



2009 WORKSHOP

IDENTIFYING THE PERSON: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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## Abstract

### **Escaping Control: Resistance and Dissimulation of "Gypsies" to Police Identification in West Europe, 1880-1914.**

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The policing of the "Gypsies", from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the eve of WWI, appears as a major element in the shift of identification history at this time. The individual control of nomads, vagrants and Gypsies represented in fact a fundamental step in the extension of criminal identification practices to a mass scale during the interwar period, particularly to foreigners and migrants. In this paper, the forms of control and the logic behind them will be considered in the context of West continental Europe, with a special emphasis on border dynamics between France, Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy. The ambition to contain Gypsy mobility contributed to a new juridical definition of what was defined as social marginality and a threat to public order. With the reinforcement of police and jurisdictional measures, from the 1880s the traditional methods of repression were reinforced with new tools, inherited from scientific and criminal police methods, and experimented on Gypsies (police census and mass registration, expulsions, biometric identity documents). Paradoxically, the activation of these new instruments and the gradual tightening of borders produced an increasingly frequent practice of expelling caravans in transit from one country to another, and this circulation was perceived by newspapers, public authorities and heads of police services as a demonstration of inefficiency. This created conditions for general and repressive identification practices, and new forms of resistance were developed by the Gypsies in order to escape to this new control system. If physical violence against police agents was not rare, multiple other strategies have also been elaborated such as falsification of documents, inappropriate uses of ID, forgeries and duplicity. Based on several emblematic cases of border-crossing, this paper will question how the *interiorisation of identification methods* engaged individual and collective response strategies based on confrontation, ruse and dissimulation.

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