

## Immigrants, Rom and Sinti, and Italian National Identity

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### Abstract

*This essay picks up a few threads in the ongoing debate on national identity in Italy. Immigration and the intertwining of cultures locally have stretched the contours of the nation state to a breaking point. As a result, the social self has become a sharply contested terrain between those who want to install a symbolic electronic fence around an imagined fatherland and those who want a more inclusive nation at home in a global world.*

*After discussing the views of Amin Maalouf, Alessandro Dal Lago, Abdelmalek Sayad and Patrick Manning on national identity and migration in the first half, the essay goes on in the second half to examine the powerful contribution to the debate by leading Italian Romani intellectual Santino Spinelli and Romanologist Lorenzo Monasta. The depth of the current identity crisis in Italy makes this country an ideal laboratory to probe new approaches on the subject.*

Fino a che punto dovrebbe spingersi nel tempo la ricerca della propria identità? Non fate sforzi. In realtà siamo tutti africani, figli di Lucy.

*Lorenzo Monasta.<sup>i</sup>*

... it is difficult to say where legitimate affirmation of identity ends and encroachment on the rights of others begins.

*Amin Maalouf.<sup>ii</sup>*

### 1. "Uno Stato poco onorevole," a dishonorable State

Taken together, Lorenzo Monasta's and Amin Maalouf's quotes unveil identity as something that is at once inconclusive and dangerous. If born of necessity as infinitely open to becoming, how legitimate an operation is it to reduce it to finitude? And, once defined, is it ever innocent? In other words, can we reflect in ourselves that foundational openness identity bore in the beginning of time and make it an idea congruous with the needs of a global society today?

It seems to me that the very moment we impose an enclosure around it we cut it off from that *res extensa* of which it is naturally a part. As a result, it turns immediately into psychological entrenchment impinging nastily on our humanity. In his book *In the Name of Identity* Amin Maalouf advances an idea of identity that recognizes all the natural strands that historically make up our individual and collective self-perceptions.

“Each of us should be encouraged to accept his own diversity, to see his identity as the sum of all his various affiliations, instead of as only one of them raised to the status of the most important, made into an instrument of exclusion and sometimes into a weapon of war.”<sup>iii</sup> Maalouf happily embraces all his own affiliations, including those he did not choose such as place of origin and parental culture. More importantly, he does not make excuses for or expresses any qualms about being equally at home in France as he is in Lebanon, in the West as he is in the Middle East, writing French and speaking Arabic, being Christian and being a proud citizen of an ancient and universal Arab-Muslim civilization: “societies themselves need to accept the many affiliations that have forged each of their collective identities in the course of history, and that are shaping them still.”<sup>iv</sup>

Painfully aware, however, of how perilous the path he is treading can be, he aptly titled his book in French *identités meurtrières*, literally: killer identities. The French/Lebanese writer documents and analyses both diachronically and synchronically how the narrowest possible definition of identity – in which one allegiance alone manages to take exclusive hold of us -- has become in the last few decades again so dominant in the West. This one allegiance that has been taking an exclusive hold in Italy today is the idea of *patria*, or fatherland -- a result that was never inevitable and one which owes its success to a resurgence of nationalism.

Those who reject identification with this socially constructed model become unpatriotic, that is, potential *outsiders*. Now, for a long time since the end of the World War II and well into the 1970s and 1980s in Italy these were the terms consistently invoked by *fascists*. Evidently, Italy has changed so much so in these last two decades that the marks of a fascist worldview have now become the signposts of a “democratic” one.

Interestingly, among the cases he examines, Maalouf also finds that the construction of an extremely reductive and, for this very reason, absolute form of identity is so symbolic that it may just be the result of unreflective reaction: “The identity a person lays claim to is often based, in reverse, on that of his enemy.”<sup>v</sup> The example here is that of an Irish Catholic that defines himself by all that his Englishman counterpart is not.

Can this mechanism explain what happens today to a growing number of Italians confronting migrants and Rom minorities? Would it be true to say that more Italians today may identify with these fascist symbols because Eastern European, Middle Eastern, Rom and African workers have been immigrating to Italy? What do Italians see in these migrant workers and in the Rom minority in particular, one may wonder, that they want to be them, but *in reverse*? Could the notion of freely chosen identities which immigrants and Rom carry with them be what scares increasingly more people in the host country? Completely in the dark as to how painful and ambiguous the process of migration really can be and what ideals or inhumanity may be its root-causes, many Italians’ response to these “invading hordes” is to recoil in fear and re-claim ideas one might have believed confined once and for all to the dustbin of history: *patria* (fatherland) and its collateral set of *patriotic* rituals that include a military hero cult and additional choreographic fanfares.<sup>vi</sup>

Italian sociologist Alessandro Dal Lago, author of a ground-breaking book, *Non-persons*, unceremoniously attacks this resurrected notion of *patria*. According to him, two things make the Italian case peculiar: “not only does this claim appear particularly weak, given the relatively short, conflictual, and dishonorable (*poco onorevole*) history of the Italian State (which in a little less than a century and a half was ruled by an authoritarian monarchy, a totalitarian regime, and a stymied and corrupt democracy).

The main problem in the rediscovery of a national sentiment of Italy as a homeland is that it coincides with a process of rendering inferior other societies.”<sup>vii</sup>

Dal Lago’s findings witness the return of rituals and a pernicious set of concepts that eerily evoke a brutal past in recent Italian history, and this is cause for alarm. The repackaging of an Italian national identity now underway around an exclusive and segregating concept of *patria*, in fact, seems to follow the same sequence that cadenced Fascist national myth-making in the 1920s. Then the Fascists also imagined a fatherland. They fantasized that this, Fascist Italy, was the modern incarnation of ancient Rome; invented an empire with a preposterous Italian master race; allied their pet fatherland to two other newly and similarly repackaged fatherlands, the German and the Japanese, each also with its own wing-clipped and thus distorted identity, an identity now made so much smaller and thus intolerant; and together, these three fatherlands, ushered in WWII causing untold suffering for millions of people worldwide.

If this were not enough, we should never forget what two of them also did about thirty years before. In 1914-5, to be precise, Italy and Germany, then still recent nation-states, acted on a similar “imaginative” course competing with their European sister fatherlands, notably England, France, Holland and Belgium -- all of them similarly powered by distinctively murderous special identities and grand colonial vocations. This first time around the world *carnage*, as WWI was called in the end, had been fueled by a series of wars against imagined enemies that were determined, according to the nationalist propaganda of the time, to frustrate the glorious “re-birth” of their imagined sacred fatherlands.

Today, as was so tragically shown once again in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, a myth about a community is being re-created and its exclusivism and mythical superiority proclaimed. For this to take hold, however, *outsiders* must be imagined. Consequently, as Alessandro Dal Lago explains, an appropriate enemy must be identified and then degraded to the status of a *non-person*. Paradoxically, the more the dominant group succeeds in degrading its imagined enemies the more secure its citizens feel because now finally they “know” who they really are. After all, as the Nazi slogan advertised, “Gott mit uns,” god is on our side. This is a mentality that unfortunately is still with us. No matter how brutal our soldiers can be in war they still return home to us as heroes. At this point, it is only to be expected -- after a few waves of immigrants have reached Italy -- that these should become the ideal targets of a newly rediscovered Italian fatherland. As Dal Lago points out, intellectual theorizing in some quarters has quickly produced reasons in support of exclusive and segregating identities: “Rather than conceiving of diversity as plurality, the articulation of a shared and egalitarian human condition, differentialism has often hypothesized cultural separation and has mythologized national and cultural roots.”

What is impressive again today in Italy is the gross unanimous front against these foreign workers and “why many intellectuals and a large segment of the media, the political class, and ‘average citizens’ formed a coalition that was hostile to migrants when confronted with a phenomenon of limited dimensions.”<sup>viii</sup> Clearly, large numbers of Italian intellectuals have moved to the right in these past thirty years *organically* attaching themselves to a parasitic state and economic powers historically encoded with all kinds of cancerous cells packed with fascistic, clerical, and mafia-loaded information.<sup>ix</sup>

For, despite the new republican veneer applied to the new Italian state after the war this continued to a large extent to embody the legacy of the Fascist period; moreover, the state was also rapidly recast and reconfigured with an injection of democratic values within the new NATO environment as its authoritarian form was updated.

This was the memorable result of a US sponsored break-up in 1948 of the Anti-Fascist Coalition that had led the *Resistance* against Nazism and Fascism to victory and whose brief work in office had aroused for the first time in recent Italian memory the hope for a total democratic renewal of the state through the establishment of a “repubblica fondata sul lavoro,” a republic grounded in labor ideals -- as the new Italian Constitution written by the Coalition recites. Due to the new geopolitical realities that set in following the war, however, this new democratic republic never materialized completely.

The history of the next thirty years is, therefore, a chronicle of painstaking and in the end vain efforts to establish that more humane “republic of the producers” envisioned by that generation of Italians (Communists, Socialists, Liberals, and Catholics) who had epically defeated Fascism. From all that has been said so far it should be clear that the old Italian authoritarian state recast anew after the war is the very same state we have today, a *patria* hardly to be proud of, a fatherland furthermore – we need to keep in mind -- that has not shied away even from routinely conspiring and sponsoring violence against its own citizens.<sup>x</sup> It is precisely to this state that many intellectuals of today have been organically cemented through the creation of an American type of *intelligenza mediatica*, media based intelligentsia, a reoriented intellectual class that operates virtually unchallenged through the media constantly manufacturing consensus for the ruling class through the press, reality shows,

opinion makers, and a plethora of insipid tv programs devoid of any educational content, all of which interrupting every five minutes an otherwise endless flow of stultifying commercials.

Accordingly, the only news allowed to be printed or broadcast is the one appropriately selected and carefully repackaged by the intellectuals corporately organized to operate the media networks; the only subjects up for public discussion are the ones approved by the networks.

This cloning on Italian soil of this slice of the American way of life was finally accomplished more recently through the authoritarian wholesale purchase by Berlusconi of the quasi totality of the national and local media. With no significant political dissent to contend with, with a *magistratura* or judicial system relentlessly attacked and diminished by Berlusconi’s officials, with no fully independent working class organizations, with no conscious revolutionary subject, with a civil society in which even liberal Kantian intellectuals of the Edward Said type, constructively critical of power, have been incapacitated, a growing number of Italian intellectuals have ended up manufacturing daily class consensus around a new *murdering* national identity against which Maalouf has warned us. It is against this background that Alessandro Dal Lago digs deeper into his subject. Explaining what motivated him to write a larger work than he had previously planned, the sociologist, interestingly, writes:

“It was necessary to understand how the appearance of foreigners seeking work or other social opportunities made certain clichés about humanity, tolerance, and rationality in our culture magically disappear.

I don't refer only to overt manifestations of racism: acts of violence against defenseless foreigners, even children; uprisings that are clearly xenophobic in their methods and slogans against "criminal" immigrants; senseless proposals to blacklist immigrants in every way; deliberate or implicit falsification of information regarding foreigners.

I refer instead to the decline in our political culture which could only conceive of expelling, containing, or confining migrants, and thus refuses to recognize them both as human beings and as economic resource ..."<sup>xi</sup> This is the sociologist's factual report not an episode from the *Twilight Zone* series. In today's Italy "non-persons" are real and "persons" are very dangerous. Here are Dal Lago's laconic remarks:

"Humanity is divided into majorities, citizens endowed with rights and formal guarantees, and minorities, illegitimate foreigners (not citizens, not nationals) for whom guarantees are negated ... due to social mechanisms of labeling and implicit and explicit forms of exclusion, humanity is divided into *persons* and *non-persons*."

Once identified as such, I wonder, can *non-persons* ever revert to being *persons*? It can happen, in Abdelmalek Sayad's view, provided that the host culture faces immigration as a "premiere mirroring opportunity" to take a deep look at itself. Short of this, Dal Lago, concludes, any analysis on immigration is necessarily "amputated" and "false."

"Immigration is ... not only an economic, social, political, and legal issue, but is also a cognitive problem ... A. Sayad summed up the role that immigrants play in producing social and scientific discourses with his concept of the 'specular function of migration phenomena.'

Simply by virtue of living among us, migrants are those who require us to reveal who we are:

in the discourses we maintain, in the knowledge we produce, in the political identity we claim."<sup>xii</sup>

In other words, those Italians who accept the challenge of looking at themselves in the mirror provided by the immigrants would become aware of the collective removal from their national consciousness of the fact that a great many of their co-nationals have been until not long ago *émigré*, migrants, emigrants, and immigrants themselves; which means that today's Italians are the children of yesterday's *e-migrants* and *in-migrants*. Emigration is, in fact, a traditional *topos* in the recent history of Italy. Scores of Italians from the South went to work to Northern Italy as "hordes" of Italians also emigrated to Northern Europe, Australia and the Americas. Only someone like Maalouf who has not repressed his migratory past knows how hard it must have been for those generations of Italian migrants to leave their country and their families. "Before becoming an immigrant one is a migrant, an *émigré*. Before coming to one country one has had to leave another. And a person's feelings about the country he has left are never simple."<sup>xiii</sup> Of course, emigration itself represents another endemic result of a malfunctioning and parasitic Italian state that forced many of its own citizens onto this harsh and painful road. It is enough – Maalouf reminds us -- to go through the police archives, past medical records, or sociological studies compiled in those countries that "welcomed" those Italian migrant workers to understand the impact that their poverty and different customs and language had on them.

The migrant stays suspended between two worlds, no longer belonging entirely to either one and yet constantly alighting both. Deeply etched into the memory of generations of Italians this profound and universal human experience has now been apparently written out of official Italian identity, and has been replaced by a fear and a hatred of the immigrant.

All this goes a long way towards explaining the behavior of those Italians who, unable to bear to look at themselves in the mirror, attack “those who embody that part of themselves which they would like to see forgotten. History contains many examples of such self-hatred.”<sup>xiv</sup> It is exactly this self-hatred in my view that reveals a psychology that always runs against the current of what it is to be human. Migration, according to Patrick Manning, a student of migratory movements in human history, “stems from the very core of human behavior.”<sup>xv</sup>

With this, it seems, we have then come full circle. The necessity for an unbounded identity - - evoked in the opening lines of this essay, -- set in the beginning of time as an evolutionary gene gave rise after all to the *modus vivendi* of our species: migratory movements. These have stood the test of time articulating the ongoing process of becoming human, as -- in Manning’s words -- a “human habit” and “as a thread running through the full extent of our history as a species.”<sup>xvi</sup> Romanologist Lorenzo Monasta makes this same point with a tinge of humor: “Even a dog knows that our social and cultural progress can only be the result of the steady intercourse and the coming together of people who are different from each other.”<sup>xvii</sup>

Whether or not Italians are able to redefine their collective identity in more inclusive ways only the future will tell. But now, in Abdelmalek Sayad’s terms, what would Italians learn about themselves by looking in the mirror held for them by the Rom and Sinti who live in Italy?

## **2. Rom and Sinti question national identity**<sup>xviii</sup>

From what has been said so far, Italians would learn that the nation itself is a problematic locus, as any discussion on immigration shows.<sup>xix</sup> For Patrick Manning, in fact, “migration is usually left out of the debates on nationhood. Yet the migration of people was central to creating the need for new identities”, *national* identities.<sup>xx</sup>

So, while migration is responsible for both reproducing national identities and producing ever new ones it is nonetheless usually left out of the equation. But immigration embodies by definition the non-national. It is in its nature always to confront the nation as its own opposite. For it is the “limit of whatever stands for a national state, a limit which brings to light what the state inherently is thus revealing the fundamental truth about it,” says Sayad.<sup>xxi</sup> We have again the mirror effect here. Immigration functions as a mirror for the national state unveiling its concealed essence, its truth. And what is the truth about the nation state? Let’s turn now to the Roma and see how their presence mirrors the nation state’s inherent concealed truth.

If, following Manning, migration is in our human genes then Rom and Sinti are migrants too, just like the rest of us, with a caveat. Mass migrations have never been holiday trips or wondrous voyages embarked upon for the sake of personal enrichment. Migrations have always been in many ways forced upon people, triggered by necessity and/or persecution. In the Romaní case, migrations have been the result of persecution. Naturally, not all Romani people are or have always been migrants. The Rom do not migrate unless they are forced to relocate although – this must always be kept in mind -- a majority of them was forced into slavery in the old Rumanian principalities for a few long centuries. Many also have not migrated for many generations by hiding their own identity. Of course, forcing people into hiding egregiously emblemizes one of the ways in which the national state enforces national identity.

Because we are speaking of the Romaní people a distinction is in order here: migration and nomadic life are two different phenomena. It is important to repeat this fundamental notion: Rom, Sinti, Kale, Manouches and Romanichals are *not* nomads!

They have never had a *nomadic* “vocation” or a *nomadic* life style. Rom, Sinti, Kale, Manouches, and Romanichals, instead, make up all together *one* trans-national minority people. Here lies the essence and the truth about the nation state unveiled by the presence of the Romaní communities. It is their very trans-national existence that strikes at the core of national identity. As Pierre Bourdieu has demonstrated, we live under the shadow of what the French philosopher has called *pensée d’État*, or “State Thought”, that is, in Sayad’s phrasing: “forme de pensée qui reflète, à travers ses propres structures (structures mentales) les structures de l’État ainsi faites corps.”<sup>xxii</sup>

Accordingly, we think of everything, including immigration, says Sayad, through the refracting lens of these nation State-mediated mental categories, State categories born with the nation State which they now constantly mediate on all ideological levels. All of these categories are therefore *ab origine*, he points out, ‘national’, and therefore, immediately ‘nationalistic.’ In essence, anything *national* is *nationalistic*. In this view, then, the State as Nation, *nationalist* in nature, stands as the supreme arbiter (Sayad is borrowing from Émile Benveniste here) endowed with an ultimate power, the “acte de définir”, the right to define others, an act, a prerogative, that presides over every opposition, dichotomy, and contradiction including those defining an individual or group as national/non-national, national/foreigner, national/immigrant, national/Rom, Italian/Rom, and at home/non-at home.

Thus the very nature of the State is to discriminate. This is the cause for the ambiguity which enshrouds migrants in their inseparable double-helix personae of emigrant and immigrant. Their presence leads to a contradiction which Sayad calls “provisoire qui dure”, *enduring provisional*. How can one continue to be present in a place in which one is by definition – that is, according to the dictates of State Thought -- absent?

Conversely, how does one manage to be but partially present and be in a way absent when one is physically present? Finally: is it even possible to think migration outside of State Thought categories?<sup>xxiii</sup>

That’s why the existence itself of majorities and minorities in the nation state is problematic and derivative of nationalisms that have imagined nation states by turning historically diverse populations into the modern national peoples of today.<sup>xxiv</sup> The nation state is, therefore in this view, the ultimate source of prejudice against whoever according to State-Thought does not fit the prescribed national norm. Not surprisingly, *prejudice* is what Rom and Sinti have been and continue to be up against. Prejudice, in fact, frames their relationship with the dominant population in any nation states in which they live as a minority group.

“Migration was forced upon them,” repeatedly insists Santino Spinelli in his important book, *Rom, Genti Libere (Rom, Free People)*. As he recounts the history of his people and the immeasurable sufferings inflicted upon it by all governments; as he chronicles the long European record of brutal expulsions, deportations, five centuries of slavery for 600, 000 Roma in the old Rumanian Principalities, and the *Porrajmos*, the final solution decreed by the Nazis for one million and a half Roma, the massacres meted out against Romaní communities in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and the horror of “campi nomadi” (*camps for Nomads*) in today’s Italy – the reader learns that each of these events has forced the Rom people to be continuously on the lookout and on the go. Spinelli drives this fundamental point home to us:

“Driven out of all European states they would make long stops in border areas, especially where these afforded a natural refuge, in the forests or in the mountains.

They roamed continuously to escape inhuman repression and this has been mistaken for nomadic lifestyle. Even today public opinion, despite the fact that we live in the era of communications and advanced technology, still holds this erroneous view of the Romaní people.<sup>xxv</sup>

Santino Spinelli is an Italian Rom, an intellectual, a university professor -- the first to teach Romanès and Romaní culture in Europe -- at the University of Trieste and now at the University of Chieti, Italy.<sup>xxvi</sup> Also, a musician and a composer of international fame, he founded the “Alexian Group” to promote Romaní music in the world.<sup>xxvii</sup> Thanks to his polymath activities in an astounding variety of fields and media, Spinelli is *the* reason why more people in Italy can have direct access to a Romaní perspective, one that is not otherwise heard very often. It was exhilarating for me to learn that the Romaní people not only does preserve a vigorous core of oral culture but that it has also for more than a century now had a written culture, that there is already a strong and thriving Romanò literature and theatre, that recently Romanès has been standardized, that a long list of Romaní writers write in their language in all countries in which they live, that Romaní language and culture are being now taught, and that many books are being written by Romaní authors to make this wonderful culture known to the wide public. Through Spinelli’s works and music Italians can now learn about Romaní culture and history, gain genuine information on all aspects of the Romaní world, beyond prejudice, clichés, or romanticism, and ... take seriously the opportunity to *look at themselves in the mirror*.<sup>xxviii</sup>

“If long ago,” he writes, “keeping our contacts with the external world, inimical and repressive, to a minimum helped us to make ‘invisible’ and thereby retain our *romanipé*, in today’s global world if we do not share it with others it will ‘disappear.’”

The word *Romanipé* dots Spinelli’s work. It translates the many registers articulating Romaní culture, life-styles, world-view, spirituality, and language. In brief, it denotes the soul of a global trans-national Romaní universe; in one word, it represent its identity.

Thus, when Spinelli reflects on the long story of anti-Rom institutionalized prejudice in Europe he describes it as a radical rejection of their Romanipé on the part of the *Gajé*, the non-Rom.

“These were measures enacted against a defenseless people that was trapped and forced everywhere to survive against all odds. These cost the Romaní communities incalculable damage: indescribable suffering and persistent trauma that never healed. The Romaní people have incredibly withstood this inhuman violence while other groups under the same circumstances have disappeared. Socially, morally, and culturally, however, it has paid an enormous price. Today still discriminated against, it keeps paying this overbearing tax with no reparation in sight. It is not true that the Romaní communities resist being integrated into the larger society. What they resist is the “way” in which this is demanded of them: that is, through forced assimilation which itself entails a total and humiliating loss of identity.”<sup>xxix</sup> The word used by Spinelli which I translated here as “loss of identity” actually carries stronger referential power in Italian. The word he uses, “*personalizzazione*,” literally points to a precipitous loss in value, the loss of a whole range of meanings irradiating from the word *persona*, person, the self: loss in *personhood* and in *personality*. It may also indicate a prospective loss of any role a free actor may interpret on the stage of life and the space s/he can claim: *persona*, *personage*, *personal*, *personalize*. This is what a rejection of Romanipé also means, I think, and this is what a Rom resists.



Because of this history and because of the transnational nature of the Romaní universe, the Romaní communities have developed a wide gamut of different traditions which enrich their common identity:

“Each individual today has a prismatic identity, that is, a multiple inheritance which is at once cultural, linguistic and psychological. This multiple identity is built upon the sum of so many diverse identities.”

This resonates very powerfully with Amin Maalouf’s vision of a liberated collective and personal identity that is comfortable with the many layers history has built into it, and also one that is perfectly aware and accepting of its own many cultural, spiritual, national, transnational, regional, local, universal, sexual, and artistic allegiances. Both Maalouf and Spinelli underscore the social and political relevance of such a liberated identity with no *killer* temptations.

“Today a multiple-layered identity may help everybody overcome the inclusive-exclusive dichotomy and may also help articulate better the complexity of living in the larger society (*vivere quotidiano*). Under these conditions, it is useless and harmful to force one type of identity upon an individual or raise unsurmountable ethnic fences. It is more rational to learn to value all the facets of the contemporary world, one that is so dynamic and multicultural. Every member of a community may want to choose one’s own identity (or identities) which reflects better one’s own sensibility; one also needs to have the opportunity not to have to choose at all. Thinking and acting accordingly will help us balance between individual and collective responsibilities and will also help affirm an ever broader idea of identity and citizenship.”<sup>xxx</sup>

This is how Romanipé can be safeguarded and allowed to thrive today in a world in which everybody should be free to engage his/her identity as both an individual and a citizen.

This reminds me of the imaginary conversation Maalouf engages with an immigrant and a native citizen.

“I would first say to one party: ‘The more you steep yourself in the culture of the host country the more you will be able to steep yourself in your own’; and then, to the other party: ‘The more an immigrant feels that his own culture is openly respected, the more open he will be to the culture of the host country’.”<sup>xxxii</sup>

This kind of thinking can be, of course, quite subversive in a country like Italy in the process of reappropriating a long discredited notion of nationalism, a country, Alessandro Dal Lago reminds us, in which “legal and political universalism has been progressively delegitimized,” and a country that has invented “new regional and sub-regional nationalisms, over-emphasizing the local models of economic growth.” It seems that here “political society can only exist as a local community, bound in some exclusive way to a territory, and above all, in competition or conflict with other territorial communities.”<sup>xxxii</sup> Italy is also a country, however, defined by the shameful and horrendous presence of *campi nomadi*, camps for nomads, -- once again, Romaní people are *not* nomads.<sup>xxxiii</sup> These camps are the genocidal places in which Rom communities are forced to live in inhuman conditions. As Monasta reminds us, these camps are typically located near the cities but far from civilization. They are in landfills, cemeteries, open sewers, high voltage pylons, and kennels. These are places with no hot water, with a few toilets and no sewers, with high populations of rats running through kitchens and bedrooms, biting adults and children, with electricity running next to water pipes, with the ground constantly flooded with the water from the lavatories that in the open mixes with the sewer, with barracks, really makeshift huts, made of wooden planks nailed together with an impermeable tarp over the roofs themselves pressed down with spare tires,

finally, these are places where the spectacle of frequent fires is ever present, fires that spread in a second devouring the whole camp as firemen arrive too late, or do not come at all -- on one occasion, the firemen did not bother even going because they thought the call to the fire department was a joke.<sup>xxxiv</sup> This episode speaks volumes about the level of widespread anti-Rom prejudice. Here, in these camps, because of the lack of hygiene and the frequent lethal fires, whether due to arson or not, not surprisingly, the death rate for children is the highest in the country. These *campi* are also places in which people, however, try their best to live with dignity by keeping their huts and "streets" clean, by socializing and even having fun at the local "coffee shop" just as war time prisoners managed to find some solace in Nazi concentration camps. No Italian would ever want to live in one of these *terre di nessuno*, no man's lands, and raise their children there. Anyone can see this shocking situation by visiting, for example, the "campo nomadi" at Poderaccio near Florence, a city celebrated for her art and museums reminiscent of the *Renaissance*, or by leafing through *Vite costrette*, a book with numbing photographs of the camp, authored by both Italian activist and writer Lorenzo Monasta and Rom consultant Burhan Hasani.<sup>xxxv</sup> In his preface to the book, Leonardo Piasere, an Italian Romanologist, remarks that "Of course, this is not a classic concentration camp ... these are lagers particularly built to test human endurance and suffering .."<sup>xxxvi</sup> These are the places where Romanipé lives on in a superhuman effort to resist the barbarity forced upon the Rom.

These are the places of Romaní resistance and the places of non-negotiable barter or caving-in to the demands of the brutal institutional force regularly unleashed by an imagined Italian fatherland. The comparison between concentration camps and *campi nomadi* is also unsettling given the high participation of Rom and Sinti as partisans in the struggle against the Nazis and the fascists during WWII.

This is another page completely forgotten in today's Italy.

Poignantly, Santino Spinelli, comments: "the ideals in the name of which they fought or sacrificed their lives have been betrayed if we consider the loss of values in our society today, the plight of many Romaní communities still discriminated against or forced into *campi nomadi*, and if one considers the long list of children killed by the collateral effects of racism, marginalization, and misinformation. Did they sacrifice themselves for this? The Italian State has never paid any reparations at all to the Romaní communities for the crimes committed against them by the fascist dictatorship."<sup>xxxvii</sup>

In his more recent book, *I pregiudizi contro gli zingari spiegati al mio cane*, Lorenzo Monasta revisits this topic laying bare the philosophy underlying the existence of these *campi nomadi*. He takes issue with the government policy of *delocalizzazione* (delocalization) of the Rom communities, the policy of forceful relocation of these communities:

"The policy of delocalizing the Rom communities defies elementary logic. Either you find a secluded place isolated from everything and everybody or you will always find someone who thinks of delocalization as localization in 'his/her home'. That's why we always end up turning these camps into non-places. Spaces undefined by geography, history, or humanity, non-places, according to Marc Augè, are for those who pass through them devoid of referential signs. They make people feel disoriented, isolated, and are fully functional in controlling them. Let's get to the point: those who do not want "gypsies" in their home should clearly state that there is only one other solution and that would be their extermination. Do we, hypocrites, really think that those who do not want them in their homes will find someone else welcoming them elsewhere?"<sup>xxxviii</sup>

The combination captured here of racist, fascist attitudes in the populace, the inconclusive criminal circularity of government policy, and the reference to French anthropologist Marc Augé is truly mind-boggling. Thus Italy, a signpost of Western civilization, turns out to be a country of *non-persons* and *non-places*.

“If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place. The hypothesis advanced here is that super modernity produces non-places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places and which, unlike Baudelairean modernity, do not integrate the earlier places: instead these are listed, classified, promoted to the status of ‘places of memory’, and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position.”<sup>xxxix</sup>

Italy, a country that has had a late start on modernity leaving behind her Southern part -- half of herself -- in pre-modernity now, incredibly, it seems, overflows with an excess of super modernity! It is this condition that is responsible for dotting the place with non-places, with *campi nomadi*.

Augé is concerned with a “world thus surrendered to solitary individuality”, a human condition epitomized by a dehumanizing society with clinics and hospitals as places of birth and dying, and credit card transactions that do not require the use of words. This super modern society in which everything becomes temporary and ephemeral produces *non-places*. Non-places, however, do not devour and annihilate places. Those coexist, instead, with places standing as opposite polarities to each other: “the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like the palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten.”<sup>xl</sup>

It is in this porous and productive intersection located in an in-between area that place/non-place, presence/non-presence, identity/non-identity, fullness/emptiness, reference/non-reference, meaning/non-meaning, humanity/inhumanity, nation/non-nation, person/non-person, national/immigrant, Italian/Rom and word/silence are negotiated by the defenders of a mythic Italian fatherland and those who prefer to read about it in history books.

Here again Santino Spinelli reveals the truth about Italian State Thought and its embodied mental, social, and political structures of national identity: “*Campi nomadi*, centers of racial segregation or *apartheid*, are a nazi-fascist legacy. They are social dustbins derivative of a culture of hatred that denies human rights. This can be understood very clearly as one analyzes the concept of ‘*campi nomadi*’. The word ‘*campo*,’ even in its repugnance, brings to mind concentration camps and is rather far from the idea of ‘encampment’ which of course is part of Romaní culture. The word ‘nomads’, which implies a cultural form and not an ethnic designation, actually conceals the real name of the ethnic group: a people that is not ‘named’ does not ‘exist’ and if it does not ‘exist’ it has no rights. This is a strategy aimed at repression and used by the Nazis who kept calling Rom and Sinti with a name other than theirs, *Zigeuner*. In the era of communications words imply an end. Keeping defining the Romanès communities as ‘gypsies’ or ‘nomads’ implies the decision to perpetuate “racial hatred” and discrimination. This is all the more evident when one considers the location chosen for these *campi nomadi*, often found by high voltage pylons or next to landfills or in slums, all places in which no Gajo (non-Rom) would ever want to live. *Campi nomadi are a crime against humanity*. The death list of Romaní children, forced to live in *campi nomadi* or marginalized by the civilized world, is extremely long: it is a war report in peace time.”<sup>xli</sup>

How many Italians are ready to hear this? How many Italians do actually understand the meaning of these words? How many Italians know that these *campi nomadi* are actually in their backyard? How many of them ever make a point of visiting them? How many do hear about and see the Roma but briefly through rapid images in the background in the news packaged with the words 'nomads' and 'crime'? How many actually allow themselves to see through all this and socialize with Romaní people?

Spinelli continues: "The Romaní communities represent actually a thermometer for measuring the degree of civilization attained by the society in which they live." Any notion of freedom, civilization, and democracy, he writes, will remain an empty word as long as the century-old sufferings of the Romaní communities are not made public, as long as these communities are not paid back socially, morally and culturally.

"Public opinion is unaware of this situation and is led to believe otherwise by the new and modern (although really *old*) 'propaganda'. The *Porrajmos*, the cultural genocide of the Romaní communities, began in Europe with an Edict issued in Germany in 1416 (in Italy a similar Edict was issued in 1483 by the Serene Republic of Venice), but actually it has continued down the centuries as a rejection of *Romanipè* and continues to this very day. The world changes, societies evolve, but anti-Romaní attitudes persist. It is worthwhile remembering that discrimination is illegal and is a crime against humanity."<sup>xliii</sup>

It is shocking to hear and realize as an Italian that while many Europeans have been enjoying peace since 1945 many Romanès have not and that actually for a long time Romaní children have been raised, have grown up, and have become adult and old in communities that have been segregated for centuries, even enslaved.

Here again, what would mean to ask Abdelmalek Sayad's ultimate question: is it even possible (or allowed, for that matter) to think of Romaní segregation and repression outside the parameters of State Thought categories? Here is a good start: "Romaní culture can be fully enjoyed provided that we get rid of our ethnocentric mindset, provided that we above all do not see it as synonymous with social degradation, social inequality, or unlawfulness ... There is a tendency, instead, to make an entire people responsible for acts committed by single individuals pointing out their ethnic origins. Often people are not discriminated against because they behave badly, but they behave badly precisely because they are discriminated against."<sup>xliiii</sup>

Walking through these non-places of Italy as Rom, non-persons par excellence, go about their business, and looking around in that social intersection in which fascistic identities contend for supremacy while others, more liberated, yearn to break through too narrow an encirclement that threatens to choke them, I am amazed, humbled, and brought to tears by the words of hope written by Spinelli in his book:

"There is an artistic ferment underway within and without the Romaní communities. Intellectuals are raising questions about their own language, their own art, and their own creative abilities with the goal in mind to empower their group identity or to win more respect in places where they live steadily... They all share an iron determination to break their 'silence' and overcome the 'empty space' which their ancestors often created between themselves and the dominant society in order to protect themselves and survive. They want to be seen as they really are and be able to defend publicly their right to their own culture. It is an act of courage and an expression of trust in their own ability to persuade their own interlocutors. This is a walk on a new road, replete, I am sure, with twists and turns.

Is society ready to reach out with an open hand?<sup>xliv</sup>

Are we, really? I do hope so for all of us.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> “How far back in time should we project the origins of our identity? Don’t waste your time. In truth, we’re all Africans, Lucy’s children.” Lorenzo Monasta, *I pregiudizi contro gli zingari spiegati al mio cane*. BFS edizioni, Pisa, 2008, p. 14. My translation.

<sup>ii</sup> Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*. (translated from the French by Barbara Bray), Penguin Books, New York, 2000, p. 32.

<sup>iii</sup> Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity*, p. 159.

<sup>iv</sup> Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity*, p. 160.

<sup>v</sup> Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity*, p. 14.

<sup>vi</sup> For an analysis in depth of the immigrants’ plight, see the excellent and fundamental work by Abdelmalek Sayad, *La double absence: Des illusions de l’émigré aux souffrances de l’immigré*. Collection Liber. Seuil, 1999. This work has also appeared in English: A. Sayad. *The Suffering of the Immigrant*, Cambridge: Polity, 2004. In this essay I have used the French text.

<sup>vii</sup> Alessandro Dal Lago, *Non-persone: l’esclusione dei migranti in una società globale*. Nuova Edizione. UE Feltrinelli, Milano, 2004, p. 10. I quote from the meritorious English translation of the book by Marie Orton: Alessandro Dal Lago, *Non-Persons: the exclusion of Migrants in a Global Society*, IPOC Press, Milano, 2009, p. 16. I inserted the original wording “poco onorevole” which Orton translates as “dishonorable” to maintain the full referential signification of the expression in Italian history.

<sup>viii</sup> Alessandro Dal Lago, *Non-Persons*, p.15.

<sup>ix</sup> I am referencing here Antonio Gramsci and his theory of the intellectuals viewed as *organically* attached to the ruling classes. Class conscious intellectuals side with the working classes attaching themselves organically to these.

<sup>x</sup> I am referring here to what is known to Italians as *strategia della tensione*, the concerted action of the state and its repressive organs against the Italian Communist Party, the entire political Left and the unions. Beginning with the Reggio Emilia massacre of 1960 state sponsored violence continued all through the 1970s with the 1969 massacre of Piazza Fontana in Milan, the 1974 bombing of the train Italicus and the Piazza della Loggia massacre at Brescia, the 1980 massacre at the train station of Bologna. More state violence and conspiratorial violence against social and political dissent was unleashed also through the infamous P2 group, *Gladio* underground activities in cooperation with the CIA, attempted right-wing coups, and the many Mafia related assassinations of magistrates and activists. Of course, who really was behind the Red Brigades and their decade long terrorism culminating with the kidnapping and murder of liberal statesman Aldo Moro in 1978 still remains unknown. It still surprises me how all of this and more remains unknown to public opinion outside Italy. To understand the connections between state and Mafia, see the work by Neapolitan journalist Roberto Saviano whose report from the trenches, *Gomorra*, won him wide acclaim internationally with both the book and the film by the same title in 2008. Saviano, whose life continues to be in danger, has been repeatedly attacked by government officials and forced to a virtual underground existence. He has been living since the publication of *Gomorra* under bodyguard protection.

<sup>xi</sup> Alessandro Dal Lago, *Non- Persons*, p. 14.

<sup>xii</sup> Alesssandro Dal Lago, *Non- Persons*, p. 19. The Italian text has “senso comune” here which appears as “social discourse” in the English translation. While I can see the merit of this choice, I also feel that the semantic opposition evoked here between conscious production of scientific discourse and its distorted reflection and reproduction among the lay public as cliché is lost.

<sup>xiii</sup> Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity*, p. 38.

<sup>xiv</sup> Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity*, p. 16.

<sup>xv</sup> Patrick Manning, *Migration in World History*. Routledge, New York, 2005, p. 2.

<sup>xvi</sup> Patrick Manning, *Migration*, p. VIII.

<sup>xvii</sup> Lorenzo Monasta, *I pregiudizi*, p. 10. “Lo capisce anche un cane che il divenire sociale e culturale puo’ solo essere il frutto di un continuo confronto e mescolamento tra diversita’.” My translation. The author’s humorous title and reference to dogs stems from the very serious attempt to get through the barriers of prejudice and explain in simple but “not banal” terms the truth about Rom and Sinti minorities. See his introduction in Lorenzo Monasta, *I pregiudizi*, p. 5.

<sup>xviii</sup> A note on the terminology: the Romaní people consists of five main communities: Rom, Sinti, Kale, Manouches and Romanichals. These names like the word *Rom* all mean “man” and are used synonymously. *Rom* (pl. *Roma*) is the more widely preferred term for themselves worldwide. Romaní people speak *Romanès*. I only use here the names Rom and Sinti because these are the two main historical Romaní communities represented in Italy: here Rom people live in Central and Southern Italy while Sinti communities live in the North. Historically, Rom people also have lived in the Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe while Sinti have lived in Northern Europe and France. Although in the title of his last book Spinelli only uses the term “Rom,” in the body of the text he always mentions the names of all five communities together when he refers to the totality of the Romani people. The same practice is followed in his first book too. Alexian Santino Spinelli, *Baro romano drom: la lunga strada dei rom, sinti, kale, manouches e romanichals*, Meltemi, Roma, 2003, pp. 87-88.

<sup>xix</sup> Following Sayad, I employ the term migration as a total phenomenon consisting of emigration plus immigration.

<sup>xx</sup> Patrick Manning, *Migration in World History*, p. 140.

<sup>xxi</sup> A. Sayad, *La double absence*, p. 396. “l’immigration constitue comme la limite de ce qu’est l’État national, limite qui donne à voir ce qu’il est intrinèquement, sa verité fondamentale.” My translation.

<sup>xxii</sup> A. Sayad, *La double absence*, p. 395. “a form of thought reflecting through its own structures (mental structures) the structures of the State that as a result have become embodied.” My translation.

<sup>xxiii</sup> A. Sayad, *La double absence*, pp. 420-421 and p. 418. Sayad’s reference to Benveniste is in: É. Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, t. 2, Paris, Minuit, 1969, pp. 14-15, p. 41, pp. 150-151.

<sup>xxiv</sup> I applaud Lorenzo Monasta for interjecting this provocative thought: “... stato nazione – concetto moribondo, ma tenuto in vita artificialmente perche’ ancora comodo ...” (“nation state ... a concept almost dead, artificially kept alive because it may still do the job ...”). Lorenzo Monasta, *I pregiudizi*, p. 17

<sup>xxv</sup> Santino Spinelli, *Rom, genti Libere: Storia, arte e cultura di un popolo misconosciuto*. Dalai, Milano, 2012, p. 88. This is a wonderful and powerful book, in so many ways the sequel of his first equally important and breaking ground book titled *Baro romano drom: la lunga strada dei rom, sinti, kale, manouches e romanichals*.

A unique treasure house of Romaní history and culture, this special book tells the history of all five Romaní communities, expanding upon every important aspect of Romaní cultural and spiritual life: music, literature, language, activism, famous Romani people, sociology and religion. It should be translated into English and made known to a world audience! The Romanès word *Porrajmos* literally translates “devouring.” As Spinelli reiterates, no Romaní community has ever received any reparation or has ever been officially included in the long lists of victims of Nazi atrocities. No Rom was even invited to be heard at the Nuremberg Trials against Nazi criminals in 1945. Only recently a monument has finally been erected near the German Parliament in Berlin with a poem titled “Auschwitz” written by Santino Spinelli. Finally, when numbers of Yugoslav Romaní people were forced to flee from their land and tried to find asylum in Italy they were refused refugee status by the Italian authorities and were placed, instead, in “camps for Nomads”! These were people who had had a house and a job in their country, they had never been *nomads*!

<sup>xxvi</sup> Santino Spinelli, *Rom, genti libere*, p. 221. My translation.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Santino Spinelli often but not always adds *Alexian* to his full name.

<sup>xxviii</sup> For the English speaking reader interested in Romanès at least two books should be mentioned here: Ian Hancock, *A Handbook of Vlax Romani*, Slavica, Columbus, OH, 1995; and Ronald Lee, *Learn Romani, Das-dúma Rromanes*. Hertfordshire Press, 2005.

- <sup>xxix</sup> Santino Spinelli, *Rom, genti libere*, p. 95.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Santino Spinelli, *Rom, genti libere*, pp. 200-1. Italics are mine.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity*, p.41.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Alessandro Dal Lago, *Non-persons*, p. 14 & 16. The translation of the second half quote is mine.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> These are interchangeably also called *campi Rom*. I am employing in this essay the slightly more used of the two.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> In 2008, a *campo nomadi* near Naples was set on fire by a Mafioso who did not want his children to go to school with Roman children from the camp. A moment of this horror can be viewed on youtube googling [Napoli-Incendiarono campo nomadi](#). Many other fires due to both arson and non can be seen on youtube.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Burhan Hasani e Lorenzo Monasta, *Vite costrette; un viaggio fotografico nel campo Rom del Poderaccio*, Prefazione di Leonardo Piasere, Ombre corte, Verona, 2003. ‘Vite costrette’ in the title expresses the reality of human beings forced to live restricted, amputated lives. Translated, the title reads “forced into constricted lives.” The photographs in the book never fail to shock. Rom co-author Hasani, who was born in Yugoslavia, has lived for more than ten years, his entire adolescence, in this camp. Leafing through this book I was reminded of the memorial books published after WWII by Italians interned in Nazi concentration camps. One of these belonged to my father. Just as *Vite costrette* does, it illustrated with photos, drawings, and brief narratives, snippets of prisoners’ life in the notorious *lager* known as Sand Bostel located in North-Western Germany.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Leonardo Piasere, “Prefazione”, in *Vite costrette*, p. 7-8. Piasere is also the author of the very important book *I Rom d’Europa: una storia moderna*, Laterza, 2004.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Santino Spinelli, *Rom, genti libere*, p. 118.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Lorenzo Monasta, *I pregiudizi contro gli zingari*, pp. 32-33.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. (Transl. by John Howe), Verso, 1995, Pp. 77-78.
- <sup>xl</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places*, p. 79.
- <sup>xli</sup> Santino Spinelli, *Rom, genti libere*, pp. 126-127. Italics are mine.
- <sup>xlii</sup> Santino Spinelli, *Rom, genti libere*, pp. 128-129.
- <sup>xliii</sup> Santino Spinelli, *Rom, genti libere*, pp. 14-15.
- <sup>xliv</sup> Santino Spinelli, *Rom, genti libere*, pp. 244-245.

So how did Italy go about building a sense of national identity? Did it just happen by itself? Was it a concerted governmental effort?Â The thing is, Italy and the Vatican remained technically at war until the Fascist era, when Mussolini finally made peace with the church (decades later, after it had become clear the pan-catholic cavalry wasn't ever coming). It was during this era that Italy proper was really consolidated, with sweeping infrastructure, education, and social programs. Really, though, Italy worked out because they were involved in WWI and WWII and had a strong mutual collective interest. Sinti, Manouches, Kale and Romanichals. Rom and Sinti both live in Italy. One of the prejudices afflicting the Romani is their alleged "nomadic" life-style. Their nomadism has never been a vocation or a cultural trait but the result of the systematic persecutions on the part of all States.Â Of course, the criminal and political ills afflicting the South now afflict to a degree the North as well. Do Neapolitans, Italians and immigrants live in a state of law or in a country dominated by criminal interests? 13 Unsurprisingly, the parte malsana, the unhealthy portion of society, along with their racist leghisti blames the South for everything. For instance, they blame the Neapolitans for what the media routinely call emergenza rifiuti, "garbage emergency," referring to the.