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From Ferrarotti's *baraccati* to Roma camps. The long wave of housing marginality

VINCENZO ROMANIA*, TOMMASO BERTAZZO

University of Padua, Italy

E-mail: vincenzo.romania@unipd.it; tommaso.bertazzo@phd.unipd.it

*Corresponding author

Abstract. Italy is sadly notorious in Europe as “campland”, as the nation that has created the largest and most systematic model of territorial segregation of Roma people within institutional camps. Most scholars have interpreted this phenomenon by using exogenous or abstract theoretical conceptualizations. In this article, we offer a different perspective by focusing on the internal factors of continuity between housing marginality and the rise of *campi nomadi*. We will focus on the case of Rome, showing how the intertwined phenomena of *baraccati* [shanty dwellers] and *borgate ufficiali* [institutional suburbs], studied by Franco Ferrarotti, played a major historical and sociological role in determining some of the characteristic aspects of camp governance. This perspective offers new insights for understanding and addressing the current challenges of social and housing inclusion of Roma people in Italy.

Keywords: Housing studies, Romani studies, urban studies, Franco Ferrarotti.

1. INTRODUCTION

Roma people are the largest and long-settled ethnic minority living in Europe (FRA 2020). At the same time, they are one of the most discriminated-against groups across the continent (Eurobarometer, 2019). All over Europe, such discrimination has produced a significant spatial, social, and economic segregation, but what happened in Italy is particularly noteworthy: the country that hosted the largest and most pervasive system of Roma camps – ethnically connoted areas of residential segregation designed by institutions for these minorities. At their peak, Roma camps – institutionally labelled as *campi nomadi* – housed around 40,000 people, while today only 15,800 people live in the camps, out of a total of 150,000-180,000 Roma residing in Italy (Associazione 21 Luglio 2024).

Although only a minority of Italian Roma live in camps, in the common perception camp dwellers represent the entire group. The segregated and often undignified living conditions¹ of those who live in camps therefore fuel

¹ Indeed, there are cases in which Roma camps have been transformed into dignified housing

the processes of stigmatization. For this reason, Italian Roma camps have attracted significant scholarly attention, primarily committed to conceptualizing their existence and nature. We propose to classify this literature into two main strands: exogenous explanations of the phenomenon and theoretically oriented interpretations. Some authors, however, go beyond this classification, offering exogenous explanations through theoretical interpretations; or do not fit neatly into either category. Therefore, the distinction should be understood as purely ideal-typical and functional to the argument of the article, namely the need to delve deeply into the internal historical causes that led to the creation of the camps.

The former strand includes all articles that explain the birth of Italian Roma camps not as a domestic phenomenon, but as a manifestation of a broader process that sees the emergence, throughout Europe, of a large and varied system of camps of different natures. In camp studies, “camp” is an umbrella term used to indicate a variety of heterogeneous socio-spatial formations, developed within Western states and supranational contexts to respond to different and sometimes contradictory functions. The camp has been variously described as: a) a modern technology of humanitarian government (Hyndman 2000); b) a thanatopolitical institution, i.e., an expression of the triumph of power over confined subjects (Agamben 1998); c) a device of colonial expansion (Gilroy 2004); or d) as a space of resistance and political claim (Ramadan 2013).

The most representative study of this strand is Picker’s *Racial Cities* (2017). According to Picker, the genesis of Roma camps can be traced back to the ethos that animated colonial camps, with which they share a dual ambivalent function: on the one hand, the protection of supposed Roma nomadism, essentialized through a precise discursive order; on the other, its progressive neutralization through practices of assimilation and sedentarization. In Picker’s view, such ambivalence would confirm the historical continuity of these spaces with the colonial experience, making Roma camps a contemporary reworking of devices aimed at confining populations considered racially inferior and, at the same time, a threat to the economic, social, and cultural order (Picker 2017: 86).

The second strand of interpretation is theoretically oriented. Although most Romani studies are, in turn, theoretically oriented, some interpretations tend towards greater theoretical abstraction, based on a strong conceptual framework. For reasons of space, we will only

present here the studies that refer to Agamben’s philosophy. These are, after all, among the most widespread in the sociopolitical interpretations of Roma camps. Giorgio Agamben describes camps as the “nomos of our time”. The widespread phenomenon of camps is interpreted as the manifestation of a “geopolitics of exception”. Roma camp therefore represents the materialization of the «state of exception» (1996: 38), a place where ordinary law is suspended and those confined there, stripped of their civil and political rights, are reduced to their “bare life” (Agamben 2003), at the mercy of a power that disposes of them. Authors such as Piasere (2006), Armillei (2018), and Legros and Vitale (2011) made extensive use of Agamben’s conceptualization to show how institutions governed nomad camps through the device of the “state of exception” and how bureaucracies played a significant role in standardizing and simplifying the internal differences of Roma camp dwellers. However, other scholars have highlighted the limitations of Agamben’s conceptualization. Some has shown how this approach ignores the multiplicity of actors and forms of governance in the camps (Maestri 2017). Others have argued how Agamben does not pay enough attention to the agency of camps’ dwellers (Kalyvas 2005), and their daily strategies of “campzanship”, i.e., citizenship-making in the camp (Sigona 2015).

In conclusion, the first strand of studies offers an interesting perspective but one essentially based on exogenous contributing factors, while the second strand focused primarily on regulatory and governmental aspects, paying little attention to the domestic historical factors that led to the emergence of the camps. The aim of this contribution is to integrate these perspectives by showing how Italian Roma camps can also be interpreted as an authentic product of endogenous factors of republican Italy and its tendency to create long-term housing precarity.

To do so, we will focus on the Italian city that has experienced the longest and most extensive phenomena of urban marginalization: Rome. After a brief historical introduction on urban marginalization in the Italian capital from 1871 to the fascist era, we will analyse the studies conducted since the 1960s by Franco Ferrarotti on Roman shanty towns. Ferrarotti devoted a profound sociological reflection to urban marginalization, exploring the living conditions of the so-called *baraccati*, paying attention both to the material difficulties imposed by segregation and to the social relations and survival strategies put in place by the inhabitants. Finally, we will show how, in recent decades (1970s-2010), in the city of Rome, the transformation of suburbs and shanty towns, on the one hand, and the emergence of camps, on the

areas. This is the case, for example, of the Village of Roses, to which we have recently dedicated a journalistic in-depth study (Romania and Bertazzo 2026b).

other, intersect in dynamics of exclusion of the excluded and resistance to such exclusion.

The main goal is to reveal a genetic line connecting Roman shanty towns to Roma camps, highlighting the similarities and continuities between these two socio-spatial formations and recognizing Roma camps as a profoundly Italian phenomenon.

2. BARACCATI AND BORGATE IN ROME: A SHORT HISTORY.

Compared to other Western countries, residential segregation in Italy appears more nuanced (Kazepov 2005), but remains a relevant phenomenon, albeit partly historically underestimated. Historically, the process has declined above all with respect to socio-economic status; more recently, however, both for the Roma camps and for the phenomena of segregation of international immigrants, the ethnic component has become more visible (Balbo 1994). Rome exemplifies this phenomenon better than other Italian cities, in the polarization between gentrified and peripheral areas and in the strong territorial discontinuities generated by this divide (Cellamare 2016). Such discontinuities generate significant inequalities in terms of educational opportunities, employment, and social mobility (Atkinson and Kintrea 2001).

The city of Rome has a long and continuous history of urban marginalization (Insolera 2011). The presence of extensive shanty towns spans from the establishment of Rome as the capital of the Kingdom of Italy in 1871 until at least the 1990s. Nevertheless, the phenomenon remained invisible in the public representation of the city for a long time, except for the period from the end of the Second World War to the early 1970s, when journalists, writers, filmmakers, and sociologists began to focus their attention on the inhabitants of shanty towns, the so-called *baraccati*. In 1956, publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli financed an inquiry into the condition of people living in the Mandrione shanty town². Two years later, intellectual, writer, and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini published a report for *Vie Nuove*, the magazine of the Italian Communist Party, entitled «Viaggio per Roma e dintorni» (Journey through Rome and its surroundings), in which he examined the conditions of deprivation in the capital's shantytowns. Two famous literary works about *baraccati* are *Ragazzi di vita* (1955) by Pasolini and *Racconti romani* by Alberto Moravia (1954). Shortly afterwards, sociologist Franco Ferrarotti and his

research group launched the first sociological surveys on the conditions of shanty dwellers in Rome (Ferrarotti 1970; 1974).

Let us now summarize the main phases of the phenomenon, highlighting for each period the main social and urban factors that favoured precarious dwelling and slum formation. Historically, the rise of shanty towns and suburbs in Rome can be divided into four major phases: the Liberal age (1870-1922), the Fascist age (1922-1945), the post-war expansion phase (1945-1970), and the phase of progressive elimination of shanty towns and birth of Roma camps (1970-2000). Throughout all these phases, Roma people have always been present in the Italian capital, but their visibility and relevance have changed considerably. In this section we will focus on the first two phases, while we will analyse the situation after WWII in the next section, showing how it appeared to the sociological eye of Franco Ferrarotti and his collaborators.

The history of housing marginalization in Rome dates back to 1870s, when the city assumed the role of capital of the newly formed Kingdom of Italy. In the last decades of the 19th century, the population grew rapidly, increasing from 213,000 (1871) to 509,000 inhabitants in 1909 (Comune di Roma 1960). During the same period, the relative weight of the Roman population in relation to the total national population doubled (idem). It was therefore during this period the nation began to undergo progressive urbanization, as happened in most European countries (Antrop 2004).

However, this growth was not adequately regulated in terms of housing policy, either with regard to urban planning or the provision of public housing. This deregulation encouraged both building speculation and illegal construction, i.e. the emergence of «self-built shacks or shacks built in the recesses of the city, which ended up forming separate residential areas, veritable 'cities within the city' with their own forms of social organization» (Salsano 2012: 137). From a territorial point of view, the first shacks were built in areas covered by natural or built elements and/or isolated and therefore less controlled. Typical locations for precarious settlements were Roman aqueducts, such as Acquedotto Felice, Mandrione, Porta Portese and peripheral state-owned lands (*terre demaniali*) near the many railway lines converging in the capital. These areas were also inhabited by Roma populations, coming mostly from the neighbouring region of Abruzzo. Shanty towns such as Acquedotto Felice survived for over a century, demonstrating the pervasiveness of these phenomena and the slowness of politics and bureaucracy in combating them (Portelli 2024). The inhabitants of the Roman

² The inquiry involved the anthropologist Franco Cagnetta and photographer Franco Pinna, but it also found the support of intellectuals such as Pier Paolo Pasolini, Elsa Morante and Goffredo Parise.

shanty towns were called *baraccati* in Italian, a term that we will use throughout this text, as well as *borgate* and *borghetti* to emphasize the specific nature of the phenomenon. During the Liberal Age, also the first institutional attempts were made to overcome the slums through emergency housing solutions offered by the Municipality of Rome. Under Mayor Nathan, in 1911, the first temporary public houses made of wood were built (Farina and Villani 2017).

During the following phase, the Fascist era, new conditions of marginalization were added to those already mentioned, both on an urban and national level. From a national point of view, Fascism's policies discouraged internal mobility, thus reducing the chances of settlement for those already living in areas that excluded them from the property market (Treves 1976). The aim, consistent with the ideology of the regime, was to halt the historical trend towards urbanization (Breschi 2007). Fascist «legislation against urbanization» (laws 358/1931 and 1092/1939) restricted the transfer of residence to cities, requiring the possession of a job, for reasons of public order, economics. They were only completely repealed in 1961, at the height of the Roman shanty towns.

At the municipal level, an important factor contributing to urban marginalization was the demolition of large areas of Rome's historic centre and the consequent eviction of many families (Salsano 2010). Rome was clearly a central city in fascist ideology, which strongly proclaimed a return to the classical origins of Italian/Roman civilization. For this reason, significant investments were made in its urban transformation, aimed at increasing the size and grandeur of the central thoroughfares, thereby demolishing the less functional dwellings. This led to the large-scale eviction and displacement of residents from the city centre. Added to this was the migratory pressure of Italians attracted by the economic opportunities of the capital and pushed by the poverty experienced in their regions of origin. However, these opportunities were limited, because Rome had limited industrial development, which inevitably led to a process of housing marginalization.

Institutions responded to this set of phenomena with the introduction of official suburbs named *borgate ufficiali*, i.e. the stabilization of marginalization through the construction of precarious but institutionalized housing. In several areas of Rome (Tor Marancia, San Basilio, Tiburtino, Gordiani, Prenestina, Tufello, Acilia, Trullo), it was decided to build clusters of temporary houses to remedy spontaneous settlements. The construction model was initially based on the use of «very simple housing structures» (*casette di semplicissima struttura*) intended for the «derelict classes», as reported by Francesco

Boncompagni Ludovisi, governor of Rome from 1928 to 1935 (Farina and Villani, 2017). Throughout the Fascist period, the *borgate* were often built on unsuitable land, with significant problems of permeability and sanitation. Moreover, the size and amenities were typically inadequate. The borgate Gordiani and Tor Marancia, built in 1933, for example, although constructed with brick frames, had a single 16-square-metre room per family, with external bathrooms and almost entirely inadequate facilities. As Villani explains, «[l]iving conditions in these housing estates deteriorated rapidly. From the very beginning, it was clear that their success was compromised from the outset by the temporary nature of the projects and the segregationist logic from which they originated» (Villani 2017: 17).

Alongside this, the Municipality of Rome built temporary shelters inside barracks, factories, and disused hotels. These were dilapidated structures with a high concentration of inhabitants, which typically led to further precarious housing conditions and relational and family instability (Farina & Villani 2017). At the same time, the clearance of existing shacks began, with their inhabitants being transferred, at least partially, to public housing. This process was never completed; rather, it was characterized by the continuous transfer and spontaneous re-emergence of new shacks on the outskirts of the *borgate* themselves. Although a substantial process of eliminating the shacks began in 1928, in 1929 there were still 32,683 shack dwellers in 6,032 shacks (ASC UAS 1929). The institution of *borgate* did not make the precarious housing disappear but increased its presence, «generating the first cases of illegal settlements consisting no longer of temporary shacks but of real, durable constructions» (Salsano 2012: 148).

The survival of shacks next to suburbs was linked to mechanisms of tolerance towards everything that was not very visible. In a 1936 document, the governorate of Rome recommended resolving the situation of the various shanty dwellers «either through public assistance [...] or by repatriating families who had no possibility of finding work in the capital, or by tolerating illegal shanty towns, but in well-designed and supervised areas» (Villani 2017: 13). This marked the beginning of a process that pushed the inhabitants of the most precarious housing areas to the outer edges of the city. One episode is particularly significant. In 1930, the shacks located in the Portuense area were cleared so as not to create a visual obstruction to the wedding of Maria José and Umberto di Savoia, with the arrival of the Belgian sovereigns in Rome. The municipality offered the *baraccati* [shacks dwellers] either a cash subsidy or the possibility of accommodation in a former pasta factory.

In conclusion, starting from the Fascist era, the intertwining of spatial and economic segregation affected urban planning in Rome and, more generally, in Italian cities. The official suburbs «functioned as the original nuclei of the outer suburban belt and as cornerstones for the subsequent process of urban expansion» (Ivi: 9).

As regards Roma people, the expansion of the shantytowns also led to differences in migration flows. With the annexation and forced Italianization of Istria, there was an increase in arrivals from the Balkan area, in addition to internal migrations of Roma populations residing in the centre-south of the country. However, Roma people were excluded from both access to official *borgate* and the allocation of public housing. Finally, starting in 1940, Italian Roma were rounded up and imprisoned in concentration camps. Of the 25,000 residents in Italy during the Second World War, 1,000 lost their lives and an unknown number were imprisoned and killed in German camps (Hancock 2018). In short, Roma people living in Rome faced even worse housing conditions than other inhabitants of shanty towns and suburbs. They survived by occupying spaces left vacant by others who were just as desperate, but less discriminated against on ethnic and racial grounds.

Summing up, the Fascist era represents a prodromal phase for the model of institutionalized housing insecurity that would later become a reality in Roma camps. Laws against urbanization never succeeded in limiting the spatial mobility of Italians but created a large grey area in terms of urban planning. The reaction to all this was the creation of suburbs (*borgate*) which, similarly to what would happen later with Roma, helped to control the mobility of marginalized people by limiting their movement and segregating them in spaces of physical and symbolic invisibility.

Furthermore, we witness the ineffectiveness of the suburbs in absorbing *baraccati*'s housing marginality, their tendency to stabilize precariousness and the persistent dialectic between spontaneous settlements and authorized areas. If we look at the recent history of Roma camps, we see how municipal administrations will sometimes proceed by institutionalizing spontaneous illegal settlements, and other times by introducing new authorized areas, near which, however, new spontaneous settlements will inevitably arise. This phenomenon continues today, as we have shown in the cases of Genoa, Turin, and Padua in ethnographic research conducted during the 2022-2025 period (Romania and Bertazzo 2025).

An additional point of contact between fascist *borgate* and *baraccapoli* and Roma camps is territorial stigmatization and invisibilization (Sisson 2021; Wacquant *et al.* 2014). Both Roma camps and Roman shanty towns

and suburbs arose as spontaneous results of poor urban regulation and planning, to which institutions did not respond with well-considered policies, but with a simple process of transferring the social problem elsewhere, to make it as imperceptible as possible to the majority of society. Another point of contact lies in displacement. In many cases, in fact, the suburbs were built at considerable distances from the shantytowns being evacuated, forcing those who were transferred to undergo a painful process of displacement.

Finally, the mechanism of evictions with pocket money is another recurring feature constantly found in the case of Roma people, who are regularly forced to vacate and relocate in exchange for financial compensation (Romania and Bertazzo 2026a).

3. BORGATE AND BORGHETTI IN THE POST-WAR PERIOD: FERRAROTTI'S STUDIES

The first sociological studies on housing marginality in Rome date back to the 1960s. Indeed, Fascism and idealistic philosophy had prevented Italian sociology from developing and becoming institutionalized before the Second World War. The situation changed radically during the 1950s, with the birth of the first research institutes, the introduction of the first sociology faculty positions (1961-1962), and the subsequent establishment of the Higher Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Trento (1966). The newly formed Italian sociology was greatly influenced by the United States and the New Deal, which pushed for rapid modernization and industrialization of the country (Rossi 2023 [1973]).

Italian sociology identified alignment with the positions of the modernizing elites as the best way to finally achieve the status of an academic discipline (Bortolini, 2012). To do so, the new generation of sociologists had to distance themselves from a series of intellectual positions – from Pasolini to Carlo Levi to Rocco Scotellaro – which, although lacking any “scientific qualifications”, had until then intervened to describe the profound transformations experienced by Italy since the immediate post-war period. In relation to the modernizing elites, composed of industrialists, economic operators, public administrators, politicians, and trade unionists, sociologists thus positioned themselves as «bearers of scientific knowledge, objective and directly applicable to the solution of development problems» (Ivi: 355).

This epistemological stance and these normative orientations are also visible in the work of Franco Ferrarotti, one of the most representative figures of early Italian sociology. His studies conducted in the late 1960s

and 1970s on the living conditions of shanty dwellers in Rome led to the publication of two books that were important both for sociological debate and for public opinion: *Roma: da Capitale a Periferia*³ (1970) and *Vita da baraccati*⁴ (1974). These two books can be classified as examples of public sociology, strategically intersecting three different linked ecologies (Abbott 2005) or interconnected fields (Bourdieu 2020): the academic field, the political field, and the media field.

Programmatically, the two studies recall Chicago School's urban studies, but unlike the exponents of the First School (1915-1935), Ferrarotti offers a more structuralist explanation of urban marginality and adopts a critical tone towards both the political and intellectual spheres. He accuses Italian politics of not having done enough to solve *I mali di Roma* (the ills of Rome)⁵, bowing to the interests of property speculators; and he accuses intellectuals such as Pier Paolo Pasolini and Moravia of offering an overly romanticized representation of poverty, which ended up reproducing and justifying it (Ferrarotti 1974: 16).

Roma: da capitale a periferia (Ferrarotti 1970) argues, as its title suggests, a *j'accuse* against the unregulated expansion of the suburbs in the Italian capital and the failure to integrate its inhabitants. In a century, the city's population increased tenfold, from 213,233 inhabitants in 1871 to 2,251,495 inhabitants in 1962 (ISTAT data), leading to an explosion of urban marginalization. At the time Ferrarotti undertook his research, the suburbs presented a very complex picture of precarious dwellings. The author distinguishes three different typologies of precarious dwellings: the official *borgate*, the spontaneous *borgate*, and finally the so-called *borghetti*, i.e., the shanty towns where *baraccati* live.

Official borgate are the only ones subject to public sanctions... Spontaneous settlements are clusters of illegal buildings that have sprung up on the outskirts of the city or in the Roman countryside on land that has been illegally subdivided, i.e. subdivided outside the town plan. Finally, there are the so-called "borghetti", which consist of groups of small brick houses, huts, and shacks built partly of sheet metal and partly of brick (Ferrarotti 1970: 55).

The situation therefore reproduced what happened during the Fascist era: the construction of official settlements for poor people did not prevent the continuous transfer between official and spontaneous suburbs and

slums. Shanty dwellers were considered by politicians either as an "ugly blemish, a reminder of sad times" or, even worse, as "troglodytes". But, Ferrarotti asks, «aren't the shacks and the suburbs of Rome a symptom of deep structural divisions and contradictions?» (Ivi: 12). He returns to this point in *Vita di Baraccati*, oscillating between defending the humanity of the shanty dwellers and an attitude of implicit paternalism:

Baraccati are a separate, segregated humanity, but only from an objective point of view, considering the conditions in which they are forced to live due to 'a series of factors that do not depend, at least not entirely, on them (Ferrarotti 1974: 17).

Those who do not adapt [to today's capitalist exploitation] either deliberately or, as is more often the case, simply because they lack sufficient flexibility, are finished: cut off, isolated, segregated, ghettoised, excluded (Ivi: 21).

However, Ferrarotti grasps here two fundamental points for understanding the reality of Roma camps as well: ghettoisation as a process of social exclusion of those who do not adapt to the rules of capitalism; and the resulting double victimisation and stigmatisation of them. A third, no less important, point: the political invisibility of the excluded: «baraccati have no right to citizenship; they are, by definition, squatters, invisible men and women» (Ivi: 32).

Consistent with post-Marxist critical theory, Ferrarotti defines shacks as «a necessary function, the inevitable and unavoidable product of the capitalist city as it is configured in its forces and real social relations, in its harsh objective demands» (Ivi: 13). Although he does not state so, his conception echoes the post-Marxist book *Le borgate di Roma* (The Suburbs of Rome), written in 1960 by Piero Della Seta⁶ and Giovanni Berlinguer.

The areas of precarious dwelling are spaces inhabited by the so-called «reserve armies of capitalism». Politics does not address this as a structural issue, but adopts an emergency approach, which is expected to be overcome autonomously by events:

Shacks are always thought of as an emergency situation, linked to war, immigration... But the shack dweller is not simply a displaced person. In the city based on the principle of profit maximisation, shacks are the norm: luxury neighbourhoods and ghettos of poverty are necessary to one another (Ibidem).

³ En: Rome: from Capital to Periphery.

⁴ En: Life as shanty dwellers.

⁵ *I mali di Roma* is also the name of a conference held in 1974 which will be fundamental in determining public policies for overcoming slums (see further).

⁶ Piero Della Seta was an important politician in the Roman Communist Party, with extensive knowledge of urban planning and journalism. He was a city councillor from 1956 to 1985 and a tireless protagonist in urban planning battles in the capital.

In an entirely Italian paradox, shanty dwellers are mostly construction workers, engaged in building dwellings they will never be able to enjoy. Thus, a city split in two emerges: on one side, prestigious areas destined for the well-off and, on the other, anonymous and mass-produced peripheries, shacks, and *borgate* «dozens of kilometres away and lacking services».

Similarly to what occurs in illegal settlements that arise following the eviction of Roma camps, the houses of shack dwellers are built using scrap materials «sheet metal from nearby construction sites, planks, mismatched tiles, sections of wire mesh, asbestos sheets, fruit shipping crates», and become veritable bunkers. The combination of social isolation and absolute precariousness leads to barricading oneself behind barbed wire fences. The explanation for this relationship is brilliant and reveals phenomena of resistance to contact with external reality that are also very common among Roma living in camps and shantytowns, as we showed in our book on the segregation of Romani people in Italy (Romania and Bertazzo 2025).

In the barbed wire that defends the entrance from neighbours one can read the desperation of those who stay afloat only through an extreme concentration of the minimal available resources, the insecurity of those who cannot open up and collaborate because they cannot risk a bad encounter (Ferrarotti 1970: 45).

Just as would happen later in Roma camps, the objective conditions of the shacks profoundly limit the life chances of shack dwellers and function as a factor of social disintegration: «Under normal conditions, housing constitutes the nucleus of the primary socialization process; here it functions as a factor of disintegration with respect to any associative need or will» (Ibidem: 47).

Thus, genuine ghettos emerge, separated from the rest of the city by barriers of built and natural environment:

The borgata responds very precisely to the definition of "ghetto" with which its existence has been denounced on several occasions. Along the Aqueduct, on both sides, the shacks are lined up. At the rear, in the direction of the Appia Nuova, lie lands and fields owned by the Torlonia family. On the other side, towards the Tuscolana, there is instead a strip of deserted and uncultivated land of a few hundred metres, an authentic segregation belt, a sort of "no man's land" that separates the borgata from the neighbourhood, the shacks from the "buildings" (Ibidem 148-149).

More specifically, many *borghetti* emerge as construction ghettos, that is, hobo-like structures for precarious workers, to draw a parallel with Nels Anderson's

celebrated research (Anderson, 1923). Ferrarotti explains this well in the final chapter of *Vite di Scarto*, emphatically entitled *Il ghetto edile* (The Construction Ghetto):

Take a peasant from Abruzzo who abandons the land and leaves for Rome. Having got off the train, if he has a point of reference, he heads towards some borgata to visit people from his village. Here the only support they can give him is to let him sleep somewhere and put him in touch with certain "friends" able to offer him immediate work. And immediate work, in Rome, means work in construction. The immigrant is thus enclosed in a ghetto, from which he may never escape. [...]. The construction worker carries the full weight of a ghetto existence: intermittent employment, marginalisation from overall social structures, psychological isolation, the difficulty of aggregation at the level of class consciousness (Ferrarotti 1974: 117).

Urban ghettos are places of waste for wasted lives⁷, to use Bauman's terms (Bauman 2013). As occurs, for example, in Turin, where a Roma camp is situated near an asbestos collection site, or like a thousand other Roma camps that have arisen next to landfills, motorways, or other undesirable places. Pina, a lady who has lived at the Acquedotto Felice for 36 years, explains: «Not only the Municipality of Rome but all municipalities collect the rubbish and burn it, because they say that this rubbish brings many ills, as the doctors have discovered. Here there isn't a refuse collector who is concerned with collecting this rubbish, gathering it and taking it somewhere to burn it, because we are not part of humanity» (Ferrarotti 1974: 40).

In the same interview, she refers to another recurring element also found in Roma camps: fences, walls, security, and control devices used to guarantee absolute separation between the shack dwellers and the rest of society:

They're building a great wall like a concentration camp so that we can no longer pass through to where they are... Don Roberto⁸ actually went to the Municipality to talk about this matter and they told him that gardens must be made here and there's nothing to be done. [...] Don Roberto said: we won't let them build the great wall, because as soon as they build, it we'll tear it down and we've decided to tear it down, because we're not in a concentration camp (Ferrarotti 1974: 72).

Walls in Roman suburbs emerge from recurring conflicts between shack dwellers and local residents, par-

⁷ Similarly, Leonardo Piasere defined Roma people as 'people of the dumps' (Piasere 1991).

⁸ Don Roberto Sardelli, the principal Catholic actor engaged in the political defence of *baraccati*.

ticularly affecting Roma communities. Ferrarotti hastily dismisses shantytowns as spaces of deculturation, whilst public policies view them merely as sites of self-reproducing marginality requiring intervention at the “primary socialisation” stage. However, this paternalistic view overlooks the ambivalent nature of these spaces. Following Wacquant’s approach to ghettos (Wacquant 2008), shantytowns also contain significant solidarity networks, parallel institutionalism, and communal habitus – making them potential spaces of alternative humanity rather than simply areas of social degradation (Romania and Bertazzo 2026a). Ferrarotti’s successors themselves, through their research, would provide a more multifaceted picture of urban ghettos.

In subsequent decades, Ferrarotti would not return to addressing the problems of the peripheries and would therefore not investigate the outcomes of the housing relocations which, albeit not directly, he had helped make possible. This was instead done by Maria Immacolata Macioti, his long-standing collaborator, who in the 1980s returned to interview the inhabitants of the *borghetti* to observe the long-term effects of housing relocation processes. Macioti recognised how the destruction of the *borghetti* and the consequent relocation of their inhabitants to new neighbourhoods of the city had not succeeded in helping them overcome the condition of marginality from which they came. Although housing conditions might appear undeniably improved, Macioti found that many of the problems affecting them, rather than easing, had intensified with the transfer (Macioti 1988). The overcoming of the *borghetti* had coincided with a substantial rupture of a model of social organisation, communal and oriented towards mutual aid, which had until then enabled those groups to confront material conditions of extreme hardship.

Similarly, forty years after Ferrarotti’s studies, Stefano Portelli (2017) studied the people then evicted from Rome’s shantytowns. Consistent with Macioti, he argues that the demolitions of the *borgate* and *borghetti* and the transfer of their inhabitants, far from having resolved the condition of marginality of those groups, produced repercussions which, transcending the individual psychological dimension, «have decisively influenced Rome’s urban and social development» (Portelli 2017: 70). The assumption that providing “proper houses” to inhabitants of self-built neighbourhoods would overcome their marginality and make them full citizens proved largely fallacious. In brief, Ferrarotti failed to grasp the long-term consequences such uprooting would generate for these groups.

In conclusion, many of the issues listed in this section had already emerged critically during the Fascist era.

However, Ferrarotti’s main merit lies in showing the relationship between ghettoisation and the political inability or unwillingness to fight against social exclusion, and in investigating the effects of ghettoisation on shanty town dwellers. Walls, barbed wire, and control of the excluded in institutional areas are therefore not new phenomena introduced with the Roma camps, but variations on a paradigm of exclusion and control already experienced by shanty town dwellers. However, his analyses also have significant pitfalls, as the aforementioned epistemological naivety and a certain normative orientation, in terms of paternalism and uncritical support for modernization.

4. FROM THE CLEARANCE OF SHANTYTOWNS TO THE BIRTH OF ROMA CAMPS IN ROME

Whilst in the 1960s there were 13,684 families living in shacks, primarily in the area between Casilina and Nomentana, this number fell to 3,200 families in 1976, eventually reaching zero in the early 1980s when the last 13 shantytowns, housing 1,513 families, were demolished (Careri *et al.* 2016).

The final phase of this analysis begins in the 1970s with the gradual clearance of shantytowns and the emergence of Roma camps. These two phenomena intersect and are closely linked. Firstly, because numerous violent episodes against Roma occurred within the Roman borgate, leading to the creation of “protected” areas. The intention was to defend Roma from attacks, but as is easily understood, the barriers segregating them served politically, above all, to protect neighbours from the unwelcome presence of Roma themselves. In fact, even back then, there was widespread anti-Gypsyism in Italy, the effects of which have continued to the present day (Piasere 2009). Secondly, because many of the abandoned old shantytowns (Gordiani, Quarticciolo, Casilino 900) were occupied both by long-established Roma and by Roma migrants arriving in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s from Yugoslavia and Romania. With their arrival, the shantytowns were reborn. In 1994, 18 were recorded, some located in the very places where the historic shantytowns demolished in the 1970s and 1980s had stood. The establishment of ten Roma camps that same year was primarily motivated by the closure of these new shantytowns.

But let us proceed step by step. To understand the genesis of the nomad camps, particular attention must be paid to the period from 1970 to 1975. During this time, numerous attacks against Romani populations occurred in the Roman peripheries. In 1972, at San Basilio, «a citizens’ protest provoked yet another expulsion order by the police» (Salsano 2012: 173), lat-

er blocked by school authorities' intervention. In April 1974, a camp of Serbian Roma located in the Settecamini borgata was evicted and then set on fire by *carabinieri* and the local population. Mirella Karpati, pedagogist and long-standing collaborator with the NGO Opera Nomadi, described this as a veritable round-up (Karpati 1975). In December 1974, again at San Basilio, Roma were evicted to "protect them" from attacks by some families from the area. As in other cases, school and church authorities attempted to mediate with the Municipality and police, but without success.

Meanwhile, increasing tensions in the city's shantytowns led to an important conference in 1974, entitled *The Ills of Rome*, which forcefully raised the political necessity of eliminating existing shantytowns. In 1975, Mayor Clelio Darida announced for the first time the project to establish an equipped area for nomads. The measure was set within a legislative context that was beginning, at European level, to recognise the needs of Roma people. A 1973 memorandum from the Council of Europe recommended that member states take initiatives precisely to defend Roma from the discrimination to which they were subjected. It would be approved by the Italian government only in 1985. However, the creation of rest areas was delayed and episodes of intolerance continued. In April 1976, a camp inhabited by Xoraxane Roma at Tiburtino III was stormed by a group of three hundred citizens armed with iron bars and sticks (Lacio Drom, 3/1976). Police intervened to protect the Roma, but only to escort them away. Similar demands for removal from shacks and settlements occurred in 1978 at Casal Bruciato (Lacio Drom, 6/1978) and in 1979 at Borghetto Prenestino (Lacio Drom, 5/1979).

Meanwhile, evictions of the largest existing shantytowns began: Mandrione and Borghetto Prenestino in 1981; the Via Meda camp, occupied by Slovenian Roma, and agricultural land occupied by approximately 400 Xoraxane and Rudari Roma at Quarticciolo in 1983. The new defining feature of this period is the systematic recourse to evictions, first of shantytown dwellers in general and then of Roma in particular. Evictions, establishments, and new evictions would characterise the entire subsequent history of Roma camps in Italy, until the most recent period (2018-2026) when the establishment of new institutional camps ceased, although various slums continue to persist.

On 28 March 1985, upon proposal by the PCI (Italian Communist Party), the regional law "Provisions in Favour of Roma" (Regione Lazio, law n.82/1985) was approved, the first Italian law to establish camps. The Municipality implemented the provisions contained in the regional law in December 1985 and January 1986,

approving the establishment of the first Roma camps. As Salsano explains, however, things did not proceed as planned: «Whilst awaiting the construction of the camps, thanks to the commitment of Councillor Mori, provisional stops equipped with essential services were authorised for ten Xoraxane families in the territory of the 9th District and for eight Rudari families in the 5th District. For the others, due to the determined opposition of residents which clashed with the goodwill of the Municipal Administration, it was not possible to find a place for rest and their removal from Rome was ordered» (Salsano 2012: 192).

Meanwhile, the Roma presence in Rome grew. There were approximately 6,000 in 1990 and around 10,000 a decade later, thanks to arrivals of former Yugoslavs first and then Romanians. The new migrants settled in the very shantytowns that had been cleared in the previous decade: «In 1994, 18 large shantytowns were recorded and a 'reabsorption plan' was presented by Mayor Rutelli, along with regulated municipal spaces through the construction of 10 "nomad camps"» (Careri *et al.* 2016: 18).

5. CONCLUSION

This article has sought to demonstrate the historical and sociological continuity between the experience of Roman slums and shanty towns and the subsequent establishment of ethnically segregated areas, such as Roma camps. Its main limitation lies in the enormous scope of the available data and related fields of study. Even within these limitations, we believe we have demonstrated how certain factors clearly show continuity between the two different phenomena. First, the institutional production of urban marginality. Second, the attempt to control the phenomenon of marginalized housing not through effective social policies, but through the systematic segregation of the poor and excluded. Furthermore, the secondary victimization of those living in ghettos. Finally, as can also be seen in sociological literature inaugurated by Ferrarotti, a certain tendency to consider marginalized housing as a phenomenon to be combated with top-down policies, without involving precarious dwellers.

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