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# Controlling the Home: Material Expressions of Anti-Roma Sentiment

Social Sciences

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## ABSTRACT

The Romani people, also known as the Roma diaspora or simply the Roma, are an Indo-Aryan ethnic group that has experienced centuries of oppression and stigmatization. Largely seen as a “nomadic” group, the issue of housing is at the core of exploring modern Roma struggles. One key question to further the research on the connection between anti-Roma sentiment and housing is questioning how housing has served as a physical expression of cultural anti-Roma sentiment. Though the Roma are commonly perceived as choosing their nomadism, this article seeks to deconstruct this stereotype through the lens of housing law, forced nomadism, and Roma settlement patterns. In particular, I examine the definition of “home” in Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights and the connection between this law, anti-Roma sentiment, and present Roma housing conditions. Looking at forms of resistance to anti-Roma sentiment, I analyze the role of squatting in bringing attention and sympathy to Roma housing issues. Finally, I look at how the stereotype of the “nomad” has affected the identities and self-perception of the Roma. Through this examination, my research shows the connections between the social degradation of a particular group and housing degradation. Because matters of the home are so intertwined with matters of identity, the control of the home has deep-rooted impacts that are clearly seen when examining the control of Roma’s right to housing.

## KEYWORDS

Housing • Nomadism • Anti-Romani Sentiment • Stigmatization • Self-Perception

## Controlling the Home: Material Expressions of Anti-Roma Sentiment

The Roma Diaspora in Europe has a long history of discrimination and hardship. Anti-Roma Sentiment has been a volatile force in shaping the lives of the Roma, including their settlement patterns. The Roma are often perceived as a homogenous, nomadic group, but that is far from the truth. Contrary to the nomadic stereotype, the housing situation among the Roma exists along a spectrum. It is estimated that only about twenty percent of the Roma are nomadic now (Toninato, 2018, p. 152). The nomadic situation of the Roma is one of great complexity. On one hand, it is true there are subgroups of the Roma who choose to live as nomads. On the other hand, the nomadic stereotype of the Roma has led to a damaged sense of self and misguided housing policy decisions, which are in and of themselves a manifestation of Anti-Roma sentiment. Furthermore, much of the “nomadism” of the Roma has been forced eviction, and “nomadism” has functioned more as a survival strategy than a way of life. How housing policy addresses and should address this complex issue is a point of discourse, but I argue that the necessity lies in legitimizing Roma housing situations under the legal definition of “housing” while pushing back against the perception of the Roma as the “other.” Naturally, the economic situation among the Roma varies as well, yet even the wealthy are heavily affected by Anti-Roma stereotypes, which in turn further affects Roma settlement patterns. Overall, by examining housing as a human right (and the removal and protection of that right), forms of Roma resistance, and the effects of housing instability on Roma identity,

one can see how housing has served and continues to serve as a key material expression of cultural attitudes toward Romani groups.

## Forced Nomadism

If one first accepts housing as a human right, then one can see how nations have withheld that right from the Roma as a form of oppression (and thus as an expression of Anti-Roma sentiment). Going through the history of this oppression in Sweden and Romania, the development of current housing instability among the Roma population is clear. Of particular importance is the development of forced nomadism as a survival mechanism. Beginning with laws in the 1500s and 1600s allowing landowners to kill Roma “trespassers” and continuing into the twentieth century with entry bans prohibiting any long-term sentiment of Roma people in Sweden, Roma people were put in a “condition of permanent displacement” (Teodorescu & Molina, 2021, p. 404). In Romania, after the abolishment of slavery in 1864, the Roma were relegated to *mahalas* (Teodorescu & Molina, 2021, p. 405). They were separated from society but also felt the need to separate themselves from society in order to avoid hostility. After the end of World War II, Roma people continued to live on the outskirts, often in rural areas (away from public services and employment) in inadequate houses, where they developed shanty towns (Teodorescu & Molina, 2021, p. 405). Housing conditions especially worsened for Roma people in 1989, as Romania essentially privatized their entire housing stock.

In modern-day Europe, there is an eviction crisis among the Roma population. Cittadini (2022) explains that “forced evictions are increasingly used as

a tool against [Roma groups] by local authorities” and that the situation is “generally characterized by weak protection of the housing rights of Romani individuals” (p. 86). Cittadini also calls these evictions “one of the most evident and tragic outcomes of anti-gypsyism in Europe” (p. 98). As recently as May 2021, Al Jazeera reported on mass evictions in Italy (Lee, 2021). Additionally, in 2018, Rome directly ignored an order from the European Court of Human Rights to stop evictions when they forced out more than 300 Roma living at a formal camp (Lee, 2021). The same year, the UN Human Rights Regional Office for Europe announced to the press that France had been evicting over 10,000 Roma people every year since 2014. Beyond evictions, 52% of Roma live in a state of housing deprivation, and about a quarter of Roma faced housing discrimination when looking for housing in the past five years (FRA, 2022, p. 18).

Thus, one can see the development of temporary settlement patterns in reaction to inadequate housing conditions and forced nomadism as a result of rampant eviction rates and displacement. As Teodorescu and Molina (2021) express, “It is very clear that nomadism is one of the few possibilities for survival in this population (p. 413). One can also see that some of the temporary living conditions perceived as nomadism are instead housing instability. Furthermore, these inadequate housing conditions were not only an effort from European governments to oppress the Roma people by both systematically forcing them to the outskirts of society but also by taking away from them the human right to housing.

## What is “Housing”?

How, then, does a government adequately respond to this crisis of

housing and human rights? In order to understand how the government should approach this crisis and the failures of the European Court of Human Rights’ approach to the subject, one must first establish (1) how one defines “housing,” (2) how this definition corresponds with current Roma housing conditions (as established in the last section), and (3) what are stereotypes surrounding Roma nomadism and the effects of these stereotypes.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) requires in its definition of “home” in Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights the “existence of sufficient and continuous links with a specific place,” which clearly poses opposition to incidences of nomadism and housing instability among the Roma (2022, p. 106). Though the ECtHR acknowledges some exceptions to this, such as in the case of *Hirtu and Others v. France*, the exceptions are often made in relation to the Roma’s status as an underprivileged group, rather than recognizing their informal or temporary settlement as a legitimate form of housing. For example, in the case of *Chapman vs the UK*, judges from the ECtHR protected caravan settlement as a “traditional way of life” to protect the “special needs” of the Roma, which in turn played into the harmful belief that “Roma are unwilling to follow everyone’s laws” (Cittadini, 2022, p. 91, 94). Thus, the question for the ECtHR is not whether the Roma deserve the right to housing, but rather whether they deserve the right to be nomadic.

This poses an issue in several ways: it invalidates temporary forms of Roma settlement, views the Roma only in terms of their marginalization, and conflates being Romani with being nomadic. Furthermore, not viewing these forms of Roma settlement as legitimate then means

that through this lens, Roma people living in these settlements exist in a permanent state of homelessness. Additionally, not securing explicit housing rights but rather exceptions to housing violations leaves vulnerable Roma people in an even more precarious situation. In other words, the emphasis of the ECtHR on certain forms of settlement as “ways of life” rather than legitimate settlement promotes “otherization” and harmful stereotypes associated with nomadism, perpetuates ethnocentric ideas of the “home” as fixed, and jeopardizes Roma people who live in temporary housing that does not fit the definition of a “home.” Thus, what was intended to protect the Roma becomes an insidious extension of anti-Roma sentiment.

The harm of the ECtHR in perpetuating nomadic fallacies can be seen through the use of harmful nomadic stereotypes in policy decisions and through representations in literature and culture. There exists the misconception that Roma people are nomadic by nature and thus choose (or deserve) the precarious housing situations they have been forced to endure. As Lee (2021) reported in Al Jazeera, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi declared in 2008 a “Nomad Emergency” that defined Roma as a threat and ordered the removal of informal Roma camps. This shows how the Italian government perceived the Roma and nomadism as one in the same and based harmful policy decisions off of this perception.

In Toninato’s (2018) examination of outside- and self-representation of the Roma in literature, he compares the paradoxical idealization and abasement of nomadism from outside groups with the Roma’s dismal self-representation of their own practices of nomadism. Toninato explains that in early seventeenth- and

eighteenth-century European literature, nomadic Roma groups were described as living “in perfect accordance with the laws of nature,” having a “primitive” way of life, and not valuing “comfort and riches” (p. 144). In this description, one can see a paradox. There is almost a mythologization of nomadism as it is seen as a return to nature, but at the same time there is a clear condescension in viewing nomadism as “primitive.” In regards to the Roma not valuing comfort, one can see the damage of this stereotype in modern day legislation. When the Roma are seen as having a preference for precarious housing situations, as discussed above, this poses an issue for the housing they are offered and results in situations such as the declaration of a “Nomad Emergency” in Italy (Lee, 2021). When nomadism is seen purely as a preference rather than a survival mechanism, then it is less likely that formal, secure housing options will be offered, and blame will be put on the Roma instead of on the oppression that put them in this position.

Building off of this view of nomadism, Roma camps are seen as almost utopic areas serving as “refuge[s] from mainstream society,” “a site of freedom, unconstrained... by the bonds of modernity” (Toninato, 2018, p. 145). In reality, they are anything but. Looking at the history of Roma camps, they have been used as sites of oppression, not of freedom – a way to segregate and oppress the Roma people, such as the cases in Romania (Teodorescu & Molina, 2021, p. 405). One can see the truth of Roma nomadism when looking at Roma self-representations of nomadism in literature. As Toninato (2018) asserts, the way Roma depict their own nomadism in literature is as “an endless circular wandering” in which they are “permanently excluded from the majority society” with the “impossibility of

staying, of settling anywhere” (p. 154, 156). When viewing depictions of nomadism in literature (and thus when looking at a cultural view of Roma nomadism), Toninato summarized it best when she said “All in all, Romani poets appear to point out to the reader that what is frequently portrayed as an allegedly carefree existence, is in fact a reality dominated by violence and oppression (p. 158). Thus, through the examination of harmful stereotypes of Roma nomadism through their representation in literature, one can see the failures and dangers of the ECtHR in perpetuating these stereotypes and conflating nomadism with Roma identity.

## **Squatting as a Form of Resistance**

What are the Roma to do, then, when the law does not recognize their settlement as a legitimate form of housing? In Italy, the Roma aligned themselves with a larger political movement: the squatting movement. As framed by Maestri (2019), the squatting movement in Italy, through which members attempted to create affordable housing or social centers, developed around the 1970s and aligned itself with the housing rights movement (p. 933). Initially, the movement centered on working-class Italians, but later grew to include migrants and asylum seekers. As a result of this growing inclusion and the 2007/2008 economic crisis, Roma joined the movement. Roma aligned themselves with the squatting movement in order to reframe the perception of their own claims to housing within the context of the greater urban housing crisis. By doing so, they were able to legitimize their housing struggles in a way that Article 8 failed to do.

Maestri (2019) explains that though Roma had previously squatted, they had not used squatting as a form of political expression before aligning themselves with the wider movement (p. 933). By expressing their struggle in this way, they both made their struggle visible as well as related it to a wider experience, thus garnering themselves wider political support and sympathy, as they were no longer perceived as stigmatized “Roma-nomads” but as victims of a greater economic and housing crisis (p. 938). This is not to say that squatters did not face stigma, but rather that “Roma housing exclusion [came to be] construed as the symptom of a broader housing crisis linked to the capitalist system, which also affects other Italians and migrants” (p. 942). Contrary to their previous experiences, the Roma began to be seen as entitled to the human right of housing not as a “way of life,” but because of their mere “presence... in the urban fabric... regardless of their national formal citizenship and ethnicity” (p. 943). This also meant that their demands for housing went beyond Roma camps and extended to more formal homes in council housing estates (p. 934). Thus, by participating in squatting as a form of resistance and self-advocacy, the Roma were able to legitimize their housing struggles in the eyes of non-Roma in a way that others, such as the ECtHR, were not able (or perhaps not willing) to do on their behalf.

## **A Look at Wealthy Roma and Identity**

Despite the successes of subgroups such as the Roma squatters in Italy, the effects of forced nomadism, pervasive nomadic stereotypes, and the failures of Article 8 remain. Even within wealthy Romani groups, negative stereotypes take

hold and shape settlement patterns. The “use of the Gypsy image as a symbol of homelessness” and the “impression that Gypsies are a collective, uniform entity” result in negative treatment and negative self-perception even among Romani who do not face housing struggles (Toninato, 2018, p. 147,149).

Crețan and Powell examined this power of group stigmatization of wealthy Roma in their research from 2018. By examining wealthy Roma, one is able to isolate, to a degree, the sheer effect of stigmatization. Even though this subgroup of Roma displays economic security, they are still called “thieves” and “beggars” (p. 433). They still bear the “emotional burden of stigmatization.” In fact, when looking at the main reasons why wealthy Roma migrate, it is to avoid stigmatization. Because a large portion of this stigmatization takes place in the public sphere, there is a trend among wealthy Roma heavily affected by group stigmatization to retreat into the private sphere, limiting their interactions to those within their household (p. 437). Even within a group of Roma that has relative freedom in their movements, they are still restricted to occupying a very small space in society. Wealthy Roma, then, provide a stark example regarding how physical space reflects social organization. When dominant social groups view non-dominant social groups as smaller, they force them physically to occupy spaces that the dominant group deems that they deserve, whether directly through housing segregation or indirectly through group stigmatization.

## Conclusion

Overall, housing represents a key lens through which to examine societal views of Roma. By examining forced

nomadism, Article 8, Roma squatters, and wealthy Roma through this lens, one can clearly see housing was (and still is) used as a key material expression of cultural attitudes towards the Roma in different settings. When there is social degradation of a particular group, there is also housing degradation. Because matters of the home are so intertwined with matters of identity, the control of the home has deep-rooted impacts that are seen especially when examining this phenomenon within Roma groups. Shelter exists as a basic human need, and when States systematically delegitimize and restrict access to this need, this acts as an extension of the State's oppression of that group. In order to improve social conditions, one must also examine physical space and its role in reinforcing social hierarchy. In other words, we must get to the heart of the issue: the home.

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