

“When a breach arises”

Good bureaucratic action and informal scrap metal collection in Northern Italy

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ABSTRACT: This paper analyses affirmative bureaucratic intervention into the informal commercial practices of scrap-metal collection among the Sinti in a North-Italian province. To contextualize these events it is vital to examine institutional logics, and how they resonate with public officials’ sense of self as well as political loyalties. In everyday bureaucracy Gypsies are considered to be perplexing subjects, provoking contrasting images of poverty and excess. These cultural representations are the opposite of the idea of a decent social-work client. Hence, bureaucratic intervention on behalf of the Sinti put the former in a deontological and moral limbo, one which stimulates them to navigate the political and organisational structures of their organisations in a creative way. This paper aims to bring a positive example of where the social and institutional discrimination against Roma and Sinti in Italy and Europe can be broken. Even if it is not possible to reverse this discrimination, it at least introduces affirmative bureaucratic action as an enlightening direction for anthropological study.

KEYWORDS: BUREAUCRATIC SELF, INSTITUTIONAL MORALS, RESISTANCE, AFFIRMATIVE ACTION, MARGINALITY.

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When a breach arises and there are people at the top who use it more as... a strategy, not to honour their promises, but to get power or bring the interests of the powerful to the fore, then it becomes frustrating¹. You are under no obligation to raise basic questions, but then I found out by doing precisely that, that I was no longer part of it. And that is a reason why I stepped down. Aside from age and the fact that you don't want to carry on with the same routine, the most important reasons are being under pressure from people's demands and the feeling that you have to make a concrete contribution (Carlo, 28/01/2013).

Carlo resigned from his position after 25 years as the highest civil servant in an north-Italian department for social security. Throughout his time there he had been known and respected by his colleagues as a rational member of the administrative elite, carrying out his job with modesty and values-based professionalism. As such he is representative of middle-class individuals in modern, capitalist societies, holding onto ideas of positive social transformation and the promises and duties of the social contract. His professional behaviour and motivation can be described, following Bellah (1985), as a mix of freedom from external influence and nonagency (Weiss 2015: 251). Carlo's decision to help a Sinti² community – who might be described as the opposite to Carlos (Tauber forthcoming) – needs to be seen as a response to the neoliberalisation of social policies. The previous deal – in which the actions were aligned with the good of society – collapsed and a new deal introduced which focused on immediate gains and political marketing. This collapse is why Carlo feels betrayed. Before resigning, he decided to help a community which, for many reasons, exists outside capitalist and neoliberal realities.

1. A first draft of this paper was presented at the second meeting of the Biannual Symposium "Anthropological Talks in South Tyrol", Bolzano 2015. I would like to thank Vincent Dubois, Ester Gallo, Chris Shore, Francesco Zanotelli who commented on a first draft during the symposium. I would also like to thank Dorothy Zinn, with whom I co-organized the event. Almut Schneider, Marilyn Strathern, Catalina Tesar, Paola Trevisan and Monika Weissensteiner read previous drafts; I am very grateful for their critical feedback. I would like to thank Maria Lord for her careful language revision and I am indebted to the three anonymous reviewers who gave valuable input and suggestions. I would especially like to thank my main interlocutors whose names are anonymized. Without their readiness to be proactive, their humour and professional passion it would have been much more difficult to do research within their departments.

2. In this text, I refer to the Sinti when I deal with a specific research context in northern Italy, as the interaction with the civil servants here took place exclusively with an Italian community of Sinti (Tauber 2014). I use Roma as a general category as in the terminology of European policymaking this term has gone through several transformations (cf. Matras 2013). I use Gypsies, when referring to everyday conversations with civil servants.

Change of inner-institutional and political relationships

This paper draws on long-term ethnographic fieldwork with bureaucrats in Italy and the Council of Europe. I describe an unusual situation in which Sinti were helped and also the practical day-to-day work of bureaucrats with Sinti, something which historical (Lucassen 1993) and ethnographic research (Tauber 2003) has ignored.

This engagement shows the complexity of how different levels of administration and social relationships interact when moving towards a positive solution to a problem. It also includes social relationships between bureaucrats and social-security clients, as well as the value of the welfare system for citizens. In addition, this study reveals the social relationships between elite officials and politicians (Nader 1972). While all these relationships matter, I mainly focus on how a change in policy impacts on senior civil servants and, in consequence, this transforms the relationships between junior and senior officials.

As will be seen, Carlo's help for the Sinti is a bureaucratic response to political indifference and against the market and EU-regulations, which favour large recycling companies. However, this action starts with a political breach which results in him stepping down and leaving the administrative elite.

The main question is, whether these social and political changes lead to new values or simply allow civil servants to act how they wish, something which had not been allowed before. In order to understand how the civil servants see themselves, it is important to look at how morality and competence are combined within the administration. To do this it is important to see how the self and state are combined (Lea 2008: 234), and here I look at people who both control and represent the state (Bourdieu 1999) but who also want to do «sensible things».

Anthropology interested in bureaucratic resistance had difficulties in seeing people who «buck the system» (cf. Feldmann 2013: 149). Doing sensible things and being resistant are not automatically the same thing, and this article will seek to discover whether the help for the Sinti was bureaucrats doing sensible things, bureaucrats bucking the system or the administration swimming against the neoliberal stream. In other words, do these civil servants show that the (Italian) state is constructed on the idea of the «other» (see Piasere 2009, 2012, 2015) or that neoliberal policies have regional effects on institutional actions which help the Roma?

By looking at a provincial context and a period which saw unusually pro-Sinti action – seen as a lively and exciting time by public officials – this article moves towards an anthropology of the «good» (Robbins 2013); my interlocutors saw allowing a sector of society which suffers discrimination access to resources as good. Robbins writes:

If you look around anthropology today, it is hard to miss the importance of work on suffering. But it is also possible to spot a number of lines of inquiry that, while each still somewhat small or even marginal in themselves, may be poised to come together in a new focus on how people living in different societies strive to create the good in their lives. The point of this kind of work is not to define what might universally count as good, and its practitioners are neither so panglossian as to claim that any given society has in fact achieved the capital G Good, nor so Pollyannaish as to imagine that societies might achieve it on a regular basis if only we could identify what it is. Their more modest aim is to explore the different ways people organize their personal and collective lives in order to foster what they think of as good, and to study what it is like to live at least some of the time in light of such a project (Robbins 2013: 457).

Approaching the social security department and the Sinti scrap metal collectors

The social security department looked at here is in an autonomous province of northern Italy. It is part of the administrative apparatus of an autonomously governed province, which is subdivided into thirteen areas of responsibility and is governed by eight politicians. The department, part of the broader area of healthcare, social welfare and sport, was set up in the early 1980s when a debate about social welfare was prompted by a broader awareness of these issues on the international stage. The main purpose of the department was to promote social policies in a region that had, until the early 1970s, experienced emigration because of poverty. It is now among the richest provinces of Italy and considered to have one of the best functioning administrative systems in the country.

At first the department had no office dealing exclusively with the Roma, refugees or migrants. An office for these was only established at the beginning of the 1990s. At the same time Italy experienced its first immigration from eastern Europe and Africa, and the Council of Europe began to debate the human rights of the Roma. The Sinti have been present in this region for several generations (Tauber 2014; Iori 2015) and are Italian citizens. Their administrative allocation to the social security office of migrants, refugees and «nomadi», something common to most Italian provinces, has been contested and is a focus of criticism.

Although Sinti are only around 0,04 % of the population of the province, the social and economic issues associated with them provoke vigorous discussion. Housing is an ongoing issue as most Sinti families still prefer to live in their caravans on small sites, and, according to officials, once they have moved into social housing «they do not respect our rules». Another contentious issue is that of schooling (especially absenteeism and leaving school at an early age). A third issue is that of their precarious economic position, linked to their work of selling and begging. Scrap metal collection is practised mainly by Sinti men, who are keen to emphasise that they work autonomously and only within their own family. These men would not accept an employer or any other kind of working hierarchy. They have no experience of wage labour and reject the need to pay taxes on their income (Ferrari 2012). Their approach to work, from a capitalist standpoint, differs radically from the surrounding societies of the Italian Eastern Alps (Tauber forthcoming), as well as from the Romanian and Xoraxanè Roma who practise informal scrap-metal collection in Rome. This organisation of work³ has been described as a representation of their difference from surrounding cultures and their forms of dependence (Solimene 2016). In summary, it is possible to say that Sinti family networks form a non-capitalist social and economic model within a capitalist world (Brazzabeni, Cunha, Fotta 2016). This also includes their rejection of economic models promoted by the administration, e.g. social-economic cooperatives for disadvantaged groups. Lucassen and Willems write that «these groups [Roma] were regarded as a threat to a well-ordered society; from a socioeconomic point of view they did not fit in the poor relief system» (2003: 304). As such they are a problem for social security aimed at motivating and controlling people dependent on welfare (Dubois 2015). This paper not only aims to tackle what is claimed to be a form of institutional violence against Roma family systems (cf. Saletti Salza 2010; Tosi Cambini 2011)³, but also deals with administrators who are sensitive to diversity and culture and sense the dilemma between having doubts about their clients and resisting the economic reform of welfare.

3. So far the debate on European and national policies for Roma has seen ambitious inclusionary projects produce new forms of exclusion, poverty and marginalization (Grill *et al.* 2013). It underlines the re- or new production of ethnic categories through the analysis of segregation (Gay y Blasco 2016), discourse analysis (Jovanović 2015; Simhandl 2007) and the ethnisation of politics (van Baar 2014, 2015). In Italy, social anthropologists have dealt with the question of the official state categorisation of «nomadi» or «zingari» and «antitsiganism» in great detail (Piasere 2009, 2012, 2015) and institutional violence against the Roma.

In 2007 I got in contact with Norma, a public official who dealt with Gypsies. My research inside her department was only possible because of her readiness to allow me access⁴. She became my main interlocutor and tutor, explaining administrative practices, procedures and rules of behavior. Before I moved up the administrative hierarchy to begin my participation and interviews, Norma taught me on how to act in an institutional context. My desire to study up (Nader 1972) was helped by being taught how to act by a junior official. I learned about the existence of what Norma described as «those at the top, [and to deal with them] you need to know how hierarchy works», as well as the usefulness of informal social relationships within the institution. I was also able to understand Norma's idea of herself within what she called «this hierarchy»⁵.

In 2008, after 10 months of participant observation, I left this institution but we continued to keep in touch after my fieldwork. In 2010 Norma contacted me because of a problem outlined by local Sinti families who were being obstructed by the police from collecting and selling scrap metal because of new European and national regulations on waste management. We met in Norma's office, discussing possible strategies and puzzled about how to take this up the hierarchy. As the scrap metal problem called for broad cooperation, she judged the situation as follows:

Without the director's support I cannot do anything. If I call the legal office of the province, they will tell me to come next year. However, if Carlo [the director of her department] calls them he will get an appointment tomorrow. Carlo gives me the greatest possible freedom of movement and action but for this request it is not enough (Norma, 10/11/2010).

In this meeting we drafted the proposal which began the second phase of my research. Through becoming involved in a two-and-a-half-year process to legalize scrap-metal collection for Sinti (and other scrap-metal collectors), I became a semi-insider, involved emotionally and interested in ending the project positively. In my previous research with the Sinti I had found the administration unpredictable and so, for a while, I kept a «skeptical and critical

4. The formal admission for my research was given by her director, but it was her who accepted me.

5. Understanding the concept of «hierarchy» after my long-term ethnographic work with the non-hierarchical, egalitarian Sinti (Tauber 2014) was a culture shock. While with Sinti I had to learn how to be a gendered person within an egalitarian logic, constantly negotiating new and egalitarian relationships with other women, and men. Here – inside the institution – I had to learn about the impossibility of thinking and moving without the consent of «those at the top».

distance» (Gingrich 2004: 161). The more I learnt from the public officials about what it means to be a person inside the institution, the more my distance reduced. I had to learn about institutional conceptions of time and the communication and working structures, which regulate meetings and procedures. I became part of the complex institutional dynamics. I was in regular contact with different levels and different departments. I did not merely observe meetings but participated actively in them and also went out for lunch, coffee and cigarette breaks with public officials. I was brought in, on Norma's request, as an «expert» on the Sinti. This led to ethnographic insights but I also had to face ethical dilemmas, e.g. how much could I negotiate between the Sinti informal economies and a state institution. As the project asked for in-house institutional creativity and pragmatism, I also faced moments in which I, as well as public officials, hit a brick wall. In this second phase I clashed several times with Norma, which highlights the degree of my participation.

Between the top and the territory: Mediators and isolated individuals

The purpose of this paper is not to analyse Sinti economies but the difficulty in governing them: something which is difficult for the state and is present in the thoughts of civil servants. This is the point at which the moral concerns of civil servants meet the informal economy of the Sinti, which, importantly, operates alongside the total bureaucracy of the capitalist market economy (see Graeber 2015). As a result, we need to see this mix of worlds as embedded within a system based on the social contract and an idea of what is socially and politically good.

Therefore, the work of public officials should be perceived as part of being a «correct» civil servant, and their engagement with the Sinti and the new forms of departmental interaction described here seen as a sense of resistance and good. This is present in the political outrage of Carlo against indifference, superficiality and a short-sighted policy motivated by economic considerations. It is also a response to his own unease and general scepticism concerning the «economization of social responsibilities». This can only take place during a specific and exceptional time, as ordinarily Carlo would not have dedicated his time to the immediate needs of a small marginal community, but delegated the task to junior officials.

In my conversations with civil servants it quickly became clear that, despite many years of experience of working with Gypsies, they found themselves in a quandary. Norma spoke of her own long period of thought on this, moving between ideas of «Porsches in the Gypsy camps» and «Gypsy children

who would be sent to the back of the class by their teachers», and drawing on her experience in other fields of diversity (LGBT). While the majority of the civil servants who have direct contact with Roma or Sinti families, or have applications for financial support for the families on their desks, continue to be reluctant to engage with them, Norma is more proactive. She is aware of the ethical dilemmas faced by civil servants: Gypsies do not correspond to the «myth of the good client» who requires convincing that they have a right to support from the state (Notdurfter *et al.* 2015). On the contrary, they are keen on informing themselves about financial support but do not allow social workers to intervene (cf. Tauber 2015). For the civil servants there is a sense of guilt towards those «truly in poverty» and «the additional bureaucratic and moral disquiet about the Gypsies, as no-one really knows what they do, or do not, possess». In addition, civil servants working with the Roma often move between positions and work in social isolation, both from their co-workers and from the Gypsies, to whom they are merely Gäge (non-Gypsies) and representatives of the state.

This is also true for Norma in the social security department, working at a low level in an area avoided by most of her colleagues. In her work she has solved many problems without communicating with her colleagues. Moreover, in her relationships with the people on the ground, in particular with Roma and Sinti families, she is only seen as someone from the local authority despite years of close and dependable work. In this she experiences what Lea describes as the state «within the self and the self within the state» (2008: 235), a strong sense of social justice and the state's foundation as a place Gypsies do not belong (Piasere 2012, 2015).

Norma's description of her early years in the department helps up to appreciate this sense of institutional isolation and loneliness:

At the beginning, a lawyer worked with me. But he told me from the start, "look, forget it, of course I will not accompany you to a Gypsy camp, who knows what is happening there." And also, from a legal point of view, even if you studied law, it is not so easy to deal with the legal documentation, you must have already read through the stuff. He and his colleagues were simply not interested, this area of work [Gypsies, refugees and migrants] is not seen very positively, or, rather, the role is difficult. You must take a mediating role and then you don't please anybody. You please neither the clients nor the civil servants of the area. Nor the politicians, because officers want as few problems as possible. It is a relatively difficult role. Privately, friends and also my family suggested I look for another job, as being in contact with these groups is not a plus. Maybe it was like that also for my superiors: *I don't want anything to do with this [issue], just solve the problem, no matter how. Of course, keep me informed* (Norma, 4/02/2013).

One of Norma's first questions in the reversed interview⁶ which she conducted with me in 2013, was: «Then [before you came to know the institution] you would have explained to a Sinta/Sinto that the province, municipality or social district are responsible for these issues. Today [after your research in this department] what would you say?» I answered that I would give Sinti the names of public officials, explaining which of the officials would work *for* them. Norma agrees but simultaneously expresses her unease:

It depends on the individuals, but isn't this the wrong way to go about it? Because the administration should be self-contained and work independently; but I'd like to ask again, isn't this the wrong way? It is important and clear to us who sits where and occupies which position, but, I need to ask you, isn't this the wrong way? (Norma, 15/02/2013).

This reveals the ambiguities and contradictions she experiences as a civil servant: the sense of duty, the social contract and institutional morality question her identity and sense of belonging. Official moralities move along these contradictory lines: in the code of conduct public officials are expected to be loyal to the institution; to follow the instructions of their superiors; and, if they refuse to observe the rules and get a written request, they are obliged to carry it out unless the request is illegal. Officials are told to not share internal data externally, except in cases in which they are overtly allowed to.

Over the years I came to recognize how the hierarchy, professional competence and loyalty had been incorporated into, and continuously negotiated during the work of civil servants. Norma, like other officials in the social security department, had a strong sense of the hierarchy and the dilemmas it posed. They constantly referred to how superiors see things, how they make decisions and what they need. Although Norma had gained broad freedom of action because she dealt with marginalized subjects (who were not regarded as politically important inside as well as outside the institution), she was convinced that her autonomy was guaranteed by her superiors because she had established respectful and trusting relationships with them. During our conversations it became evident that there is an ambivalence about being a civil servant with a public duty of loyalty and correctness. She credits civil servants with having initiative and being active, seeing the single civil servant as significant, while describing herself as being outside the structure, as a normal employee simply waiting for directions from above:

6. I introduced this methodological approach towards the end of my research, complementing my analysis with what my interlocutors would find it important to reflect on.

I depend on them. I am a normal employee and I should give [laughs bitterly] advice to the directors. I can say, of course, be careful, this or that would be important or interesting, that is my role, but the decisions... they decide which aims are to be pursued or taken into account. But they also deal with areas that are important, and of course also with what is overlooked by politicians. And you can imagine, the closer you get to an election year, the more you get priorities that are completely different from those concerns that are seen by society as largely negative (Norma, 17/11/2011).

She perceives herself as a civil servant who is assessed, observed and valued by senior staff. However, not all managers were the same in junior officials' eyes, they were judged according to their relationships with subordinates and their competence; Norma expressed her scepticism and doubts about top members of the institution delicately, after having praised the reasons why certain people are in a higher position. Over the years, she came up with a stronger and more pragmatic distinction in terms of value and respect for the people ranked above her.

Norma was convinced that «knowing how the system works and building on trusting relationships permits you to work properly, also as a subordinate official». In many situations, including politically delicate issues like moving a Sinti family from a contaminated area to a safe place, she had permission to accompany the families (in the very early morning in order not to cause a public scandal) but was not accompanied by her superiors. One could say that her relative autonomy is a consequence of the marginalization of the Sinti, something which contributed to her own social isolation in the institution. Despite this, Norma maintained social relationships with civil servants in other departments and also escaped total professional isolation by working on other issues.

Trust of the department's hierarchy was vital for those civil servants disapproved of a «socially indifferent leadership». To them it was essential to rely on relationships whose basic values were rooted in a political and administrative morality and sense of the social contract. Carlo described this confidence as fundamental, «I would be lost without this framework and could not do my work properly».

«When a breach arises»

For subordinate civil servants the organisational hierarchy is essential. These civil servants are aware of the political leaning of a legislative period and of its effect on the institution, but their point of reference remains primarily their superiors. It is different for managerial staff, who assume that

the civil service machinery does the preparatory work while they concentrate on the demanding job of negotiating over the content with politicians. Carlo puts it this way:

The thing is, it is always about... about rights; let's say, the possibility, the possibility of accessing the resources of a community. And that has to do with the claim that today society and communities acknowledge the presence of social rights. It is an achievement both of contemporary society and organization. And when one agrees with that, let's say, that there are groups, people and groups that depend on these resources. Yes? They are not people that ultimately have resources, property, that they can organize to support themselves, but they are people who need those resources to be able to satisfy their material and social needs. And those... who must take the responsibility for guaranteeing these rights over the resources, for the claims, are civil servants. And in our case primarily [those of] the province. And the institution must function in a way that these claims can take place. These... these provide opportunity, means, resources, money and also information, support, governance for the groups. It is the function of a public authority, such as a province, and... I got into it in order to be able to take part and participate. That was my intention, to do that in my working life (Carlo, 8/11/2010).

He identifies himself as a resource, basing his principles on the social contract which promises to support people who do not have the resources to satisfy their material and social needs. While his sphere of influence could be restricted or widened by political guidelines, a lack of agreement with the provincial government brought new alliances and unusual collaborations into being. Carlo understood himself as someone who worked for «the people that ultimately have [no] resources, property, [so] that they can organize to support themselves».

I interviewed Carlo several times during 2007-2008, and then from 2010 onwards. Now he is 63 years old and has a precious institutional memory. He, who set up the department and was supported over many decades by his political superior. He is known as a competent jurist with a fine sense of social sensitivity. When I met Carlo for our first conversations in 2007 he expressed his commitment to working for the principles of the social contract, praising it as a great achievement of modern society. Still, he had no feeling for what was going on in his department and the Sinti were not seen as a priority.

When I saw him three years later he expressed his disquiet about the new political tendency to economise on social provision. He said that policymaking had changed and he would now produce policy papers which ended up in the wastepaper basket after a month. He spoke about «papers without souls» (cf. «policy animism», Lea 2008). This contrasted with previous political administrations when the politician responsible for social policy had invited

the entire administrative staff once a year for a round table to discuss issues. Carlo, like other civil servants, reminisced about the old style of leadership. Public officials would say that the old leadership made it easy for them to identify with the department. Officials participating in the scrap-metal project outlined above (five people from three different departments: waste management, the legal office and social security), saw the political makeover as being more concerned with economic management than concrete issues. An official in the social security department commented on the new «political atmosphere» within his department: «we are administering and that's it. [There is] no debate, no dialog no vision anymore. To administer social [policy] is not enough» (Riccardo, 12/06/2012).

As a result, Carlo decided to take an active part in the low-budget scrap-metal project, explaining that: «we are not working for the people anymore but for the political elite». Having disdain for the new political style he was keen to make clear his own views:

How our institution develops is not about problem solving and talking to each other anymore. Instead... I mean problem solving for the people... it is problem solving, but very often for the political elite: *I need this, I must go to this meeting, be present this at the press conference, I met with X or Y and they asked me*, etc. This is how the job works now. It just does not deliver solutions for the people anymore. That also happens, but in a very roundabout way, so that the members of the government can say in their surgeries that we are solving the problem (Carlo, 4/06/2013).

What follows Carlo's moment of clarity was a collapse in the relationship between himself and the political elite. He was thrown out of the political and administrative network in which he had been embedded for more than 20 years. The result of this was a growing state of social isolation, cut off from discussions over, as he said, «sustainable social policy... I was no longer part of it».

How affirmative action is born

The breach Carlo was experiencing was significant as this was the main motivation for him to participate in the low-budget scrap-metal project. His criticism was of the lack of socio-political content and the economic neoliberalism of the political leadership. Over years of ethnographic research I observed a process of change in civil servants, from discrete and loyal towards the active defence of moral and political frameworks. Carlo moved from looking to the political elite to looking into what was going on in his

department and in the region. While for many years the department had been characterised by its hierarchy, Carlo's crisis and his growing scepticism of the political elite allowed for new forms of “good” action. It was at this point they could address the concerns of the Sinti. Carlo decided to become an active participant in the project, and a link with other provincial legal and waste management departments whose cooperation was needed, opening up social relationships in an apparently inflexible institution.

In 2013 the project reached a positive outcome, the Sinti had a provincial decree in their hands permitting them to collect scrap metal. At this point I found myself asking the civil servants how supporting an informal economy with no tax payments, social insurance and working licenses was compatible with their administrative duty? They said, this might not have happened in calmer political times, but the issue required a solution and so intervention on a social-policy level was justified: tax regulations were not their concern. Although they expressed doubts, they found that it was worth being oppositional in these «socially cold and politically empty periods» when the next victims of the newly unleashed economic and political dynamics could be themselves.

At the beginning of the project there was a sense of conspiracy (cf. Herzfeld 2005). The main question was how the director could convince the civil servants of other departments of the need for a change in policy and, alongside legal matters, it was the persuasive powers of the director and his symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984) that lay at the heart of the meetings. This led to the legal and resource-management department making him personally responsible for the «appropriateness of the project».

Team meetings in his own department were no longer about providing a «correct bureaucratic process for all citizens in our society», more and more Carlo saw himself as the spokesperson for a group whose mere presence was enough to prompt feelings of unease, disapproval, mistrust and a sense of guilt in most civil servants. In normal bureaucratic procedures Gypsies are a side issue which public institutions do not tackle unless they are forced to. During this exceptional time, however, I could see civil servants interacting with departments which were sceptical and lacked motivation, achieving representation and social justice for their clients. They looked forward to the meetings with excitement, finding these new forms of work inspiring and motivating. They enjoyed being in the presence of the director and the Sinti men who regularly joined the consultations, suddenly seeing them, «despite their marginality, [as] dignified people» (Carlo, 18/05/2012).

Concluding remarks: The finite era of good action

Up until now, anthropologists have generally overlooked the moment when civil servants are not in harmony with political representatives. Various authors have pointed out that despite institutions violence against the people it is tasked with protecting⁷ there are local contexts in which this can break down. This can be ascribed to hard-working civil servants (Gupta 2012: 23), or even a conspiracy between civil servants and the people (cf. Herzfeld 2005: 372). Above is a description of hard-working civil servants and a conspiracy between civil servants and the people. However, as an ethnographer it is not easy to identify informants who break with political power and institutions to help underprivileged clients (Feldmann 2013: 149). I see in Carlo and his team, people who, for a limited period, resisted the neoliberalisation of social policies by legalizing informal scrap metal collection for the Sinti. The question remains, however, which structures allow or hinder bureaucrats from acting according to their own values?

The case described here reveals that it was necessary to create a new space within the institution. This allowed officials to express unease with new policies and to act in a way which was in harmony with their values. These were already present but had only been put into practice by junior officials. While these values had been «inactive» (Weiss 2015: 243), they still remained part of the organization of the department. This inactivity was also sustained by the Gypsies not corresponding to the «myth of the good client» (Nothdurfter et.al 2015). The power to create a new space for action was given to the civil servant at the top of the hierarchy, but it could only be used if good action were part of the self-perception of all civil servants.

Despite civil servants feeling downhearted about the temporary nature of this ability to behave in a different way, their actions led to an ethnographic understanding of what was perceived as good values and behaviour. While affirmative action might be rare – the Roma in Italy are relegated to the margins of society and the workings of institutions – it is also important to look at situations that are positive, to avoid «suffering» (Robbins 2013) or «dark» (Ortner 2016) research. I argue that we need to understand administrators within state institutions by seeing these as systems of «public rule of action and thought», and which have shared values and «ways of thinking in common, ways of acting in common» (Mauss 1968: 25). Understanding how insti-

7. This has been described as a «vertical topography of power» (Ferguson 2006: 108), as a burgeoning bureaucracy (Gupta 2012) or as institutional indifference (Feldmann 2011).

tutions work and how civil servants navigate them makes it possible to see how people can break with the institutions’ structural violence, and form new ways of engaging with the public.

This example of good action brings into question whether the (Italian) state is still built on the territorial and social exclusion of «Gypsies» (Piasere 2009, 2012, 2015). The point is not that neoliberalisation places Roma outside the state, but that it can affect all of us. As Norma notes with discomfort, «it depends on the individuals». There is a potential problem here for ethnographers of Roma, we might lament the impact of neoliberalism but the previous regime excluded Roma as well (cf. Lucassen, Willelms 2003). Did a neoliberal regime have the effect of pushing Roma to the fore, revealing what the Sinti had suspected all along: you need to know who to speak to? The answer to this will only become clear over time and through further research, and whether the state retains spaces for both «antitziganisms» (Tosi Cambini, Beluschi Fabeni 2017) and Roma-*philia*(s).

The long-term relationships built up by a junior official, Norma, with the heads of Sinti families, the development of relationships within and between institutions, and the indignation of a senior official all had their part to play in masking the legalization of scrap-metal collection for the Sinti as success. Political disenchantment pushed Carlo to undertake meaningful action, opening doors for a team who used their creativity to negotiate between their own beliefs and the state, as well as a seemingly paradoxical relationship between administrators and the Sinti. In doing so, they brought about a positive social transformation, engaged in ethical action and were true to their institutional selves.

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