THE ROMA COMMUNITY OF ROME: HEIRS TO THE LEGACY OF A GHETTO SYSTEM

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Expanded Ethnic Enclaves are Rome's Reply to Its "Nomads Emergency"

The overgrown males now all sally forth from their cells, and disport themselves on the combs; and so crowded does the too prosperous city become that hundreds of belated workers, coming back from the flowers towards evening, will vainly seek shelter within, and will be forced to spend the night on the threshold, where they will be decimated by the cold.

– Maurice Maeterlinck, The Life of the Bee

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the motives, mechanisms and political strategies that underlie the construction of ethnic ghettos for the Roma of Rome, using those observations a point of departure for a fuller understanding of how much ghettos from different times and places have in common. Key comparisons will be made to Italy's Jewish ghettos of the 16th century and native American reservations of the 20th century in the United States. It will be argued, using this broadly comparative approach, that it is more useful to speak of a resonating ghetto system than of separate ghetto narratives – if the mechanisms are to be replaced. For those with a special interest in the origins and evolution of the ethnic enclave as a mechanism of social control, these findings and ruminations may offer some small insight or jumping-off point for more refined exploration.

1. OVERVIEW

To physically enclose and isolate ethnic minority groups at the periphery of demographically diverse cities has been a popular strategy among urban managers for centuries, employed particularly during periods of rapid growth or political transition. The system reached an apex with the Jewish ghettos of the 16th century Italian city-states – stressing the notion that the lifestyle of Jewish citizens posed a persistent threat to the "health and honor" (Siegmund, 2006, p. 205) of the majority. Centuries later, walled ethnic enclaves within strategically important cities still characterized civil conflicts in Cyprus, Lebanon, Bosnia, Israel-Palestine, and Northern Ireland, while ethnicity defined regional partitions in South Africa and post-colonial India, etc.

Despite many important differences, all ethnic ghettos have a strong family resemblance because these support a single fundamental political strategy; they constitute a semi-permanent containment regime for a despised minority of minimal economic value to the host community. Today's ongoing ghetto-building projects are supported by hand-crafted pieces of special legislation that support normally illegal activities, and for this reason – putting aside the purely ethnic concerns implied by this approach –Êdeserve special attention.

Italy's authorized Roma camps of 2010, with familiar gates, fences, and density, show the ghetto system in evolution. The diverse Roma communities of Rome provide a complete illustration of the trend: they generally live in 17 peripheral "camps" (Legge regionale, 1985, art. 2) – some authorized and subsidized, some unauthorized but tolerated – supporting about 7,600 persons. Living conditions in all the camps are inadequate in relation to crowding, sanitation, privacy, and access to markets, workplaces, schools, and hospitals. While the United Nations, EU, and others uphold the human right to adequate housing regardless of legal status, providing standards for space, privacy, security, ventilation, location, plumbing, sanitation, etc., the Italian government has short-circuited or simply ignored these standards in the process of designing a constellation of Roma camps that hover at the periphery of several major cities.

The result is a clearly articulated, painfully felt, second standard for the Roma in relation to living conditions and access to opportunity. Far from hiding its project, the Italian authorities so far have met with significant popular support at the domestic level, have broadcast their intentions to expand the existing program to include mega-camps –

nicknamed “Solidarity Villages” (Excerpts from the Minutes, 2007) – and have effectively disregarded numerous complaints, reprimands and indictments issued by the relevant authorities in Brussels. Physical living conditions in the camps provide a useful barometer for measuring the gap between real conditions and minimum legal standards, though it is understood that a successful outcome would not be merely improved housing but rather a dismantling of the ethnic enclave paradigm as a whole, regardless of the quality of the built environment.

2. A NEW GENERATION OF ETHNIC GHETTOS

A new generation of ethno-racial ghettos has emerged in Europe to cope with the new fluidity of minority communities viewed as unassimilable. At the forefront of this emergence are the Roma (‘gypsy’) enclaves authorized and engineered by the Italian government beginning around 1985 and intensifying in recent years under the auspices of both liberal and, at present, decidedly right-wing administrations. The Roma enclaves of Rome fall squarely within the long tradition of ethnic ghetto construction in Europe and elsewhere: they are a strategic reply to nameable and predictable political circumstances, they produce a kind of engineered precariousness, and they exert a specific form of juridical violence through bureaucratic statecraft in a concerted effort by authorities to assert self-legitimization of the state during a period of broad-based insecurity. By institutionalizing a permanent double standard for physical living conditions within a democratic social framework, Italian authorities have thrown down a gauntlet which should be taken up by the European Union in defense of adequate housing standards for all marginalized groups.

With this summer’s reports from France of the vigorous eviction, detainment, and deportation practices undertaken by Sarkozy and aimed at the Roma community (AFP, 2010), it is not difficult to accept Italian Foreign Minister Roberto Maroni’s suggestion that France is “doing nothing more than copying Italy” (Al Jazeera, 2010) with its newly aggressive, and disciplined, expulsion strategies.

While these policy makers compete for author’s credit, it is interesting to take a close look at the mechanisms they have employed to contain and marginalize their Roma citizens. The heterogeneous communities of Roma people in Italy have experienced substandard living conditions for centuries, a product of their troubled relationship with the majority culture and a legacy of callous discrimination towards them in Europe. Today approximately 140,000 Roma reside in Italy and about 7,400 reside in Rome. Of these, approximately 60% are Italian citizens, 15% are itinerant, 35% are settled in enclaves built or tolerated by the government, 75% are illiterate, and fewer than 3% will live beyond 60 years.

The example of Roma enclaves on the periphery of Rome – about 17 can be found, half authorized and half unauthorized – may offer a useful case study.

The problem addressed here is the coercive deployment of sanctioned ethnic enclaves – physically isolated and sealed from mainstream urban residents – by the Italian government as the permanent housing strategy for a Roma community viewed as congenitally mischievous and economically valueless. American relatives of these dreary places might be the Japanese internment facilities of the 1940s or contemporary Native American reservations.

3. BACKGROUND AND PRECEDENT

Though the word ‘ghetto’ seems to stem directly from the Jewish template conceived in Venice conceived around 1516, and while many useful similarities between the medieval prototype and the newly minted ethnic enclaves exist, here the term is used more broadly with reference to Loïc Wacquant’s expanded notion of a “a sociospatial contraption” (Wacquant, 2008, p. 4). Wacquant argues convincingly that this device is used to support “specific regimes of racial domination”, and “affix blame for unpalatable social facts” (Wacquant, 1997, p. 226) complementing a broad, bureaucratic program of “punitive containment of the poor” (Wacquant, 2000, p. 177). More specifically, Wacquant suggests that a ghetto is an institutionalized mechanism of physical closure and social control that typically provides for the involuntary, permanent, and total residential segregation of prescribed minority groups that are popularly perceived as an occupational threat, an economic burden, or a social menace in relation to the majority. These meanings were foreshadowed by the Jewish ghettos of the 16th century and are implied here with reference to a ghetto system.

Because the history of urban development in the western tradition is littered with ghetto projects, the logic of the ghetto system is not difficult to discern. There is much to be learned, for example, from the unfolding and decay of South African townships, South American favelas, North American Hoovervilles, and the ethnically partitioned cities of the Balkans; through these comparisons we can recognize the political calculus and confirm the prerequisites that led most recently to the conspicuous decrepitude of Italy’s enclaves. In most examples, ghetto construction emerges from a climate of broad-based anxiety, economic insecurity,

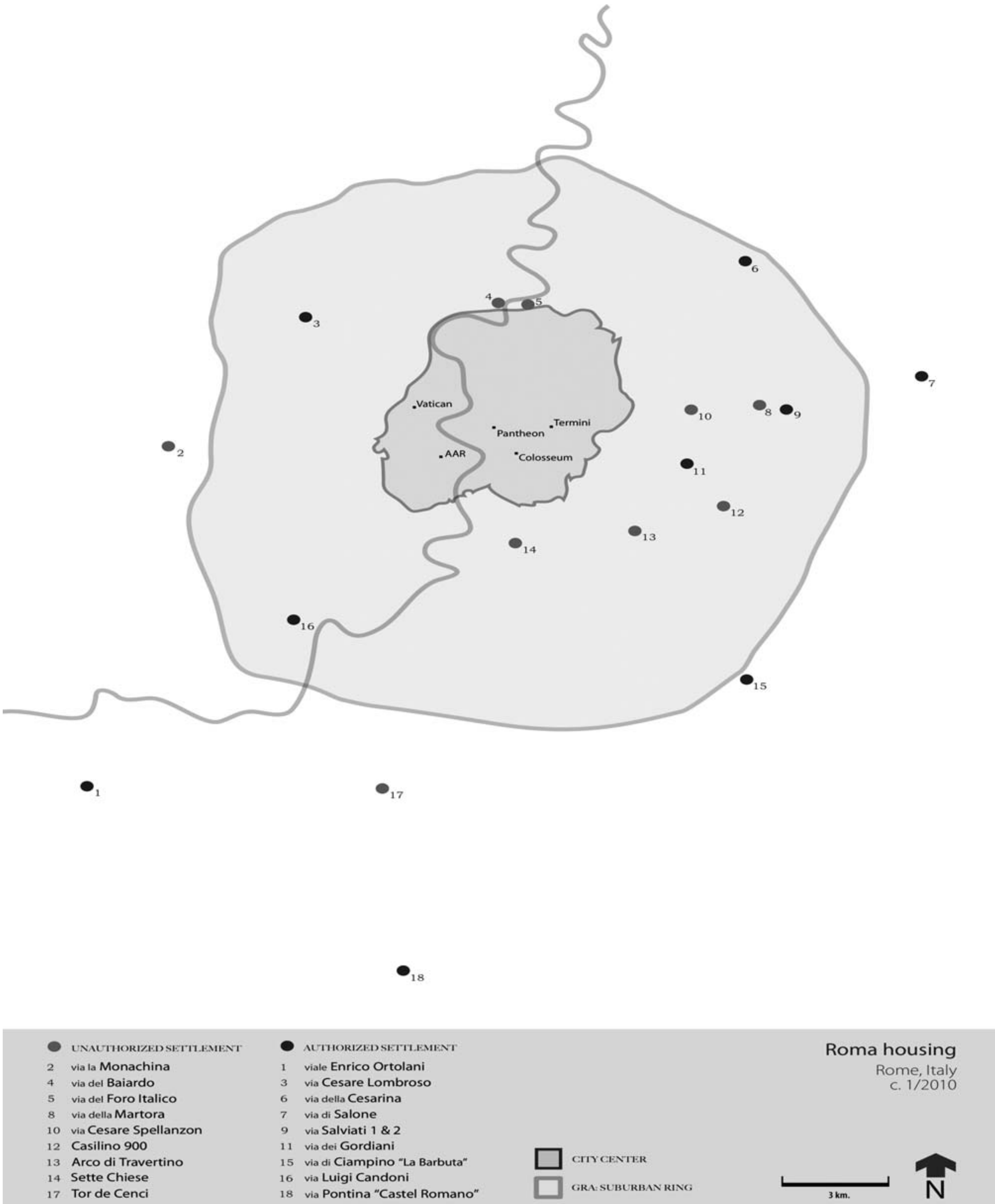


Figure-1: This map shows the approximate locations of 18 Roma "camps" in and around Rome, c. May 2010. The blue dots are authorized enclaves, the red dots are unauthorized enclaves, and the inner ring is the perimeter of touristic Rome. (image: author)

Figure-2: A similarity of living conditions is also found in the Rohwer Japanese internment camp in Arkansas, where official plans generated crowded and haphazard results. (photo: The Bancroft Library. University of California, Berkeley)

Figure-3: The Roma enclaves of Rome are just one variant on an old theme: the ethnic ghetto. Housing on the Pine Ridge native American reservation in South Dakota is similar in style, materials, and general disrepair. (photo: Kristina Barker for the Rapid City Journal)

xenophobia, and racial scapegoating. This climate, usually a result of endemic constraints amplified by political conjuring, generally owes little to the civic performance of the minority group that is ultimately confined to the ghetto.

The Italian Jewish ghettos of the 16th century illuminate many prominent characteristics of the ghetto system. The emergence and dismantling of these urban containers are punctuated clearly in time and space by circumstances that even the most casual student of the period might discern. With a clockwise turn of this chart, it can be easily demonstrated that the ghettos appeared in regional clusters according to timings not corresponding to an apex of anti-Semitic feeling but rather to a convergence of political needs unrelated to the Jewish community and the presence of resources within the Jewish community that were considered vital to the satisfaction of those needs. Put differently, we learn from the example of the Jewish ghettos to associate the construction of such places with a cool-headed appropriation of particular assets in support of particular political projects.

Through this lens in particular, a strong resemblance between this medieval example and today's Italian Roma camps can be seen. In both instances, a reliable rhetoric of racial prejudice was invoked alongside brazenly cynical efforts to validate negative associations with a popularly despised minority.

4. THE ROMAN VARIANT

Structural discrimination and a formidable array of social obstacles that gave shape to "anti-ziganism" in Europe dogged the Roma minority for hundreds of years. While segregation and substandard living conditions have been a constant, fortified enclaves designed, built, and managed by the Italian government are relatively new and can be assessed – as with the Jewish example – as a phenomenon driven forward by forces that are to some degree independent of the narratives of racial prejudice and stigmatization used to rationalize them. That is to say that the phenomenon relies on these narratives but is not a conclusion reached inevitably from them.

As you might expect, the official explanation for the enclaves provided by municipal authorities in Rome varies according to audience. For most outsiders and those generally concerned with humanitarian affairs, the establishment of enclaves is depicted as a sound alternative to the squalor and insecurity of squatter settlements, a gesture of benevolence made towards a troubled minority group showing low appetite and low aptitude for mainstream lifestyles. For Romans and other Italian who share a concern about declining national economic prospects and a reflexive disregard for the civil rights of the Roma, the construction of new enclaves and demolition of obsolete ones offer proof of the government's increasingly commitment to extract unwanted elements from the social domain by any means necessary. In this version of the story, the Roma are portrayed as key actors exerting a disproportionately negative influence on the remainder of

5. ITALIAN SOCIETY, WHETHER OR NOT THIS PORTRAYAL IS IN AGREEMENT WITH THE FACTS

For example, the frequently cited assumption that Roma citizens are responsible for increasing crime does not correlate well with national statistics, which puts crime in Italy on an

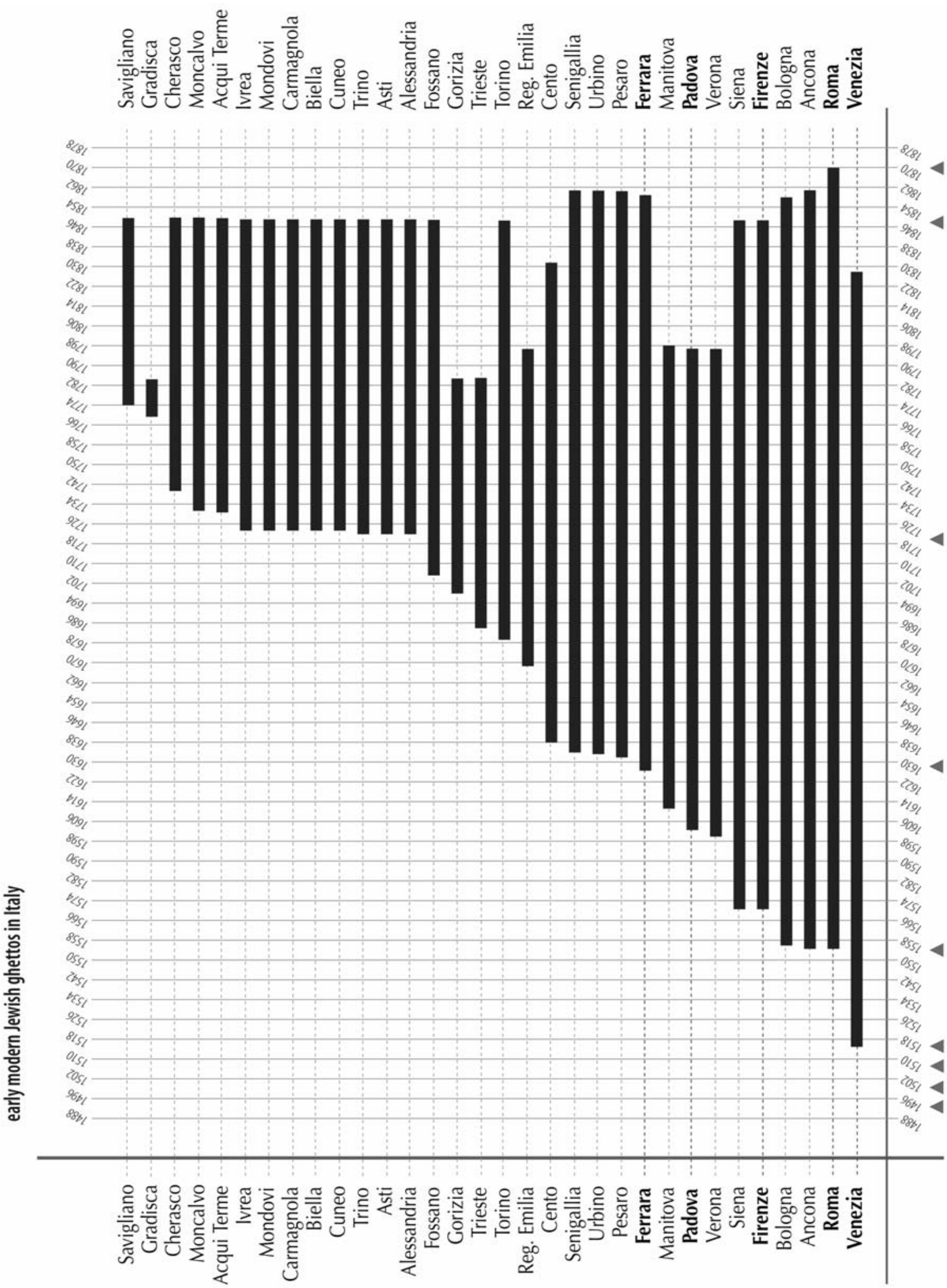


Figure-4: Most of the Jewish ghettos found in the Italian city-states between the early 16th and late 18th centuries are listed here, with some episodes of political and social change indicated to make sense out of their appearances and disappearances. (image: author) even keel and links Roma convicts mainly to petty, non-violent offenses.

One observer notes that "the estimated effect of immigrants on both total and property crimes [in Italy] is not significantly different than zero" (Bianchi, 2008, p. 3), and in any case the trends above can hardly be taken seriously as the symptoms of a national emergency. Yet in the summer of 2008 the provincial government of Lazio, of which Rome is a part, issued its "Urgent Provisions to Address Civil Protection Status Emergency on Settlements of Community in Nomadic Territory of the Lazio Region (Order No. 3676)" to declare that;

> *"Given the extreme criticality in territory of the Lazio region, with particular reference to areas of the Urban Municipality of Rome and the surrounding areas, and because of the presence of many non-citizens and illegal travelers who have permanently settled in those areas, and given that these settlements, because of their extreme instability, have created a situation of serious public concern, with possible serious consequences for public order and security for local people..."*

So with these questionable premises it placed responsibility for a crisis directly on the bent shoulders of the Roma community, choosing to adopt "extraordinary and exceptional measures aimed at overcoming rapid emergence" of its problem, which boiled down to the continued presence of Roma people within its jurisdiction. Though rife with inconsistencies and insincerity, this gambit has so far brought enormous political dividends and largely negligible public censure.

Here lies a simple and important linkage between the Jewish ghettos of the 16th century Italian city states with the Italian enclaves earmarked for Roma people now: both were designed to produce large amounts of political capital cheaply and upon demand. In the process, the beleaguered members of the target community become residents of a pillory where they are left to accrue negative social capital. The rules of the ghetto system oblige them to live ambiguously, under conditions neither sufficient nor destitute, without functional legal status, within marginal spaces made permanently temporary, reliant on shadow work, relegated to "sociospatial seclusion" (Wacquant, 2008, p. 7) and abandoned by mainstream social institutions.

In most instances of this type of seclusion, it can been seen that ghetto residents come to represent, and seem also to embody, the dangers of the unwanted immigrant: contagion, dishonor, dirt, profanity, shiftlessness, lassitude, parasitism. The enclaves in particular ensure that these associations are nurtured in the public consciousness. They are the holding place for a "permanently necessary enemy" (Barrington, 2001, p. 724), a social prison that simultaneously asserts the non-viability and the culpability of its residents, their feebleness and their potency. All the while the fact of the ghetto, its implied necessity in the service of public order, presents an almost irresistible opportunity to invoke Wacquant's "logic of the trial" (Wacquant, 1997, p. 222) as non ghetto-dwellers, seeking an alibi for their collective shortcomings, take up the victim's role in relation ghetto-dwellers as the perennial perpetrators.

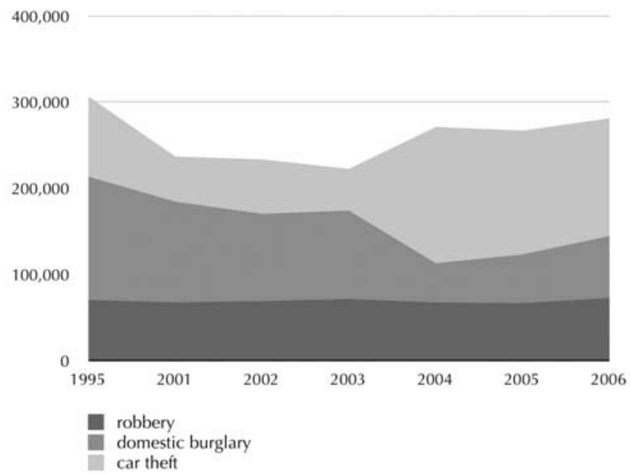


Figure-5: A decade of crime statistics shows no dramatic change during the years when Roma enclaves were conceived and built in the name of public safety and order. (image: author)

6. THE SHAPE OF MANAGED INEQUALITY IN ROME

What is the form and the nature of life inside the Roma enclaves of Rome? The informal, unauthorized enclaves support self-built shelters with minimal sanitation, though some, like Casilino 900 due east of the city's historic core, were tolerated by the municipality for more than 40 years. (Casilino 900 was evacuated and closed in early 2010 as part of an ongoing effort to motivate the Roma population to leave Italy or funnel them into authorized enclaves lying further from the city center and imposing stricter police surveillance upon inhabitants.) In this way, personal volition and free movement are maximized at the expense of personal comfort and hygienic standards for residents of the unauthorized Roma enclaves of Rome.

Most of these units are metal containers designed for short-term and limited human occupancy, and accordingly are unsuited for modification, expansion, or repair. Above all, they are small, incommodious, closely packed together, and isolated from major urban amenities.

These places, when relatively new, present Roma inhabitants – for whom they are expressly and exclusively made – with interior conveniences and sanitation conditions generally superior to those found in the unauthorized enclaves. In exchange, residents experience highly constrained freedom of movement while expending unusual amounts of energy to reach schools, markets, and hospitals. Each of the authorized enclaves in Rome is punctuated by a perimeter fence, an entry gate, and constant police presence. The newest of these also are equipped with flood lights and raised surveillance cameras that peer in all directions. With age, these types of living containers deteriorate quickly. With ten years of use, most of the original advantages of the designed enclave environment erode. Residents are shipwrecked on the urban margin, hemmed in by fences and guards, and confined to living spaces providing, on average, a mere 41% of the floor area required by Rome's standard building code for each inhabitant (Regolamento Generale, 1934, art. 40). These crowded metal boxes, along with the barricades that encircle them, illuminate the double standard sanctioned by the Roman municipality for its Roma residents in an unambiguous way.

The congregation of Roma people into a constellation of isolated enclaves is a welcome development for many mainstream Romans, but has had most unwelcome consequences for enclave residents. For them, hardships multiply under these compounding constraints. Enclave residents are pressed towards downward cycles of destabilization, material want, social exclusion, demoralization, and extralegal activity. For their political wardens, these cycles appear to validate the "resurgent penal fortitude" (Wacquant, 2005, p. 42), "gusting xenophobia" (Wacquant, 2005, p. 45), and "catastrophist discourse" (Wacquant, 2008b, p. 10), which accompany most episodes of ghettoization and which allowed the dubious concept of a Roma enclave system to be considered in the first place. So far, so good, one might say, from the perspective of a government which, "through its structure and policies, patterned actions and inactions" determines the "scope, spread, and intensity of marginality in the city" (Wacquant, 2009, p. 174). But are the enclaves legal?

The United Nations, the EU, and others uphold the human right to adequate housing regardless of legal status, providing increasingly explicit standards for space, privacy, security, ventilation, location, plumbing, design appropriateness, etc. The major legal mechanisms used to enable and defend

Figure-6: This satellite view of the enclave called "via di Salviati 2" shows a dense, gridded plan where living units are arranged orthogonally along a main artery — quite out of keeping with conventional residential arrangements in the Roma tradition. Though crowded, the enclave is adjacent to empty and industrial lots. (photo: Google Earth)

Figure-7: In the unauthorized enclave called "Casilino 900", demolished in February 2010, improvisational shacks were supplied with water running through spigots installed and paid for by municipal authorities, confirming the notion that these unhealthy places were tolerated as long as they remained convenient. (photo: author)

Figure-8: A perspective sketch of the gridded plan at the authorized "via di Salone" Roma enclave, showing a format most readily compared to a barracks or prisoner of war camp. Authorized and publicly-funded enclaves support prefabricated housing units arranged by rank and file upon a raised concrete slab. (image: Stalker Osservatorio Nomade study group)

Figure-9: A typical exterior of a housing unit in the authorized "via Salviati 2" Roma enclave due east of downtown Rome. This dwelling is approximately ten years old. (photo: author)

these rights are: 1.) The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 25 (1948); 2.) The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, art. 11 (1976); and 3.) The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racal Discrimination, art. 5.e.iii (1969). In addition, Rome's standard building code, reg. n. 5261 (1934), art. 40 specifies minimum standards for house size, function, and hygiene – regardless of the background or legal status of the inhabitant – as noted earlier.

As a consequence, the authorized Roma enclaves around Rome require special laws and regulations to override routine law. The major legal mechanisms used to enable and defend the ghetto system are: 1) Regional Law n. Lazio 82/85 (May 1985), establishing a protocol for enclave construction to be designed and funded by the province; 2) The Security

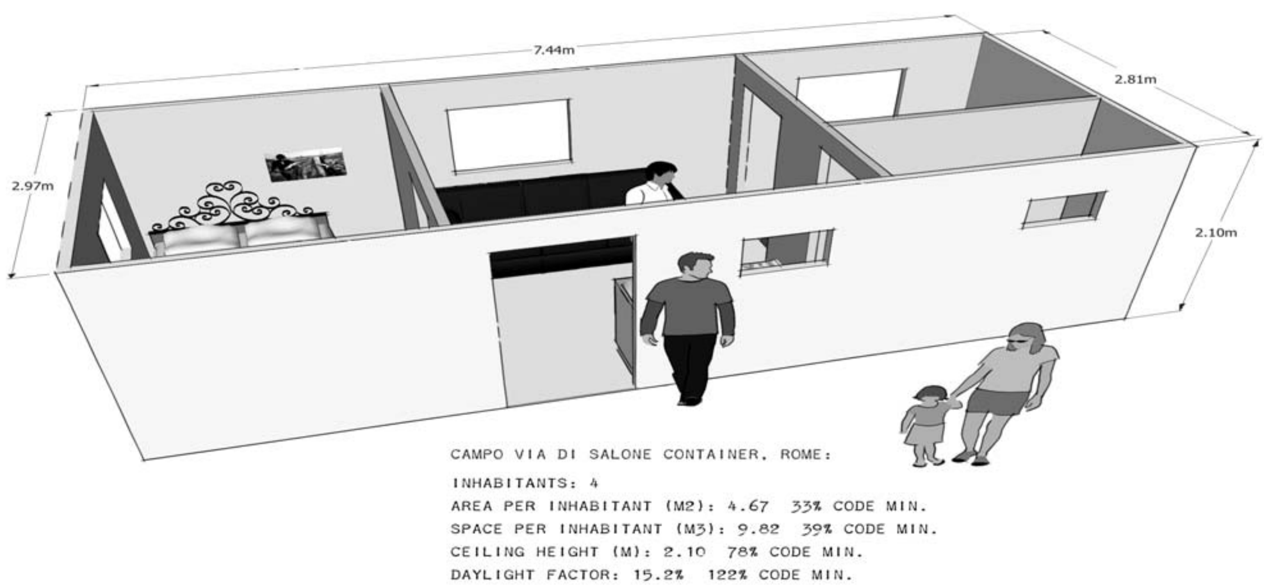
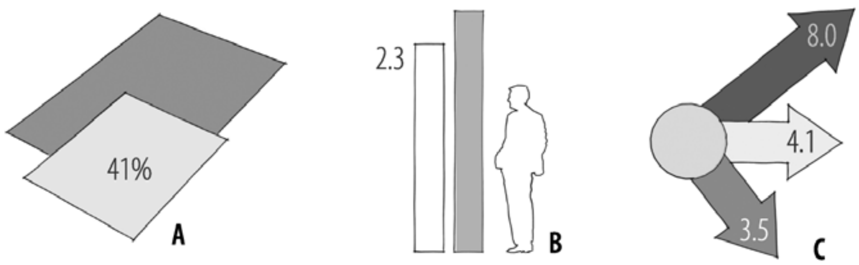


Figure-10: This model of the typical housing unit at the authorized "via di Salone" Roma enclave shows how cramped and poorly allocated interior space is inside. Children commonly have no space to complete homework or read quietly, undermining already poor prospect for success in Italian schools. (image: author)

	inhab.	area per inhabitant (m^2)	code min. %	ceiling height (m)	code min. %	interior length (m)	interior width (m)	non-livable area (m^2)
typical authorized Roma camp container	4	5.69	41%	2.33	86%	8.47	3.21	3.03
building code minimum	4	14.00	100%	2.70	100%	-	-	-



At A, the typical - area per person in an authorized container compared with the minimum allowed by the Roman standard building code. At B, the average ceiling height (m) in an authorized container compared with the minimum allowed. At C, three average walking distances (km) from authorized ramps via de Salini & via salviati to (clodewise from top) nearest hospitals, schools & grocery stores. All designed, contracted and paid for by the municipality of Rome.

Figure-11: A simple analysis of the typical housing unit in the authorized Roma enclaves of Rome compares spatial characteristics to the minimum allowable dimensions allowed by the Roman standard building code, along with typical distances to key destinations from authorized enclaves. (image: author)

Pact for Rome (May 2007), which expanded police powers and Roma enclave surveillance; 3) The Nomad Emergency (May 2008), discussed above and granting a prefect special powers to respond forcefully to the Roma problem, and 4) The Nomad Plan (July 2009), which specified consolidation of Rome's Roma enclaves along with a population ceiling for Roma people within the province.

In this way, for the moment, the political expediency of the Roman enclaves has eclipsed the their questionable legality and leaves open the prospect that other Italian municipalities will follow suit. Meanwhile, despite a chorus of critics and a fattening file of official reprimands, Italian authorities have met with significant popular support at the domestic level. They continue to broadcast, without apology, their purportedly upright intention to develop 'mega-camps' to hold a greater percentage of the province's Roma population and incorporate – inside the perimeter fences – customized medical and educational facilities. These gestures, deeply tied to broader urban planning concerns, are consonant with

Figure-12: At the "via Gordiani" enclave, an entry gate is prominent. All visitors must pass in and out here, watched by police and guards hired by the municipality. Across a busy road a warehouse for non-human goods is visible, creating a regrettable symmetry.
(photo: author)

Figure-13: At the authorized "via di Salone" Roma enclave, the same fencing, flood lights, and cameras can be found all along the perimeter that is a girdle for housing units arranged in gridded plan. Roma residents here pooled their money to purchase and install overhangs to protect entrance doors from oppressive sunlight during the summer months. (photo: author) other permanently temporary campaigns of ethnic segregation in Israel, the southwestern United States, the Balkans, and elsewhere. With these gestures, Italian politicians have become lead architects of a flexible, low-cost warehousing system designed for Europe's Roma minority.

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