real is heterogeneous: the majority of Gypsy families reside in apartments allocated by the local government in social neighbourhoods; some families continue to wait (as they have for some years) for their “*reajuntamento*” (“rehousing”), in the meantime camping next to a supermarket parking

lot in plastic tarpaulins, or dwelling in some shanties in a shipyard; while others are “transiting” families who, for several reasons, settle around the city in rural and “marginal” areas.

Since *ciganos* are to all intents and purposes Portuguese citizens, it is difficult to obtain specific demographic, geographical and social data on their distribution in the national territory – for these informations could violate their privacy and discriminate against this “ethnic group”. Politicians and social workers face an ambivalent situation concerning how to “protect” and “include” *ciganos* in the state system – for they are Portuguese citizens “like any other” – while simultaneously dealing with them as an “exception” – as Portuguese Gypsies are, in fact, considered a distinct “cultural group”, a minority, although not recognized as such by any national law.

In presenting my ethnographic data, I wish to address two distinct yet related levels. One pertains to the personal “circulating” experience of the Gypsy family I am currently working with. This “circulation” is circumscribed to the urban space of Vila Real and I shall focus my description on the “rootedness” experience created through those short local movements. The other concerns a critical discussion of the institutional approach to the constructed Portuguese Gypsy “marginality”. This approach springs from an evaluation of Gypsy life conditions from an exclusive focus on problems of social inclusion, which justifies an institutional “obsession” with issues of legality and normativeness.

I am interested in understanding how institutions create, act and impose upon Gypsies the categories of “incompetent” and “unfit users”, unable to live and dwell according to societal rules, thus turning them into objects of social rehabilitation programmes. State intervention most often fosters more or less explicit processes of “citizenship education”: how people are supposed to live, eat, clean and so on – presupposing the social, cultural and “natural” ignorance of the group in question.

I will hence begin my narration about Sara (the name is fictitious) and her family, within a specific institutional context: that of an educational course for adults, attended by a group of Gypsy women, all related to each other, and sharing a peculiar condition. Namely, they have in common the so-called “Social Insertion Income”: a short-term pecuniary benefit the state grants Portuguese individuals or families as part of a ministerial programme whose goal is to support their gradual social and occupational inclusion. In return, the state sets some obligations to be fulfilled by beneficiaries, under penalty of losing their grant, such as: acceptance of work placements, professional training or self-employment incentives, in order to foster people’s insertion in the labor market; daily frequency of educational courses; use of social facilities (for instance, for Gypsy shanty-dwellers, going to public balnearies to shower twice a week, or collecting clothes and food from charitable institutions like *Mão Amiga* or the local Red Cross); compliance with domiciliary help (for example on so-called “Special Rehousing Programmes”, where people are accompanied by social workers throughout their process of “suitable” adjustment to housing circumstances).

In this context, I am primarily interested in the obligatory attendance of the educational course, as well as in its contents. For it does not consist of simple reading and writing lessons. As the teacher likes to say, “this is a course of citizenship education”: which means teaching hygienic habits – because “what is normal for

us, is not so for them” – dietary notions, social rules, precepts of living indoor – as “for them it proves very difficult to live in a house, they don’t know how to”. The teacher suffers some pressure from the Social Housing Sector of the local municipality to emphasize this last subject, in anticipation of future and possible rehousing plans.

As I have said, *ciganos* are Portuguese citizens. As such, a “politically correct” approach would consider them within a comprehensive category including all socially deprived citizens in need of government support. However, the state grants Gypsies special attention, framing them in a complex network of discourses and practices which, through a “hyper-ethnicizing” process, creates and establishes arbitrary boundaries between society’s members and the groups living at its “margins”.

The teacher conducting the course is an important institutional figure, not only for the *ciganos* of Vila Real, but for all local authorities who, directly or indirectly, deal with social issues concerning the Gypsy families. She is a pivotal character, considering all the areas of competence she maneuvers in and exerts influence over, even aside from her socio-educational mission: she is in charge of the “Family Assistance Office” at the school all the Gypsy children attend; she is a representative at the Regional Direction of Algarve/Vila Real de Santo António, which is involved in planning social projects and local interventions, specially those related to the “Social Insertion Income” ministerial programme; she is a member of *Santa Casa da Misericórdia* – a venerable non-profit public institution of social assistance; finally, she is also a delegate at the Local Representative Assembly.

This elucidates the “useful” role she assumes in the lives of Gypsies coping with their daily duties and problems, such as school registrations and frequencies, children’s vaccinations, medical appointments, interviews with social workers, psychologists and housing sector workers. She is constantly at the cross of institutional actors’ and Gypsy families’ information networks.

As follows, the “citizenship” course becomes a government’s tool to wield power and control. As part of a friendly, open and respectful approach, the teacher asks each person in the room at the beginning of the lesson about whether they have complied with deadlines, whether they have disregarded their duties, and whether “everything goes well”. This sort of questioning, on the verge between a charitable and a bureaucratic stance, often does not leave room for educational activities to take place. The teacher in this fashion acts in a paradoxical manner in her class: while she urges people’s willingness and dedication to learning and each person’s awareness and responsibility regarding their process of “citizenship access”; she at the same time insists on discussing people’s current practices, overburdening their daily existence with moral precepts and evaluations, thus “trivializing” this existence through insistent inquiries and rhetorical discourses on rights and obligations.

This kind of social interventions brings to mind Foucault’s notion of “technology of citizenship”, which refers to the discourses, programmes, and agents aimed at integrating “people” into circuits of responsible self management, realizing their capacity for autonomous citizenship. Institutions create a dual and contradictory representation of *ciganos*: on the one hand as a deviant, socially dangerous and incompetent

group who constitute a menace to society; on the other hand as disadvantaged, needy people in a perpetual state of vulnerability. This double-faced concept of Gypsy “marginality” encourages and legitimizes the involvement of welfare institutions in people’s lives, aiming to reform their behavior, bodies, morality and lifestyles. In this process, institutions are willing to demand the suffering of the people they manage in return for citizenship inclusion and feelings of national belonging, thus violating their individuality and identity.

It was in this context that I met Sara, last October, as she and her family – consisting of herself, her husband and their three small children – were facing desperate times of housing insecurity. They had been living together with Sara’s sisters and uncles in some shanties in a shipyard, but had decided to leave, on account of rats and family disagreements, in search of a place to lay their tarpaulins. All of them, including Sara, had already applied for government housing, which they now await. Sara’s mother has for the past ten years lived in a government house with her husband and ten other relatives, including children and grandchildren.

For the past two months I have accompanied Sara’s family in its sort of “wandering” through the city, looking for a place to “stay” where they could sleep and dwell.

This family is approached and sometimes harassed by the metropolitan police, on a daily basis, compelling them to pick up their items and personal belongings and leave. Their movements are narrowly circumscribed, ruled by a permanent concern over the contingency of shelter for the night. They move constantly, even if only for a few meters, yet never with a house as destination. This generates a “mobile” rootedness in the urban territory, whose form and meaning are shaped by institutional policies and strategies, or better yet, by their “non-existence” – as they are reduced to law and order enforcement. In the end, these (absent) “policies” effect the propagation of a bureaucratic apparatus aimed at discouraging and correcting any practice which does not fit into the standards of “normal” citizens’ or local residents’ behavior.

As a response to the institutional attempts of literally “removing the carpet from under its feet”, this family copes by mobilizing relational networks – which have proven “weak”, as they are grounded on memories of dissipated interactions. Nevertheless, these networks become significant as they highlight a spatial knowledge and experience of a territory which is not, in fact, unknown or unexplored.

The ethnographic frame I have described incorporates three conflicting elements. The first is state rhetoric, mediated by the local administration and police. This element does not contribute to any adequate or effective solution to granting Gypsies those so-called “citizenship rights” (such as house access) – apart from dislodging them and forcing them into situations of (so feared) “illegality”. The second element consists of institutional practices, such as educational courses for adults, which reproduce state rhetoric through patronizing and moralist postures focused on constraining Gypsies to reform their behavior. Finally, I have considered Gypsy agency itself, which activates its own independent pathways to citizenship through families’ relational networks.

In conclusion, I would like to quote Marco Solimene, an Italian anthropologist who conducted fieldwork among Bosnian romà families in Rome: “to build an alternative and more reasonable solution, such as for

example to obtain a house or a land, rests with the autonomous initiative of romà, with their creative skills of profit from their relational networks, and with lucky circumstances, rather than with the interface with institutions, appealing to a ‘smoggy’ concept of right” (Solimene, forthcoming, p. 31).

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