

Tales from 'PrecarioCity': the denizens of the Spanish postmodern cityscape

Daniel Briggs examines how Gitanos have been aggressively marginalised

A denizen is someone who, for one reason or another, has a limited range of rights than citizens do...civil, cultural, social, economic and political. A growing number of people around the world lack at least one of these rights, and as such belong to the denizery rather than the citizenry, wherever they are living (Standing, 2011)

This article concerns a population of gypsies (Gitanos hereafter) who live outside the northern Spanish city La Coruña. This was not always the case as they used to inhabit parts of the city centre and lived selling scrap metal and working in local markets. They were considered a blemish on the new visions for the cityscape and, over the course of 30 years, they have been excluded from social, cultural and political life and shunted into derelict areas outside the city.

Their displacement has produced a 'PrecarioCity' - a 'no go' and 'no know' zone of urban outcasts. In such a place, risk is elevated, illegality is multiplied and policing is targeted on Gitanos. Efforts to welcome Gitanos back into the city have been persistently thwarted by media-led campaigns linking them to drugs and crime. I begin by briefly discussing Gitanos' position in

Spanish society before exploring how this process has severed their access to various rights and has negatively perpetuated their marginality.

Gitanos in Spanish society

Gitanos have historically suffered varied forms of social persecution and legal discrimination. Their movement to Spanish cities throughout the twentieth century saw them encounter further social and political marginalisation (Poveda and Marcos, 2005). To this day, there remain high levels of social rejection against Gitanos across the sectors

of education, health service, employment, housing and justice (Rodriguez et al., 2009). Poverty and social exclusion are the norm (Garcia et al., 2007) and in popular consciousness

Gitanos are considered 'destitute thieves' who are immersed in illicit drugs and crime networks (Jalon and Rivera, 2000).

In La Coruña, where around 700 Gitano families lived (Fundación Secretariado Gitano Galicia, 2006), most were employed selling scrap metal or through various temporary forms of manual labour in the docks or construction. Yet, over the last thirty years, they have been gradually excluded from public life and shifted from established encampments in the city centre - where they sit on

precious land for commercial investment - to more marginal locations.

Charting exclusion and demonisation

Many Western cities have recently received significant privately-funded investment and regeneration, transforming the urban landscape into one characterised by plush apartments, extravagant shopping malls, cultural zones and tourist beauty spots and concerned with cultivating a profitable night time economy. These changes have been buttressed by exclusionary town planning and aggressive social policies and zero tolerance tactics on the most visibly marginalised groups. This is precisely what has happened to Gitanos settlements in La Coruña over the last 30 years. Gitanos have been deliberately moved from the city centre to free up the valuable land they were occupying.

The social repercussions of this displacement to the outskirts of the city came to light during the late 1980s, when the heroin market evolved and in the 1990s, with the new cocaine market. These changes presented Gitanos with an opportunity, especially following a law introduced in the 1990s that required permits for selling scrap metal or market-trading. Many were forced to diversify their economic activities. They were provided land with virtually no infrastructure and this is where they stayed; spatially ostracised, living on the fringe of the city, continually discriminated against by companies when they attempted to find work. When the drug market took a stronger grip on the city in the late 1980s and early 1990s, drug dealing, for some Gitanos, became a way to earn a living. Peñamoia, in La Coruña, became one of the primary drug dealing and drug using hubs in Spain during this period.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the drug problem had exacerbated as the business had attracted other unemployed and ostracised Gitanos from around the region. A local news report referred to Peñamoia as a 'human dumping ground' and as the 'ghetto of the

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city'. The area started to attract council attention, but despite periodic redevelopment proposals most resources were devoted to recurring police stop and search operations against anyone entering and leaving the area. A series of pledges were made to integrate Peñamoia families into the life of city, although these were widely opposed by residents, as local media reported almost exclusively on their alleged criminal and drug involvements.

A new highway development proposal focussed some of these concerns in 2007. Caution was expressed because of fears about the displacement of drugs and crime to other areas of the city. More

enlightened commentators argued that the new developments might further marginalise Gitanos. Representatives on local authority meetings asserted that the problem

of relocation and reintegration were not only about drugs and crime but also that their communities had still not been given the tools for integration: many lacked work permits, they were not politically recognised and lived in areas devoid of any social or structural support.

Life in Precario City

To this day, Gitanos are still existing under these precarious circumstances. In 2004, a study was undertaken on the demography of Gitano families in Peñamoia. Around 76 families were living in the area – most were drug-dependent, unemployed (or peripherally employed), or had criminal records for drug offences (Fundación Secretariado Gitano Galicia, 2005). This profile, and their existence in

these wastelands, has not been aided by one-sided media reporting.

There are continuing protests against the relocation plans for Gitanos: for local city residents it is entirely a matter of drugs, crime and community safety. Residents claim it is not a matter of 'xenophobia or racism' but concerns about their 'quality of life' and their 'safety'. Nevertheless such collective rejection has undeniable racist overtones; when local city residents protest their placards read 'No Gitano.'

Relocation plans for Gitano families demanded that they could move under the explicit condition that they cease involvement in crime or other 'illicit activities' (the whole

Gitanos who have jobs often work on a temporary and intermittent basis and are typically the first to be fired

community seemingly being put 'on notice' in order to be able to receive economic benefits). This is difficult to envisage in practice, given the poor levels of support and

limited work opportunities. Gitanos who have (or want) jobs often work on a temporary and intermittent basis and are typically the first to be fired (Stewart, 2002) – they are the most disposable workers. This article has shown that, over the last 30 years, a divisive community safety agenda in La Coruña has coercively moved Gitanos from the central areas of the city, where they had their livelihoods, businesses and communities, to poorer, substandard conditions on the fringes of the city. The worst case is that of Peñamoia which grew into one of Spain's largest drug markets. Gitanos have engaged in illicit activities – such as drug dealing - to 'get by', because of the ways in which their livelihoods had been taxed and regulated. This exclusion was exacerbated by the

local media which focussed on the 'drugs and crime' nexus and the 'problems' of reintegrating Gitanos. It was therefore not surprising when residents protested with signs saying 'no Gitanos in our community'. However, when, subsequently 're-integration' became an option, some Gitanos still rejected this on the grounds that it signified an increased monitoring of their activities and only reinforced other forms discrimination (Stewart, 2002). There continue to be numerous social and health problems in Gitano communities across the city and, given their political and social treatment, this has only reinforced their fragile position in the society. ■

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