

Gypsies: idealised rebels or the scourge of society

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It goes without saying that there are no fixed national characteristics, and that these characteristics change over time, sometimes quite radically. For most periods of their history, Americans, for example, have been seen as self-centered, parochial, and pragmatic, exhibiting none of the propensities for imperial drives so important to nineteenth-century Europeans. The situation now is reversed. Europeans, especially Germans, have no imperial ambitions, but the USA has shaken off its isolationism and embraced imperial aggrandisement. While the justification for this policy varies, at least publicly, it is clear that it is closer to that preached by Carl Schmidt than to that of Thomas Jefferson. We see real changes in the country's political behaviour and in the national character, at least of the ruling elite. But there have been cases when the image of particular ethnic groups/nations changed not so much because of real changes in their character or way of behaviour, but because the cultural/political context of the perception of these ethnic groups had changed. This was the case with Gypsies and to some degree Jews, with whom Gypsies could be easily compared.

The images of Jews and especially Gypsies have changed not so much because of real changes in the position of the two groups, as because of changes in the cultural environment in which they are embedded. The purpose of this paper is to show how the images of Gypsies have changed in European discourse. At the beginning of modern European history, Gypsies were seen as a scourge of society, a position they shared with Jews; in recent political/intellectual discourse they have become noble rebels/sufferers. The Gypsies' image will be also be compared to that of the Jews.

The Scourge of Society: Jews and Gypsies as Asocial Groups

Gypsies entered Europe in the fifteenth century, during a time of dramatic change in European society.¹ The core was the disintegration of the old familial structure that had constituted the essence of European feudalism. In the feudal arrangement, the person did not exist as a separate individual but was part of a larger group, such as a peasant commune or monastic order. Most of the European population were tied to the land and could not move from one place to another. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, this structure started to crumble, mostly due to the introduction of the money economy and the emancipation of increasing numbers of peasants. In this new situation, many people had no attachment to a social group or order. They had lost the old feudal attachments, but had not developed the new legalistic values of the modern West. As a result, this period saw not so much the creation of the new capitalist political/social structure as a great push for social meltdown and the eradication of a variety of asocial groups. Armed bandits and vagabonds were among these groups. The fear of these groups was not based on something imaginary. Not only armed mercenaries but even unarmed vagabonds were often the source of crime.

The fourteenth through sixteenth centuries were also a time of great epidemic diseases. The Black Death and syphilis were real scourges of Europe. Gypsies as well as vagabonds could be related to the spread of both crimes and disease. Gypsies were similar to vagabonds in their often asocial proclivities, but vagabonds were usually not related to ethnic categories. In fact, the majority were of the same background as the local population. For Gypsies, asocial characteristics were attributed to them also as a particular ethnic group that looked different from the rest of the population. Especially in Central/Northern Europe, swarthy Gypsies looked quite different from the mostly fair skinned and often blond population.² Similar to other asocial groups, they were to be isolated and expelled, "sent in chains to the galleys" and sometimes the colonies.³ Furthermore, Gypsies dressed distinctly differently, and had no desire for assimilation. Thus, they were permanently fixed in the mind of the public and authorities as a nation of criminals.⁴ In a broader context, asocial behaviour became Gypsies' essential attribute.

Jews were also set aside from the rest of the society. They dressed differently, spoke a different language, and had no intention of being assimilated. Jews and Gypsies in fact constituted one imaginary body, a nation of non-productive parasites with international dimensions. They lived all over Europe, and were seen as connected to each other. This collective asocial body had two parts. The Jews, the

aristocracy, used their cunning, unbounded greed, and support of each other to engage in chicanery and fraud to fleece the naïve and good Christians. Gypsies, the lower part of this body, took advantage of the rest of the population through direct stealing.

Gypsies and Jews were also an alien metaphysical/religious entity. Jews again occupied the role of leader, the upper part of this imaginary body. Jews were not only non-Christian, but anti-Christian. The very existence of Judaism confronted Christianity, since it was emphasized in medieval lore and later that Jews had been mortal enemies of Christ since the time of Christ's life and suffering, and were openly related to Satan. Gypsies belonged to the lower part of this metaphysical/religious body; they were simply not Christians and set a bad example that one could live outside Christianity. There paganism was also related to immorality: promiscuity, love of stealing, and making money on sorcery, fortune-telling, and so forth. This parasitic connection started to be broken as the image of Jews slowly improved, at least in some European countries. The reason for this change was the continuous development of capitalism.

Gypsies and Jews: Moving in a Different Direction

In the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, the middle class that would benefit from capitalism's money-oriented economy was still a marginal group. Both feudal lords and peasants saw capitalism as an evil that undermined the foundation of their socioeconomic existence. The situation started to change by the seventeenth century, at least in European countries such as Holland, where the middle class ruled and their values dominated society. Jews had mostly been abhorred as usurers, as the people of money – remember Shakespeare's Shylock. As soon as money and making of money were legitimised, Jews as people of money also acquired legitimacy.⁵ On the other hand, seventeenth-century capitalism made society even more intolerant of vagabonds and other asocial groups. It was not accidental that the seventeenth century became a period of what Foucault called a "grand confinement." Institutions such as work houses proliferated, where marginal elements of society were incarcerated and compelled to work. The organisers had in mind that marginals must be removed from normal society and compelled to generate profit, and also that work houses would re-educate them, instilling the work habits essentials to moral regeneration.

In this new arrangement, the fate and image of Jews became more and more separate from that of Gypsies. While Jews were fully incorporated (but not fully accepted) into the fabric of European society, at least in the same way as the Huguenots in Catholic France after the abolishing of the Edict of Nantes, the Gypsies continued to be stigmatised and persecuted. This general negative approach to Gypsies, as a group closely associated with the asocial underworld, not integrated into society, explains the approach of the protagonists of the Enlightenment to Gypsies. It was distinctly different from their approach to Jews.

The Enlightenment approached the Jews with caution and discovered among them negative characteristics different from those of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Jews were criticised not because they made money, but because more than gentiles they rejected "Enlightenment" and continued to segregate themselves from the rest of society. However, it was believed that Jews could be eventually "enlightened" and fully accepted into society. The conversion of some Jews to Christianity, especially mainstream forms such as Catholicism in France, was seen as a form of "Enlightenment," a sign of final incorporation into the mainstream.

The situation with Gypsies was absolutely different. They were firmly placed in the underworld, outside any social contract, and were persecuted in both France and the rest of Europe.⁶ Along with vagabonds, they were locked in work houses, sent to galleys, and deported to the colonies. In some countries, Gypsies were enslaved and kept in bondage almost to the middle of the nineteenth century.⁷ This viewpoint could be seen in the attitudes of the protagonists of the French Revolution, very different from their approach toward Jews. Following a long trend, starting in the seventeenth century, Jews were finally incorporated into French society. They became, at least in the eyes of the law, the same as other Frenchmen. They simply professed a different religion; from this perspective they were similar to Protestants. Gypsies were approached in the same way as asocial elements, and the French Revolution had little appreciation for these groups.

It was true that the first act of the French Revolution was the liberation of the Bastille's inmates. It was also true that quite a few of the inmates could be seen as common criminals. Yet, in the eyes of the

revolutionaries they were political prisoners locked up because of their beliefs and opposition to royal despotism. Those who were defined as common criminals, purely asocial elements, were treated with conspicuous brutality. During the September Days of 1792, the Parisians engaged in mass lynching of the inmates of the city prisons. While some of those who perished in these lynchings could be regarded as political prisoners, the majority were common criminals and prostitutes. The fact that some were petty thieves and teenage boys did not save their lives. Society had a strong anti-criminal, anti-marginal attitude. Gypsies were affiliated in the public mind with these asocial groups, so it was not surprising that the Revolution did not legally emancipate Gypsies in the same way as French Jews or Protestants.

The period that followed the French Revolution and Napoleonic era is usually called the Romantic reaction. There was an approach to Gypsies specific to the era. The cultural image of Gypsies became absolutely divorced from reality, and a new, positive image emerged in motley literary discourse. Gypsies were transformed into noble sufferers, victims of oppression, broadly interpreted as civilisational control as such.

Gypsies as Romantic Heroes

In the first half of the nineteenth century, capitalism continued to develop in Western Europe and society acquired what Durkheim called "organic solidarity," marked by the continuous process of societalisation. The basic principles of societal interaction were shared not just by the middle class, but by increasing numbers of workers. Workers became proud to belong to the "honest poor" who earned their daily bread by working rather than stealing. Violence definitely remained part of daily life. Brawls were common, and class conflicts erupted into deadly confrontations, as in France in 1848. But violence, especially with deadly weapons, in solving personal problems became more infrequent.

Brothels flourished. Yet the brazen sexuality common in earlier centuries, when patronizing brothels was as legitimate and common for all members of society as visiting the public tavern, became less common among the middle class. The virtue of family life was upheld. There was much more concern with clothes and with personal hygiene. There was a continuous "civilising process" as defined by Norbert Elias.

This normalisation of society was a result not just of direct state repression. The Hobbesian Leviathan of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but also of internal processes in society itself. Society became essentially more self-policed, relegating crime and asocial behaviour to the fringe, both socially and spatially. Crime and asocial behaviour became more associated with "bad" segments of the city. This process of decriminalisation, combined with the continuous negative approach to crime and marginals among the majority of the population, had lessened the fear of violent criminal activity (e.g., banditry) so strong in previous centuries. Bandits, real outcasts, started to be moved from the realm of real life to the cultural imagination. Intellectual trends helped to transform cultural images of bandits/outcasts into noble heroes. The image of Gypsies was incorporated into this new image of outcasts. Consequently, they became not villains, as in previous periods, but noble fighters against injustice, in this case the very rule of society.

The praise of Gypsies as heroic rebels was due not only to the marginalisation of violent crime, but also to trends in Romanticism that related oppression to the very existence of society. Romanticism, like any other major intellectual trend, was a controversial phenomenon with many, often mutually exclusive elements. For example, the post-feudal, Enlightenment society, regarded by most of its philosophers as the bright future, was distinctly individualistic, a society where individuals were free from oppressive autocracy and church. Individualism was not seen as a reason for asocial behaviour but as the foundation of a nearly harmonious society. But many intellectuals of the Romantic era had different views on individualism. Nineteenth-century European society demonstrated to them quite a different side of individualism, in which the emancipated individual became either a hapless victim of capitalist society or a predator himself. The familistic feudal society was seen in quite a different light, as a society of mutual help and true solidarity. From these images of medieval times emerged the first socialist doctrines. This side of Romantic thought is well known. For us, however, another trend in Romantic thought is more important.

According to the intellectual trend, the creation of modern capitalist society, modern democracy, did not liberate the individual. On the contrary, it created the conditions for total enslavement of the individual by

society. This vision of democracy as a controlling institution could be seen in some visions of the USA. Alexis de Toequeville, who visited America at the beginning of the nineteenth century, discovered that American democracy had led to a situation where the individual came under strict control of society. The same idea was preached by Alexander Hertsen, the seminal Russian author. Hertsen proclaimed that while in Russia the Czarist secret police controlled the lives of individuals, society itself played this role in America.

In this context, the alternative was not a return to the collectivistic society of the Middle Ages, but a revolt. This revolt was directed not against institutions such as royalty and church (as in previous periods), but against society itself. Thus, decline of fear of violent crime and the view of society as oppressive merged together and produced the idiosyncratic image of noble outcast which was so characteristic of the Romantic era.

The outcast as rebel discarded all values of society. They had neither a permanent job nor a permanent place of residence. They had no stable family and led a rather loose sexual life⁸ because they assumed that people must live together only if they had a real attachment to each other, not because of dry legalistic formalities. Gypsy life can be easily incorporated into this image of noble bandits/outcasts as rebels. Gypsy outcasts were transformed into heroes. One good example of such an approach to Gypsies is an image of Gypsies in Aleksandr Pushkin's poem "Tziganc," (Gypsies) where Gypsies lived the life of "noble savages." They did not enjoy the amenities of civilization, but did not suffer from civilization's problems: restraint and artificiality. Their love affairs did not preclude personal tragedies, but they were much better than the artificial, restrained sexuality of civilization. This Gypsy image of a noble rebel and equally "noble savage" or peasant unspoiled by corrupt civilization not only had no relationship to real life, but was also absolutely foreign to the bureaucracy of most European states, which continued to see all Gypsies as dangerous Vagrants.⁹

As in the previous era, the image and perception of Gypsies and Jews were generally quite different. Jews could also be rebels in Romantic discourse, for example, the title character in Karl Gutzkov's play Uriel Acosta. But Acosta was a rebel because of his personal characteristics, not because he was a Jew. In fact, he confronted not gentiles but fellow Jews. In Pushkin's poem, a person became an outcast because he was a Gypsy. As a rebel, he confronted not other Gypsies but outsiders. These differences in cultural construction can be easily explained by the respective positions of Jews and Gypsies. Despite all the problems Jews faced, they were nonetheless incorporated into the mainstream of society in most European countries, whereas the Gypsies remained outside it. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the fates and images of Jews and Gypsies were absolutely different. But the intellectual and political trends that originated at the end of the nineteenth century would make their ultimate faces quite similar.

The Common Fate of Jews and Gypsies as Foreign Race

By the end of the nineteenth century, Social Darwinism was a distinct intellectual trend. Like previous trends, it emerged not only because of scientific discoveries and cultural/intellectual development (e.g., Darwin's discovery) but also because foreign policy: rising tension between European powers and colonial expansion. Social Darwinism implied not only the existence of superior and inferior races, but also various inborn racial characteristics. It had direct implications for the anti-Semitism that remained despite Jewish integration into European societies. Jews' supposed negative characteristics – absolute alienation from the rest of society, greed, and living at the expense of others – were seen as biological attributes.

Social Darwinism also directly influenced the development of criminology, most important Cesare Lombroso's theory on the origin of crime and criminals. According to Lombroso, the term criminal was not a sociological but a biological definition. Criminals were biological mutations, a sort of resurrected prehistoric people with wild instincts that pushed them to engage in crime regardless of social conditions. Biologization of crime and national characteristics in general made it possible to attribute to particular nations negative characteristics that were immutable and biologically fixed. For the first time since the beginning of the modern era the images of Jews and Gypsies became similar. A new type of anti-Semitism emerged, in which Jews were alien to their country of birth regardless of their degree of assimilation. Their greed and exploitative instincts were biologically given. Gypsies became a nation of thieves, parasites who would engage in criminal activities regardless of societalisation. This image

coincided with “a second wave of Roman migration to Western Europe.”¹⁰ This approach in the first half of the twentieth century eventually led to the Nazi policies toward both groups. Both were proclaimed as foreign to Aryans, to society in general. They were to be exterminated in the “final solution” of ethnic cleansing.

The end of World War II and subsequent political and intellectual changes in most of the West led to new images of Gypsies, in many ways similar to those of the Romantic era. These new intellectual trends were directly related to the rise of the student movement which was leftist in essence, decolonization, and the rise of minority movements in the USA that challenged traditional values of Western capitalism. All this created a social/political setting for new cultural trends.

Gypsies as Discourse

The new trends were mostly postmodernist philosophies, specially structuralism and poststructuralism. Structuralism was the most important among these intellectual phenomena. Claude Levi-Strauss, the founder of structuralism, relied on the findings of Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistics. His point was that reality does not define the structure of language and culture; rather language and culture define the nature of real life. This notion was elaborated by an array of French intellectuals such as Foucault, Derrida, Barthes and Lacan. They transformed social reality into “text” that could be interpreted in all imaginable ways. Values and social categories became arbitrary attributions. What was negative for one group could well be positive for another. This theory was applied to groups usually seen as marginal: criminals, the mentally ill, vagrants. The behavioural patterns seen by society as deviant were praised in the postmodernist philosophies of the Left.

There was renewed interest in Gypsies as an object of study. They were still seen as predisposed to various forms of asocial behaviour, but this became a positive attribute. Gypsies joined deviants and criminals as a revolutionary force.¹¹ This approach resembled that in the Romantic era. A major difference, however, was that Gypsies themselves were affected by the interest of outsiders. There was a stirring of Gypsy national consciousness and even an emerging dream to create a Gypsy state, “Romanestan,”¹² quite possibly inspired by the creation of the state of Israel.

By the 1980s and later, it ceased to be popular to praise Gypsies for particular manifestations of asocial behaviour. It became more fashionable to regard certain negative characteristics as manifestations of deep-seated prejudices. Gypsies were viewed in the context of “labelling theory,” which saw those who differed from mainstream society as suffering from stigmatising “labels” arbitrarily attached by conservative ruling elites, ignorant and brainwashed populace, or zombie-type racist vigilantes. As soon as these prejudices disappeared, due to experience, education, and legislation, Gypsies would be completely integrated into European society. This approach is not shared by a considerable segment of society, who continue to view them quite negatively.

Conclusion

Like Jews, Gypsies have existed in two capacities: real and imaginary, with the latter dominating public discourse. To some degree, their fate has been similar to that of the Jews, who also have existed not only in the real life, but also as a subject of cultural imagination. Sometimes Gypsies were presented as born thieves, permanent enemies of society. Sometimes the same Gypsies emerged as noble freedom fighters. In many cases, the images had little or no relationship to reality. It is clear that those who deal with Gypsies often were not so much concerned with real Gypsies as with propagating or implementing their own political agendas.

References

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2. Angus Fraser, *The Gypsies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 69, 123.
3. The issue of expelling Gypsies can be traced to the sixteenth century. See David Mayall, "A Egyptians and Vegabonds. Representations of the Gypsy in Early Modern official androgen Literature," *Immigrants and Minorities*, 16, no. 3, (November 1997): 62, 64; Fraser, *The Gypsies*, pp. 96, 145, 169, 170.
4. Mayall, "Egyptians and Vagabonds," p. 67.
5. Jim MacLaughlin, "A European Gypsies and the Historical Geography of Loathing", *Review Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center* 22, no. 1 (1999): p. 32.
6. Leo Lucassen. "Harmful Tramps: Police Professionalization and Gypsies in Germany, 1700-1945," *Crime History, and Societies* 1, no. 1 (1997): p. 31 Mac Laughlin, pp. 35-37, 40; David M. Crewe, *A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1994), p. 155; Fraser, *The Gypsies*, p. 151-53.
7. Fraser, *The Gypsies*, p. 224.
8. The image of Gypsies as sexually loose seems to have been fully incorporated into intellectual discourse by the eighteenth century. Heinrich Crellmann the eighteenth-century author of a classic text on the Gypsies, stated that Gypsy women were Aunchecked by any idea of shame and ... trained for an offering to sensuality (David Mayall, "The Making of British Gypsy Identities, c. 1500-1980", *Immigrants and Minorities* 11, no. 1 (March 1992): p. 27.
9. David Mayall, "Gypsy Travellers: The Nineteenth-Century Response," *Immigrants & Minorities* 4, no. 3 (1985): p. 54; MacLaughlin, "European Gypsies," p. 44; Lucassen, "Harmful Tramps", pp. 33-39; Fraser, *The Gypsies*, p. 137.
10. Action, "Economic Success and Political Failure," p. 231.
11. One might add that in praising real or imaginary asocial characteristics, these Leftist researchers completely ignored Marx=s quite negative views: A Karl Marx classified the Gypsies as "lumpen proletariat" and considered them counter-revolutionary." Marlene B. Sway, "Simmel's Concept of the Stranger and the Gypsies," *Social Science Journal* 18, no. 1 (January 1981): p. 47.
12. Jean-Pierre Leigeois, "A Gypsies and Their Culture: Cohesion within Dispersion", *Cultures*, 4, no. 2 (1977): p. 98.