

# The Roma in Italy

## Racism as usual?

**Claudia Aradau**

**O**n 30 October 2007, Giovanna Reggiani, a 47-year-old Italian woman, was robbed and murdered in a deserted area of northern Rome. The man accused of murdering her was a Romanian Roma, Nicolai Romulus Mailat, who had been living in one of the 'unauthorized' settlements in Rome. The media immediately reported horrific stories of torture and rape, raising the 'spectre of "monsters" arrived from Europe'.<sup>1</sup> The crime became more than a crime; it was a crime against the nation. The wife of a naval officer, Reggiani sparked the protective and militarized anxieties that help constitute and reproduce the legitimacy of nation-states. And the nation reacted. The ex-communist mayor of Rome, Walter Veltroni, requested an emergency decree for the deportation of European citizens deemed to be a threat to public security. While the settlements at the margins of Rome and other Italian cities were being evacuated and bulldozed, the government of Romano Prodi, former president of the European Commission, was busy fast-tracking a decree on 'urgent provisions for removals from Italian territory for reasons of public safety'. The decree was openly aimed at Romanians and particularly the Romanian Roma, who had rights of mobility and residence since 2007 when Romania joined the European Union. The incident was followed not only by new security legislation but also by vigilante violence against Roma and Romanian citizens. Occasional instances of physical violence gave way to more systematic attacks on the camps. The media continued reporting details of the violence as emblematic of the 'discontent of the nation' with the government's policies on immigration and security.

Despite the urgency with which the Prodi government passed security legislation, and Veltroni's reassurances of firm action against crime perpetrated by Romanians, the government lost a vote of confidence in parliament and was swiftly replaced by a new Berlusconi right-wing government. In an alliance with the parties of the extreme Right, the Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance) and Lega Nord (Northern League), Berlusconi came back to power on promises to crack down on crime and change immigration policies. Two weeks after his electoral victory, for the first time since the Second World War, Rome elected a right-wing mayor, former youth leader of the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement, Gianni Alemanno. Alemanno's 'Pact for Rome', which sailed him to power, had promised the expulsion of 20,000 immigrants in Rome and the destruction of the camps inhabited by the Roma. The government's 'security package' also envisaged the criminalization of undocumented migrants, the demolition of 'unauthorized' camps and the fingerprinting of the Roma. In the meantime, violence against the Roma continued unabated: arson, physical attack, insult and injury. In May 2008, a Roma camp in Naples was set on fire with Molotov cocktails. A few days later, another was burnt to the ground after a teenage Roma woman was arrested for allegedly trying to steal an infant.

The events were subject to widespread denunciation from all corners of the political spectrum. Liberals and radicals, capitalists and anti-capitalists, NGOs and governments, the Catholic Right and the secular Left reacted with declarations, appeals and press conferences, condemning the fascist turn in Italian politics and the ethnic profiling of the Roma undertaken by the new Berlusconi government. Alemanno's election as mayor of Rome reinforced suspicions about the rise of neo-fascism and an extreme Right whose security policy had gone 'out of control'. Liberal activists and NGOs focused on showing the falsity of the reports that had allegedly sparked the violence against the Roma and Romanians. The Roma represent only about 0.3 per cent of the Italian population. The teenager accused of trying to steal a baby was not Roma and did not try to steal the baby. Romanians are not criminals, but care for the elderly and clean the streets of Rome. Crime is not disproportionately the responsibility of foreigners. Rather, statistics show that crime has not increased over the past decade and Italy continues to have one of the lowest murder rates in Europe.<sup>2</sup> The Roma were not even foreigners, but more than half were European and Italian citizens. They were driven to live in makeshift camps by the lack of housing. Italy has a systematic and publicly funded system of camps that ignores the Roma's demand for adequate housing and continues to call them *nomadi*, despite their sedentary lifestyle. Many of the camps were set up to shelter refugee Roma from ex-Yugoslavia. Other camps have an even longer history. Campesina 900 in Rome dates back to the 1960s.

Exposing false perceptions did not make much of a dent in government policies or abate popular violence. Other voices continued denouncing the anti-Roma measures as racist and fascist and appealed to the universal prescriptions of law, democracy and human rights. *Famiglia Cristiana*, Italy's most widely read Catholic paper, suggested fascism was resurfacing in the government and drew parallels between the treatment of the Roma by the Berlusconi government and that of the Jews by the Nazis. The Council of Europe referred to 'historical analogies which are so obvious that they don't need to be spelled out'.<sup>3</sup> The financier George Soros sent a letter to Berlusconi demanding urgent measures to protect the Roma from racist aggression. Médecins du Monde, the French NGO founded by Bertrand Kouchner, Sarkozy's minister of foreign and European affairs, described the situation of the Roma as a 'state of exception' which should no longer be covered in silence.<sup>4</sup> The European Network against Racism denounced the Italian authorities for 'conducting arbitrary detentions and expulsions, making provisions for discriminatory anti-Romani and anti-Romanian laws and measures and openly inciting its population to racially motivated violence.'<sup>5</sup>

A state of emergency had been declared, executive powers were passing decrees that directly targeted particular sections of the population, and European citizens were losing their rights. The situation should have been indisputable. Nonetheless, the accusations of fascism and racism remained largely ineffective. Despite the rhetoric, few measures were taken by international institutions to try and halt racist discrimination against the Roma. The Italian situation appeared extraordinary, beyond the bounds of normal politics. However, rather than being something new, racism has long been constitutive of the normal politics of modern states. The problem with the accusations of racism and fascism was that they did not make sense of the government's measures against the Roma as part of the ordinary fabric of liberal politics. This was compounded by the gradual incorporation of anti-racist movements into a liberal discourse of culture and prejudice. Yet neither cultural nor biological difference was immediately at stake in the exclusionary reproduction of infra-humanity in Italy. The measures were part of a much more insidious and entrenched racism whose workings have been largely neutralized by the rhetoric of security. As Franco Frattini, Italian Foreign Minister and former European Commissioner for Freedom, Security and Justice, put it: 'These things are done by many other countries in Europe without causing any scandal.'

## Ordinary racism

Faced with accusations of racism and fascism, the Italian government reacted with indignation. 'Macché que razzisti, Italia e in regola' ('What racism? Italy is in order!') was the headline of one of the Italian dailies in the wake of the European debates about Berlusconi's 'security package'.<sup>6</sup> After all, when Berlusconi came to power, his 'security package' could rely on the emergency legislation brought in by Prodi's centre-left government. The Communists themselves, who had taken part in Prodi's twenty-month government, had been supportive of these measures. The government claims that all the measures it has taken are legal. In the wake of concerns voiced by the European Commission, Italy 'reassures the EU that fingerprinting Gypsies is legal and not racist'.<sup>7</sup> According to the government, the measures are actually compassionate, driven by a desire for social integration. The Italian interior minister Roberto Maroni justified the new state of emergency instituted nationally in July 2008 by the Berlusconi government as being 'better to assist the illegal immigrants by accommodating them in buildings rather than tents, and guarantee them more humane treatment'.<sup>8</sup>

In rejecting accusations of racism regarding the fingerprinting of the Roma living in camps, Maroni argued that 'I must be able to know who is in Italy, where they live, what they do, what they will do in coming months.' That fingerprinting will also entail the deportation of undocumented migrants appears as collateral damage of a policy that presents itself as genuinely striving for social integration. What better way to govern populations than by gathering adequate knowledge about their life? Furthermore, the 'security package' is not much of a novelty in the European security landscape. Maroni had, after all, pointed out that making irregular migration a crime only brings Italy into line with other European countries such as Britain and France, which have long had similar laws.

In Italy itself, accusations of racism did not stand before the law. In March 2008, the Court of Cassation passed a judgment on six defendants, including the mayor of Verona, who had signed a leaflet demanding the expulsion of all Roma from the city. The court decided that it was not a case of racism but of 'deep aversion [to Roma] that was not determined by the Gypsy nature of the people discriminated against, but by the fact that all the Gypsies were thieves'.<sup>9</sup> In the court's judgment, racism is defined by ideas of superiority and racial hatred and not by criminal statistics. As the mayor and the other defendants were found to be prejudiced against the Roma's criminal behaviour, rather than cultural or racial differences, such racial prejudices were not deemed to amount to racism.

Eventual anti-racist measures by EU institutions did not fare any better. Jacques Barrot, the European commissioner for justice, freedom and security, also declared: 'The measures being carried out by Italy to tackle the Roma emergency do not violate EU law.' In the wake of a report submitted by the Italian government, the measures envisaged in the 'security package' were found not to contradict European legislation since fingerprinting only targets persons who cannot be otherwise identified, rather than particular ethnic or racial categories.

The outbursts of violence and the vigilante patrolling of the streets of Rome appeared as expressions of popular discontent, which were justified by some voices on the extreme Right as responses to state indifference and inaction. The population, who



have supported the anti-Roma anti-immigrant policies of successive right- and left-wing governments, do not see themselves as racist, fascist or in any other way extreme. Those who started anti-Roma vigilante patrols on the street of Italian cities call themselves 'Circolo della Libertà' (The Freedom Circle) and claim to be acting against growing insecurity in urban areas.<sup>10</sup>

The widespread accusations of racism have ignored the discourses of law, freedom, liberalism and order that underpin both popular and governmental reactions. They share the liberal view that racism is a problem of individual prejudice and misguided perceptions and they are formulated in the liberal terms of the rule of law and universal rights. But by trying to find recourse in liberal law and universal rights, anti-racist accusations have inhabited the same space as the legal theory that condones it. What none of these accusations has come to terms with is the liberal justification of 'protective measures' within the confines of the law.

What is really at stake in Italy is not the rise of extremist language, but liberal politics as usual. Rendered more visible through the spectacular state interventions in the wake of the murder of Giovanna Reggiani, Italian government policies harbour many continuities and similarities with European policies already in place. The demand to introduce DNA tests for assessing demands for family reunification by refugees, the criminalization of illegal immigrants and the increase in prison time for migrants who have committed a crime are not new, but have already been introduced in several other European countries. Similarly, fingerprinting is not a novel measure, reminiscent of the 1930s. Rather, the fingerprinting of asylum-seekers is common policy in the European Union, where the Eurodac database aims at preventing asylum-seekers from applying for asylum in different countries. At the same time as the Italian government was undertaking the fingerprinting of the Roma, including children, the EU drafted legislation requiring the fingerprinting of all children over 12 years of age (after an initial proposal of fingerprinting everybody older than 6) for the purpose of fighting child trafficking. In the context of the 'war on terror', fingerprinting has become a much more extended device than denunciations of the Italian case care to admit.

What the Italian case should highlight is a more insidious and less striking form of racism that is already at work in Europe and whose effects often remain unnoticed: the increasing use of 'security' discourse to divide humanity with the commonsensical measure of a need for social protection.

### **Security as liberal politics**

By ignoring the co-constitution of racism and the modern state, liberal anti-racism is not only ineffective but can become a dangerous force in the perpetuation of state racism. The anti-racist discourse that emerged at the end of World War II understands racism as a matter of individual prejudice and proposes cultural rather than political responses to it.<sup>11</sup> From this vantage point, the accusation of anti-racism can be uttered by virtually anybody. State institutions can therefore become involved in an anti-racist struggle that is oblivious of the perpetuation of state racism through the use of security measures. Yet security has been constitutive of the biopolitical aspect of modern states, which place both the welfare and protection of populations at their core. Within the larger rationality of welfare and the betterment of populations, racism introduces a split in the continuum of life, differentiating the assurance of life from its denial. According to Foucault, the function of racism is to fragment and create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by power. Yet racism becomes invisible as immediate cultural or biological coding through the separation between state and society brought about by the security *dispositif*.<sup>12</sup>

The security *dispositif* treats populations as 'natural objects' with their own laws of functioning and self-regulation. It is thus no surprise that the Italian government relied

on laws that allowed for emergency measures in situations of natural disasters, calamities and other events. With the development of biopolitics, it is not the relation between state and citizen that is at stake, but the relation between state and population as an object of government. While contractual relations to the state require the legitimation of sovereign power in relation to right, governmental interventions are assessed in terms of their utility or non-utility for this new object of government, the population.<sup>13</sup> State measures become justified by the principle of efficiency and integration in the ‘natural’ functioning of societies. Limits to what the state can do are no longer primarily established through the contractual negotiation of rights between the individual and the state, but in relation to the objectives of governing society.

It is the definition of society and population as independent realms of knowledge which should not be destabilized that provides the most insidious justification of the anti-Roma measures. As the social becomes naturalized, the state holds individuals and groups of the population accountable for the proper use of their freedoms. Those who do not conform to the limits and conditions set by the state become dangerous, disorderly excesses that disturb the good functioning of society. As they pose a risk to the good functioning of society itself, their neutralization or elimination can only be a logical corollary. With the neoliberal representation of society on the model of economic markets, which only need framework conditions to do their self-regulative work, policing excesses and disorderly disruptions of the well-functioning societal organism become a necessity without immediate biological or cultural inscription.

The Italian government has justified its measures in relation to intrusions upon the ‘natural’ functioning of society. The presence of the Roma is seen as being of an ‘extreme critical nature’ and as a cause of ‘serious social alarm’. The Roma disrupt the security and ‘nature of things’ in Italian society. Therefore the ‘security package’ only aims at restoring the self-governance of society and does not necessarily apply to particular ethnic or cultural categories. As such, it can apply indiscriminately to both the garbage situation in Naples and to the Roma, using similar measures to restore the proper functioning of cities. Soldiers are deployed to fight both crime and the garbage crisis.

In the biopolitical state, law has changed its function and itself become a site of racism. Legal interventions make decisions dependent upon standards of efficiency and appropriateness ‘naturally’ contained in the characteristics of society. Thus, fingerprinting is an appropriate intervention for correctly identifying all members of a community. After all, the Red Cross joined the government’s fingerprinting process, arguing that it was done by respecting rights. And how could a database managed by a humanitarian organization not be respectful of human rights?

In the terms of neoliberalism, the kind of individual to be fostered through law and other social measures is the entrepreneur. Legal interventions no longer attempt to palliate the effects of the market, but to create subjects as entrepreneurs and to regulate the unavoidable conflicts that emerge among competing entrepreneurs.<sup>14</sup> Those who cannot become self-governing are to be preventively neutralized. And while these categories can become culturally and racially reinscribed, their exclusion is nonetheless rendered in the preventive terms of protecting society and securing its way of life.

## Notes

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# Sarkozy's law

## The institutionalization of xenophobia in the new Europe

**Dominic Thomas**

France's recently elected hyper-president, Nicolas Sarkozy, assumed the presidency of the European Union on 1 July 2008 under acrimonious conditions triggered by the 13 June 2008 Irish 'no' vote on the Lisbon Treaty. Nevertheless, France has been able to obtain virtually immediate consensus on two significant and connected initiatives: the European Union Pact on Migration and Asylum and the Union for the Mediterranean project. Closer scrutiny of these French priorities provides interesting insights into broader debates on the contested parameters of a European identity.

Recent developments in Europe shed new and disquieting light on the original organizing principle of the European Union, according to which the EU was to become a 'family' of democratic European countries. EU membership has continued to grow (adding new members in 2004 and 2007) and this growth has been accompanied by the liberalization of internal frontiers. These measures have also coincided, however, with heightened concerns over border control and the vulnerability of 'Fortress Europe'. At the same time, assertions of national sovereignty have taken on an increasingly shrill and reactionary intensity, raising important questions about belonging, cohesiveness, and the sanctity of the original structuring aspirations and objectives.

France has, historically, played an extremely important role in defining EU identity, and policies and measures concerning migration and security precede the Sarkozy administration. In the Third Annual Report on Migration and Integration (2007), the EU emphasized the point that the 'integration of third-country nationals is a process of