



The contentious sovereignties of the camp: Political contention among state and non-state actors in Italian Roma camps



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ABSTRACT

The global proliferation of camps manifests an alarming phenomenon of burgeoning marginalization, and shows that the concept of ‘camp’ is today increasingly crucial to grapple with current changes in the world’s geographies of exclusion and inclusion. Specifically, this article focuses on ‘institutional camps’, i.e. created by government agencies in alleged emergency situations and aims to conceptualize sovereignty over this type of camp. After critically reviewing the ongoing scholarly debate on camp sovereignty, I situate my approach within the work of scholars who see political authority over the camp as comprising a multiplicity of both state and non-state actors. The article contributes to this perspective by drawing on the theory of ‘contentious politics’ advanced by [McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly \(2001\)](#). Through this analytical framework, I suggest construing camp sovereignties as contentious, i.e. inherently constituted by conflicting and ever-evolving power relations that change according to framing strategies, political opportunities, resources and repertoires of action. In order to show the benefits of such approach, the paper focuses on the empirical case of the Italian Roma camps in Rome, through which I show that camp sovereignty is not only fragmented into a multiplicity of actors but is also the result of conflict, compromise, negotiation, and co-optation among actors whose frames, opportunities, resources, and repertoires constantly change over time.

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1. Introduction

The current proliferation of camps globally has attracted increasing attention among scholars, including geographers, who have interrogated their diffusion and governance, as well as the everyday practices of the people living in these socio-political spatial formations. In addition to refugee camps and immigration detention centers, new hotspots, asylum seekers centers, and migrant identification facilities are quickly mushrooming as a response to the so-called European ‘migration crisis’ ([Davies & Isakjee, 2015](#)). This growth manifests an alarming phenomenon of burgeoning marginalization, and shows how the concept of ‘camp’ and what [Minca \(2015b\)](#) has on the pages of this journal described as “camp studies” are today increasingly crucial to grapple with current social changes in the world’s geographies of exclusion and inclusion.

This article arises from [Minca’s \(2015b, p.80\)](#) call for “spatial

theories that might help us understand the actual workings of the camp” – also echoed by [Davies and Isakjee \(2015\)](#) – and aims to contribute to the analysis of camp governance. In so doing, the question addressed in this paper is: how can we conceptualize sovereignty in institutional camps? Drawing on scholarly work that suggests seeing camp sovereignty as plural and hybrid, I will focus on the contentious nature of camp sovereignties. The perspective put forward in this article foregrounds the interaction between state and non-state actors governing the camp and the dynamic nature of their relationships, which constantly change over time, fluctuating between conflict and cooperation. I will do so by using the analytical tools developed by [McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly \(2001\)](#) in their theory of ‘dynamics of contention’, which focuses on framing strategies, political opportunities, resources and repertoires of action as key aspects in the interaction between the actors involved in the camp. Overall, through this article I intend to show the usefulness of this framework in the analysis of camp governance, not only because it underscores multiplicity but because it also emphasizes a temporal perspective, deepening the understanding of the historical evolution of camp sovereignties.

In the first section of the article I will examine the meaning of

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“institutional camp” to specify the scope of my argument. I will then consider the literature on camp governance, focusing on how the political authority over institutional camps has been conceptualized. After reviewing Agamben-inspired works, which stress the role of the sovereign state decision in the creation of camps, and those that draw on the Foucauldian notion of governmentality, I will discuss the current understanding of camp sovereignty, which scholars have recently suggested to see as layered (Turner, 2005), multiple (Hanafi & Long, 2010), and hybrid (Ramadan & Fregonese, 2017). By building on these debates, in the second section I will expose the theory of political contention advanced by McAdam et al. (2001) and suggest construing camp sovereignty as contentious, i.e. inherently constituted by ever-evolving power relations among claim-makers whose frames, opportunities, resources, and repertoires change over time. To show the benefits of such perspective, the third and fourth sections of the paper present an analysis of the Italian Roma camps, which shows how the sovereignty over the camp is not only fragmented into a multiplicity of actors but is also the result of constant conflict, compromise, and co-optation.

The data presented in this paper have been collected in Rome from September to December 2013. During the fieldwork, I conducted 60 in-depth interviews and informal conversations with a variety of actors (both governmental and non-governmental) participating in the governance of the Roma camps, i.e. policy-makers, politicians, members of subcontracting associations, advocacy volunteers and activists of social movements. In addition to this, I analyzed 22 policy documents, including local ordinances, council deliberations, policy guidelines, documents of the local police, regional and national legal texts, and policy reports. Through the interviews and conversations, I identified the conflicting views and claims made by different actors, how these were framed, the resources mobilized (such as alliances), and the opportunities and repertoires of action. The analysis of the policy documents enabled me to trace the historical development of the Italian Roma camps, with a specific focus on their definitions, objectives, and target population, which provided an understanding of the context within which the actors involved in the camp governance operate. As I will show in the article, these interviews and documents clearly highlight the complex and contentious nature of sovereignty over institutional camps.

2. The governance of institutional camps in camp studies

Scholars working on the camp have highlighted the multifaceted dimension of this spatial formation (Hailey, 2009), which includes camps for refugees (Agier, 2014), semi-carceral institutions, like migration detention centers (Moran, Gill, & Conlon, 2013) and EU hotspots (Squire, 2016), spaces of transit (Davies & Isakjee, 2015) and of sanctuary (Czajka, 2012), protest camps (Brown, Feigenbaum, Frenzel, & McCurdy, 2017) and, some argue (Diken & Laustsen, 2005), gated communities. For this reason, as Hailey (2009, p.1) points out, “[d]efining the camp is a central problem of our contemporary moment”. Broadly speaking, a camp can be defined as a temporary confined space, characterized by an exceptional and ambiguous status between exclusion and protection (see Minca, 2015b). Camps differ, however, in a series of other aspects. For example, while migration detention centers can be regarded as a form of forced segregation, gated communities are usually seen as a case of self-segregation. Secondly, those living in sanctuary spaces or gated communities are represented as needing protection, whereas those in identification and removal centers are seen as a potential threat to the nation state order. Finally, despite their official temporariness, camps have different durations. While refugee camps often persist and become a temporal limbo of

governmental inertia, “autonomous camps” (Hailey, 2009), such as informal settlements or protest camps, fight for extending their duration.

This article is concerned with one specific set of camps: institutional camps which are officially created and managed by governmental agencies in alleged emergency situations and which forcibly segregate (often ethnically) stigmatized subjects for a protracted period of time. As observed by Minca (2015a, p.90–91), there is a difference between “state-enforced camps” and “counter-camps” (i.e. “spontaneously created by refugees or migrants-on-the-move”). Drawing on this distinction, this article will focus on state-enforced camps. It will not deal with carceral spaces, such as immigration removal centers, but it will specifically focus on camps that are used as a form of “forced housing” (*logement contraint*) for undesirable categories (Bernardot, 2005), such as migrants or ethnic minorities. The former can be included in what Hailey (2009) terms “control camps”, and the latter are part of what he terms “necessity camps”, which “offer accommodation, assistance, and protection” (Hailey, 2009, p.323). These are, for example, migrant accommodation such as the *cités de transit* used in France to house people originally from Algeria and Morocco in the 1960s–1980s (see Bernardot, 2005), asylum seekers' residential accommodation, such as the *Wohnheim* in Germany (see Fontanari, 2015), homeless camps (see Herring & Lutz, 2015), as well as contemporary Gypsy camps, such as the *villages d'insertion* in France (see Legros, 2010) and the *campi rom* in Italy (see Sigona, 2005).

There are two main theoretical approaches that have significantly marked the analysis of the governance of institutional camps. The first one is informed by the work of Agamben, while the second draws on the Foucauldian concept of governmentality. Many scholars in international relations have resorted to the work of Agamben (1998, 2005) to understand the spreading of camp-like institutions (Edkins, 2000), mostly after 9/11 (see, for instance, Ek, 2006; Gregory, 2006; Minca, 2005, 2015b). The main contribution of an Agambenian approach lies in understanding the camp as the spatialization of exception, i.e. the suspension of ordinary law. These spaces are characterized by ambiguity, or “indistinction” (Agamben, 1998; see; Agier, 2014; Diken & Laustsen, 2005; Giaccaria & Minca, 2011), as the state of exception entails an erasure of the clear-cut distinction between political life and biological existence, producing a state of “bare life” whereby the “homo sacer” can be subject to violence with impunity. According to Agamben (1998), who draws on Schmitt's work, the sovereign manifests itself through the decision of who counts as bare life. However, the fact that Agamben draws on the Schmittian notion of sovereignty as “decisionist state power” (Brown, 2010, p. 48), i.e. the executive power as opposed to the legal one, makes his analysis strongly state-centered. As a result, he does not offer a nuanced and detailed account of how the exception as a governing logic and its spatialization are put into action through a variety of actors beyond the state. For this reason, he was criticized for overlooking the complexity of the sovereign agencies and equating the political domain with the legal (see Amore, 2013; Gregory, 2006; Martin, 2015; Ramadan, 2013), as well as for dismissing the capacity of resistance of the subjects confined in the camp (see Butler & Spivak, 2007; Gregory, 2006).

In contrast, the Foucauldian approach to the camp embraces the complexity of power through the notion of governmentality, which offers an alternative to state-centered understandings (Lippert, 1999). Governmentality can be defined as an “ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses, and reflections, the calculations and tactics” (Foucault, 1991, p. 102) enabling the exercise of power. It rejects the idea of a single state and static sovereign actor (see Hanafi & Long, 2010) and it underscores the interactions

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