Contemporary Anti-Gypsyism in European Mass Media

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Abstract—This paper focuses on the contemporary phenomenon of Anti-Gypsyism which diffused widely throughout social representations of the so called "Gypsies". In Europe and especially in Italy, the media tends to reproduce racist stereotypes and prejudices through a xenophobic depiction of this ethnic group, often offering an ethnocentric point of view. From an anthropological perspective, Roma people are a minority group facing diasporic phenomena across Europe, produced by the host societies.

Keywords—Roma people, Anty-Gypsyism, Ethnocentrism, Mass Media.

I. INTRODUCTION

OUR contemporary era has witnessed the affirmation of new forms of racism and xenophobic tendencies, in particular against Roma/Sinti/Nomads/Gypsy citizens; this is what we call Anti-Gypsyism. Among the consequences of rise of these new forms of racism, there has been an increase in diasporic movements and the marginalization of population groups who, for various reasons, are considered unable to adapt to the Western socio-economic system: among them, millions of Roma, for whom chronic unemployment and poverty have become the norm [1], [2]. Perceptions of Roma/Gypsies/Nomads are extremely negative in all European societies. Today in Italy the different ethnic groups of the Romani, Sinti and Roma populations are estimated to be about 170.000 people, This is a small number when compared with the 1-1.5 million who are resident in Romania and Bulgaria, the 800.000 resident in Spain, half a million in Slovakia and Hungary, Serbia's 400.000 residents and the 350.000 in France. This introduction outlines the problematic issue that has motivated many NGOs' projects or community interventions in the last twenty-five years. The minority status of many Roma groups highlights the rhetoric of governments' ethnicization policies across Europe, policies often seeking to deal with the "Roma question" within the perspective of assimilative welfare. But as we know, the challenge and the objective of any effective action would put in place a self-determination (empowerment) of the Roma/Gypsies. In fact, if we draw our attentions to the international level, the United Nations issued a series of acts concerning ethnic minorities and racial discrimination: Recommendation No. 2/399 of the Sub-commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, Study of the Rights of Persons Belonging to Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities

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(1977); Resolution No. 1991/12 of the Economic and Social Council on Protection of Minorities (1991); Resolution No. 1992/65 of the Economic and Social Council on Protection of Roma (Gypsies) (1992); General Recommendation No.27 of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on Discrimination against Roma (2000); Declaration of World Conference Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (2001).

In the European context, moreover, it should be noted that the EU began taking an interest in the "Roma question" from about 1990, regarding the Roma groups' mobilities as an invasion into the territories of the European States. Since the early 2000's, however, there has been a change of perspective in the governing bodies and it has been decided that inclusion of the Roma ethnic minorities within the political agenda should be pursued. Since then, there have been many directives, resolutions, recommendations, reports and studies issued by the EU – through Council of Europe (CoE) and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (Osce) mediation - designed to preserve and improve the living conditions of EU-Citizens Roma, to protect them, "including" and integrating the Roma culture through a perspective of assimilative processes typical of Western culture. It is easy to remember, for example, the Council Directive 2000/78/EC establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation (2000); the European Council Directive 2000/43/EC on Implementing the Principle of Equal Treatment Between Persons Irrespective of Racial or Ethnic Origin; the Resolution of the Council and Representatives of Member States' Governments Meeting within the Council on the Response of Educational Systems to the Problems of Racism and Xenophobia (1995); the Resolution of the Council and the Ministers of Education Meeting within the Council on School Provisions for Children of Occupational Travellers (1989). Nevertheless, it is clear these purposes and actions have not resulted in good outcomes and have not had god aims, as witnessed by activists, NGOs, scholars, etc.

II. GYPSIES' DIASPORA IN ITALY

Referring to the Italian case, Roma/Gypsies usually represent in the Italian social imaginary stereotypes of marginalization and discrimination in the social imaginary due in a large part to depictions featured in mass media. There are many recent episodes of human rights being denied: very often Italian "Zingari" are deported without any warrant, trampling the Italian Constitution, laws, and international law. Interned in detention centers, Roma/Gypsies are often treated harshly by the police without any understanding or sympathy to

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emotions and family ties. The legislative decrees issued in 2007, 2008, and 2009 by succesive governments always referred to a social alarm, a "necessary" answer for public security against a general Romanian criminal presence. As is known, an important role in Italy is played by the political party Lega Nord, which is a federalist and regionalist political party founded in 1991 as a federation of several regional parties from Northern and Central Italy, most of which had arisen and then expanded their share of the electorate during the 1980s. Lega Nord was to influence the government on illegal immigration, especially when dealing with immigrants coming from Africa, mainly targeted as non-EU immigrants, and in ousting Roma/Sinti populations living in Italy. In 2000, some Roma were expelled from Rome and then compensated by the Berlusconi government after the intervention of the European Court of Human Rights. Local institutions periodically threaten the transfer of residents of the camp, as a forced deportation, but without proposing concrete solutions shared by the local population and the Roma themselves.

Fig. 1 Gypsies camp evacuation in Italy, 2011

Today Italy continues to deny Roma and Sinti applications in relation to the European Charter on ethnic and linguistic minorities that protect minority languages; moreover the Italian government denies the Framework Convention for National Minorities. The frequent expulsion orders issued by mayors and governors deny the right to residence, the right to work, health and education. Similarly, with regard to a Galician and Portuguese frontier case study, it has been argued that borders and frontiers are at the same time real and imagined and lived/experienced entities. We can compare them to a form of creating and created meaning over social realities, forever contested and negotiated all over time and space. In this theoretical framework, according to Martins [3], it is necessary to discover a contemporary scientific anthropology in order to know individual diversities and pluralism that give sense to our lives. In conclusion, defining borders and frontiers as multi-layered realities means that they need to be addressed from different angles. In fact, Roma citizens cross dominant society's borders, in a critical and

dialogic cosmopolitanism. Due to their ethnicization, they are obliged to live as refugees in Western societies and represent the marginalized group par excellence to be excluded [4].

In 2008 the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (Cerd) produced a report on the Italian situation. This document noted an increase in the spread of prejudice against immigrants and Gypsies among politicians and the media and asked Italy for "Resolute actions", in order to prevent a tendency to stigmatize and stereotype people because of their ethnic origin. In summary, the report urged that the State must increase its efforts to prevent and punish effectively hate speech and racism in the media; contain any tendency to stigmatize, stereotype or single out persons on the basis of race, color, national origin, or to use racist propaganda for political purposes; take measures to remedy the fact that the mass media present a negative image of Roma and Sinti, in particular, for example, by giving legal force to the "Charter of Rome", that is the journalists' code of conduct on migrants; encourage the media to play a positive role in combating prejudice and negative stereotypes that lead to racial discrimination. The Charter was born from an agreement between the National Council of the Journalists' Association (Consiglio Nazionale dell'Ordine dei Giornalisti, CNOG), the Italian National Press Federation (Federazione Nazionale della Stampa Italiana, FNSI), UNAR (National Office Against Racial Discrimination) and UN High Commissioner, that suggests to pay extreme caution in the publishing of information relating to asylum seekers, refugees, victims of trafficking and migrants. In fact, the purpose is to adopt an appropriate terminology which reflects national and international law so as to provide readers and viewers with the greatest adherence to the truth as regards all events which are the subject of media coverage, avoiding the use of inappropriate terms. Another aim is to avoid spreading inaccurate, simplified or distorted information; it is necessary to pay attention to the possible negative effects of superficial or unprofessional behavior on those who are the object of news coverage, on readers/viewers and, as a consequence, on media professionals' credibility.

III. ANTI-GYPSYISM AND MASS MEDIA

In 2012 a municipal police officer was run over and killed in Milan by a SUV driven by two young gypsies. Later, it was made clear that the boys were resident in Italy (one boy was born in France and the other in Italy, but "ethnically" gypsies). Unfortunately, a sentiment of intolerance rose in the collective imaginary and national media helped stir up a "witch-hunt" against Roma/Sinti residents. The consequence was a new wave of racial instigation, discrimination and hostile statement, which confirms the labile relationship between minority groups and dominant groups. In 2011, the Italian newspaper "La Stampa" spread a false news piece: a 16 year old girl living in Turin reported that she had been raped by two Gypsies coming from a nearby camp. She was readily believed and soon an angry mob of some 500 people marched toward the camp armed with clubs and torches, who gave vent to their rage, by breaking windows, smashing furniture, and

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setting some of the shacks on fire. Later, the firemen put out the fires and the girl confessed that she had invented everything. She had been afraid of telling her parents that she had sex with her boyfriend. This incident illustrates well the host society's need for identifying an enemy; someone who can becomes a perfect scapegoat.

promotion of diversity and multiculturalism, if committed to change. Instead of focusing on negative headlines about Roma emphasis should be put on finding positive stories and on giving the Roma a voice. There are lawyers, teachers, politicians and doctors of Roma ethnicity, so why not reporting about them?" [6].

Fig. 2 The false rape in the Italian journal "La Stampa", 2011

Fig. 3 The Dosta! Campaign logo

In the worst of its tendencies, journalism amplifies prejudices and ethnocentrism and touts a racist message through the use of clichés and stereotypes, or inappropriate choices of words. In these cases the journalist degrades the value of this civil profession, a situation that leads to reflection on the boundaries between reporting rights and obligations and responsibility towards minorities. Concerning the Travellers, another "gypsy" subgroup, and the press regulation and racism in the UK; Morris (2000) specifies that in creating largely negative images of them, "…the press may argue that they are merely reflecting standard public opinion; and they may be right. But in reflecting it they condone, encourage and confirm racist assumptions whereas, some might argue, it is part of their role to counter such bigoted simplifications… Racist invective by the press infects society in a widespread way; a way in which an unintentionally racist remark by one individual to another cannot. They confirm existing prejudices and create new ones, much as parents do in transferring unexamined aversions to their children" [5].

As literature shows, groups which are readily and easily stereotyped, such as Gypsies, Nomads, Travellers, are likely to experience layers of discrimination in their lives which lead to its entrenchment; in fact they are much less likely to become members of the group which is active in the stereotyping or labelling (the so called host society), making it much more difficult to counter such representations with different pictures and other realities. The Roma Campaign Dosta, promoted by Council of Europe, highlights that "The media, sometimes unconsciously, too often consciously, spread anti-Roma feelings. In case of reporting a crime committed by a person mentioning the ethnicity does not have any positive impact. By the same token, patronizing attitude is also harmful. In addition, media generally do not pay attention to stories in which the Roma are the victims, as it is the case for racist attacks or hate speeches pronounced by politicians towards Roma, all of these acts that media could help to condemn. Media can be a valuable tool of awareness raising and

As stated above, talk of Roma people in the media generally makes of them a scapegoat for social ills and troubles between different cultures. This is often the result of an ethnocentric attitude, that is the tendency to believe that one's ethnic or cultural group is at the top of an imagined hierarchy and subsequently assigns other cultures and nations lower value on that scale. As Sumner says: "Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders. Each group thinks its own folkways the only right ones, and if it observes that other groups have other folkways, these excite its scorn. Opprobrious epithets are derived from these differences." [7] Social representations are not simply opinions or attitudes, but cognitive systems, ingenuous theories or branches of knowledge that we use to discover and organize reality [8]. They have two main purposes: giving individuals a guide to orientate themselves in the social field and offering them a reading instrument for their belonging group. In Moscovici's words, social representations provide "a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history" [9].

Another important feature is that the articles on the Roma are much more frequently in newspapers and other local media than in international ones. As observed, most of these pieces fall into the category of short news without a accurate or thorough analysis or a detailed description of the context behind the story. In describing the minorities and their instances from the point of view of the majority society, the media tend to reproduce racist stereotypes and prejudices that accompany them. In general, it is much easier to sell to editors' articles which reaffirm existing stereotypes, rather than ones that go against them. The Roma people continue to be considered social outcasts who do not deserve the same treatment and respect as other citizens. The way the media help to spread anti-Roma feelings can be separated into three ways: using terminology and inadequate speech, preparing

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descriptions full of stereotypes and tending to associate the crime to ethnic group. This attitude on the part of professionals has its matrix in widespread feelings in social common sense because we have to consider that the journalist is not an isolated subject. His construction of reality often reproduces the scarecrow for the majority of society. Sigona recommended that "Local Media should make a serious effort to offer an imagine of Roma and Sinti not biased by prejudice and stereotyping; (they) Should allow more space for Roma and Sinti to express their views on events concerning their communities (and) Should use a more appropriate and precise language when reporting on events concerning Roma and Sinti and avoid to use the label "nomads" that is generic and misguiding" [10], [11]. As Morris noted "What is needed is a range of representations; a confirmation that Gypsies and other Travellers, while they have their own distinctive cultures – and, in some cases, languages – are also people as complex and varied and human as all those other people portrayed by the media. In various manners their way of life can be shown to have been made more difficult by governments who profess that their policies exist to ease the lives of citizens." [5]

IV. CONCLUSION

Finally, fundamental rights to dignity and equality of all (Roma people and non Roma people alike), deserve and demand our respect and unconditional protection. Public information services especially must remember their high degree of responsibility. Nobody must be allowed to feel free to harm the dignity of others through racist propaganda and incitement. Real integration starts instead from the rediscovering of diversity as a resource, and from an experience of contact among ethnic groups [12]. An intervention hypothesis could be building a trans-ethnic sense of community, with a plan of mutual participation between autochthones and immigrants to the life of the community, to find transitional spaces where people could meet each other and grow up together [13].

For this reason, the media should reflect the cultural diversity and multi-ethnic perspective for social cohesion and integration. Presenting different lifestyles as result of cultural differences constitutes an operation of divulgation and diffusion that should be the product of multicultural presences in Western societies.

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