

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" (Siegmond,

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 – deserve 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 –