

## Public authorities and Roma populations in Turin

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*For the last three decades or so, European cities have had to deal with the issue of land occupation by migrant populations from Eastern Europe. The city of Turin has adopted various measures with respect to the “Roma question”: the closure of certain illegal camps, tolerance of others – facilitating their consolidation – and the creation of supervised “official” camps. Despite the apparent contradictions, these policies in fact all lead to similar outcomes: spatial relegation and the containment of the populations concerned.*

Of the various ways in which public authorities choose to address the question of Roma migrants, the spatial approach is one of the most common, particularly in Italy (Legros and Vitale 2011). Between marginalisation (in physical terms first and foremost, but also in social terms, legal terms, etc.) through the creation of *campi nomadi* on the one hand, and the shutting-down of illegal camps on other, these public measures do not always correspond to coherent political action plans. Rather, they reflect a somewhat schizophrenic attitude on the part of public authorities motivated as much by an imperative to exert greater control over these populations in a context of spatial concentration – as is the case with the creation of *campi nomadi* – as by the desire to render these populations invisible, leading to actions of dispersal, in particular via the closure of illegal camps. As we shall see here in the case of Turin, these different approaches, which simultaneously evoke notions of segregation, exception and integration, and are often presented as alternatives, are in fact linked and interdependent.

### Official *campi nomadi* and illegal camps

While the primary objective of the action implemented by the public authorities in Turin remains the elimination of temporary and precarious housing inhabited by Roma populations, the strategies and underlying reasoning has changed several times over the last 30 years. The measure known as the *campo nomadi* (“travellers’ camp”) was introduced in Turin in the 1980s and presented as the solution to the housing problems of Roma populations that had arrived in the city in the preceding decades and who, up to that point, were living in illegal camps (Sigona 2002). The *campo nomadi* was a sort of village made up of small, identical prefabricated houses, laid out according to a regular plan within a perimeter defined by physical barriers, that was separate from the rest of the city. The legislator’s intention was for the creation of official *campi* to encourage the integration of these populations by offering them the possibility of settling definitively and permanently in the city. A set of standards (“Regulations for specially equipped sites for Roma and Sinti”, Città di Torino, latest version dated 2004) was also established with the aim of facilitating their supervision and thus ensuring the safety of other citizens (Manzoni 2012).

Today, there are four *campi nomadi* in Turin, created between 1978 and 2004, which are inhabited by a total of 880 people comprising Sinti<sup>1</sup> from the surrounding Piedmont region and Roma originating from the former Yugoslavia (Città di Torino and Prefettura di Torino 2011). The

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<sup>1</sup> The Sinti are an ethnic group of Romani origin.

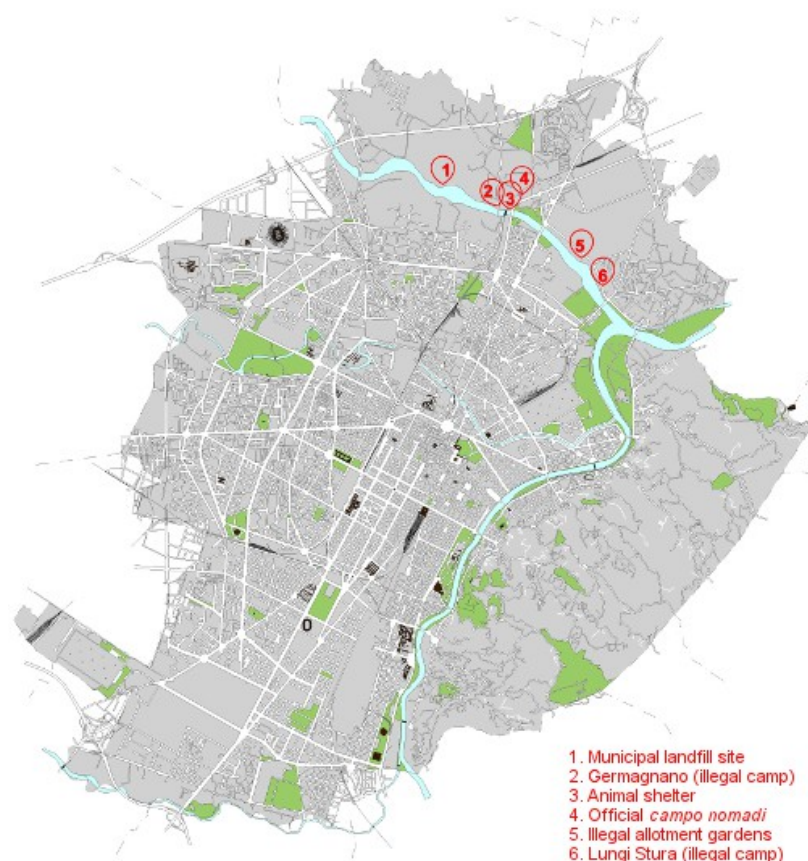
administrative and regulatory management of these *campi* (definition of rules, issuance of access permits and residents' permits, allocation of houses, etc.) falls under the responsibility of Turin city council's Office for Travellers and Emergency Settlement, created in 1983. Its work is supported by the Nucleo Nomadi, a special section of the municipal police that was created in 1988 with the specific aim of monitoring and controlling "travellers" throughout the city. The Nucleo Nomadi's role includes supervising movements of caravans, arrivals and departures, and transfers of families and individuals between camps, and enforcing internal rules, which also cover the maintenance of houses, the cleanliness of communal spaces, the circulation and parking of cars and the issuing of pet permits.

In parallel, six illegal camps – referred to as "spontaneous sites" in official documents – are home to a further 1,500 individuals (Città di Torino 2013). Most are Roma of Romanian origin who have recently migrated to Italy, arriving in Turin in the latter half of the 2000s. The geography of these illegal camps has changed considerably over the last few years, but today most are to be found in the north-east of the city, where three of the four official *campi* are also located. This is not a coincidence.

### **Between spatial marginalisation and the institutionalisation of Roma camps**

At the present moment in time, spatial concentration is clearly a key factor in the configuration of precarious housing for Roma in Turin. This is the result of a very real, albeit tacit, public intention: on the one hand, the administrative authorities have organised expulsions from illegal camps; on the other, they have managed the official *campi* as well as the public services on offer in such a way that most Roma camps – illegal and official alike – are now concentrated in the same part of the city. This very same area is also home to the public landfill site, the municipal animal shelter and unauthorised activities such as illegal waste dumping and unlawful allotment gardens.

**Figure 1. The spatial concentration of "marginal" activities in the city of Turin**



Source: author's work based on documents produced by Turin city council.

Between the deliberate decision to push any activities deemed too unsightly for the city centre out into the suburbs and the tacit agreement to ignore the illegal nature of certain activities, the public authorities have thus tolerated, and even authorised, the development of precarious housing and its perpetuation in time and space. This perpetuation is first of all physical, as I was able to observe first-hand during field studies conducted between 2013 and 2014 in the illegal camps known as “Lungo Stura” and “Germagnano”, which are respectively home to around 880 and 250 people (Città di Torino 2013). The first families who arrived in these camps have been there for six or seven years now; the housing there has become consolidated and stabilised. The floors of the huts have been cemented, curtains have been put up at the windows and flowerpots decorate front doors. Furthermore, some huts are now used for non-residential purposes (bars, a space for clubs and associations, and four places of worship).

This stability is obviously a positive element for residents, compared to other cases in Italy and France. In Rome and Marseille, for instance, successive expulsions have resulted in Roma being subject to forced mobility every three, six or ten months, leading to increasing vulnerability in terms of housing conditions and personal circumstances. However, the spatial concentration of the camps in Turin also allows the public authorities to optimise checks and controls, as well as vehicular patrols by the Nucleo Nomadi within the camps. In the course of my fieldwork, I observed that the Nucleo Nomadi might patrol the camps as often as two or three times a day. On the other hand, the management of services provided for Roma populations, in spite of their illegal status, is also facilitated by this concentration and spatial and temporal stability – for example, an ambulance can be found parked in the Lungo Stura camp every day. There are also social workers, responsible for ensuring children are in full-time education, who coordinate transport to and from school, as well as a number of associations that organise various activities for young people, children, etc. These services are intended specifically for Roma populations and designed to offer them opportunities to integrate; significant resources are made available to them in this way. However, this “welfarist” approach can create dynamics of dependency among Roma, whose level of autonomy with respect to certain municipal services is significantly limited. For example, the constant and long-term mediation effected by social operators between families and children’s teachers often prevents a direct relationship between the two parties being established; all questions concerning children’s educational pathways pass via these operators.

That said, I observed that the Roma do not always wait for public-sector responses to their needs (Legros 2009), as illustrated, for instance, by their detailed knowledge of health services and the administrative procedures required to access them.

## **Recent developments**

In 2012, following the allocation of €5 million of state funding, Turin city council set up a programme aimed at “overcoming” the vulnerable conditions faced by Roma populations, by developing integrated actions in favour of employment, education and housing. Confronted with the fragile housing conditions in the illegal camps and the very run-down *campi nomadi*, this programme seeks to rehabilitate and improve (in terms of sanitary installations and cleanliness) those sites that are to be kept open. In addition to three official camps, the programme includes two illegal camps, although no mention of a possible legalisation of these latter sites has been made in the official documents. For those who are evicted, in particular from the Lungo Stura camp, which is supposed to disappear completely by the end of 2015, a number of rehousing procedures are planned: in the private sector (with mediation from the public administration); by taking over old farms or building on private land for which the evicted populations will be responsible; or, finally, through the regularisation of caravans on farmland. The public authorities are therefore once again caught between the need to enforce landowners’ rights, which requires them to evict Roma populations, and the need to recognise fundamental rights such as the right to housing. “Assisted

voluntary returns” are also planned, with a trajectory involving reintegration into the country of origin, accompanied by local associations.

As the programme only began in late 2013, it is still too early to analyse the results.

### Putting things into perspective

The example of Turin enables us to identify the contradictions of public policy with regard to Roma populations: the creation of *campi nomadi* as an exceptional measure (Agamben 2003), the tolerance of illegal camps (though not without ambiguities: Sarcinelli 2011), the spatial concentration that until now made it possible to effect checks and controls on both spaces and people. What these *modi operandi* have in common is that they deny the Roma the opportunity to become stakeholders themselves: they are not recognised as people with a right to access both the spaces they are allocated and the rest of the city in all its complexity. Today, there is without doubt a need for studies that concentrate on the Roma themselves, in order to gain a better understanding of their approach to the city. How are their spatial practices, their territorial ties, and, more generally, their relationship to urban society characterised (Legros 2009)? Such studies, focusing attention on Roma as actors and stakeholders in the city, and not as the passive subjects of public action, could reveal new avenues for a better administration of these populations.

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