



NEW AGE TRAVELLERS

Strangers in a strange land

In what follows my aim will be to present a sort of unofficial history of the new age travellers and their troubled relationship with the British state. By unofficial, I mean an account presented from the standpoint of the marginalised in opposition to official accounts; accounts, that is, which typically represent the interests of the status quo. It does not begin by presuming that the travellers are inherently guilty of the crimes of which they are accused. Nor does it accept that British society has been threatened by the travellers in any tangible way. It begins rather with the assumption that they are a legitimate minority who have found themselves subject to an extraordinary level of persecution from an intolerant and inhospitable society.

The Making of a Folk Devil

Although they had been around since the 1960s, the travellers only came to the attention of the wider public in 1985, specifically in the wake of a ban by English Heritage on their free Festival near Stonehenge. This was an annual event central to the culture of the travellers, but deemed incompatible with the rights of local landowners, the needs of a largely conservative archaeological fraternity, and the world of international tourism promoted by English Heritage. Prior to this ban, no one had really noticed the travellers. They did not seek to court attention, they were rarely mentioned by the press, and remained almost wholly invisible to the wider public.

With the ban on the free festival this changed dramatically. The media, within weeks, managed to turn a progressive and passive subculture into a folk devil represented as posing a terminal threat to the

fabric of British society.

The mechanisms they used had already been deployed on others such as the miners. First, they refused to concede that the travellers had a legitimate culture or voice at all. Second, they ignored any attempt by the travellers to counter this distortion. Third, they imposed their own stereotypes. It is within this context that the stories which subsequently appeared

They call themselves new age travellers, Madam Speaker. In Gloucestershire we call them new age vermin.

Paul Marland MP, in The House of Commons.

have their origin; of work-shy dole scroungers, addicted not only to illegal drug abuse but to a life of crime and deceit.

Such reports were then compounded by stories of horrible offences perpetrated by the travellers: the robberies, the vandalism, the noise, and the dirty children.

And things got worse. For no matter how the travellers reacted they could not escape the stereotype the media had created. As the press had managed to dehumanise the travellers completely, the stage was set for the clampdown that followed.

The Clampdown

It began like this: the travellers, their festival banned, decided, in protest, to march on Stonehenge. They set off, preceded by dancers, accompanied by assorted percussion, and followed by a ramshackle procession of old vehicles. It represented many things, but a terminal threat to the English way of life it did not.

Faced with the prospect of the 'hippy invasion', English Heritage began to take unprecedented measures; steps had already been taken to ban named individuals from proximity to the site. At a cost of some £240,000 the ancient monument was surrounded with a new series of rings, not made of stone this time, but razor wire. This brought to Salisbury plain an atmosphere not unlike that of Fort Apache the Bronx.

Meanwhile the local constabulary made its own preparations. More banning orders were obtained, and plans for a wholesale exclusion zone were initiated.

This prevented anyone resembling (or even vaguely resembling) a traveller from coming within five miles of Stonehenge. This extraordinary tactic, despite the threat it posed to liberal notions of freedom and liberty, was not really that new. Essentially it amounted to a further extension of measures which had already been deployed against the miners the previous year.

The strategy of exclusion was not all that was borrowed. For, in the context of the fearful threat posed by the travellers the local constabulary were substantially reinforced by personnel from other local forces, many of whom had been 'blooded' in earlier struggles such as the infamous Battle of Orgreave during the miners' strike. It was a professional and well drilled 'army' which confronted the travellers that hot summer, a force equipped with the latest in urban control technology and trained in techniques of crowd suppression.

The confrontation, when it came, was subsequently presented as the 'Battle of the Beanfield'. The term 'battle' appeared to signify that the two sides had fought in some sort of equality. Like most things in this bizarre tale, the truth was different. Not that this would be known to the public, particularly given the quality of information they received from a media whose acceptance of the police line was astonishing.

I've been on the road since 1985. I became a traveller because I was homeless. I'd had enough of squatting and staying with friends. Someone offered me a caravan for £50. The next week I bought a £50 motor and I was away. - Traveller Johnny.

My evidence suggests what occurred was not so much a battle but a massacre. Eyewitness accounts indicate just how far the police went. The stories are disturbing, but they were never printed. Film evidence does indicate something of what happened that day. It shows the police systematically attacking the travellers with batons; breaking the windows of their vehicles; it even shows them attempting to drag the terrified occupants through the windows they had smashed. Over a hun-



Simon Hallsworth



REVERSE ORDER

Travellers are being shifted day after day after day after day; once the Bill has become law, we envisage the most frightful time ... people are talking about scum and wasters and riff raff. There's a hate campaign going on.

Anne Bagehot, National Gipsy Liaison Officer, The Save the Children Fund

dred people were arrested. By the time they were released many found their vehicles had been systematically wrecked. Remarkably, no traveller was subsequently prosecuted; all charges were dropped. The travellers did seek restitution claiming wrongful arrest. They pulled back though, frightened that if they lost the case, the police would have established a new precedent for mass arrest.

However, if new Government legislation is adopted, the police will not need such a precedent. The Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill, is geared, amongst other things, to the regulation and eventual elimination of the travellers and their way of life. The process is already well advanced and has continued since the victory at the beanfield in 1985. More free festivals have been banned. The travellers face systematic harassment wherever they go. No one will provide them with temporary sites on which to stay. Such sites that do exist, meanwhile, are in danger of disappearing.

Conclusion

There are two sides to every story. Often there are more. The problem, though, is that rarely in our society is more than one side given a chance to state its case. Unfortunately this is usually the prerogative of the victors. The consequences of this are serious - as this brief account has sought to indicate. It leads not only to a misrepresentation of the true character of our society, it leads to the generation of accounts which obscure, in their bias, actions which we should view as repugnant.

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Dyslexia and criminal justice

When you read, does your eye see the printed word and your brain register it in reverse order? Can you read sufficiently to know which station to get off at when you are on the tube or do you have to count the stops? Can you read Danger, Keep Out? These are just a few of the difficulties that dyslexic people can face.

Between 4-10% of the population are found to be dyslexic. A recent BBC documentary found that a staggering 52% of the 115 offenders tested in prisons and Probation offices showed strong indications of dyslexia. Whatever is made of these statistics the fact is that dyslexia is an hereditary, neurological disorder that most often appears when a person has impaired visual and auditory perception. The problem can be overcome if dyslexia is recognised and diagnosed and the right educational help is offered at the earliest opportunity. If it is not, the slippery slope from frustration at not being able to learn as fast as your contemporaries may lead to truanting which may lead to being on the streets and into petty crime.

As early as the '50's Dr. Macdonald Critchley, a leading neurologist in the dyslexia field, believed that a thorough investigation into the link between dyslexia and crime was needed. Dr Harold Chasty is still fighting for the rights of the dyslexic offender and has often spoken on their behalf in court. He speaks openly about the legal problems of dyslexic offenders, and the way in which the legal process is weighted heavily against them. He cites the example of dyslexic offenders

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who have been known to sign statements they cannot read.

Further, because of their difficulties in sequencing and following conversations, they believe they have said one thing when another has been actually recorded in statements, which the dyslexic offender

may sign without understanding.

Dyslexics do have problems with short term memory sequencing and perception, and can interpret things incorrectly. This Dr Chasty readily admits does not excuse their crime, but does mean that they may be disadvantaged in the criminal justice process, which needs to be aware of the problems associated with dyslexia and anti-social behaviour.

Judge McGee, himself a dyslexic working in Courts in the USA, talks openly on television both in the States and in this country about a minority of the general population, but a large proportion of the criminal population who are dyslexic. There is an urgent need to recognise this and act by diverting dyslexic offenders onto special learning programmes. This is exactly what Andrea Mason, District Attorney in Baltimore, USA has pioneered. All first time young offenders are screened for dyslexia and those found to be dyslexic and who are willing to respond to treatment are offered a 9 month programme of special teaching carried out by trained volunteers as an alternative to sentence. If they complete the programme successfully without committing further offences the case against them is dropped. The scheme is so successful with the courts that other programmes in New York and Louisiana have been set up.

Last November, a conference, Dyslexia: a Sentence? was held in central London and attended by over 100 people from the criminal justice system. These included magistrates, probation officers and the police, but lawyers and judges were sadly absent. Nonetheless it was the first conference of its kind in this country and Channel 4 news covered the issues.

Probation Services such as ILPS are also taking an interest and proposals for intervention have been made. The proposed scheme would train probation officers to recognise dyslexia in offenders, and arrange for referral on for diagnosis and special teaching.

Juvenile crime is high on the political agenda. The fact that undiagnosed dyslexia could be one of the reasons for some offenders' behaviour has not been given the serious attention that it warrants.

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