

Gypsies in the Diaspora? The Pitfalls of a Biblical Concept

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In the 1980s historians and social scientists in various countries started to challenge the prevailing view of Gypsies as mainly criminals and outcasts. Especially in Germany, a number of studies were published that aimed to rewrite their history. For the first time in history, “Gypsies” took over the power of definition from the state and used it to shape their own historical image. This socio-ethnic mobilization strongly influenced the approach and research agenda of historians who dug into the history of the Gypsies. Their attention was restricted to persecution during the twentieth century, and most took for granted or explicitly supported the new pan-Gypsy identity and the “diaspora” theory. The result is a rather one-sided and questionable interpretation of the history of gypsies and other itinerant groups.

Dans les années 1980, les historiens et les spécialistes des sciences sociales de divers pays se sont mis à contester la pensée dominante dépeignant principalement les Tziganes comme des criminels et des parias. En Allemagne, en particulier, l'on a publié un certain nombre d'études cherchant à réécrire leur histoire. Pour la première fois de l'histoire, les « Tziganes » ont repris de l'État le pouvoir de définition et l'ont utilisé pour façonner leur propre image historique. Cette mobilisation socio-ethnique a beaucoup influencé la démarche et le programme de recherche des historiens qui ont fouillé l'histoire des Tziganes. Ils se sont concentrés sur la persécution des Tziganes au XX^e siècle, la plupart tenant pour acquis ou soutenant explicitement la nouvelle identité pan-tzigane et la théorie de la « diaspora ». Il en résulte une interprétation plutôt unilatérale et suspecte de l'histoire des Tziganes et d'autres groupes itinérants.

OVER THE LAST decades, social historians have focused more than ever on the lives of common people. The rise of labour and ethnic history and the interest in what German colleagues have coined *Alltagsgeschichte* have stimulated many scholars to dig deep into the social, economic, and cultural dimensions of the most diverse groups and categories. As a result we now

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know much more about the lives of prostitutes, Italian mill-owners, poor Italian immigrants, peddlers, female servants, black slaves, and others who, for a long time, were left out of the historical narrative, or at most were only dealt with in a marginal context. This development has also called more attention to one of the most marginal of all categories, the Gypsies, who until recently were only looked upon as an example of the ultimate poor and criminal other.

Around 1980 historians and social scientists in various countries started to challenge the prevailing view of Gypsies as mainly criminals and outcasts. Especially in Germany, a number of studies were published that aimed at rewriting their history. Most of these authors were strongly influenced by the initiative of German Gypsies and their spokesmen to claim financial and moral compensation for and acknowledgement of their persecution during the Nazi regime. Furthermore, this social movement developed a clear ethnic profile by rejecting the stigmatizing label *Zigeuner* (Gypsy) and adopting the names *Sinti* and *Roma*, thereby stressing the link with alleged Indian roots. This choice marked an important turning point. For the first time in history, “Gypsies” took over the power of definition from the state and used it to shape their own historical image. As in the case of the Jewish inhabitants of Europe, it was the Nazi persecution and subsequent mass killings that strongly stimulated this sense of ethnic belonging and even national feeling. By lumping together different itinerant groups with divergent ethnic identities into one racial category, the Nazis not only succeeded in rounding up and killing many of them, but also to a large degree stimulated the feeling among the victims that they all had more in common than they thought.

This socio-ethnic mobilization, which also emerged in other countries, strongly influenced the approach and research agenda of historians who dug into the history of Gypsies. First of all, their attention was restricted to persecution during the twentieth century; secondly, most authors either take for granted or explicitly support the new pan-Gypsy identity, thereby projecting this concept of recent ethno-politics into the past. The result is a rather one-sided and questionable interpretation of the history of Gypsies and other itinerant groups. It pictures Gypsies mainly as victims and fails to do justice to their undeniable social, economic, and cultural contributions to the societies in which they have lived and participated. Little attention is paid to the often much more subtle and multi-faceted relationships with non-Gypsies and the sometimes relative importance of the specific Gypsy identity.¹ This interpre-

1 For a good recent example of such an approach, see the interesting autobiography of Walter Stanoski Winter, *Winterzeit*, edited by Thomas Neumann and Michael Zimmermann (Hamburg: Ergebnisse Verlag, 1999). See also Thomas Fricke, *Zigeuner im Zeitalter des Absolutismus. Bilanz einer einseitigen Überlieferung* (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus, 1996). For a critical assessment of his sources and interpretation, see Leo Lucassen, “Zigeuner im frühneuzeitlichen Deutschland. Neue Forschungsergebnisse, -probleme, und vorschläge”, in Karl Härtner, ed., *Policey und frühneuzeitliche Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000), pp. 235–262.

tation also reproduces contemporaneous pan-ethnic claims without testing to determine whether these are backed up by the historical sources.

That this development has not met much opposition is understandable, because it coincides with the rise of the new social history and the proliferation of studies on specific immigrant groups, among others, in American cities. Although these community studies, whose strong focus on groups was characterized by Ewa Morawska and others as the “ethnicity-forever” approach,² waned at the end of the 1980s, the focus on ethnicity as an organizing principle was further stimulated in the 1990s by the emerging popularity of the diaspora concept. Without question, we fully acknowledge the right of Gypsy organizations, as well as representatives of other ethnic groups, to shape their history in ethno-nationalist terms. Nevertheless, it becomes problematic when scholars get involved in such political emancipation or uncritically incorporate the issues of the day. This is not to argue that historians must pretend to be non-normative or that they should stay at a distance from the people they study, but it remains their task to assess critically the historical claims of ethnic groups, be they Germans, Italians, Québécois, or Gypsies. The new discourse of historical diasporas seems compatible with the political claims of Gypsy organizations and scholars working in this field. Recent scholarship gives us the opportunity to judge to what extent the diaspora concept is a useful tool in ethnic and migration studies.

Recently, the well-known migration sociologist Robin Cohen published a well-informed and subtle overview of the different usages of the diaspora concept, distinguishing five types: victim/ refugee, labour, trade, imperial, and cultural diasporas. His overall definition boils down to a combination of the following features: an often traumatic dispersal from an original homeland; the collective memory of an escape from a homeland, be it mythologized or not; an ethnic consciousness that spreads across group members in several countries and over a long period of time; a troubled relationship with the “host” society; and the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in tolerant host societies.³

From a (socio) historical perspective, this typology is problematic, because it easily leads to an anachronistic projection of contemporaneous nation-state concepts into the past and a highly selective search for and interpretation of sources which corroborate what one hopes to find (continuity of co-ethnic feelings). Is it really possible, in a reconstruction that spans over centuries, to define clearly who belongs to the group in question, in the eyes of the majority or in the eyes of the individuals themselves? We illustrate these points by

2 Ewa Morawska, “The Sociology and Historiography of Immigration”, in V. Yans-McLaughlin, ed., *Immigration Reconsidered: History, Sociology and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 187–240. See also Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen, “Introduction”, in Lucassen and Lucassen, eds., *Migration, Migration History, History: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1997), pp. 9–38.

3 Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (London: UCL Press, 1997), p. 180.

focusing on groups that hide behind the label “Gypsies”. For centuries they have been regarded by the public as a nomadic people with a common culture and lifestyle, who were dispersed all over the world a very long time ago. In overviews of the diaspora concept, Gypsies are even depicted as a supreme example of a trans-national ethnic community.⁴ Intellectual spokesmen of Gypsy communities align themselves with this modern academic custom by emphasizing this trans-national or “pan-identity”, in the hope of an acknowledgement of their group rights by the international political forum. We consider the social developments that have led to this struggle for recognition and explore to what extent the diaspora concept illuminates the history of the Gypsies.⁵

When we apply Cohen’s definition to the so-called Gypsy population, we immediately find ourselves in dire straits. About whom are we actually talking? In the past, many terms have been used to label people who travelled with their families and practised itinerant occupations. The variation between countries and in different periods of time was considerable. The term Gypsy, to mention the most widely used, was in many cases not reserved for those who considered themselves as an ethnic group; others who travelled with their families were labelled in similar ways (“travellers”, “tinkers”, “nomads”, “*Landfahrer*”, “*Jenischen*”, and “*woonwagengewoners*” to mention a few).⁶

These top-down *object* categorizations, mostly based not primarily on ethnic but on sociological features (travelling with a family while using tents or caravans), for analytical reasons have to be distinguished from *subject* definitions used by the various groups themselves. Furthermore, historical research has shown that a sustained categorization over time can strongly stimulate ethnic group feelings.⁷ This approach, in which “Gypsies” and similar labels are primarily regarded as social constructions, does not imply that we deny that all kinds of itinerant groups have developed an ethnic group consciousness (also from the bottom up); we only argue that the contexts in which this awareness came about has to be taken into account.

4 See, for example, William Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return”, in *Diaspora*, vol. 1 (1991), pp. 83, 100, who talks about Gypsies living in a “meta-diaspora”; John A. Armstrong, “Mobilized and Proletarian Diasporas”, in Steven Vertovic and Robin Cohen, eds., *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1999), p. 393; Gabriel Sheffer, “The Emergence of New Ethno-National Diasporas”, in Vertovec and Cohen, eds., *Migration*, pp. 396–419, who talks about Gypsies living in a classic “wandering ethno-national” diaspora.

5 See the most recent synthesis of our historical knowledge on these groups: Angus Fraser, *The Gypsies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992). Fraser freely talks about the Gypsy diaspora (p. 21).

6 For a summary of our findings, see Leo Lucassen, Wim Willems, and Annemarie Cottaar, *Gypsies and Other Itinerant Groups: A Socio-historical Approach* (London/ New York: Macmillan/ St. Martin’s Press, 1998).

7 David Mayall, *Gypsy-Travellers in Nineteenth-Century Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Leo Lucassen, *Zigeuner. Die Geschichte eines polizeilichen Ordnungsbegriffes in Deutschland 1700–1945* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1996).

Definitions by governments and self-definitions, a subject which has hardly been explored, were quite often inaccurate. Only a handful of historical studies enable us to acquire some sort of grasp on the interaction between the two. The same applies to reliable anthropological studies on the degree of group cohesion and the individual lifestyles of so-called Gypsy groups. Only after World War II did a number of innovative standard works appear, but these were never based on comparative research into divergent national groups.⁸

Pariahs into Noblemen

The further one goes back into time, the more difficult it is to find convincing evidence for the existence of self-proclaimed Gypsy groups sharing a common past, origin, or even ethnic group feeling.⁹ From the fifteenth century onwards, an array of explanations have circulated regarding the origin of people who travelled in groups and had itinerant occupations. They were classified as conglomerations of antisocial vagrants on the edge of society; as heathens, in other words non-Christians; as Egyptians, because of the association with magic and sorcery; or as Jews who had been in hiding during severe persecutions.

A fundamental shift in the scholarly conceptualization was brought about by the book on Gypsies written by the German historian Grellmann in 1783. Based mainly on a crude and primitive comparison with a language in Hindustan, he pointed to Northern India, claiming that Gypsies had moved from there four centuries earlier.¹⁰ Furthermore, he analysed traits that he found to be characteristic of Indians and, so he went on to say, of all Eastern peoples. In the end this highly speculative and associative argumentation led him to identify Gypsies as descendants of the lowest class of Indians, the pariahs, also known as Sudras. These Gypsies/ Sudras supposedly had fled their homeland during the war of conquest waged in 1408–1409 by Timur, who was bent on introducing the Islamic faith into India by fire and sword. What happened to the Sudras afterwards remained unclear. The most likely route seemed to pass through Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey, but, because there was no factual evidence, he considered another pattern of emigration equally possible.

This new interpretation of the Gypsies' history in diaspora terms *avant la lettre* was highly successful, not in the least because it fitted perfectly in the

8 Especially noteworthy is Judith Okely, *The Traveller-Gypsies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Anne Sutherland, *Gypsies: The Hidden Americans* (London: Tavistock, 1975). More recent works will be mentioned below.

9 For a detailed discussion on this issue, see Wim Willems, *In Search of the True Gypsy: From Enlightenment to the Final Solution*, trans. from Dutch (1995) by Don Bloch (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1997).

10 On the work and influence of Grellmann, see Willems, *In Search of the True Gypsy*, pp. 22–92.

ethno-nationalist discourse of the time.¹¹ His book was translated into several languages, and the Indian link took firm root. In the two centuries that followed, outsiders continued the research into the origin of Gypsies. As far as we know, no one has ever systematically explored any myths, stories, or other oral traditions which might point toward a far-away homeland. Moreover, there are no written sources that offer solutions. This, however, did not prevent Gypsies and their representatives from using the Indian paradigm to buttress their ethno-national claims.

An important turning point was the World Romani Congress which took place in London in 1971. This initiative was supported by the prime minister of the Indian Punjab (the alleged homeland of the Gypsies), who that year created the Indian Institute of Romani Studies.¹² In the decades that followed no further concrete evidence for the Indian link was found. In Angus Fraser's most recent authoritative survey, *The Gypsies*, the author refrains from taking a stand in the contemporary debate on language and origin.¹³ He offers an array of possibilities and leaves his readers free to pick and choose among them, mainly because there is almost no firm empirical basis for any of the prevailing beliefs.

Language, which should be the definitive factor, fails to do the trick. Because historical records are almost absent, there is space enough for speculation (and manipulation). To give an example: a regular explanation for the self-designation *Rom* (referring to all Gypsies with an alleged link to India) is the Indian word *dom*, a particular conglomerate of tribes. It is possible that their original caste features were preserved by the Asiatic and European Gypsies, but, according to Fraser, this explanation fails to connect the Romani language with any particular Indian dialect. He then refers to Grellmann's idea that Gypsies were closely related to the Banjara, a mixed race of roving traders forming one of what used to be called the "criminal and wandering tribes" of India, although he (again) admits that the Banjara language bears little similarity to Romani. Not without irony, Fraser ends his argument on ethnic roots by postulating that some Gypsies who have in modern times studied the problem of origin have been attracted by alternative hypotheses, which would make their ancestors *kshatriyas* — the warriors who formed the second rank among the four castes of Hindu society — rather than a motley crew of minstrels and low-caste vagrants. These few authors have received support from Indian writers in supposing that the Gypsies may descend from Jat and Rajput warriors. According to Fraser, such a mixture would account for the range of physical types evident among the modern Gypsy populations.

11 Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

12 W. R. Rishi, *Roma: The Panjabi Emigrants in Europe, Central Asia and Middle Asia, the USSR and the Americas* (Patiala: Pujabi University Press, 1976).

13 Fraser, *The Gypsies*, pp. 10–32 on "Origins". See also Angus Fraser, "The Present and Future of the Gypsy Past", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 2 (Spring/ Summer 2000), pp. 17–31.

Fraser's extensive reading of the available literature on the subject has brought him to the conclusion that, as long as it remains impossible to narrow the options of time and place, there will still be plenty of room for dispute as to exactly who, in terms of caste, occupation, and ethnic origin, left the Indian subcontinent a thousand years or more ago, and whether or not they left as a single group. Some have claimed on linguistic grounds that the Gypsies, on first entering Persian territory, must have been a single race speaking a single language. Others have produced contrary linguistic evidence and argued that the morphological, lexical, and phonological differences between European, Armenian, and Asiatic Romani might be more easily explained if there had been more than one exodus or if there was already some differentiation within the language at the time. As far as Fraser is concerned, the latter standpoint appears the more persuasive.¹⁴

What we can establish is that, in this latest compendium of historical knowledge about Gypsies, no conclusive answers are given with relation to origin. This, however, does not seem to bother Gypsy intellectuals and political leaders. The web site of the International Romani Union, with representatives from 26 countries, explicitly asks for recognition of Gypsies as a people and even as a nation.¹⁵ The leaders of this mainly Eastern European movement no longer accept the label "Gypsies" and prefer to be called by their more proper designation, "Roma", to which they add that not all "Gypsies" or nomadic peoples are Roma. Without a trace of scholarly doubt they consider themselves the descendants of the ancient warrior classes of Northern India, particularly the Punjab, being identifiable by their language, religion, and customs, which could be directly linked to those of the modern Punjabi. The academic godfather of this Romani movement is Ian Hancock, himself of British Romani and Hungarian Romani descent and professor of Romani Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. He also represents Roma on the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. On the *Patrin Web Journal* he offers a brief sketch of the origins of the Romani People:

At the very beginning of the 11th century, India came under attack by the Muslim general Mahmud of Ghazni, who was trying to push Islam eastwards into India, which was mainly Hindu territory. The Indian rulers had been assembling troops to hold back the Muslim army for several centuries already, deliberately drawing their warriors from various populations who were not Aryan. The Aryans had moved into India many centuries before, and had pushed the original population down into the south, or else had absorbed them into the lowest strata of their own society, which began to separate into different social levels or castes, called *varnas* ("colors") in Sanskrit. The Aryans regarded Aryan life as being more precious than non-Aryan life, and would not risk losing it in battle. So the troops that were assembled to fight the armies of Mah-

14 Fraser, *The Gypsies*, pp. 28–29.

15 International Romani Union [online], <http://www.Romani.org>.

mud of Ghazni were all taken from non-Aryan populations, and made honorary members of the Kshatriya, or warrior caste, and allowed to wear their battledress and emblems. They were taken from many different ethnic groups who spoke many different languages and dialects. This composite army moved out of India through the mountain passes and west into Persia, battling with Muslim forces all along the eastern limit of Islam. While this is to an extent speculative, it is based upon sound linguistic and historical evidence, and provides the best-supported scenario to date. Because Islam was not only making inroads into India to the east, but was also being spread westwards into Europe, this conflict carried the Indian troops — the early Roma — further and further in that direction, until they eventually crossed over into southeastern Europe about the year 1300.¹⁶

Within two centuries the pariah-forefathers Grellmann attributed to Gypsies have been transformed into non-Aryan warriors. The status of truth is given to concepts and empirical data that fit best with the aspirations of a pan-nationalistic movement. Historical knowledge (or lack of it) and political aims have become inevitably intertwined by the leaders of these parties and social movements.

The claims and aspirations of self-proclaimed Gypsy leaders, however, have not trickled down to the ones they represent. This is well illustrated by the recent anthropological study on Vlach-Gypsies in Hungary by Michael Stewart, in which he states that, for the ordinary Gypsy in one of the unofficial ghettos on the edge of an Eastern European village or town, the manoeuvres of Gypsy intellectuals on the national and international stages rarely mean much, at least not yet. According to Stewart, it sometimes seems that the Romany political parties spend more effort establishing their credibility among non-Gypsy authorities than among their own constituents: “Even though in most countries these leaders have successfully argued that the Gypsies should be treated as an ethnic minority and have succeeded in changing some official practices, the leaders’ concern remains very different from those of ordinary Gypsies.”¹⁷ In this context he notes that, in a recent survey of 10,000 Hungarian Gypsies, 90 per cent of the respondents were unable to name a single Gypsy political party. After years of fieldwork, Stewart dares to say that the Gypsies he studied did not have a homeland to dream of, no original territory to reclaim.¹⁸ What makes them special is that they are quite happy in this condition. The obsession on origins is not theirs. He subscribes to the earlier findings of English anthropologist Judith Okely

16 *Patrin Web Journal* [online], Geocities.com/Paris/5121/history.htm. A more extended exploration of Hancock’s ideas are offered in Ian Hancock, Siobhan Dowd, and Rajko Djuric, eds., *The Roads of the Roma*, a PEN anthology of “Gypsy writers” (Hatfield: Hertfordshire University Press, 1998), pp. 9–21.

17 Michael Stewart, *The Time of the Gypsies* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1997), pp. 4–5.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

on Gypsy-Travellers in England, that the idea of Indian origins unnecessarily exoticizes the Gypsies and ignores their own view of themselves.¹⁹ In other words, most non-intellectual Rom do not seem to care where their ancestors came from:

In all the time I have spent in Harangos, I have never once heard a spontaneous conversation about the geographical or historical roots of their own people. Although the Rom were aware that the non-Gypsies had a fantastical hierarchy of “real Gypsies” and “miscegenated half-castes”, in dealings with each other, the Rom showed little or no concern for their pedigree as “true” or “bastardised” Gypsies.²⁰

Stewart even goes one step further when he writes that his extended experience in Hungary and shorter trips elsewhere in Eastern Europe has convinced him that, with the exception of the educated Gypsy intellectuals who run the Rom political parties, the Rom do not have an ethnic identity. For them, identity is constructed and constantly remade in the present in relations with significant others, not something inherited from the past: “For the Rom I knew in Harangos, the basis of their social cohesion lay neither in a dream of a future reunion of their people nor in a mythology of shared ancestry.”²¹

Awareness of Kinship Behind the Borders

Stewart’s contemporaneous conclusions also seem valid for the recent past. To illustrate this we have chosen three moments in time, in three geographically different regions in Europe. We start in early nineteenth-century England, to be exact in 1816, when an influential book was published by John Hoyland (1750–1831).²² During an annual meeting of his church in 1815, the proposal was made to improve the religious and social conditions of Gypsies in Great Britain, and Hoyland was asked to gather more information on the English Gypsies. He started by sending a list of questions to all district magistrates, and a year later he published his book. His findings were further based on personal experience and on the opinions of leaders of itinerants. The most important conclusions included the following. He estimated the number of Gypsies in England at 18,000 to 20,000, and they all mentioned Egypt as their home country, although they had no idea when their ancestors had come to England. They had no inkling of genealogy and no internal organization, but they did know each other’s sharply regionally

19 Okely, *The Traveller-Gypsies*, pp. 2–17.

20 Stewart, *The Time of the Gypsies*, p. 28.

21 *Ibid.*

22 John Hoyland, *A Historical Survey of the Customs, Habits & Present State of The Gypsies; designed to develop The Origin of this Singular People, and to promote The Amelioration of their Condition* (York: Alexander, 1816). For more elaboration on Hoyland, see Willems, *In Search of the True Gypsy*, pp. 137–150.

bound trek routes. Half of all Gypsy families practised no vocation. They did not permit outsiders to study their language, which they themselves called “jibber-jabber”. They observed their own morals and customs, which Hoyland fails to specify further, had no religious observances of their own, and for the most part knew only the Lord’s Prayer. They passed the largest part of the year under the open skies, sheltering in cheap hotels only in winter. To this observation Hoyland added that they did not move from place to place as a form of opposition to law and order, as the authorities all too readily imagined, but to earn their living in the traditional itinerant way.

We have to travel from the beginning to the end of the century and from England to Central Europe, where in 1893 a demographic survey of Gypsies in Hungary and Transylvania was carried out on the orders of the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior, which aimed to “civilize” the Gypsies and to eradicate itinerancy.²³ The results of the census contradicted prior assumptions: only 3 per cent of the 275,000 Gypsies turned out to be itinerants. Some 7.5 per cent were semi-sedentary, while the overwhelming majority had already been sedentary for a longer time. In carrying out the census, local authorities could not rely on objective criteria such as language, way of life, external characteristics, or self-definition. In determining who was eligible to be counted, a simple criterion was used: was a person known as a Gypsy? Thus at the local level popular anthropological-racial notions and tradition were followed to determine who belonged to the Gypsy population, rather than any formal indicator. Reality, however, proved more varied than expected. For example, only 30 per cent of all those surveyed reported Romani as their mother tongue; 20 per cent were more or less familiar with it; and more than half claimed Hungarian or Romanian as their first language. The vocations of those included in the census also displayed much less deviation from the norm than anticipated. The total number of employed Gypsies in the survey population was 134,454. From the 154 different vocational activities that they reported, a differentiated picture of their social status emerges. There was no indication that they maintained relations with itinerant groups abroad, whereas conceptions of a country of origin were absent. The “Gypsies” considered themselves to be part of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

A next jump leads us into the post-Communist era of Eastern Europe, where Stewart did fieldwork among the not impoverished Gypsies in Harangos (an Hungarian agrotown situated just north of the great Hungarian plain with about 1,000 Gypsy inhabitants), whom he compared with other groups in Hungary.²⁴ According to Stewart, the Hungarian Gypsies historically did not form a single homogeneous group, whereas the variation among contemporary Gypsies is considerable. Nevertheless, he believes that in Harangos he found most of the issues that pitted Gypsies of all groups against ordinary

23 Willems, *In Search of the True Gypsy*, pp. 180–182.

24 Stewart, *The Time of the Gypsies*, p. 1.

Magyars and Communists elsewhere in Hungary. The particular way in which the Rom in Harangos resisted assimilation may have been unique, but none of the other Gypsy groups gave up its identity as a distinct group either.²⁵ Stewart wants his readers to be aware of the significant differences among Gypsy groups. Linguistic and historical differences aside, in the eyes of Stewart, none of the Gypsy categories in Hungary formed a homogeneous population from a sociological point of view. Family organization and culture were varied, and consequently official policies did not have a uniform, across-the-board effect.

The Host and the Guests: Animosity Forever?

The Harangos case may show that an important part of the diaspora definition (collective memory and ethnic consciousness) does not apply. Where the element “troubled relationship with the host society” is concerned, however, Gypsies have a stronger case.

In European history since the Middle Ages all kinds of travelling groups have met deeply rooted prejudices, rejection, (racial) discrimination, and sometimes outright and violent persecution. The lowest point was reached during the Nazi period, especially the years of the Second World War, in which at least 220,000 of them died or were killed in concentration camps. Besides that we can only speculate about the mass murder of Gypsy populations in Ukraine, the Crimea, Croatia, Serbia, and other war regions.²⁶ It is understandable that this tragedy has become highly stressed in the political fight for international recognition as a nation by the Gypsy intellectual leaders, but they go one step further, stating that their history is exclusively marked by attempts to banish Gypsies, forced assimilation, persecution, deportation, slavery, and attempted extermination.²⁷ This postwar identity formation presumes the animosity between the host and the “travelling” guests to be a historical given. From a socio-political perspective, one can have doubts about such a way of group presentation, whereas historically this interpretation is not backed up by empirical evidence.²⁸

Starting with the social and economic position of Gypsies and other itinerant groups in Western Europe through time, it is evident that Gypsy occupations as such have never existed.²⁹ All occupations (including fortune-

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 10–12.

26 See Willems, *In Search of the True Gypsy*, pp. 244–262, on the “Gypsy Policy Before and During the Nazi Regime”. For the numbers of deaths in Eastern Europe, we refer to Michael Berenbaum, *A Mosaic of Victims: Non-Jews Persecuted and Murdered by the Nazis* (London and New York: Taurus, no date). Web sites provide numbers like 500,000 and 600,000 imprisoned and murdered Roma in the 1930s and 1940s (International Romani Union [online], www.Romani.org), but also 1.5 million Roma who died in the course of the Holocaust. (Patrin Web Journal [online], Geocities.com/Paris/5121/history.htm).

27 In Hancock *et al.*, eds., *The Roads of the Roma*, a timetable is included, in which only the moments of outright discrimination, racial acts, persecution, and murder are mentioned.

28 See Lucassen *et al.*, *Gypsies and Other Itinerant Groups*, especially chaps. 4 and 8.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 153–189.

telling) we know from the literature on Gypsy groups were also practised by non-Gypsies. Even itinerancy was not peculiar to them. Tens of thousands of people were itinerants without being looked upon as Gypsies. Characteristics such as the family as working unit, mobility, and self-employment were general phenomena and can therefore not be explained by reference to a "Gypsy culture". The specific feature of Gypsy occupations lies only in a combination of the three: being self-employed and travelling with one's family. People who chose such a way of life were very likely to be labelled by the authorities as "Gypsies" (or something similar) in Western Europe. The power of definition has been so strong since the fifteenth century that it became very difficult for people to escape from it. Moreover, it could easily lead to the development of ethnicity: people began to feel that they were different from others and so began to cultivate their own way of life and the symbols attached to it. This question of ethnicity and group formation is inextricably bound up with Gypsy occupations: it was the economic choice of an itinerant profession *with* the family, an overt travelling way of life, that set off the stigmatization. Cultural characteristics such as dress and language seem to have been less important in this respect. The stigmatization can partly be explained by mistrust of itinerant occupations in general. Most accusations against Gypsies were similar to those against hawkers, entertainers, and craftsmen who left their families at home. These ideas were reinforced from time to time by sedentary economic organizations such as the guilds, which tried to defend their privileges and monopoly. The combined stigmatization, however, never led to the disappearance of itinerant professions. Notwithstanding their distrust, many authorities realized that itinerants fulfilled a necessary economic function, and they therefore restricted themselves to fighting the alleged abuses.

These abuses were especially associated with people who took their families with them. Invariably this category is put forward as the example of people who took undue advantage of the legal possibilities for itinerant occupations. The only way to escape the Gypsy stigmatization and label was to stress one's distinctive character as a professional group. The most successful in this respect were the showmen, but the same process can be discerned with German organizations of hawkers from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards, who in all Western European countries managed to avoid stigmatization. Their organization and lobbying convinced the authorities that they were "honest" businessmen who could not be compared with the "dishonest" Gypsies. On the whole, the restrictive and often outright discriminatory policy towards Gypsies did not make their economic activities impossible. Although Gypsies did not play a key role in the sectors discussed, their work cannot be dismissed as parasitic or as begging in disguise. Even the most repressive authorities from time to time admitted that Gypsies could be useful and, in some cases (such as seasonal work), indispensable. As a matter of fact, in economic terms Gypsies can very well be compared with the lower and middle classes; there were outright beggars

and criminals among them, but most earned a modest living, while — notwithstanding the stigmatization — some groups were rather successful, such as coppersmiths and horse-dealers.

Furthermore, historical analyses show that itinerant occupations in general and Gypsy occupations in particular could only exist if they adapted to the changing economic situation. The widespread ideas that industrialization caused the decline of itinerant occupations and that Gypsies always hold onto their traditional occupations can both be dismissed. To begin with, industrialization and modernization had divergent effects and their development was far from uniform. Industrialization may have made many itinerant and traditional occupations obsolete, but others emerged instead, and “Gypsies” as well as “non-Gypsies” reacted accordingly. Only after the Second World War do we see that in many countries Gypsies were forced into a rather hopeless social and economic position. Explicit legislation such as the Dutch *Caravan Act* of 1968 made travelling virtually impossible, and a strong anti-Gypsy feeling and attitude in the surrounding society has created a dead-end street. Deprived of their itinerant occupations, discriminated against in the regular labour market, and unable to escape their own group and thereby their stigmatization, many Gypsies and other itinerant groups have found it very difficult to cope with the situation in economic terms.³⁰

If travelling groups fulfilled a useful and necessary function on a social-economic level in Western Europe, why then were they confronted with a repressive policy from the fourteenth century onwards? Have states and their officials been blind for such a long time? As a matter of fact, they were not — at least not totally. Authorities constantly have made divisions within the migrant population between the “good” and the “bad”, the “honest” and the “dishonest”, or — in the words of the Polish historian Geremek — between migrants with and without an alibi.³¹ But why is it that most of the time travelling groups have been depicted as bad? The traditional answer is that these groups, especially the so-called Gypsies, were parasites, not victims of stigmatization or prejudice. Generally speaking, this image is false. The opposite explanation is not convincing either: it interprets the repressive policy as a way to discipline and control people who do not fit the ideal of the dominant classes and views the social problems (poverty, banditry) as social constructions that serve merely as an excuse. Although this approach has valuable elements and is not to be rejected entirely, it does not help us much further, unless we are satisfied with conspiracy theories.

If the explanation lies neither with the groups themselves nor with the dominant society, are we then left with an unsatisfactory compromise? Not necessarily. The key to our problem is the development of the system of poor

30 The same holds true for Gypsy groups in Eastern Europe in the post-communist period. Stewart, *The Time of the Gypsies*.

31 For a summary of our findings on this subject, see Lucassen *et al.*, *Gypsies and Other Itinerant Groups*, pp. 55–73.

relief in Western Europe. Laws that restricted the poor relief from the fifteenth century onwards to the local poor and simultaneously refused citizenship rights to poor immigrants created a category of “vagrants” and Gypsies. This poor relief system was based on the restriction of relief to local inhabitants, and the exclusion of aliens had far-reaching effects for the stigmatization of travelling groups who (rightfully or not) were expected to be reduced to beggary. The final transition in the nineteenth century which linked poor relief to the place where one lived could no longer change a great deal for travelling groups. On the contrary, every municipality then ran the risk of becoming liable for their support, which more than motivated the authorities to prevent their stay, let alone settlement.

An explanation of the ongoing stigmatization of travelling groups in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially in Germany and France, links poor relief with state formation. From the end of the eighteenth century onwards, internal migration in Western Europe increased.³² Due to ongoing commercialization of the agricultural sector and the uneven pace of industrialization, jobs became less secure, leading to a growing mobility. In agriculture year-contracts were replaced by irregular demand, and in industry much work was still seasonal (construction), whereas factory work often was temporary as well. This unstable feature of the labour market caused many labourers to move constantly from one place to another.³³ In view of the traditional ideas on migration and mobility, it is not surprising that this situation led to growing concerns of the authorities. Migration may have been the rule, as it had been in pre-industrial Europe, but the norm still was sedentarism. The fear of a great mass of rootless and wandering paupers was widespread.

Apart from political disturbances, fear of the mobile poor, especially those who were labelled as vagrants, seems to have been one of the major reasons for professionalizing the police in France and Great Britain. The vagabond was depicted as the prototype of the criminal because of his alleged refusal to work and to accumulate possessions. The police in German states also focused strongly on this category. This is especially well illustrated by the emergence of police journals, which paid much attention to the *gemeinschädliche Umhertreiber* (harmful tramps). Although most of them did not commit serious crimes, the police tried to establish constant supervision and control by spreading detailed information about them among the local police forces.³⁴ As Alf Lüdtke already observed, the tenor of executive police conduct was directly influenced by the increase in population and migratory movements.³⁵

32 Leslie Page Moch, *Moving Europeans: Migration in Western Europe from 1650 Onwards* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 76, 102ff.

33 Steve Hochstadt, *Mobility and Modernity: Migration in Germany 1820–1989* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

34 Lucassen, *Zigeuner*.

35 Alf Lüdtke, *Police and State in Prussia 1815–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 82.

The monitoring of itinerant groups was further reinforced by the specialization within police forces that took place in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In the wake of the general bureaucratization that accompanied state formation in Western Europe, special branches were established for the surveillance of such “social problems” as prostitution, aliens, vagrants, and in some countries Gypsies. Strongly influenced by the general negative ideas about travelling groups, the sections that occupied themselves with these categories could to some extent gain autonomy and the power to define the problems in their own perception and interest, if only to justify their existence. In the late nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century the two main thriving objectives of the policy towards travelling groups were sedentarism and regular work and — in the case of foreigners — expulsion. The result of this development was that the demarcation line between nationals and foreigners on one hand and normal and anti-social citizens on the other was more and more stressed.

The Quest for a Distinctive and Enriching Life

The fourth feature of a diaspora, according to Cohen, is the possibility of a distinctive, creative, enriching life in tolerant host countries. This is a rather vague factor, but it would appear to refer to the fact that many migrants are better off in their host countries than in the countries of origin. This may be true for some groups, but there are no indications that it is also true for Gypsy groups, especially not in light of their general unawareness of a native country and the lack of reliable historical information on their status and background in countries outside Europe. Actually there are no data at all to make a well-considered comparison. Neither are there signs that on a group level their existence in Western and Eastern Europe improved in the postwar period. The only important change, as we noted earlier, is the development of a social movement with nationalistic aspirations, commanded by some intellectual leaders, who stress the awareness of a common need for emancipation. Social aims, political ambition (recognition as a global people), and the struggle for memorization and *Wiedergutmachung*, in accordance with their faith during the Nazi period, are clustered in the work of some leading scholars in the field of Gypsy studies, in particular but not exclusively in Great Britain.³⁶

One of these for more than a quarter of a century has been Thomas Acton, since 1998 the first professor of Romani Studies in the world.³⁷ His ideas are worth analysing, not only because of his status in the circles of politically

³⁶ Besides Ian Hancock, mentioned earlier, these are Nicolae Gheorghe (sociologist from the Institute of Social Research in Bucharest) and Donald Kenrick and Graham Puxon (from Great Britain).

³⁷ His inaugural lecture was delivered and published at the University of Greenwich (School of Sciences) and carries the title “Authenticity, Expertise, Scholarship and Politics: Conflicting Goals in Romani Studies” (Greenwich University Press, 1998). Since 1999 Acton has also taught a transitional programme in Romani Studies, MA Gender and Ethnic Studies, at the same university.

motivated Gypsy leaders, but also because he is one of the most active scholars in this specific field of study.³⁸ In his inaugural lecture, Acton's view on Gypsy studies and his position in their nationalistic movement is formulated in a crystallized form. He begins by declaring that, as an expert witness in many court cases, he puts his knowledge at the disposal of individual Gypsies to help redress centuries of oppression of their community. He immediately adds that, by doing so, he has in a way put himself in the same position as many (racial) scientists during the Nazi regime.³⁹ From a moral and political point of view, however, Acton thinks this is a necessary course of action. By doing so he wishes to join the majority of those associated with the International Romani Union, to be described as one advocating Romani nationalism. In his eyes this is a very mild form of nationalism that is cultural and non-territorial and that looks to Gandhi and Fanon for its inspiration. The movement developed in a dialectical opposition to the earlier discourse of European states and scholars about the nature of true Gypsies. One could say that it is a socio-political reaction against anti-Gypsy feelings and policies. Acton considers the history of Gypsies in Europe as a tale of two genocides, in the sixteenth century (the beginning of what he calls "anti commercial nomadism") and in the twentieth century (the vanishing of that kind of life). In between, a kind of overall Gypsy identity developed, although, as Acton points out, by the late nineteenth century West European Gypsies often hardly knew there were Gypsies in other countries. "They tended to insist that only their own immediate associates were 'True Gypsies' and all others were half-breeds or imitations. On the other hand, if they were dealing with *Gaje* (non-Gypsies) who they believed to be prejudiced against Gypsies, it might well be more convenient to insist that in fact they were only travelling traders, who should not be persecuted as though they were 'Gypsies'."⁴⁰

According to Acton's line of reasoning, the Romani nationalism of the 1960s attempted to get rid of this internal scapegoating (and the scapegoating by society in general) by explicitly seeking to transcend divisions among travelling groups, which were considered as tribal. Romani nationalists accepted the variety of Gypsy or Traveller ethnicities, bypassing the historical differences. This social strategy could succeed, according to Acton, because of the general assumption of European racism that claims to ethnic homogeneity are self-validating. In a way it works like a boomerang: we are one, because they say we are one; so we unite by using that frame. In the end, what is decisive is not present or former cultural similarities, but the common experience of persecution and genocidal racism — taking as fact that this indeed historically happened to all these so-called Gypsy groups.

38 See, for example, T. Acton and G. Mundy, eds., *Romani Culture and Gypsy Identity* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1997).

39 In Willems, *In Search of the True Gypsy*, this relationship between the gathering of academic knowledge and the use policy-makers have made of it through time is the central argument.

40 Acton, "Authenticity", p. 9.

Actually we are talking about an anti-racist movement. In this process of social engineering, reality does not always correspond to the political truth. What Acton *cum suis* wish is this: "Consensus that a common national identity has to be built to under-write common institutions which will be strong and legitimate enough to represent a Romani people internationally, and accept collective reparations similar to those paid to Israel, from states like Germany deemed to be the successor regimes of those who pursued genocide against the Gypsies."⁴¹ This is indeed the only way for Romani activists to reach their goals because international institutions such as the United Nations recognize no other platform to plea for the human rights of minorities. Unfortunately, the International Romani Union faces difficulty in this regard:

To legitimate their interventions, such bodies need the most legitimate possible Romani negotiating partner. In this they are continuously frustrated, because the real difference of interest and ideology of Romani politicians have led to a factionalism which, so far at least, has prevented the building of any financially secure institutional base to which it would be politically possible to pay collective reparations. The Pentecostal Romani churches are notably better organized and self-financed by their members than the Romani political organizations.⁴²

It is all rather confusing, and Acton does not make it any more lucid when he resorts to the work of Nicolae Gheorghe, who suggests that Romani people not present themselves in terms of the ethnic majority and the nation-state, because these entities then have the power to model Romani self-representation. In seeking the status of national minority, Romani politicians may be falling into the trap of fighting on the enemy's territory. That is why Gheorghe advises the Gypsies to "play with" their multiple identities and in that way to question the various demands for authenticity made upon them.⁴³ This brings Acton, at the end of his argument, back to the justification of his acting as an expert witness, speaking in the name of British Gypsies and Travellers. What is the authenticity of his knowledge and why should it be true? As far as it was possible for us to fathom his philosophical contemplations, we understand that ultimately the problem is not the culture of the minority, but the racism of the majority. With this given as a point of departure, Acton dedicates himself to the nationalist cause of the oppressed travelling groups; as a real social engineer, he takes what is useful from different academic approaches. For him, the truth is in acting.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

42 *Ibid.*

43 Nicolae Gheorghe, "The Social Construction of Romani Identity", in Acton and Mundy, *Romani Culture*. This suggestion perfectly matches Stewart's findings on Vlach-Gypsies in Hungary: "For them, identity is constructed and constantly remade in the present in relations with significant others, not something inherited from the past."

On the road that Acton, Hancock, and others take, history is, to a certain extent, manipulated to achieve emancipatory political goals. This strategy, commonly used in ethno-politics, combines the idiom of nineteenth-century nationalism with that of modern anti-racism. It is, in a way, a reaction to the way in which scholars and policy-makers have pursued their political goals in the past.⁴⁴ We list the most important ones: attempts to civilize travelling groups by isolating them; forced assimilation, in colonies, camps, or by putting a stop to travelling in caravans; sterilization; deportation and imprisonment in concentration camps during the Nazi regime. The situation did not exactly change for the better in the postwar period.⁴⁵

Especially in Eastern Europe the social-economic position of Gypsy groups is far from prosperous, if not deplorable.⁴⁶ Not one single government is prepared to oppose the general feeling of the public, which is chiefly dismissive, by undertaking reforms in this area. There seems to be no group of Gypsies willing to mobilize along nationalistic lines. Therefore there is a considerable chance that we will see the plea for tolerance toward groups on the margins of society eventually returning like a boomerang, together with an appeal to their persecution in the past and present. By stressing the contrasts between Gypsies and the rest of society, thereby applying the idiom of nineteenth-century nationalists and folklorists adapted to modern times with mention of a diaspora from the homeland India, malevolent minds have an argument to use against a nation-within-a-nation whenever it suits them.

Back to the Diaspora: A Few Closing Remarks

We return to Cohen's typology of diasporas to conclude that, in the case of Gypsies, Rom, or whatever umbrella term one wishes to use for previously professional itinerant groups, we are left empty-handed. Linguistic research may point toward India as a possible country of origin (nearly a millennium ago) of at least a part of the contemporary Gypsy population. But that does not mean that the Gypsies of this world live in awareness of a homeland from which they once moved or were dispelled and suffer all the traumatic consequences. There is no collective, cherished memory, no developed or documented mythologization of an ancestral home to which they hope to return one day. Furthermore, there is no political or social comeback movement, although the contemporary Gypsy intelligentsia has, for the last quarter of the century, been emphasizing ties with India. They do this, as we saw, to provide their national quest with a historical foundation — the myth of a genesis is inextricably bound up in this — and not to propagate a right to return to the

44 For extensive references to older literature on the subject, see Willems, *In Search of the True Gypsy: Lucassen et al., Gypsies and Other Itinerant Groups*.

45 Gilad Margalit, "Die Deutsche Zigeunerpolitik nach 1945", *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, vol. 4 (1997), pp. 557–588.

46 Max van der Stoep, *Report on the Situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE Area* (The Hague: High Commissioner on National Minorities, OSCE, 2000).

Indian homeland. When we shift our historical focus to ethnic group consciousness, the picture becomes less clear. It is undoubtedly true that so-called Gypsy groups shared an itinerant lifestyle in the past, that there was an ethnic awareness and solidarity within subgroups, and that, at that internal group level, there was a connection due to the common culture, etiquette, and relationships. Another general trait that still exists in the present day is the emphasis on the difference between “us” and “them”, Gypsies versus non-Gypsies. However, in the past, there is hardly any evidence of close ties between the different groups labelled “Gypsies” by the state. Whether Hungarian, German, or English Gypsy groups, they hardly ever seemed to be aware of each other’s existence, let alone to have any sort of common group ideology. It seems as though the awareness of a collective fate developed as a reaction to the Nazi persecution, the history of persecution being the binding principle. To what extent the consciousness of a common language and culture plays a role, as political leaders stress, remains uncertain. The recent history of Gypsy nationalism, an anti-racist movement, as Thomas Acton called it, is certainly gaining ground in non-Gypsy circles. However, it is far less successful in mobilizing its own grassroots support at a national level. The only characteristic of the groups that hide behind the umbrella concept “Gypsies” that complies with Cohen’s taxonomy is a troubled relationship with the host country. Gypsies in Europe have been at odds with the Church and the State since the fourteenth century, but this applies to many itinerant groups. They had to be constantly aware of repressive reactions of the authorities, which, depending on the time and the place, could result in cruel sanctions, disproportionate discrimination, persecution, and banishment.

Our critique of the diaspora concept, however, transcends the Gypsy case. Although Cohen, Safran, and most historians who use the concept make perfectly clear that they reject outright its essentialist connotations and stress its metaphorical and heuristic value,⁴⁷ the danger of primordial notions creeping back is still considerable, especially in the work of politically motivated scholars who identify with such victim groups as Gypsies, Jews, Armenians, and former African slaves. In their publications the idea is often promoted, implicitly or explicitly, that one remains part of an original community and never completely belongs to the community in which one actually lives. In this sense diaspora is a modern label that conceals an old-fashioned way of thinking about race, people, nationhood, and ethnic groups. Finally, it remains unclear what the concept adds to existing notions of migration, networks, ethnicity, and trans-nationalism. Instead, when used in less subtle and nuanced ways than Cohen has employed, the term is confusing rather than edifying and easily leads to the creation of new myths.

47 See also Nancy L. Green, “The Modern Jewish Diaspora: Eastern European Jews in New York, London, and Paris”, in Dirk Hoerder and Leslie Page Moch, eds., *European Migrants: Global and Local Perspectives* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), pp. 263–281; Donna Gabaccia, *Italy’s Many Diasporas* (Seattle and London: UCL Press, 2000).