

## Gypsy-Traveller sites: Power, history, informality – A response to Richardson

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Jo Richardson's article on the relationship between precarity and the neglect of accommodation and maintenance on Gypsy-Traveller sites provides a renewed focus on their sub-standard living conditions in the UK. This is indeed a neglected area in contemporary terms with the accommodation situations of Gypsy-Travellers slipping further and further down the social policy agenda in recent years since the Global Financial Crisis of 2007/8. This paper provides an overview of the contribution of the research before some critical reflections on how this line of inquiry might be further enhanced. It then discusses the potential of situating Gypsy-Traveller experiences on sites in the UK within wider international debates on housing informality, which could aid urban scholars in moving beyond the unhelpful, static binary of Global North/Global South.

Richardson's contribution is important in several respects. Firstly, it shines light on the ongoing struggle of many Gypsy-Traveller groups who wish to retain their connection to a nomadic (or semi-nomadic) mode of existence. The ability to move and move freely is central to the employment practices and cultural expression of many Gypsy-Traveller groups, despite intense pressures towards sedentarisation and the incessant stigmatisation that comes with a nomadic orientation within the contemporary period; nomadism being associated with "uncivilised" and pre-modern standards of living (Powell, 2011). For some households and groups mobility can be fairly limited and confined to the summer months, such as travel to fairs or weddings. Yet living on a designated Gypsy-Traveller site (i.e. as a permanent base) plays a central role in the social organization of family and community life, with research showing how once nomadic (or semi-nomadic) Gypsy-Travellers confined to bricks and mortar can suffer psychologically as a result (Greenfields and Smith, 2010). The close proximity and communal spaces afforded by sites are central to the socialisation of Gypsy-Traveller children, intergenerational mixing and the transmission of cultural practices crucial to identity formation (Powell, 2016). Secondly, the central theme of neglect adds further evidence to the inferior treatment of Gypsy-Travellers with their accommodation needs somehow less important than those of other groups in society exposing the political and societal lack of will in accommodating nomadism (Niner, 2004). Loïc Wacquant's (2008a; 2008b) analytical concept of the ghetto is utilized here in illustrating the peculiar urban formation that constitutes the Gypsy-Traveller site and draws attention to spatial confinement. Thirdly, the article makes an insightful contribution in tentatively suggesting that there is a link between the relative neglect and poor maintenance of site environments and the propensity for internal conflict within them.

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In this sense the renewed focus on site management issues points to the environmental exclusion of Gypsy-Traveller groups (Filcak and Steger, 2014) as a neglected aspect of Gypsy-Traveller marginality, with much of the UK literature centred on social and spatial processes of marginalization and stigmatization. This notion also chimes, to some extent, with Wacquant's insights on the "institutional desertification" which is a key characteristic of ghettoization in his schema (Wacquant, 1997, 2008a, 2008b). Finally, situating experiences of UK Gypsy-Travellers alongside those of European Roma, drawing on the impressive scholarship of Isabella Clough Marinaro (2015, 2017) and Gaja Maestri (2014, 2016), is helpful in showcasing the potential and analytical power of international comparison in appreciating the wider European context of anti-Gypsyism. Reference to Maestri's (2016) work on the emergence of new squatter solidarities between Roma and non-Roma, in response to austerity in Rome, also captures more positive dynamics of urban relations.

A frustration of the article, and of wider research on Gypsy-Travellers and Roma in general, relates to the lack of an explicit and historically informed power perspective (see Powell, 2008, 2016; Powell and Lever, 2017; Cretan and Powell, 2018). Richardson (2006) has developed crucial insights on the role of discourse in controlling Gypsy-Travellers but the power imbalance they invariably face begs for a deeper, longer-term analysis and understanding of *group stigmatisation* which goes beyond notions of "othering". One which acknowledges the remarkable continuity across Europe in the positioning of Gypsy-Travellers/Roma as an often dehumanized inferior social group (Cretan and Powell, 2018; Van Baar, 2012). Of course, there are contexts in which relations are more harmonious, reciprocal and convivial (as Richardson hints at and Maestri captures), but it is difficult (and can be pernicious) to ignore the long-standing and deep-rooted anti-Gypsy-Traveller and anti-Roma sentiment that predominates; which has done so for centuries, and which has arguably been more freely and overtly expressed in recent years (Fox and Vermeersch, 2010; Cretan and Powell, 2018). While Richardson is right to state that people experience Gypsies as "not like us" and that powerful discourses must be understood within a (much, much) longer history of stigmatisation, there is a need to elaborate further on this fundamental issue.

A historical sensitivity to the experiences of Gypsy-Travellers and Roma in Europe serves as a crucial counter to the present-centred, static conceptualising which blights much research in the peculiar field of "Romani Studies". This historical viewpoint is implicit within Richardson's argument but there is certainly scope here for her, and others, to develop the insights in this article in much longer-term perspective. For example, such an endeavour would inform of the fact that precarity is far from a new phenomenon and has shaped life on the margins for many Gypsy-Traveller and Roma groups, often subsumed within a wider category of landless vagrants and paupers, throughout history (Geremek, 1997; Mayall, 1988). A further problem with present-centred accounts is their tendency to contribute to the production of static concepts, which are simply inadequate in capturing the dynamics of interdependent relations. For instance, I have argued elsewhere (Powell, 2008) that the dialectics of identification and disidentification, as put forward by Abram de Swaan (1995, 1997), provide for a more dynamic, and therefore reality-congruent, framework in approaching the relations between Gypsy-Travellers and wider society. This can also help expose the "invisibilization of Roma racism" through which poorer Roma tend to be blamed for their own marginalized predicament: Roma are decoupled from a history of persecution and constructed as "the problem" (Powell and Van Baar, 2018; see also Wacquant, 2009). This historical and dynamic lens could bring much to bear on the important issues raised by Richardson here. A dynamic framework of power can also shed light on the relationship between Gypsy-Traveller stigmatisation and their *relative* lack of social integration (i.e. the persistence of a psychological, social and spatial separation) vis-à-vis other "outsider" groups in society, while also informing of in-group power dynamics. This latter issue raises thorny questions for academics and welfare professionals such as the

resolution of internal conflict among the Gypsy-Traveller community, gendered divisions of labour and domestic violence (Casey, 2014; Powell, 2011; Okely and Ardener, 2013). The frustration here is that Richardson could go much further and deeper in her analysis in contributing to an understanding of these neglected areas, which would be extremely valuable. Richardson's contribution refocuses attention on the continued marginalisation of Gypsy-Travellers and the way in which site accommodation maintains social and spatial separation and perpetuates perceptions of inferiority. But it is also the case that Gypsy-Travellers in conventional housing (Greenfields and Smith, 2010) and "wealthy Roma" households residing in large dwellings in more affluent locations also face intense stigmatisation (Cretan, 2015; Cretan and Powell, 2018; Ruegg, 2013). As well as the increased attention to historical processes and power relations called for above, this suggests the need to also incorporate the experiences of upwardly mobile Gypsy-Traveller/Roma groups into future research. This would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the relational dynamics of group stigmatisation and marginalization, and can also challenge the essentialization of the "Gypsy condition" or the "Roma category", which Maestri and Richardson call for.

Finally, though beyond the scope of the article, Richardson's insights also connect to recent debates on housing informality. For instance, she touches upon the informal responses of municipal authorities to unauthorised encampments (i.e. non-enforcement), which can help facilitate nomadism. Furthermore, Richardson's argument that "mainstreaming" on Gypsy-Traveller sites may undermine the positive social relations and cultural exchange within them chimes, to some degree, with ongoing debates about the consequences (intended and unintended) of the formalization of "slum" housing in many parts of the world (see Meth and Buthelezi, 2017; Meth and Charlton, 2017). Recent research has challenged the notion of housing informality as a phenomenon of the "Global South" in calling for a processual and relational approach (Clough Marinaro, 2017; Durst and Wegman, 2017; Boudreau and Davis, 2017; Lancione, 2016; Pasquetti and Picker, 2017). Gypsy-Travellers, Roma and other semi-/nomadic groups across Europe have long operated within the context of housing informality, it could be argued. For example, Roma ghettos in Romania and Slovakia exhibit many attributes that we might more readily associate with informal settlements in the likes of Indian mega-cities. A wider, comparative perspective might therefore help challenge the artificial binary between Global North/Global South, formality/informality, compliance/non-compliance etc. Again, here a long-term perspective would inform of the relatively recent process of human sedentarisation (that is, in the long sweep of human history) and help challenge conceptualisations which tend to (re)produce unhelpful static binaries. It would perhaps be profitable then, to consider the experiences of Gypsy-Travellers in the UK with those of other such marginalized groups in different urban and international contexts, and in long-term perspective.

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