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# Urban Conflicts and Institutional Mediation. Public Administration, Roma Settlements and Normative Polarization Dynamics

By Tommaso Vitale

**Abstract:** This paper, *Urban Conflicts and Institutional Mediation: Public Administration, Roma Settlements, and Normative Polarization Dynamics*, offers a sociological investigation into the mechanisms by which public institutions mediate ethnic conflicts, focusing on Roma settlements in Italian urban areas. It explores the relationship between public administration and the normative dimensions of conflict, addressing the processes that exacerbate or mitigate polarization.

The central question driving this study is: How do institutional mediation strategies influence the dynamics of normative polarization in conflicts surrounding Roma settlements, and what are their implications for social cohesion and governance?

The analysis is rooted in classical and contemporary sociological theories, drawing on Georg Simmel's conflict theory, Albert Hirschman's insights into normative conflict, and Ralph Turner's emergent norm theory. The paper conceptualizes conflict as both a process of social fragmentation and a potential generator of social norms and institutional innovations.

Employing a comparative approach, the research is based on case studies of ten Italian cities, including Milan, Rome, and Venice. The study integrates qualitative data from institutional records, ethnographic fieldwork, and interviews with stakeholders, enabling an examination of policy instruments and their outcomes in diverse urban settings.

## 1. **Polarization as Cause and Effect:**

The paper examines two dominant approaches in the literature: one that views polarization as a cause of ethnic conflict and another that considers it a result of conflict dynamics. The latter framework is applied to analyze how conflicts are shaped by institutional mediation.

## 2. **Public Policy and Roma Settlements:**

An in-depth analysis of policies targeting Roma communities highlights ten recurrent features, such as spatial segregation, the cyclic use of forced evacuations, and the lack of recognition of Roma agency. These policies are critiqued for their demagogic underpinnings and their contribution to public stigmatization.

## 3. **Innovative Mediation Practices:**

Counterexamples from smaller cities, including Trento and Mantua, demonstrate alternative approaches to conflict resolution. These include participatory planning, integrated housing policies, and the acknowledgment of Roma voices in policymaking, offering insights into non-segregative and sustainable solutions.

## 4. **Institutional Mediation and Normative Production:**

The study identifies the role of institutional mediation in fostering compromise by introducing shared normative frameworks. It argues that effective mediation transforms conflicts into opportunities for generating flexible norms and shared resources, moving beyond coercive or exclusionary practices.

The research underscores the variability of conflict outcomes based on institutional approaches. It posits that while some policies exacerbate polarization, others demonstrate the potential for inclusive governance and social integration through innovative mediation practices.

**Keywords:** Institutional Mediation; Ethnic Conflict; Normative Polarization; Roma Settlements; Urban Governance; Conflict Dynamics; Participatory Planning; Segregation Policies; Public Administration; Comparative Urban Studies; Urban Sociology

It should thus be said that, in general, there exist two ways in which to somehow recognise the Other: hierarchy and conflict.

- *L. Dumont* -

## 1. The Sociology of the State and Ethnic Conflicts

In the introduction to his book on the rhetoric of reaction, Albert Hirschman ponders on the bewilderment often felt with regard to the actions of certain social groups. With particular reference to ethnic groups, Hirschman (1991) observes how the isolation of entire social groups is much more of a troubling phenomenon than the isolation of anomic individuals repeatedly studied by sociologists: «to a certain extent, each group –within a horizon of total disorientation and often of mutual rejection– will come to ask the following question with regard to the other: "But how is it possible for them to have become like that?"».

Indeed: how is it possible? Societies appear to have broken up into several 'fragments', into heterogeneous groups which do not communicate with one another, do not understand each other, and do not accept each other. Observations such as this are to be found at the heart of much contemporary thought in the social sciences and in political philosophy. Intellectual engagement reacts to this fragmentation and attempts to explore the identity tensions and ethnic polarisations flooding the news and alarming the public.

The re-emergence of seemingly irresolvable ethnic conflicts in Europe towards the end of the 1990s has brought various observers to declare their deep concern with regard to institutions' incapacity to work towards a compromise between irreconcilable positions.<sup>1</sup>

But, for sociologists the way to conceptualise the link between ethnic conflict and institutional mediation is not shared, and presents a lot of difficulties. Particularly, the role of institutions in mediating and not exasperating contention is often elapsd. It is not something new

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Hirschman (1995: 148) shrewdly underlines that during the 1990s many social scientists could not come to believe that «those involved (in a conflict) could be so closely attached to the issues which are the object of the conflict»: thus, «faced with the emergence or re-emergence of nonnegotiable arguments, we hear the exclamation: "May God bring the class struggles back!"».

to say. In his daunting book Horowitz (1985: 95) indicated how “the obstacles to a theory of ethnic conflict are formidable. Until lately, conflict theory has been an impoverished category of analysis in the social sciences. [...] Among the elusive elements in ethnic conflict theory is an acceptable definition of conflict”. Thus, the points of tension to be found within different theoretical formulations of ethnic conflict in sociological research have to be discussed.

This paper attempts specially to discuss the links between ethnic conflict and institutional mediation in Italy, with a specific reference to Roma settlements, having recourse to a basic methodological distinction: that between *explanans* and *explanandum*. Sociology has come to embrace very different theoretical formulations according to whether the polarisation has been considered as an *explanans* or an *explanandum* of the conflicts.

Firstly, the literature which has attributed the polarisation of ethnic conflicts to its causes will be discussed. According to such an approach, the outcome of conflict depends on the irreconcilable prescriptive positions of the parties involved. Then, a second approach in which the possible polarisation between the rivals surfaces from the dynamics of the conflict and not from its causes will be illustrated. Then evidence related to different Italian cities will be introduced to explain the variation with a configurational and dynamical approach. In the last part of the article I will return to the questions raised by Hirschman and examine the reasons why it is necessary to examine ethnic conflicts in relation to the forms of institutional mediation.

## **2. What is there Polarization in Ethnic Conflicts?**

Observing very different phenomena, Geertz (1985) expressed deep concern with regard to institutions' difficulty in asserting social ties. As a result of the formation and protection of collective identities, Geertz (1999: 10) perceives the world to have become fragmented, torn to pieces with the multiplication of ethnic and religious conflicts: “*a world in pieces*,” as I have called it elsewhere, encourages circumscribed, intensely specific, intensely felt, public identities, at the same time as such identities fracture, in their turn, the received forms of political order that attempt to

contain them, most notably these days the Nation State. The projection of religiously defined groupings and loyalties onto all aspects of collective life from the family and neighborhood outward, is, thus, part of a general movement very much larger than itself: the replacement of a world tiled with a few very large, ill-fitting, analogous blocks by one tiled, no more evenly and no less completely, with many smaller, more diversified, more irregular ones". Forms of ethnic conflict are characterised as clashes between groups or conceptions of the world which present themselves as totalising cultural universes looking to carve out their own specific identity.

### ***2.1 Polarization as Explanans of Ethnic Conflicts***

Aside from Geertz, however, an entire field of study seems to have been sketched out, which (1) automatically qualifies contention as "ethnic" without questioning how and why conflicts become ethnic; (2) focuses its attention upon ethnic conflicts taking the concept of identity as a starting point, without taking into account logics of State recomposition.

The first reason for this would be that the action of conflict reveals social belonging. In the same direction, as early as 1960, in reconstructing the process of decline of ideologies, Bell (1960) had indicated clear evidence, in the tendency to recover ethnic identities, of the importance of identity as a factor giving structure to collective behaviour. According to this view, it is the tendency to make tribal, religious or national identities absolute which provokes relentless massacres and apparently insurmountable conflicts. For this reason it should be necessary to acknowledge that "inevitably, there are cultures which are incompatible with one another: cultures of the dogmatic and integralist type will never be capable of finding a ground for conciliation with those cultures which are aware of their relativist nature" (Crespi, 1996: 267). This is the thesis of "incommensurability" and "untranslatability" (Benhaibib, 2002), centred upon a holistic and essentialist vision of cultures, which assumes that cultures constitute totalities which can be clearly described; that there exists a relation of correspondence between cultures and population groups;

and that it is possible to carry out an indisputable description of the culture of a group. No room for analysing the role of public administration in these contentious dynamics.

Many dynamics of conflict at the urban level are also interpreted in this direction. Such dynamics are described as ethnic conflicts between natives and immigrants, in which certain authors attempt to analyse how ethnic and cultural diversity in urban societies translates into contentious politics. The international literature on this topic is extremely vast, and provides a good indication of the spread of ethnic conflicts where citizens come to oppose an absolute and indomitable enemy, identified as a foreigner. From this may be derived not only the mobilisation of citizens through the so-called district councils, but also the self-segregation of the more well-to-do classes, prone to choose to reside in protected and separated places.

Some authors studying ethnic conflict as a dispute between social movements have also given a central importance to the concept of identity. The recent studies carried out by Oberschall (1994) are emblematic. Identity upholds all four of the dimensions through which collective action is to be analysed: (1) discontent and grievances; (2) beliefs and ideologies; (3) the capacity to act collectively, or mobilization; (4) political opportunities structure. For this reason, "identity is a central organizing concept of ethnicity", and identity allows us to explain polarisation in ethnic conflicts: given that individuals wish to pursue the fulfilment of their own identity, it is possible to calculate their "identity-producing function" and to estimate the outcomes of polarisation in an ethnic conflict by applying a formal model (Oberschall, Kim, 1996: 67). We may to a certain extent consider that in this approach, ethnic conflict is explicitly characterised as a 'normative conflict'. In the definition of Kaufmann (1998: 85): "Normative conflicts are defined as those conflicts in which there is a question not only of conflicting interests but also of conflicting 'principles' that permit no compromise and the pursuit of which may outlive any possible defeats in the process of political decision making or judicial scrutiny. At the root of normative conflicts lie different values and, arising from this, different evaluations of the situation, which prevent the rivals from recognizing one another's point of view. Normative conflicts are therefore insoluble in principle: direct

confrontation may lead at best to their being avoided, defused, mitigated by a third party, or suppressed, but never to their being solved”.

Normative conflicts are disputes emerging in a scenario of fragmentation and division, and in which each party acts within the public sphere along the lines of a defensive logic with respect to each possible 'contamination'. Given these conditions, conflicts take on cultural and symbolic forms and content and clash with the field of identities, bringing into play values which appear incompatible and non-negotiable.

So, normative nature displayed by ethnic conflicts, in the conceptualisation of the various authors of this first approach (polarisation as *explanans* of ethnic conflicts), derives from the *causes* of the conflict. When it comes to searching for the *potential* of the conflict, the important thing in this approach is to discuss *where* this potential resides (in the economic structure, in the socioeconomic structure, in the fabric of relations, in the culture, in the intrapsychic tensions, in the inner characteristics of the social groups, etc. ...); and to discuss the weight acquired by the normative dimension in this regard.

In this approach, it is the *normative position* of the actors and their absolute normative structures which make conflict 'ethnic' and 'normative': in this sense, it is the presence of identity-producing actors which, within the dynamics of a conflict, makes the greatest reference to rules and values. The normativity of the positions of each party involved is the cause of the nature of the conflict, which for this very reason can be considered normative: the actors and the object of the conflict are taken as data. In this sense, the polarisation of identities is the *explanans* of the conflict and thereby explains its very nature. Actors dispute over their values from irreconcilable positions, and for this very reason, they dispute over conflicting interests. In this body of literature, such disputes are shown to inevitably develop in a way where what happens is nothing more than what had been predicted. In this way, any autonomous driving force of the *dynamics* of the conflict is denied. It is the same also for the constituent role of the public administration in terms of contentious change.

So, the only element that seems to be given any importance is 'what came first'. It is an approach which is developed by 'attaching' the social *actors* to a cultural identity or by assigning the *agents* a position within the social space. Everything would thus depend on the relations existing before the conflict, whilst nothing unexpected would occur in the conflict itself. In this sense, the literature defers or disregards the uncertain nature of the action in the contentious dynamics, and considers both the actors and their motives as items of data.

On the theoretical level, this first approach limits the importance of the microfoundations of contentious processes, which would otherwise require close observation of the relevant action in order to explain its developments, both in terms of unexpected consequences of the strategic action and in terms of learning in the case of radical uncertainty. In this sense, the normative dimension becomes a single causal factor determining the action, whilst the individual loses his or her ability to act rationally together with the capacity to confront contradictions and moral dilemmas. To put it another way, this approach offers no room for explaining what happens in relational terms, and denies the fact that interaction embraces a dense set of robust generative mechanisms.

The expression 'ethnic conflict' thus runs the risk of becoming "a kind of shortcut term used to refer to any type of conflict among individuals living in the same country" (Bowen, 1996: 3), considering as valid at least three assumptions which are far from having been proven: (1) the assumption that ethnic identities are ancient and immutable; (2) that these identities provide motives for persecution and for committing murder; and (3) that ethnic diversity *per se* inevitably gives rise to violence. However, as Donald Horowitz (1985: 684) wrote: "there are recurrent tendencies to ethnic cleavage and identifiable patterns of conflict, but the outcomes of conflicts are various rather than uniform. [...] Even in the most severely divided society, ties of blood do not lead ineluctably to rivers of blood".

Therefore, the inherent risk of this first approach is to consider ethnic conflicts as "aut-aut" conflicts wherein the object at stake is indivisible, a type of conflict which is completely opposed to the "more-less" conflicts in which there is room for negotiation. As Hirschman (1995) notes,



«ultimately, we should learn something from the sad outcome of the previous attempt to distinguish between constructive and destructive conflicts [...]. I suspect, for example, that the category of nonnegotiable "aut-aut" conflicts mainly constitutes a convenient label for a wide range of new and unfamiliar problems, presenting various degrees of manageability».

Hirschman's position is certainly not an irenic one. Hirschman does not share the viewpoints of a certain naïve sociology which affirms that conflicts always have a positive outcome in spite of whatever else, and that such conflicts produce integration and the recognition of a common normative territory. Conflicts may lead to social laceration, yet these are outcomes, and one should try to understand if and how they emerge. For this reason, Hirschman (1995: 141) criticises authors such as Helmu Dubiel (1990) and Marcel Gauchet (1980) for their insistence on the positive virtues of conflict «without going on to closely examine the conditions on the basis of which the paradox of conflict, and the crisis which subsequently engenders progress, can effectively present itself». Hirschman (1995: 116-7) clearly acknowledges that conflict is, historically speaking, an «effective creator of integration and cohesion», but disapproves of the fact that instead of being considered as the outcomes of a delicate process of institutional mediation, the positive virtues of the conflict are conceptualised as a constantly effective role or as a spontaneous mechanism: “their paradoxical and miraculous process has a lot in common with Adam Smith's theory of the ‘invisible hand’” (*ibidem*: 142).

## **2.2. Polarization as Explanandum of Ethnic Conflicts**

The approach just presented is certainly not the only one used in sociology in order to account for the possible tragic outcomes of the tearing up of social bonds in conflicts. Another approach is possible to pick up on the *normative production of a conflict* and thus on the role that the State plays influencing the dynamic of contention and the effects of exclusion. In this second approach, conflict is conceptualised as a generative process: that is to say, in conflict, ‘something happens’. Thus, the normative polarisation we saw conceptualised in the previous approach as a cause of conflict is now considered, to the contrary, as the *result* of the conflictual processes: social

laceration and polarisation occur where ethnic conflicts, from a normative viewpoint, do not generate institutions or mediation.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, conflict is not 'normative' *a priori* in the sense defined above: it may become normative, yet the outcome of the conflict is exactly what needs to be explained (this being precisely the *explanandum*). Similarly, conflict is not 'ethnic' *a priori*: the fact of being qualified as ethnic is something at stake in the contentious dynamics, with actors that can push or pull into this qualification or another (Stavo-Debauge, 2005).

The underlying hypothesis in the second approach is therefore the idea that the characteristics of an emerging conflict depend on its dynamics, and these dynamics explain those characteristics. In other words, the conflict as *explanans* of its normative production.

As a matter of fact, we owe to Simmel the idea that conflicts should be studied as *configurations* within their own *dynamics*, and as such always have an institutional dimension which is to be observed, for the only way to understand whether the issue generating conflict allows association or gives rise to the tearing of social bonds is to look at the way in which 'objectification' takes place. Simmel uses the term *streit* (struggle) in order to refer to a form of interaction (*wechseiwirkung*) which is of interest to him due to its intrinsic dynamism. He draws attention to the importance of the normative production of a conflict and its connection with the formation (or rupture) of social ties. Society is populated by constant tensions among "attracting and repelling forces", and these tensions are not only natural to social life but essentially allow society to be built.<sup>3</sup> Simmel's intuition is that conflicts can act upon separative factors in order to avoid the polarisation of social groups. In this perspective, conflict may become a "reparative movement against dualism" transforming antagonistic elements into social ties. Furthermore, the creation of social ties takes place via the recognition of a *Third Party* standing outside the conflict and mediating in its dynamics.<sup>4</sup> This

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<sup>2</sup> As an example, it takes into account the fact murderous ethnic cleansing is rarely initially intended by the perpetrators; see Mann (2005: 503).

<sup>3</sup> "Society takes shape as a result of both types of action" said Simmel (1908: 215).

<sup>4</sup> Pizzorno (2000) clarified the analytical meaning of the concept of recognition, a meaning which brings together both possible acceptations: recognition as a "condition of possibility" for individual action and for the aims of an individual in society to be formed, and recognition as "motivation of status", that is to say, the motivation to be included in a respected circle.

normative *Third Party*, that is, the institutional dimension, presumes there to be a consistency in the common rules. More specifically, whilst submitting to the 'control' of common rules, the rivals allow the same rules to be adapted to new situations and to have their legitimacy renewed.

There are two reasons why a normative production may emerge from a conflict. Firstly, if awareness of values and rules is raised, and the different parties thus come together and become accustomed to recognising a common reference to a normative universe, "people unite in a common struggle, and struggle under rules and norms recognised by both parties" (Simmel, 1908: 228). Secondly, a normative production may emerge if the parties involved in the conflict acknowledge that in order to reach a solution, it is necessary to carry out actions of objectification and norms production.<sup>5</sup> During the course of a conflict, each party establishes norms and follows the rules which already exist, a fact which allows "the bilateral acknowledgment that the decision [favouring whoever should solve the conflict] should only derive from the objective weight of the motives" (Simmel, 1908: 230); consequently, individuals and groups become aware of the presence of a normative dimension and, at the same time, sense the practical possibility of intervening therein. The unifying force of the struggle is therefore linked to processes of *objectification*, whether this be of the modes of conflict (objective common rules, for example, laws), of whatever is at stake (i.e. the 'ethnic' qualification), or of the objectives of the conflict.

Nevertheless, as Simmel observes, conflict can play a positive role as a constructive factor of social ties only in the presence of certain conditions. According to Simmel, there also exist types of conflict which favour the disintegration of social ties. On the one hand, the complexity and diverse nature of social organisation may make societies "rigid", that is, incapable of tolerating conflict or of valuing the normative knowledge that conflict creates. On the other hand, the plurality of conflicts in a society and the interdependence among the rivals constitute the major factor for preventing outcomes of dissolution. If multiple axes of conflict cross societies, it is

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<sup>5</sup> According to Pizzorno (1993: 193), Simmel's view of conflict as a generator of rules is reminiscent of the concept of institutional innovation employed by Machiavelli.

unlikely that destructive polarisations will arise. In this case, individuals join together and enter into confrontation depending on the object of conflict, developing different senses of belonging in a procedural fashion and multiplying the links among them. There is a normative *Third Party* which "forces the building of bridges", and individuals can thus play on their own multiple partisanships, frivolously, erratically, and interrelating regardless of different social status, and 'ethnic' origin. To the contrary, where the axes of conflict tend to decrease, overlap and coincide, the great danger arises of developing strong and constant partisanships, links based on "similarity", and "essential equalities".<sup>6</sup> Individuals become "total persons", everything about an individual can be predicted based on a single detail, and conflict releases the individual's entire potential for fragmenting social ties.<sup>7</sup>

After Simmel many sociologists have looked at rules and identities emerging from the dynamics of a conflict. In Europe, the religious wars following the Protestant reform were contained with the peace in Westphalia, through the well-known principle of *cuius regio eius religio*. Today, on the other hand, normative conflicts can not be dealt with by *only* coercively imposing the normative order of one's own "sovereign ruler" on the residents of a territory, without leaving a margin for groups going back to other hierarchies. On this point, Peter Berger (1998) highlighted on the close relationship linking the pluralism of values and beliefs to the process of modernisation. Modernisation hindered the project of building a unified system of rules shared by the majority of the population, and at the same time, raised pluralism itself to a normative point of reference, to

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<sup>6</sup> According to Simmel and Coser, in 1957 Dahrendorf considers the need to create regulations capable of allowing conflicts to manifest themselves without "overlapping each other". In the same direction, Colin Crouch and Alessandro Pizzorno believe that the institutionalisation of conflict "consists in the isolation of conflicts from one another thanks to institutional structures, ensuring that conflicts do not feed each other and creating a state of civil war where control is entirely absent" (Crouch, 1999: 23).

<sup>7</sup> In addition, Simmel introduces a vital distinction between individual interests and collective interests by explaining the degrees of brutality detectable in a conflict. In the case where individual human beings fight for a supra-individual cause, stimulated by a collective interest, an effect of depersonalisation is produced (as we have seen above). However, Simmel maintains that in the dynamics of conflicts brought about by ideals going beyond the individual, collective objectives take the personal element out of the struggle, thus producing a depersonalisation of the conflict itself. Conflict takes place by virtue of the objectification of reasons into a collective 'cause' which, with respect to those fighting, remains external, and which allows the very struggle to bring out all its harshness and cruelty without affecting respect for the adversary, thereby favoring the recognition of belonging to a common humanity.

an ideal of civil cohabitation among individuals having different values and beliefs. On the other hand, the pluralism achieved in everyday "multicultural" societies is inextricably linked to effects of particularistic fragmentation of partisanships and collective identities, and to the consequent phenomenon of community closure, of exclusive identity groups governed by forms of "community totalitarianism".

One adding reference is that of Ralph H. Turner's emergent norm theory (1996). This theory draws attention to a specific manner of coordinated action and is based on three ideas: the emergent norm, the key motive (or *keynoting*) and the situation definition. In collective action, regardless of how well-organised this may be, the central activity of collective behaviour is the redefinition of the situation, allowing "normative confusion" and the emergence of normative innovation to be avoided. The main assumption of Turner's theory is that the majority of those taking part in any intense collective behaviour experiences a normative pressure without the need for this to be internalised. The emergent norm theory identifies the circumstances in which a normative production arises within a collective action, in relation to a principle of dependence upon risks, that is, when the sense of an acceptable risk suddenly changes. In Turner's theory, emergent social norms have at once a cognitive and an emotional dimension, and thus include both moral sentiment and ethical beliefs. In general terms, "emergent norms arise, provided other conditions are conducive, when the sense of normally acceptable risk is greatly intensified or greatly diminished. If it is intensified, the emergent norm will either define previously tolerable conditions as intolerable or call for a harsher, more prompt, or surer imposition of negative sanctions upon the deviant(s), or both. If the sense of risk is diminished, the emergent norm will pronounce previously proscribed behaviour as acceptable" (Turner, 1996: 9).

Given this picture, it is possible to consider the full meaning of the assertions made in recent research on ethnic conflicts, which show how those taking part in a conflict follow a rhetorical strategy looking to reduce the multidimensionality of relations by making one dimension appear

all-important. The most extreme strategy is the perpetration of atrocities in order to polarise relations (Banton, 2000: 496).

In this sense, Ruane and Todd (2004:227) propose a way of explaining the persistence of solidarity, ethnic opposition and ethnic conflict, "without hypostatizing ethnic groups or treating ethnic bonds as foundational". Consequently, ethnic conflict can not be considered as a social form which is different to other types of conflict: "ethnic conflict thus remains on a continuum with other types of conflict, rather than being qualitatively distinct from them". Along the same lines, as John Bowen (1996) highlights, the acceptance of negative stereotypes, the fear of another group, and the motto "kill before you are killed", far from being "ethnic tensions of the permanent type", are the products of a political process, of a conflictual trend, which can be produced just as they can be erased (Claverie, 2004).

Also in the work of Wimmer (2013) on ethnic boundary making, actors and motives are activated by the conflict and not by their partisan belongings, whilst normativity is no longer related to the causes of the conflict but, on the other hand, is an effect arising from the dynamics of the conflict, from the dynamics of any conflict between unequal parties over power and resources. The 'ethnic' qualification too is not a starting point, but a way to specify the contention during its dynamic. In this sense, and there would be no normative conflicts or conflict of interests. This distinction fails because, in conflictual processes, *combinations* of desires and interests are *always* at play, and in a Weberian sense, actions are at once based on rules *and* interests. Each combination depends on the kind of interaction in specific, empirical dynamic of contention, where the State (its agency and choices) plays a relevant role (Olzak, 1992).

### **3. Data on Conflicts on Roma Settlements in Italy: Metropolitan Areas**

In Milan and Rome, municipal administrations tried to make the presence of Roma and Sinti groups, whether composed by Italian citizens or by new immigrants, even less visible than in other

towns. In the researches that we performed on the choices carried out by the Municipalities of Milan (Centre-Right) and Rome (Centre-Left) between 2003 and 2007, a quite homogeneous picture of local policies has surfaced (Vitale 2009b). It is defined by ten main traits:

1. The reifying usage of the category “nomads” that flattens a very heterogeneous “minorities galaxy” into a homogeneous identity (see also Sigona 2003).
2. An ethnic connotation that clearly splits these groups from the rest of the population, on the moral level as well.
3. The negation of any exchange and negotiation possibility; in other words, the lack of recognition of a legitimate representation.
4. A continual curtailment of the variety of used public action instruments.
5. The overall fatalism characterizing public action on the issue.
6. A strong spatial segregation of the intended housing.
7. A different administrative treatment regarding residential construction and urban standards.
8. The production of unhealthy conditions that jeopardize health and tragically lower life expectancy.
9. The cyclical resort to the device of evacuation, used without proposing alternatives (Vitale, 2009d).
10. The splitting of partners and the separation of children from their parents in case of housing emergency.

This public policy scheme has relevant political consequences that drive to a demagogic style towards consensus building and a minimalist reduction of the expectations of Roma rights defence organizations.

The problem of these policies is not only their incapacity of attacking issues, of furthering social harmony, of giving collective endowments that are useful in promoting and protecting every

individual, including the weakest. The point is that they move along consensus building logics that have a very strong generative effect, both on the ways of instrument selection (Lascoumes, Le Galès, 2007) and of local policies implementation, and on public opinion dynamics whose stereotypes they bolster. Therefore, we shall more precisely see what the assumptions of this demagogic model are.

a) The first assumption is generic but not less important: it is the idea that social policies do not draw electoral consensus.

b) Keeping issues open and fuelling them is typical of demagogic strategies, so as to perpetuate the sources of inconvenience that allow token actions aiming to obtain the consensus of one side.

c) It takes for granted that consensus can be built only through initiatives whose happiness conditions only occur on a very short term, or even better “now”; that is through actions whose success is given by the simple fact of performing them and is not assessed by their consequences.

d) A naturalized principle states that consensus is obtained through public media that justifies actions on the grounds of binary and manichaeic logic with no structure upon a continuum.

e) It deems that simple and unique interventions that lower the range of arranged and used public action tools favour the obtaining of positive feedback because they are more easily sold to the media.

f) The following idea is a corollary to what was exposed before: the individual politicians can improve their reputation more easily through physical presence in places of hardship than through the enactment of poorly visible, though effective or resolving, interventions.

These 10 logics are not demonstrated, there is no feedback of evidence stating that only following them to the letter one can obtain consensus for a local policy regarding Roma and Sinti groups. These assumptions are widely used by a part of the local political class. To be more precise, they form a prevailing ideology with the meaning given by Luc Boltanski and Pierre Bourdieu



(2008): they are widely implicit schemes, likely to generate masses of colloquial rhetorical productions and of practices tuned to various situations; an evidence of good sense is assigned to these schemes, allowing the legitimation of the idea that the only effective action is the one aimed at following a direction predetermined by social change. In other words, their aim is to show that consensus can turn out only thanks to these precise assumptions that must be accepted if one wants to perform whatsoever action entailing change. Whereas the Municipal majority looks for consensus on the basis of the outlined logics, there is the furthering of those devices like Nomad camps and evacuations that favour an institutional context in which alliances within anti-racist actors are made difficult and hardly practised: both the coalitions between associations or movements of support with trade unions and cooperation centres, and broader alliances with some socio-professional categories, such as social workers, teachers, artists, lawyers and, not least, local police officers and journalists.

#### **4. Data on Innovative Forms of Institutional Mediation: Small and Middle-Sized Cities**

The determinism of this interpretative scheme is almost asphyxiating. While its outlining is important, it would be improper to regard it as the only valid scheme to cover the whole set of local policies towards “gypsy” groups in Italy. Besides its political and moral implications, the point is essentially cognitive.

During 2008 we performed a reconnaissance of other Italian local policies; the picture that appeared allowed us to upset the above scheme and deny a single interpretation, by providing counter-factuals.

The first point, the assignment of a homogeneous identity, is undetermined by the instances of Trento, Rovereto and Mantua, capable of precisely recognizing the difference within the various groups on their territory. The case of Trezzo sull'Adda is interesting to this regard, since it undertook a long social survey in order to know each group and each family and listen to them.

The second point, the ethnic connotation as a factor of moral discrimination, is plainly undetermined by the case of Pisa, where Roma and Sinti are not a priori connoted as perverse and inclined to illicit behaviours, while the lessons learnt about the importance of mediation during the *Città sottili* programme are applied to the rest of the citizens. The universal reach of the acquired knowledge favours institutional learning useful to all citizens. In Trezzo sull'Adda, social services develop their interventions towards Roma with no specialism but within the established, if difficult, horizon of service integration.

The third point, the lack of recognition of representation and speech capability, is undetermined by the instance of Modena, that even during the drafting of the case study directly allowed the Sinti to speak and built an ad hoc collective dialogue. Even the interventions carried out in Mantua, Buccinasco, Settimo Torinese and Padua tell about the viable paths of co-designing in the direct and constant exchange with the measures addressees.

The fourth point, the reduction of available devices, is undetermined by the instance of the Region financed project of Arci Toscana. The instance of Bologna goes in the same direction, as interventions for work placement and for the support of regularization of the residence permits were joined by multiple housing interventions backing Roma families in their ability to enter private renting markets with the support of their reputational capital. Although it lacks institutional support, the experimental project carried on by *Casa della carità* in Milan goes in this direction as well: anyway the aim is to enlarge the set of available devices, thereby favouring savings and preventing dependence traps (see also Polizzi, Vitale 2010).

The fifth point, fatalism, is undetermined in the most part of the collected cases. Consider the remarks by Lucatti on the social services she encouraged. Consider the instances of Buccinasco, Mantua, Padua and Venice, that in the aftermath of 2007 undertook brave choices in a phase when stopping anti-gypsy mobilizations seemed impossible and when newspapers insisted that helping the “gypsies” meant losing elections.

The sixth point, or the strong spatial segregation, is undetermined firstly by the case of Bologna regarding the placement in private housing spread on various neighbourhoods and Municipalities; then by the instance of Padua, where the micro-area for those Sinti who want to live in proximity of their extended family is not set up in the middle of nowhere or in the middle of a motorway exit, but rather in a non-isolated area.

The seventh point, the differential bureaucratic treatment, is undetermined not only by all the collected instances of housing policies that do not set up settlement areas unfit to human habitation, but also by law-compliant solutions, inhabitable by anybody and not only by “nomads”. Social projects in healthcare and education finalized to the extension of the fruition of territorial opportunities to Roma and Sinti, rather than realizing separate interventions with a sole target, go in the direction opposite to differential treatment.

The eighth point, unhealthy conditions, is undetermined by all programmes that overcome nomad camps, as well as by measures improving health. However, an instance looks particularly interesting to us, although we had to mobilize it ad hoc by finding it out of Italy: it is the case of the interventions carried out by Lyon in order to upgrade shanty towns. It is an extremely interesting case, as it is judged in terms of “lesser evil” (Boltanski, Vitale 2006). Surely shanty towns are evil, as they are illegal land occupations that do not allow adequate living conditions and that further social disadvantages. Facing this situation and with the long term aim of gradually overcoming it, the administration committed in damage reduction by delivering some minimal services and by guaranteeing a few fundamental rights, like water rights.

The ninth point, the evacuations cycle, is undetermined both by Tuscan and by Emilian cases. The main point is not the fact that there are cities that do not resort to evacuation in their repertory, but that some local authorities do not use evacuation in a recursive, cyclical manner; that they do not evacuate for the sake of evacuation, then they let the very same area to be reoccupied in order to resort to another evacuation, with media coverage. On the contrary, the comparative research shows that evacuations are a last resort for a few cities, organized honouring international

conventions, without destroying personal effects and seeing to alternative solutions for everyone, avoiding to transfer the problem somewhere else or to postpone it a few days (see also Vitale, 2010).

The tenth point, the splitting of family units in case of housing emergencies, is undetermined by the cases of Bologna, Florence and Trento. They show that it is possible to face housing emergencies keeping family units intact, by arranging temporary shelters for whole family units, rather than for individuals or at most for women with children. Besides, these shelters are not specialized in the caring of “gypsies”, but of all people in need.

Thus, the relativized scheme shows its significance even more: it is not only justified on the constitutional level, as it honours European legislation and human rights; however, it is not justified on political level. The fatalism continually surfaces in statements by politicians and administrative managers who perpetuate policies founded on extreme segregation and periodic evacuation: “It is not our will, as we would like to do otherwise, but we cannot with these ones”.

Instead, the selected cases show that it is possible to do otherwise. Above all, choices are at the basis of the policies of nomad camps and evacuations, as the two devices work together. Furthering these policies is a choice: according to political sociology, it is a demagogic choice, insofar as the public opinion dynamics are essentially moved by political and moral entrepreneurs with no verification of the performed policy success (Prasad 2006). Clearly, this choice is partly aimed by previous decisions, by procedural routines in the appropriate sectors of the Public Administration that build small status revenues and tend to preserve themselves by its inertia (Vitale, 2009c). However, the political, electoral and economic costs of distancing oneself from that model are lower than what it looks like at first.

Finally, the ten-point interpretative scheme that appeared with the studying of the cases of Milan and Rome turns out to be relevant in order to gather the traits of many local policies. However, the herein cited cases (elaborated in detail in Vitale 2009a) allow to de-naturalize this scheme, as it holds but it is not necessary. It holds, but it does not synthesize the body of empirical

cases. It holds, but it is not the only scheme of enacted policies. In other words, we used the case studies to make the analysis sensible to contextual elements.

#### ***4.1 Institutional Mediation and Consensus Building***

The crux of the relationship between local integrated policies for Roma and Sinti and political consensus must be explored with great care. We see traces of another modality by observing the mechanisms of consensus building in those Municipalities that in recent years attempted and implemented integrated policies to prevent Roma and Sinti exclusion. In Northern Italy, the most relevant cases are Venice and Padua in Veneto, Settimo Torinese in Piedmont, Buccinasco, Bergamo and Mantua in Lombardy<sup>8</sup>. They form a sufficient number of cases of various magnitudes allowing to recognize some traits common to a model of *incremental* consensus building around one's own actions. Surely, each Municipality in this group had to face protests, sometimes highly pitched, against their policies towards Roma and Sinti groups, especially when localizing areas for housing welfare, but much less about education, literacy and work placement policies.

Therefore, we will abstract the main assumptions at the basis of consensus building through integrated policies, negotiated with Roma and Sinti.

- 1) The first assumption is that consensus building is a process that has to start before whatever actual intervention. Then it must continue during the realization and after the end of the intervention. The temporal horizon of consensus building is longer than that of the planned interventions.
- 2) The second assumption follows the incremental ways of consensus building. Local administrators plan by acting in concentric circles, by creating gradual alliances: first with those who are easy to involve due to their strong sympathy towards the proposals to implement; then by slowly discussing and negotiating with interests groups further away from the sensibilities and the attentions of the former.

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<sup>8</sup> Other interesting cases can be found in literature, with particular reference to a few Municipalities in Tuscany (Fondazione Michelucci, 2004) and Piedmont (Franzese, Spadaio, 2005).

- 3) The third assumption is about the strategical management of communications. Herein analysed local authorities greatly emphasize small achievements and the results coherent with planned objectives. They do not rule out resorting to communication tools built around individual paths of Roma or Sinti people interested by the interventions. Thus, the need of obtaining short term successes is satisfied by reporting small undergoing changes and intentionally building the idea of an active, virtuous path. In other words, forms of objectivity and proofs of reality are built (Boltanski, Thévenot, 2006) in order to show (or rather, demonstrate and prove) evidence of one's own action, by informing about its criteria of effectiveness and efficacy<sup>9</sup>.
- 4) It is foreseen that the dissent and the protests of the opposition will be tough and able to mobilize many citizens. To this end, places and devices are arranged to listen to citizens' issues, often not relevant to the intervention towards Roma and Sinti groups. Attempts are made to discern and give separate answers to ordinary citizens' needs and to keep distinct issues disjointed. Those elected with local authority responsibility often appear where citizens protest, proactively looking for dialogue, so as to contain squabble about absence and abandonment.
- 5) There is a tendency in pluralizing the used public action devices, in obtaining new funding clearly aimed to these groups, explaining in great detail that the funds at issue are supplementary rather than entailing the reduction of resources to the population as a whole.
- 6) One shall work on the mediation to favour the access of Roma and Sinti to current universal services; without activating dedicated and specialistic services; one shall negotiate to sustainably involve the beneficiary Roma and Sinti in the expense. One strengthens

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9 With this meaning, the sought-after legitimation is typical of communication and information devices; it is thus based on decision explicitness and on actor responsibility (Lascoumes, Le Galès, 2007, p. 107). However, it is worth to point out that researches regarding other public action areas noticed a behaviour of those administrations that were interested in social innovation. When they reflexively understand that efficacy and effectiveness criteria coherent with their own action logics do not attain adequate communication devices, they support ad hoc initiatives that reduce the complexity of their policies and make their efficacy and effectiveness criteria discrete, as opposed to continuous. For more detailed observations, see Vitale (2008).

public communication about the improvements in terms of recognition adjusted on co-responsibility and on activation, but also on savings with regards to previous law and order expenses.

These elements are in no way meant as the ingredients of a magic formula with the ability of obtaining and reproducing political consensus on social and urban policy choices supporting Roma and Sinti groups. Nothing here goes in the sense of writing blueprints of best practices, or just design principles. What is at stake is to describe the normative frame (and a normative frame is always about what has to be done) that actors express in their attempt to discuss and negotiate integrated policies with the citizens. This does not automatically mean falling in idealistic volunteering, as if local political decision-makers were able to accomplish everything they set themselves to do and their choices were marked solely by their political culture, their ethical conscience and the interests that they answer to. Decision-makers face not only balance of forces in a given interaction, but also institutional and normative constraints that stiffen public action: judicial, technical and accounting laws; budget constraints; technical instruments and devices with their own automatisms. What we have shown reckons with the fact that not everything is always negotiable, and it only implies that in actual situations there is always room for action and for manoeuvring, both for political decision-makers and for other concerned actors, including the addressees.

## **5. Conflicts, institutional mediation and normative production**

The contradictions opened by Roma and Sinti group presence fall on local authorities that lack the adequate tools to face them; besides, they are rarely backed by public authorities on higher levels. However, room for action and degrees of freedom are present on the local level, allowing to bend policies in many possible directions. Public policy choices that can be exerted on the local level strongly circumscribe opportunities of action regarding primary and secondary education,

work placement, healthcare, sociality and, above all, housing. They can either favour or hinder conditions of “recognition” (Pizzorno, 2007, pp. 275-95) of these communities in a “necessarily complex and self-contradictory” social order (Jobert, 1998, p. 25)<sup>10</sup>.

Institutional mediation of conflicts against Roma in Italian cities is always the result of a situated interaction game between various actors, with different interests, within common constraints (see also Le Galès, 2002). Despite having stressed the crucial role of policies and of their instruments inertia (especially the “Nomad camp” device), it is nonetheless possible to explain the other variables, which are important for the understanding and for the interpretation of conflict dynamics: in the first place, variables regarding the behaviours of political parties and entrepreneurs, as well as the interaction between political entrepreneurs, local associations and media; secondly, the stereotypes and the prejudices that consolidated on the long term towards Roma populations, that can or can not activated and mobilized in the public arena.

The outcome of these interactions is unforeseeable. The experimental reality of Italian cities presents a certain variety of dynamics and of ways of Roma and Sinti treatment which have reference not only to the scheme of eugenic roots outlined in the paragraphs above. Public action does not only enact heinous differential treatment. There is the action of government styles, different than those setting different communities against themselves (mainstream and Romani) in a standing and polarized conflict. We can also observe government and public action forms that aim towards mediation, towards the realization of integrated interventions, that set themselves medium term deadlines for the evaluation of effectiveness, that are not crushed on short breath consensus objectives. Above all, they aim at exchanging and negotiating with the Roma themselves, in the representation that they give themselves in autonomy.

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<sup>10</sup> Reflections by Ambrosini (2008, p. 212) are particularly interesting from this point of view. It is therein noted that, in the case of the Roma, conflicts surface within “territorial mobility practices of transnational minorities and social benefits still regulated by bonds of affiliation to nation-states, whose result is to dig deep inequalities within the various groups that constitute Roma and Sinti complex.



To fully grasp and conceptualize the role of institutional mediation these empirical cases we have to come back to the connection between conflicts, mediations and normative production. In terms of classical sociology, it is what Simmel (1908: 255) called "problems of governance of plurality". The point is that through this empirical research, albeit restricted to ten cities in Italy, we have seen that the State is effective in reducing polarization when its forms of institutional mediation produce a *compromise*, made possible by a shared judgment on the object of dispute, based on a common scale of equivalence which often emerges as a by-product during the conflict and which makes the disputed assets divisible<sup>11</sup>.

Let's elaborate on this point, so to say on the relevance of common scale of equivalence (Boltanski, Thévenot 2006). Through policy instruments, planning choices, localisation of services, and allocation of resources, institutional mediation introduces not just shared rules (as Coser functionalist reading of Simmel would have underlined), but of stakes recognised as being mutual (Vitale 2009e). Indeed, what is at stake it has not been just to involve all rivals in a political process, or to coerce different groups to agree on fundamental values. Normative conflicts defy the potential for mediation not so much on the basis of efficiency as on that of the quality of the mediation processes through which social matters are designated in relation to themes and problems, rules and standards. The case we have studied show the relevance of *pragmatic* forms of mediation. This is a non-coercive process of mediation wherein each party pursues a compromise solution by relying on the presence of a third party. Our evidence shows that the possibility to translate individual interests into a collective interest is no longer a question of objectifying the conflict and producing the acceptance of common rules, but to introduce flexible normative structures and give greater value to each party's capacity for self-expression. Precisely self-expression on regulation issue: on how to allocate resources and how to coordinate collective goods delivery at the very local level.

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<sup>11</sup> As Simmel (1908: 255) points out: "for certain objects, compromise by division is out of the question. [...] Nevertheless, struggles for indivisible objects are susceptible of reaching a compromise when these objects are substitutable".

The main theoretical results of our research has been to show the central role that groupings of objects, rules and conventions with a performative power as law, but also public policy instrumentation play in the dynamic of these conflicts. This is not equivalent to maintaining that actors do not have normative competences and their own value coming from socialization, driven only by external dynamic. Indeed, considering how these normative competences emerge also in the dynamics of a conflict, it may help to understand through what kind of processes ethnic cleansings become accepted by perpetrators as “moral murders”, also when there are not antecedent streams of violence and socialization.

Each conflict is unique, and thus any resolution is likely to depend on particular institutions, contentious processes and the circumstances of the time (Banton, 2000). In order to study the role of the state in structuring extreme ethnic exclusion, we have reconstructed the dynamics of the conflict by analysing the sequence of interactions, paying particular attention to if and how legitimate mechanisms of mediation, commonly recognised or accepted by the actors, emerge in the dynamics of each individual conflict, or if, on the other hand, there arise outcomes of polarisation because the normative devices are incapable of linking the different parties and the state exercising sovereignty has been factionalised. Along the same lines, polarisation has been defined as the outcome of a failure to produce normative devices capable of reaching a stable compromise among the parties in a situation.

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