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Caravan politics in the depoliticised city: Applying and opposing exceptional measures for Dutch Traveller, Sinti, and Roma caravan sites

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the depoliticisation of Dutch caravan politics, which has resulted in massive pitch shortages threatening the existence of the specific caravan housing culture of Dutch Travellers, Sinti and Roma groups. The rationality underlying the repressive governance of caravans is understood as a depoliticised affirmation of technocratic solutions to an unwanted and racialised housing culture. However, as in many other European countries, Dutch authorities have been summoned to work on Roma and Traveller inclusion programmes and address pitch shortages. The increased pressure on the Dutch government culminated in 2018 when it adopted a new framework that prohibits any further measures to repress caravan culture. In what follows, a situated account of depoliticised caravan politics – and resistance to it (i.e. re-politicisation efforts) – is presented by examining the case of Teersdijk, a large campsite in the city of Nijmegen.

1. Introduction

Across Europe, Roma, Sinti and Travellers are confronted with discrimination, deprivation, and spatial segregation. In terms of housing, many live in substandard dwellings or are forced to abandon their caravan culture. This applies also to the geographic focus of this paper, the Netherlands, about which the European Union's Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2020) has concluded that Roma, Sinti, and Travellers¹ face multiple disadvantages in accessing decent and culture-specific housing. Extensive research has been carried out on the governance of Roma and Traveller groups in many Western nations (Bessone et al., 2014; Maestri, 2017a, 2019; Powell, 2013; Sigona, 2015), which, amongst others, has theorised the multiple forms of (spatial) racialisation of caravan dwellers, the forced mobility (*evictability*), and the emergence of permanent camp sites. Yet, there is limited consideration of the recent decentralised and *depoliticised* governance of (already deeply institutionalised) caravan cultures. This study adds to this lively scholarship by offering a situated study on Dutch caravan politics from the past two decades in the city of Nijmegen. Following the abolishment of the Second Caravan act (1968) in 1999, this period has

been marked by additional hurdles imposed on caravan dwellers (*woonwagenbewoners*) through, inter alia, reducing the number of halting sites and forcing caravan dwellers to move into semi-sedentary park homes or “regular” housing.

In the context of the Netherlands, caravan dwellers consist primarily of “native” Dutch Travellers, alongside much smaller groups of Sinti and Roma caravan dwellers.² The history of caravan politics stretches back to the 1910s but have evolved over time from being initially geared to providing temporary halting sites to later, in the second half of the twentieth century, providing subsidised “immoveable” caravans in well-planned regional sites where, purportedly, caravan dwellers would “integrate” into society (Van Baar, 2021). This article focuses, however, on the period after 1999 when the state devolved its responsibility over this policy area through decentralisation. The focus on the decentralised era is motivated by the significant change of actors in caravan governance and the recalibration of policy aims. Municipalities were allowed to implement the notorious normalisation and “extinction” (*uitsterfbeeld*) policies. These policies were, respectively, designed to “normalise” the “unliveable” and “criminal” situation at campsites and to reduce the number of pitches and caravans. Eventually, under

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¹ While in the Council of Europe's definition (2012) Roma include Sinti and Travellers, many Dutch Sinti and Travellers dismiss this aggregation.

² Also Roma and Sinti caravan dwellers are native to the country. More recent Roma migrants from Eastern Europe do not adhere to the caravan communities nor live on caravan sites.

growing pressure, the Dutch state adopted a new national caravan policy framework in 2018 ([Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2018](#)). Although this framework annulled extinction and normalisation policies, little progress has been observed since.

In the light of these recent events, this article aims to examine: (1) how the institutional rationalities towards caravan dwellers have changed from containment and “gradual assimilation” towards repression; and (2) how these developments were opposed. At the core of these two aims is the search for – and periodisation of – the *political* in relation to decentralised caravan politics. This is not to say that with the ascent of neoliberalism in the Netherlands, depoliticised caravan politics could not be observed before 1999, however, the scope of this article centres on the recent more exemplary period of decentralisation and depoliticisation. Scholars such as [Rancière \(1999, 2010\)](#), [Brown \(2006, 2017, 2020\)](#), and [Swyngedouw \(2002, 2007, 2009\)](#) have talked about a depoliticisation of democracy when commitments to social inclusion and universalism (i.e. the political) are stripped in favour of more entrepreneurial, technocratic and consensus-based governance. Consequently, policymaking is increasingly indifferent to the possibility of democracy as an inclusive project for the “uncounted”. A lively debate has unfolded over the impact of consensus-driven and technocratic governance on cities and marginalised and disenfranchised inhabitants at the expense of the political. However, relatively little research has examined how depoliticised governance affects Roma and Travellers in Western Europe and how members of these groups seek to re-politicise their struggles (cf. [Picker, 2018](#)). I contend that Dutch caravan dwellers are a good example of an “uncounted” and yet also determined group.

This article proceeds as follows. The first section presents a historical overview of caravan politics in the Netherlands. Subsequently, I discuss notions of depoliticised policymaking and how these relate to anti-ziganism. After discussing the methods used here, I turn to the studied case in Nijmegen. The paper concludes with a discussion of how a depoliticised context accounts for the palpable opposition to the caravan culture. In doing so, I will also touch on the question of whether a clear turn in governance, such as the 2018 framework, allows for new forms of democratic and radical (grassroots) imaginaries, and thus for a re-centring of the political.

2. A brief history of Dutch caravan politics

This article focuses on Dutch caravan dwellers and their caravan culture. While being native to the country, their housing culture has been targeted for over a century by repressive governance. As this section will clarify, current caravan culture has been shaped by the forced re-settlements and alienation from cultural expressions and economic activities. Caravan dwellers are primarily of Traveller background, with Sinti and Roma groups representing smaller groups. There are just under 5000 Sinti, which live primarily in caravans, while the number of Dutch Roma is much smaller and the ones living in caravans almost neglectable ([Godrie-van Gils, 2018](#)). Their presence in the country has been recorded for at least 200 years ([Cottaar, 1999](#); [Willems & Lucassen, 1990](#)). Certainly, the labels used in this article are controversial as “Traveller” is a construct for an ethno-cultural group that consists of people of various backgrounds and that sometimes identify as Yenisch. The backgrounds of the Sinti and Roma caravan dwellers also differ, with the former originating from Northwestern Europe and the latter arriving in the late 19th century from Eastern Europe (Cf. [Maestri, 2017b](#)). However, without essentialising the differences, it can also be stated that there is broad communal and cross-generational consensus that caravan dwellers (from whichever background) have strong family bonds, face pitch and site shortages, and, consequently, feel threatened in their caravan culture. Relying and expanding on Dutch and international literature, Dutch caravan culture can be said to represent an assemblage of various episodes of subjugation, persecution, and violence. The deliberate attacks on Dutch caravan culture play a central and

continuous role in the Dutch history of antiziganism (also referred to as Romaphobia or Anti-Roma racism). Institutional antiziganism, in turn, can be understood as an irrational fear by authorities for Roma or Traveller groups that is staged and translated into policies that create and maintain both symbolic and physical segregation between majority and Roma and Traveller groups ([Maestri, 2019; 2018](#); [McGarry, 2017](#)).

Before the Second World War, most Dutch caravan dwellers were itinerant workers that responded to societal demands ([Cottaar, 1999](#)). However, with the First Caravan Act of 1918, caravans and temporary sites were increasingly problematised by Dutch lawmakers. The law was primarily seen as an attempt to illegalise substandard and too small caravans by imposing strict dimension regulations. The regulations were so strict that most caravans would fail the test. Yet, the caravans kept being tolerated and, in fact, their number grew incrementally until the start of the Second World War ([Van Baar, 2021](#)). In the first post-war decades – the heyday of robust Dutch welfare provision and centralised planning – so-called spatial-racial political technologies were applied. These aimed at the gradual dissolution of caravan culture ([Picker, 2017](#); [Picker & Pasquetti, 2015](#); [Sigona, 2015](#); [Van Baar, 2021](#)). The technologies from this social statist era resulted in the construction of segregated regional campsites where caravan dwellers would integrate through education and new vocations. A Second Caravan Act followed in 1968, which planned for large regional sites and an increased regulation of the shape and dimensions of the caravan. The latter was done by the introduction of large and subsidised caravans that were no longer allowed to be transported on national roads ([Sigona, 2015](#); [Van Baar, 2021](#)). This “assimilation through segregation” and indirect “illegalisation” of moveable homes demonstrates that even Dutch post-war society, which was based “on the justice-producing social contract” ([Brown, 2018](#), p. 62), allowed for the fusion of democratic commitments (e.g. civility, equality, and inclusion) and social planning with disinhibited attacks on minority groups. In other words, the Dutch justice-producing social contract was only partial and sedentary and civilised Dutch citizens were differentiated from co-inhabitants they feared. The construction of regional sites, the subsequent “deconcentration” of “problematic” sites and the overall focus on “forced integration” (i.e. assimilation) exposes the anxiety and uncertainty Dutch society had about itself and how oppressive measures were used “to maintain coherence and purpose in the face of its potential undoing” ([Brown, 2002](#), p. 557).

The suspension of the mobile housing culture and subsequent assimilation proved more challenging than civil servants in the 1950s and 1960s anticipated ([Godrie-van Gils, 2018](#)). While most caravan dwellers saw no other option than to accept different livelihoods and sedentary life on a permanent site, these sites can be understood as what [Picker & Pasquetti \(2015\)](#) and [Sigona \(2015\)](#) have called spaces of planned exclusion. The spatial-racial political technology of post-war sites proved ineffective in assimilating their resident groups but succeeded in tying down most caravan dwellers to durable sites ([Picker & Pasquetti, 2015](#)). The number of pitches seems to have stabilised at around 9500 pitches between 1968 and 1999, the time of devolution. Yet, it must be noted that in 1966 some 4000 pitches were occupied by “impoverished civilians”³ that lived in caravans due to the dramatic housing crisis caused by the war. Most of the latter group would eventually be relocated into regular housing ([Godrie-van Gils, 2015](#)). Hence, in this statist era, the absolute number of pitches available to Traveller, Roma, Sinti, and other caravan dwellers did increase.

Concurrently, in these planned spaces of exclusion, many Dutch caravan dwellers were increasingly dependent on social benefits. This proved to be the case in Nijmegen’s new regional site, Teersdijk, as well, where in 1971 protests broke out between local police and caravan dwellers. The caravan dwellers tried to break into the municipal office of Social Affairs to protest the low social benefits and planned cuts. A

³ Letter to Second Chamber, ref: 0000246372, No. 5.

newspaper article described⁴ that event as follows:

Residents from the site at Teersdijk came yesterday to the head office of Social Affairs, because they wished to protest against declined social benefit applications. Caravan dwellers applied for these benefits after many were impoverished due to decreased income from the scrap trade.

A new chapter was added to this process, when in 1999 the Dutch state decided to abolish the Second Caravan Act and move away from a statist approach towards caravan culture. This did not mean that the assimilation efforts were suspended; it rather signified the end of a centralised approach that did focus on caravan provision for the self-identified caravan community – albeit in a highly problematic manner. The then responsible minister, Johan Remkes,⁵ admitted that the culture was under high pressure due to growing pitch shortages and insufficient support for their itinerant livelihood strategies, and yet he considered the issue a concern for local authorities. Before scrutinising this episode (and expanding on the case of Nijmegen), however, I first will first expand on the paper's conceptual contribution, by discussing the depoliticisation of urban governance in relation to increasing antiziganism.

3. The depoliticised city

In recent decades, ample and insightful scholarship on urban governance has emerged, typically informing of the consequences of the neoliberal turn in urban politics (Harvey, 2012; Marcuse, 2009; Rolnik, 2014). This turn is commonly understood in terms of the promotion of large-scale commodification of public housing (Ronald, 2008), speculation in land prices (Christophers, 2017), fiscal austerity (Klein, 2014), and the shift towards participatory planning (Purcell, 2006). In short, across the globe, resource distribution and social planning have been depoliticised (or diminished) in favour of market-friendly reforms, privatised commons, and the responsabilisation of subjects. Important to note here is that privatisation and retrenchment only make sense when an “independent”, “free”, and “responsible” citizenry is shaped that can be held accountable for its success or failure to participate – rather than the faltering social state (Brown, 2006). Seen in this (neoliberal) light, increasing homelessness and decreasing urban accessibility are to be understood as “personal failures” (Hochstenbach, 2022). There is much to expand on the above developments, but in approaching Dutch caravan politics, I will bring recent literature on depoliticised urban governance into conversation with the situated study in Nijmegen. This strand, in particular, has focused on the ongoing neoliberal attack on the social state and egalitarian political culture and the resulting devaluation of inclusion, equal rights, and civil liberties (Brown, 2018, 2019).

In different ways, authors suggest that present-day urban governance addresses social problems as questions of market and economic efficiency (Brown, 2006) or security concerns (Swyngedouw, 2007, 2009). This neoliberal thought became dominant in the 1980s when the “economic” and “repressive” started to outweigh the “social” and “justice” factors in politics (Dikeç & Swyngedouw, 2017; Mouffe, 2019; Swyngedouw, 2014), not least because of progressive and social democratic factions that adopted neoliberal tenets. The “common sense society” (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014) stemming from this period is one in which the free market, private property, and individualistic lifestyles are defended and progressive agendas put in second place. Discontent certainly exists, but governments proceed *as though* propositions for inclusion and universalism are “beyond reasonable question, and thus, beyond debate” (Derickson, 2018, p. 45).

The less democratic form of governance pursued during this ongoing

“democratic crisis” (or de-democratisation process) is one that functions without the *political*. To clarify, I will first enunciate the difference between the *political* and *politics*. The former does not refer narrowly to institutional practices or decision-making but to the “space of litigation” (Swyngedouw, 2007, pp. 58–76) or “theatre of deliberations” (Brown, 2019) in which the excluded fight for their inclusion. In such a space, dissent and rupture from and opposition to imposed rules and/or land uses are negotiated, (re)materialised, or overthrown (Swyngedouw, 2007, 2009, 2014). These performative acts require that equality should be staged until the *wrongs* are ultimately undone (Swyngedouw, 2011, 2014). Just in this century, we have experienced a multitude of spontaneous eruptions of dissent, ranging from European anti-austerity protests against the Troika⁶ to indigenous people fighting corporate land claims and protracted demonstrations against racist police violence. These insurgencies are, according to this scholarship, the essence of the political. Discontent over inequalitarian socio-spatial conditions and practices is publicly (and spatially) raised and slowly generalised through a sequence of eruptions of localised protests.

These moments may well cause *politics* to start acknowledging dissent and strive for broad inclusion. Indeed, politics is understood as the arena or assembly in which equality and representation are debated and tested in the face of “those who have no part” – or, as Swyngedouw (2009) has it, as politics transmutes the noise of the “have-nots” into voice. The potential for politics to embrace the political and stage egalitarian principles is always imminent. For this to happen, Mouffe (2005, 2019) has argued agonism needs to resurface. Rather than only managing an established order, “a domain reserved for experts” (Mouffe (2019, p. 17), politicians should fight for the inclusion of the political, i. e. of the cries and demands of the disenfranchised, the excluded, the “losers of privatisation” that cannot be satisfied by neoliberal governance. Yet, as stated earlier, the disavowal and mistrust of the political has been rather successful in recent decades and has advanced governance modelled on business and security principles led by technocrats and experts. These actors claim to be rational as they are guided by data, markets, morals, and law rather than by “democratic deliberation, contestation, and power sharing” (Brown, 2019, p. 57).

In the increasing absence of a robust and influential political component, politics are increasingly a government practice that legitimises a “democracy *after* the demos” (Rancière, 1999, p. 5). This means that dissensus and opposition are (sought to be) foreclosed by powerful experts and corporate interests. Disagreement and indignation, among, for example, laid-off workers, evictees, or discriminated groups, is met with “raw manoeuvring, deal-making, branding, spinning, and indifference to facts, argument, and truth” (Brown, 2019, p. 50). Or to paraphrase Swyngedouw (2009), dissensus is included through rigid participatory trajectories or caricatured as hateful, radical, criminal, or anti-democratic behaviour. Crouch (2004) completed this by stating that the post-democratic surge signals the loss of democratic sovereignty and a return to pre-democratic times when politics were also a matter of closed elites (cf. Mouffe, 2019, pp. 12–13). Most importantly, this implies that those in power have the privilege to obscure and further marginalise “the part of those that have no part” (Rancière, 1999, from Purcell, 2014, p. 172). However, it is important to note that the same literature stresses that a complete post-political condition has not been – and probably will never be – achieved. Even though rule by experts and technocrats is on the rise, there is still “wiggle room” for resistance. The political is on the wane, yet its return is imminent.

Here I return to the Netherlands, where, ever since the late 1990s, the attack on the political has increasingly shaped welfare politics in general, and housing in particular (Hochstenbach, 2022). In terms of housing, the state has ignored growing protests against unaffordability, illegalised squatting, and diminished tenure neutrality. The last was a

⁴ In: Telegraaf 13/10/1971, *Woonwagenfamilies belegeren Soc. Zaken* [Caravan families assault Dept. of Social Affairs].

⁵ Letter to Second Chamber, ref: 27400 XI & 24508, No. 54.

⁶ The EU, ECB, and IMF that jointly decide whether an indebted EU member with a budget deficit qualifies for financial support.

result of decreasing budgets for social housing construction, the promotion of homeownership, and the large-scale privatisation of social housing stock (Van Duijne & Ronald, 2018). These illiberal politics (see Uitermark, 2005; Uitermark et al., 2018) did not affect caravan dwellers exclusively, but marked an important new stage in caravan politics. As described in the previous section, caravan dwellers had suffered from racialisation and segregationist planning even during the previous era of social planning. So, contrary to making a normative claim about social statism as being better or worse than depoliticised governance, I instead seek to scrutinise under which political reforms the latest caravan politics emerged. This sets this paper apart from studies of housing reforms, which can more accurately periodise different stages of exclusion or privatisation, and can arguably more easily make statements about which idea of inclusion is normatively preferable. Moreover, the abolishment of the Second Caravan Act can be interpreted as an outcome of increased depoliticisation. While policy targets until the 1990s were determined and funded by the central state with little wiggle room for local or non-state elaborations of the Act, the years prior to the abolishment already heralded major changes.

Discussing this preliminary stage in detail and in relation to depoliticisation is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, I will highlight the post-1999 shift (from social, yet racialised, social statism to depoliticised, decentralised, and technocratic governance), which helps describe the increased attacks on the equal rights and civil liberties of caravan dwellers in the Netherlands.

4. Depoliticised caravan politics

Various scholars, such as Giovanni Picker (2017) Powell & Van Baar (2019), have only recently grappled with the question of how the depoliticisation of housing policies and welfare provision has impacted Roma and Travellers across Europe. Salient in these works is that Roma and Traveller exclusion is increasingly understood as a paradigmatic case for the current depoliticisation of social welfare and inclusion politics (Van Baar, 2019). The connection between depoliticisation and “anti-policies” is in particular important here. Anti-policies concern swift and decisive reactions to anti-social behaviour one must not tolerate (Walters, 2008). In this line of thought, repressive interventions and policies (i.e. anti-policies) are justified to address “bad things”, “such as poverty, underdevelopment, insecurity ... and other mechanisms of marginalization and exclusion” (Van Baar, 2019, p. 163). Hence, reasonability is inherent to anti-policies. However, the threat lies in that when combatting “bad things” overlaps with minority-specific policies, it can potentially turn antiziganism into reasonable anti-policies.

In relation to Roma and Travellers, “bad things” tend to concentrate in previously planned durable sites and segregated neighbourhoods, and addressing them is said to be unavoidable. The top-down assimilationist or integrationist plans (or “unreasonable” antigypsyism) are no longer considered ethical or economically viable (Picker et al., 2015; Picket & Pasquetti, 2015). Yet, the “bad things” identified within these racialised communities are raised as “issues of public concern” (cf. Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014; on racialised groups) and increasingly the terrain of technocrats. Cries to, for example, preserve these non-sedentary housing cultures (and corresponding spaces) or invest in social programmes are ignored in this depoliticised configuration, which essentially amounts to a rejection of rights (cf. Walters, 2008; Moodie & Rofel, 2020).

That “bad things” is an acceptable label to put on Roma and Travellers and the spaces they inhabit and that the label is explicitly reproduced in policy discourses is of course telling (Van Baar, 2014, pp. 27–44; Vincze, 2014; Kóczé & Rövid, 2017; Picker, 2018). Yet, what is of more interest for this paper is that, in the present depoliticised context, policing and surveillance might still fall under the accountability of elected officials, but efforts for housing justice and inclusion less so. As Moodie and Rofel (2019, p. 236) further specify, “social messiness and human deprivation are now the purview of international planners and

NGO workers who have little, if any, accountability to the people they serve”. The thin gruel of NGOs, international organisations, and other civil society actors is, thus, becoming vital in supervising the wrongdoings against caravan dwellers and in attempting to ameliorate socio-economic exclusion (Van Baar, 2017; 2019; Picker, 2018). Here I do not intend to delegitimise the work of engaged volunteers, activists, and lobbyists, but rather seek to highlight the vulnerable position Roma and Traveller groups are in when their rights are increasingly observed only by non-state actors.

The structural exclusion of Roma and Traveller voices and demands in relation to a specific housing culture must also be understood within the purview of the new depoliticised phase it has entered. This phase is one in which the political is heavily curtailed and sought to be replaced by voices of civic partners (Picker, 2017). Politics, instead, are increasingly shaped by technocratic input (thus “insulating it from democratic demands”, Brown, 2020, p. 58). Building on these insights, I will now briefly turn to the period after the abolition of the Second Caravan Act (1999), when pitch and caravan provision in the Netherlands was both devolved and cancelled as a state duty.

Since 1999, expert knowledge (i.e. suffocating consensus) of non-sedentary housing (and the related “bad things”) has been reified, while the political – the dissent among Roma and Traveller groups and political opposition – has been further delegitimised. The foundation was laid in the early 1990s, when the central state considered long-term integration policies a costly failure, especially when they concerned centralised educational programmes and the construction and maintenance of caravan sites.⁷ Some 90% of all caravan dwellers were believed to live on benefits and pitch shortages were estimated at roughly 2000. Instead of addressing the situation, the first “Purple”⁸ cabinet (1994–1998) made the drastic decision to phase out the Second Caravan Act. This meant caravan dwellers were no longer considered a (cultural) minority and that caravan politics could be turned into a matter of “pragmatic” governance (*zakelijk beleid*). This depoliticised order would, in neoliberal terms, offer civilisational market solutions to this group. Remkes⁹ informed parliament that he was an advocate of caravan and pitch ownership among caravan dwellers; according to him, homeownership “has a positive influence on responsible citizenry” (p. 2; cf. Ronald, 2008 for promotion of homeownership), and he advised municipalities to provide such an option in combination with effective and necessary policing strategies.

Coupled to this devolution, the Ministry of Housing (VROM) offered a guiding policy document (2006) to all municipalities on how to “normalise” sites – i.e. deal with “security” and “liveability concerns” or “bad things”. This document contained five policy directions, two of which clarified how to decrease the number of or fully remove pitches (i.e. the infamous *uitersterf* or extinction policy). In addition to this document, VROM published two reports on crime and anti-social behaviour among caravan dwellers. These reports were grist for the mills of many politicians, agencies, and experts alarmed by and taking open action against wide-scale “refuge” issues (*vrijplaatsenproblematiek*) at sites (VROM-Inspectie, 2011). These issues were mostly related to littering, tax evasion, illegal construction, and drug labs (Vos & Waardenburg, 2012). These reports invoked what Swyngedouw (2007, pp. 58–76) has called the “predicament” to rally for harsh and technocratic interventions. As such, the reports have proven instrumental for justifying crackdowns on “bad things” and the removal of pitches and site redevelopments. The pitch reduction that followed after 2006 has resulted in the elimination of roughly 1000 pitches and the transformation of an even larger number into “civilised” park homes (*woonwagenuizen*). The actual decrease in the number of caravans is therefore believed to be

⁷ Staatsblad 1998, ref: 459.

⁸ Consisting of the Labour (PvdA), Conservative-liberal (VVD), and Social-liberal (D66) parties.

⁹ Letter to Second Chamber, ref: 28600-XI no. 9.

around 3000 (Blaakman et al., 2017).

However, the political could not be fully elided and pressure arose from, first, caravan dweller grassroots movements and, subsequently, EU civil society institutions (Wagenaar & Rodenberg, 2021). Between 2014 and 2017, organisations such as the National Ombudsman, Netherlands Institute for Human Rights (CRM), Public Interest Litigation Project, European Court, and European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) concluded that normalisation policies have turned the pre-1999 national caravan politics into a generic repressive model whose main focus is on addressing the “refuge issue” (*vrijplaatsenproblematiek*). “Reasonable” anti-policies were no longer sufficient to justify anti-caravan politics. The same reports highlighted that caravan provision was largely discontinued and that sites were racialised in discourses as refuges of criminals, “welfareites”, and tax evaders. Often, demands for new pitch construction were deemed too expansive or contrary to local housing regulations and zoning plans. In addition, many municipalities outsourced maintenance work and the enforcement of repressive caravan policies to newly established consultancies. Very telling was the name of one of the first such companies: *Metargus*, or Argus-eyed, emphasising the vigilance that is *apparently* needed to deal with this group. More telling is that these third parties became responsible for maintenance and site expansion, further reducing the accountability of authorities.

The eventual backlash showed that the political was still able to stage dissent and demand inclusion. Such grassroots agency is certainly no new phenomenon, as Roma and Traveller resistance has been theorised in various other European contexts (Clave-Mercier & Olivera, 2018; Lancione, 2020; Maestri, 2017a; Teodorescu, 2020). The national state ultimately decided in 2018 on the adoption of a new framework. It affirmed that normalisation and extinction policies could be interpreted as discriminatory and that, in accordance with Article 8 ECHR, Roma and Travellers seeking a pitch were entitled to one within a “reasonable period of time”. In accordance with article 8 ECHR, a member state must defer to private and family life and home. On this rests also a “positive duty” to protect and facilitate Roma or Traveller caravan cultures. However, the national state still refused to set targets and accept accountability (at national level). Whether this moment can be considered a political rupture from depoliticised caravan politics or rather a postponement of the true inclusion and enjoyment of caravan culture is the crucial question.

In what follows, starting from a situated reading of recent caravan politics in the case of Nijmegen, I address how the post-1999 caravan policies have been depoliticised, and yet what attempts have emerged to re-politicise the right to live in a caravan. I present three phases (or periodic expressions) of the depoliticised approach towards caravan politics in which security and financial considerations seek to outweigh the right to enjoy a specific housing culture, established in the Netherlands for well over a century.

5. Researching caravan politics: a situated study of Nijmegen

The matters described above are generalised and yet their “unfolding and structuration [are] always a situated affair” (Lancione, 2022, p. 1142). This I will investigate in the following (empirical) section by offering a detailed account of the caravan site politics of the city of Nijmegen. I seek to do this without dispensing with the national scale and systemic analysis of depoliticised governance (Callison & Manfredi, 2020). As with many other sites in the Netherlands, the locations of Nijmegen’s sites are on the periphery. In particular, the larger regional sites used to be built near motorways or dumps (Van Baar, 2021). Of a total of 80 pitches and 27 park homes in Nijmegen, the large Teersdijk site alone contains 62 pitches and 20 park homes (see Fig. 1). The park homes are only to be inhabited by people within the “target group” (*doelgroep*, i.e. Roma/Sinti or Traveller), but are nonetheless heavily contested by the surrounding settled community, as many do not consider these “traditional” dwelling types.

Since the 1990s, no new pitch has been added to Nijmegen’s existing stock. The article draws on fieldwork carried out between October 2021 and August 2022. I analyse Nijmegen’s caravan and site governance by drawing on three sets of data: interviews, document analysis, and observational fieldwork. Through 11 semi-structured interviews, I sought to obtain insights into how new policies have been formulated and how issues concerning shortages of pitches and loss of a housing culture are identified and addressed. The group of interviewees included one alderman, three current and one former public servants, four current and one former councillors, and the chair of the local caravan dwellers interest group (i.e. Peter Vos, a caravan dweller himself). In addition to these interviews, I had multiple phone conversations with Mr. Vos and interviewed seven current and three former caravan dwellers from Teersdijk. Furthermore, I visited an information evening regarding future expansion plans for the Teersdijk site. The insights from Nijmegen’s caravan community were crucial for my situated knowledge of the issues and challenges of the local caravan sites. Some interviewees were anonymised upon request.

Through a document analysis, I systematically collected and analysed 48 public documents from Nijmegen Council’s online repository. These included council questions, answers from the mayor and aldermen, transcripts of council meetings, council bills, resolutions, and development plans for the site. Additionally, newspaper interviews and articles, YouTube posts, and statements from the local interest group were also analysed. This helped me map the involved actors’ positions as well as the (technocratic) arguments for the restrictions imposed on site expansions. Content and argumentation analysis was used.

6. Nijmegen’s consensus around chronic pitch shortages

The pitch shortage among Nijmegen’s Caravan dwellers has currently grown to almost 100% of the existing stock (Companen, 2020). This is the result of the building freeze that has lasted some three decades. This empirical section will analyse how Nijmegen has justified and persisted in its repressive and rigid caravan politics.

Most people waiting in the queue are living-in adults and former caravan dwellers or so-called *spijtoptanten*.¹⁰ To understand what decades of building freezes have done to the people, I bring forward some personal stories. In my conversations with former and current caravan dwellers, it became clear how threatened the group feels regarding its existence. Often, painful decisions are made regarding which of the children is allocated an empty pitch. Henk (66), to start with, was forced in the early 1990s to move to a house in the Dukenburg neighbourhood. When he was 23 and met his partner, no more pitches were available on the site. Luckily, he moved to within walking distance of Teersdijk and could still visit friends and relatives on a daily basis. Now, however, close to his retirement age, he longs to move back. However, given the roughly 100 people on the waiting list, he has only a slight chance to qualify for the possible new pitches. Even lower on this list is Antoine (58), who moved in the 1980s to a neighbouring municipality and is therefore classified as ineligible for bonus points in the queue system. Also in his case, the site did not allow the expanding family to remain together, so he and his relatives instead decided to move to an empty plot of land and build houses side by side. Nonetheless, in all those years, he never felt he could integrate into local “sedentary” civilian society and longs for his youth on the campsite.

Lisanne (28), who has lived for over three years in a holiday caravan (8 m²) on the pitch of her mother, is regularly summoned by municipal authorities to regularise her address and has been threatened with eviction on the basis of zoning and fire safety regulations. She has already lived for eight years with her boyfriend and would like to start a

¹⁰ The legal definition is “someone bitterly regretting a decision or choice”; in reality, most former caravan dwellers had no other choice than to move into a brick house.



Fig. 1. Map of Teersdijk Campsite, Nijmegen. Source: author.

family, but feels forced to postpone this due to the overcrowded and precarious housing situation. To understand why the increasing housing shortage has only worsened since 1999, I identify three phases: (1) the spiteful exclusion of caravan dwellers, (2) the reluctant repentance, and (3) the redefinition of the reasonable.

6.1. First phase (1999–2017): depoliticised caravan governance and the spiteful exclusion of caravan dwellers

Almost immediately after the abolition of the Second Caravan Act, Teersdijk was identified as an area of “special municipal attention”. The focus would lie on increased surveillance and law enforcement because only a “zero tolerance” attitude could ensure “normalisation”, so that the area “would become a normal ‘area of interest’, just like the rest of the city”.¹¹ This (anti-political) stance – which, as Van Baar (2019) would argue, focused on “bad things” – contrasted sharply with the pre-1999 period, when national funds were still allocated to various community and educational activities and the maintenance of the site. Peter Vos, the chair of the local caravan dwellers’ association, recalls this turn vividly (interview, 2021):

They used to do more for us. There were community workers (*opbouwwerkers*) who supported us. There were funds for our club and church, we could organise cultural activities, also for our kids. Those workers even went with us to secondary schools or authorities to counsel and support us.

Nijmegen did not let the grass grow under its feet, presenting its normalisation programme six years before VROM would have its caravan policy guidelines ready. Nijmegen informed VROM and the Province of Gelderland that the site needed to be reduced in size (i.e. *extinction*) and redeveloped (i.e. *normalised*) and requested funding from both bodies. The premise for this programme was that this would improve the area’s liveability and the caravan dwellers’ socioeconomic position. Whether this was also what the caravan dwellers themselves wanted was ignored. This highlights the depoliticisation of caravan provision, as the right to housing was now interpreted in a much broader sense and no longer through a cultural lens – offering *regular* housing elsewhere was permissible after 1999. Still, Nijmegen needed to justify these exceptional changes by demonstrating the “deviation” of this group (cf. Uitermark et al., 2017). Liveability, security, and economic indicators became crucial and demonstrated the municipality’s

intention to operationalise “bad things” in their attack on caravan culture. VROM accepted the plan and transferred that same year, as requested, 4 million guilders (EUR 1.8 million) into the municipal bank account. In the following years, the province and municipality added EUR 2 million to this amount.¹² If local demands were considered, the roughly EUR 4 million would have likely been spent on site expansion and cultural, educational, and employment programmes. Yet, such demands were interpreted as radical and unfeasible, so the aims were instead defined by experts and policymakers.

The first, short-lived aim was the so-called complete “petrification” (*verstening*) of the site, but this proved too expensive. Instead, the municipality focused on the partial petrification and reorganisation of the site.¹³ It justified the exceptional measures by framing the area as (1) a firetrap, (2) physically inaccessible, and (3) underprivileged. In the course of events that followed, Fire Department inspectors inspected the site and concluded that Teersdijk was indeed a firetrap. Redevelopment was necessary and various households were forcibly removed for the creation of “fire corridors”. However, the process was rather sluggish – not least because of the community’s profound distrust that followed after it became clear that Fire Department footage was also used by the police and Department of Social Affairs to trace fraud and illegal activities. To accelerate the redevelopment, the municipality decided to contract a specialised consultancy, as had happened in many other municipalities. The person contracted, Jeroen Kemna (interview, 2021), recalled this period as follows:

The municipality did some dirty things ... under false pretexts they sent the Fire Department to the site ... while public servants were taking photos, social detectives, etc., and then many prosecuted. Well, you get it, no one from the municipality dared to enter Teersdijk afterwards. Hence, they contacted me.

Kemna succeeded in “appeasing” Teersdijk by communicating the municipality’s proposal: in exchange for the fire safety and redevelopment plan, all 82 households would stay on the site and no “integral” measures¹⁴ would take place again as long as he was active. The plans for the site redevelopment were only once shared with the inhabitants, in 2007. Documents, newspaper articles, and interviews with Mr. Vos

¹² Masterplan Teersdijk (2005).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ The integral approach is a euphemism for raids by various agencies, such as the tax inspectorate, social services, environmental agency, and public prosecutors.

¹¹ Beheerovereenkomst WWC Teersdijk (2009).

clarify that many opposed the construction of park homes.¹⁵ The alderman at that time, Bert Velthuis, acknowledges this, while emphasising that the housing culture was not a priority for the then city government (interview, 2022):

Besides opposing brick houses, they wanted us to address shortages. Those 20 or so houses we planned instead of the removed caravans were not enough and, in their eyes, not consistent with their housing culture ... But this domain [i.e. caravan provision] is claimed by the Security Department, even if I disagreed with this from the start ... and even we [aldermen] were barely allowed to inspect police and security data. There was no justification [for opposing expansions], and we just had to accept the explanation.

The fact that the municipality pushed through this redevelopment *as though* dissent among caravan dwellers (and concerns among some politicians) was “beyond reasonable” (Derickson, 2017) highlights the depoliticised context. This became particularly clear when several households decided to stay put rather than moving to the planned park homes. The municipality reacted by taking legal action and even calling in a private detective tasked with monitoring potential illegal activities of the households to be evicted. What remains remarkable is the relatively resigned attitude among the councillors during these encroachments on local caravan culture. The illicit use of photo material, unwanted replacement of caravans, and ultimate detective practices were only briefly and superficially raised. In 2012, the D66 (Social-liberal) and GroenLinks (Leftist-environmentalist) fractions specifically questioned the deployment of private detectives. In response, the city government argued that spying on suspected persons is common nationally, and was carried out by a licensed company. Emphasising the technocratic approach was that in the same written response, the municipality argued that all these extraordinary interventions were motivated by a desire to improve the “factual” living conditions.¹⁶

The physical redevelopment (see Fig. 2) was finalised in 2011 and was followed by the “normalisation” phase. The “factual” data were once more determining the repressive policies. The Teersdijk area was interpreted as a “low-status area”, as measured by real estate values, average neighbourhood satisfaction levels, and anecdotal input from police and other experts. To normalise the area, Teersdijk and the adjacent neighbourhood of Tolhuis were designated as “Rotterdam Act areas”. This Act, officially known as the Act on Extraordinary Measures for Urban Problems and in force since 2005. Officially, the Act was meant to improve deprived neighbourhoods and combat radicalisation, poverty, and criminality. This is, arguably, a showcase of anti-policies, as it seeks to protect specific areas from “bad things”. Nonetheless, the Act is also considered a far-reaching measure, as it limits citizens’ constitutional right to settle anywhere (Uitermark et al., 2017; Van Gent et al., 2018). It is meant to boost social mixing and can be invoked by municipalities to bar new tenants on the basis of various criteria. While the criteria changed over time, the Act primarily targeted unemployed persons, new residents (fewer than six consecutive years of residence in the municipality), and people with criminal records. From its introduction, the Act has received much criticism, and Van Gent et al. (2017) even concluded that it has had only a modest impact on liveability in designated areas.

Nijmegen’s application of the Act was, to say the least, messy. The then Minister of the Interior Stef Blok reprimanded the municipality for having de facto enforced the Rotterdam Act since 2003 (when the bill did not even pass parliament). Nijmegen was already screening potential new caravan dwellers based on income and police records. Minister Blok did not order the municipality to promptly discontinue this unlawful state of affairs, but rather to apply to invoke the Rotterdam Act.¹⁷ An

official application to the Ministry of the Interior¹⁸ followed, in which Nijmegen made an effort to establish Teersdijk’s *extraordinary* issues and how the *exceptional* measures would improve the socioeconomic status of the area. The ministry approved both the first (2014) and second applications (2017), and thereby the consensual and data-driven (techno-managerial) governance of this area. Moreover, it allowed the municipality to postpone expansion plans as long the Rotterdam Act was applied.

The most important reasons cited by the municipality were the below-average socioeconomic ranking of the site, “liveability issues” (e.g. hemp growing, intimidation of authorities, and money laundering), and “deviant living patterns”.¹⁹ The foundations of these assumptions lay in both quantitative and qualitative indicators. The quantitative indicators were indeed somehow higher than the municipal average but, as Uitermark et al. (2017) also showed, it is unconvincing and even alarming that some statistics and anecdotes can be used to justify discretionary power to disenfranchise a certain group. Nijmegen used three indicators²⁰ in its application, namely, the environmental assessment (6.8 out of 10 in Teersdijk vs. 7.6 in Nijmegen in 2013), the safety index (24% felt unsafe in Teersdijk vs. 18% in Nijmegen), and unemployment rates (9.1% in Teersdijk vs. 5.2% at the city-wide level). While the discrepancies are rather small, the caravan dwellers were especially appalled by the municipality’s selectiveness. Indicators that were good, for example, regarding volunteer aid or social cohesion, were systematically omitted from the equation. Also, unemployment was indeed higher in the years following the 2008 credit crunch, yet *in situ* financial support systems allowed most to make ends meet (interview Vos, 2021).

Additionally, it is hard to match the aims of the Act, proposed to control who moves into an area to promote social mixing, with the situation at Teersdijk. Due to the national and local pitch shortages, almost no one was moving in or out and social mixing was certainly not desired by Teersdijk’s Traveller community, as it jeopardises their culture. Regardless of these objections, Nijmegen’s mayor and public servants from the responsible agency still believe that the application was made with the strictest rigour and that the anecdotal evidence was certainly conclusive. Remarkably, this anecdotal evidence is still classified. That this concealment of the data stigmatises and threatens the local culture was countered by one of the involved public servants (interview, 2022):

Look, that application was declared admissible and really based on police data. From that, it turned out that the area was significantly more criminal and vulnerable than other areas. So, then I think: are we framing [them]? It’s data! And yes, sure, it’s data that cannot be disclosed and you’re allowed to criticise that.

Data and expert input thus enabled repressive politics, not because they upheld a reasonable agreement but rather due to the unwavering claims, storylines, and data that ruled out other options (Nethercote, 2022; Uitermark et al., 2017). This techno-managerial approach achieved at least two things: first, the municipality could redevelop the site and screen every potential new tenant (which rarely happened)²¹; second, due to the Rotterdam Act, discussions of site expansions in or around Teersdijk were suspended. As such, this depoliticised setting allowed for anti-policies (i.e. the Rotterdam Act) to justify harsh measures and a specific (and problematic) focus on the caravan dwellers. The various politics were alleged to be reasonable because they addressed e.g. fire hazards, criminality or nuisance. Yet, the application was messy and the motivation was either weak or missing.

¹⁸ By this point, VROM no longer existed and the policy area of housing came within the Ministry of the Interior.

¹⁹ Letter to Ministry of the Interior, ref: RO10/17.0001634.

²⁰ Ref: 33 797, F.

²¹ Someone was declined permission to move in based on a traffic fine in a different municipality.

¹⁵ Beheerovereenkomst WWC Teersdijk (2009).

¹⁶ Letter to the council (2012), ref: 12.0009446.

¹⁷ Letter to First Chamber, ref: 33 797, F.



Fig. 2. “Normalised” Teersdijk. Source: author (March 2022).

6.2. Second phase (2018–2021): emerging controversy and reluctant repentance

With the implementation of the new caravan policy framework, Nijmegen was potentially compelled to revisit its deeply depoliticised caravan politics. Even so, that same year, Mayor Hubert Bruls sent a letter to the council²² in which he stated that the new framework did not affect the current implementation of the Rotterdam Act and that the municipality was not legally obliged to build new pitches. Hence, the stance of the city government had become a defensive one. The city government provided two arguments for this. First, according to Nijmegen, the new policy framework did not specify that a municipality is obliged to make specific housing policies for a minority (*doelgroep*) – this could also be carried out by a neighbouring municipality, for example. Second, it argued that safety and liveability outweigh the intent of article 8 ECHR. This is remarkable, as both the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG) and the National Ombudsman specify that all authorities, including local ones, must observe article 8 ECHR and especially its relevant jurisprudence in relation to Roma and Traveller housing cultures. Jurisprudence has established that a government should guarantee enough pitches and good quality caravans (Blaakman, 2017; CRM, 2018; VNG, 2021). The mayor further specified that, in the course of time, the site would become “normalised” due to the Rotterdam Act, but that future expansion would undo all these efforts. While there was no clear data to support “normalisation” and improved liveability, the municipality persevered in its zero-tolerance approach, even though a growing number of councillors were by then doubting the supporting arguments. Former Labour councillor Arzbach recalled this steadfastness as follows:

The continuation of the anti-caravan policy and the Rotterdam Act was somehow presented as a *fait accompli*. Sure, there were some illegal practices on the sites ... but these were addressed by the responsible authorities. As far as I understood it, after all the years [of normalisation and the Rotterdam Act] only two troublesome households had been identified [and dealt with]. Well, are you limiting people’s rights and plans to expand for only those two families? That’s out of all proportion and is stigmatising!

Mr. Vos explained that while protesting before 2018 felt like

“flogging a dead horse”, the implementation of the new policy framework actually changed matters in a positive way – even though the mayor and aldermen argued differently. First, councillors who previously felt discomfort with local caravan politics but refrained from discussing the matter could now point to the dubious grounds on which Nijmegen rejected the new national framework. Second, a growing number of national civil organisations and NGOs started scrutinising Nijmegen’s caravan politics.

In 2019, Mr. Vos’s association filed a complaint at the CRM, an institution that monitors the practical human rights compliance of governments and elected representatives. That same year, the CRM ruled²³ that Nijmegen’s decision not to monitor pitch shortages contravened the new framework and was even discriminatory. CRM verdicts are not legally binding but are nevertheless adopted over 80% of the time. Moreover, this verdict illustrates the ongoing depoliticisation, as Mr. Vos was forced to turn to civil society to reprimand an authority for shirking its accountability. Nijmegen somehow felt forced to eat humble pie, not least because local political fractions increased pressure after this ruling. GroenLinks councillor Marieke Smit (interview, 2022) specified that they were approached by the caravan dwellers’ association:

Right after the CRM verdict, Peter Vos’s association contacted us and then, together with colleagues from other fractions, we decided to pay a visit to the site. Before that moment I had no knowledge of this group, their culture, and the policies. It was then that I got to know that they need expansions and wanted to live together.

The same year, Smit, with other local fractions, tabled a motion calling for a needs assessment (*behoefteonderzoek*) and a quick review of possible new sites. Still, expansion at or around Teersdijk was excluded from the start, as the Rotterdam Act was in place and did not permit the expansion of a “socioeconomically weak area”. The needs assessment²⁴ concluded that at least 93 Travellers were waiting for a pitch in Nijmegen. Out of this group, 23 were adult children living at home, and the council ordered the city government to at least build 25 pitches for this group. The quick review that followed in 2021 (Nijmegen, 2021) was not intended to fulfil the total need but that of 25 households. The results of this review were sobering, as identifying the three potential locations provoked a tremendous “NIMBY” reaction. Hence, the

²² Letter to council (Nijmegen, 2018), ref: *Standpunt woonwagenbeleid* [position towards caravan policy].

²³ Ruling 2019–126.

²⁴ Inventarisatie behoefte woonagenstandplaatsen, Companen, 2020.

techno-managerial consensus shifted from being security and liveability driven to one in which spatial limitations and public support issues were used to justify the postponement of future expansions.

Nonetheless, following the new framework, Nijmegen's caravan dwellers have qualitatively built powerful strategies and capacities to engage different actors who were previously largely ignorant of the situation. As their capacities changed, though it is important to stress that there has always been resistance, they became more successful in articulating their demands to various actors, to be allowed inclusion within the existing apparatus but also to be apart from it (as having a unique housing culture and livelihood strategies). Essentially, they have staged their legal rights (e.g. article 8 ECHR) to contest ongoing anti-policies and demand perspective. The fact that the municipality persevered in its anti-policies thereby clarified how its caravan politics moved from being "reasonable" towards increasingly violating article 8 ECHR and blatantly dismissing the new national policy framework.

6.3. Third phase (2022–onwards): the redefinition of the reasonable

The first signs of re-politicisation crystallised when the council decided to force the city government to revoke the Rotterdam Act and proceed with the construction of new pitches next to the existing site. In this process, most councillors agreed that the Rotterdam Act was stigmatising the group and delaying the municipality to comply with its human rights obligations (Art. 8 ECHR). In November 2021, the council voted out the Rotterdam Act and in early 2022 it reiterated the desire to find a place for at least 25 new pitches – ideally in or around Teersdijk. So, after two decades during which the site had to be normalised, redeveloped, and ideally "petrified", it was agreed that the only viable option left was to expand Teersdijk.

Following this considerable turn, the municipality invited Nijmegen's caravan community to an information session in which the audience was updated on the possible expansion and schedule. During this 2022 session, the project manager tried to explain that construction could not start before 2023 because of an environmental assessment. The audience was not impressed and reminded the project manager that ground pollution on this former scrapyard had already been studied in 2005 (Masterplan Teersdijk), showing that future developments could proceed on this site. In December 2022, the municipality informed the council that 30 new sites would indeed be built on the former scrapyard.²⁵ Yet, in the letter the same project manager also specified that the Security Department had been asked for advice and declared that any expansion would complicate future interventions in the area. This stance, in which the social and criminal challenges continue to be highlighted, is paired with institutional critique of the relatively large-scale land use of caravans (a pitch is usually 1.5 times the size of a plot for a terraced house). In various interviews, civil servants argued that pitch shortages had also to be understood in light of the caravan dwellers' preference for an expensive and complicated housing form, highlighting the ongoing opposition to accountability-based, legal, and evidence-based rationales.

From a more cynical perspective, what has now been proposed can be interpreted as the minimal concession to the community (and implemented at the slowest possible pace). Moreover, the area where Teersdijk can be expanded is drastically diminished due to new wildlife areas (where badgers were found) and planned industrial parks, while the quick review already ruled out other areas in Nijmegen. In this light, Arzbach (interview, 2022) aptly argued that the sudden turn in local caravan politics should not distract attention from questions left unanswered, especially the lack of agonism over a really inclusive proposal:

A quick review or a declaration of intent to build 25 new pitches got majority support in the council, but here the councillors are to blame

too, because plans that would really make a difference are voted down or postponed. Political debates still end without resolution. However, after such debates you see fraction leaders running to Vos and his people to reassure them that they will strive for other solutions.

Yet, on the other hand, one could argue that, as Mouffe would have it, these recent developments constitute a cautious reaffirmation of the agonistic debate: the *political* (e.g. protests at Teersdijk, the charismatic and vocal engagement of Mr. Vos's association with local politicians, and civil society's disapproval of Nijmegen's caravan politics) has forced *politics* to critically reassess the policies it approved to date. Surely, the new institutional stance can be understood as an attempt to deescalate a spatial conflict that became legally and publicly untenable at the lowest political and financial cost. However, it can also be interpreted as a return of the political, because what we see in Nijmegen is that Travellers' protests make dissent visible, forcing politicians to address it.

This shift from being repressive to cautiously accommodating requires ongoing scrutiny if it is to effectively withstand depoliticisation tendencies. Yet, the dynamics between the different actors are increasingly being re-politicised and have resulted in developments that, until a few years ago, seemed out of the question. An excluded party has dissented, claiming its space of litigation and planning to stage their full demands as long as these are needed, in order to become part of a system that refused them accommodation. Moreover, it has succeeded in opposing a city government in using statistics, special Acts, and other repressive means used to justify discretionary policies and actions to control and even diminish the caravan culture.

7. Conclusion

This paper has studied how caravan politics became depoliticised after its devolution in 1999. Expert opinions, strategic choices, and statistical data have ever since featured prominently in calls to curtail local expansion plans and control the caravan dweller communities. Concurrently, the right to housing of caravan dwellers has since been interpreted in its narrowest sense, suspending cultural and legal rights. By designating sites as deviant and dangerous, the techno-managerial approach signalled efforts to prove site-related problems were spiralling out of control. This became clear in various instances in Nijmegen, of which the redevelopment plan and introduction of the Rotterdam Act were the most telling. However, it is worth recalling that even more sweeping measures have been instituted throughout the country. In some municipalities, sites were closed entirely, while in others, local governments subjected all real estate transactions or building permit applications to probity screening (according to the Bibob Act). For other citizens, the threshold was usually set at EUR 250,000 or above.

Regarding the first aim, this article provides a situated periodisation of local depoliticised caravan politics that have gravely affected a quintessential part of caravan culture. This gives insights in how sovereign power can justify anti-caravan policies as reasonable. In Nijmegen, public servants and administrators have pushed through stigmatising and discriminatory policies by selectively mobilising data and discourses of fear. Even when it became clear that the municipality was acting without authorisation, such as in 2014 with the Rotterdam Act or more recently when it ignored its duty to address pitch shortages, it sought ways to justify its repressive anti-caravan proceedings. The municipality has carefully demarcated the "deviating" area, which served as a way to implement "policies that remain unacceptable or even unthinkable elsewhere" (Uitermark et al., 2017, p. 68).

The consistent and wilful ignorance of Nijmegen's council over the past two decades has signalled, at least until 2020, a further "retreat of the political" (Swyngedouw, 2009). The situation was not ideal before 1999, when national and local officials were – on paper at least – still accountable for providing enough pitches and for the wellbeing of caravan dwellers. Once this situation changed, it was evident that the

²⁵ Letter to council (2022), ref: D221248247.

council had control over how security measures would be employed and pitch shortages dealt with. Regardless of the cries from the community, politicians approved the technocratic and repressive governance style. This also allowed the radical closure of dissensus for almost two decades.

This is not to claim that only a revolutionary rupture can overcome the radical closure. Indeed, there is no reason to assume *a priori* that Roma and Traveller groups will be privileged subjects after revolutionary changes. Various grand political ruptures even confirm this point: Roma were mistreated during state socialism, after the fall of the wall, and even following the EU accession of post-socialist countries. Mouffe (2019) and Derickson (2017) have argued that social struggles should instead be directed towards the profound anti-democratic and technocratic nature of post-democratic governance. As both Purcell (2014) and Derickson (2017) have stated, the current order is always ripe for rupture, even without dramatic upheavals. “These ruptures occur when the part of those that have no part make themselves seen, and in so doing, render visible, even for a brief moment, the lie of the [ruling] order” (Derickson, 2017, p. 45). This brings me to the second aim of the paper: to set out how Nijmegen’s caravan dwellers have opposed and disrupted the depoliticisation process.

What has been vital for Nijmegen’s caravan dwellers was to re-establish democracy as the hegemonic signifier and to allow agonistic confrontations in the political arenas to ensure their voice. This paper has provided an account of the agency of the political subject constituted by Mr. Vos and his people. Surely, one may ask whether the changes in 2018 were a rupture or an effort to deescalate an untenable situation, but this, as I argue throughout this text, obliterates the agency of the caravan dwellers. Meeting only one third of the total demand for new pitches is not necessarily the determinant of de- or re-politicisation. Repoliticisation can rather be understood as the local attempt of the caravan dwellers to disrupt the Rotterdam Act and participate in democracy, by informing and contacting politicians and the media, carrying out surveys and studies, and voicing their needs and demands.

The theoretical framework used in this paper has provided ways in which institutional antiziganism can be understood and theorised in depoliticised contexts. It highlights the unprecedented “opportunities” that arise when “bad things” are measured and instrumentalised to justify minority-specific “anti-policies” as reasonable interventions. A critical scrutiny of anti-policies in relation to anti-caravan politics (and institutional antiziganism in general) is thus required (Van Baar, 2019). However, the studied case also demonstrates that caravan dwellers can fight for their space and agency. In fact, this paper clarifies that the caravan dwellers never stopped protesting, even in times when they went uncensored and unheard. Yet, what is most relevant here is to note the shift in how they engage with resistance and politicisation. They have attempted to be both self-governing and to make demands on various actors to be allowed inclusion within the existing apparatus while being allowed to remain apart from it. The situated study of this process shows, at least within Nijmegen, how these caravan dwellers have crafted strategies and capacities to engage different actors. Whether this is effective in the sense that it re-politicises caravan politics in Nijmegen (and beyond) remains to be seen in the short term: politicians might engage as promised, or simply ignore these calls from below. However, even if it turns out that politicians are not inclined to offer more than a minimum, the dynamics between the various actors will not be easily reversed. “We want a second Teersdijk” is not only a local cry; it signals a national desire, conveying the shortage of 5000 pitches and the desire to be included and no longer stigmatised.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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