Romanies, gypsies, travellers or nomads

Colin Clark and Alan Dearling ask what's in a name.

Introduction

'Now the first thing we have to say is that people have got to stop being sentimental about so-called travellers. There are relatively few Romany Gypsies left, who seem to be to able to mind their own business and don't cause trouble to other people, and then there are a lot more people who masquerade as travellers or Gypsies, who trade on the sentiment of people, but who seem to think because they label themselves as travellers that therefore they've got a licence to commit crimes and act in an unlawful way that other people don't have....In the past there has been rather too much toleration of travellers and we want to see the police and local authorities cracking down on them...Many of these so-called travellers seem to think that it's perfectly OK for them to cause mayhem in an area, to go burgling, thieving, breaking into vehicles, causing all kinds of other trouble including defecating in the doorways of firms and so on, and getting away with it, then their behaviour degenerates.'

(Jack Straw, Home Secretary, in an interview with Annie Oathen on Radio West Midlands, 22/7/99)

In the wake of the furore surrounding Jack Straw's comments, the Traveller organisation, Friends and Families of Travellers (FFT) made a formal complaint under Part III of the Public Order Act 1986, contending that the above statements constituted grounds for 'incitement to racial hatred'. Some reports dismissed the Home Secretary's remarks as 'stereotypical tripe' (Clark, 1999:14) whilst others congratulated him for taking a 'bold stance' (Ann Widdecombe, BBC Radio 4, 19 August 1999). Yet, what Straw said is indicative of the 'problem' which Gypsies and Travellers are seen to pose in relation to racial/ethnic tolerance and basic human and civil rights throughout Europe as we move into the new millennium. The Travelling community, as well as those working with them in the 'voluntary' sector and those academics working in the Romani/Traveller Studies field, have long been grappling with the pros and cons of defining the scope, nature and composition of the Gypsy and Traveller communities. Who exactly are they? How do they differ, in terms of culture and economy? The reality is that throughout this century, *all* Travellers, whatever their birthright, have been labelled as 'criminals', 'deviants', and 'vagabonds'. This nomadism renders them as inherently 'anti-social', in other words, they are not 'house-dwellers'. Since 1989, Romanies from Central and Eastern Europe have been a source of much fascination and discussion in Western European newspapers. Usually this has focused on the reasons for their emigration from their former homelands, which in Britain peaked during October 1997 when groups of Romanies arrived in Dover seeking refugee status and political asylum (Clark, 30/10/97:8). Some of the worst examples of the economic, political and social disenfranchisement of Romanies during 1997 occurred in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. For example, the Slovak government introduced tough welfare reforms (The Times, 20/10/97: 5) and certain local authorities (such as the authority controlling the town of Usti nad Labem) in the Czech Republic were building walls in order to keep Gypsies separate from the 'white' Czech population. Fortunately, by late November 1999 the Usti wall had come down. The Czech central government, which had been internationally embarrassed enough by the 'Gypsy Wall', insisted it was an 'inappropriate' measure (The Guardian, 24/11/99:19).

The flow of asylum seekers to the UK has just been the tip of the iceberg of course; approximately 6,000, out of an estimated population of 4-5 million Romanies in Central and Eastern Europe. Harassment from neo-Nazi gangs exacerbated the problems faced by Romanies and Sinti in Germany, which received groups of Romanies from Romania in 1992. Despite this media attention and public interest, academia and other 'concerned parties' have been rather slow to respond and take up the challenge against the blatant racism and hostility that has been evident during this period. Why? - because they are 'just Gypsies'? Partly, we think, it is concerned with the acceptability of racist anti-Gypsy sentiment in Europe, but this only takes us so far. We contend other important factors are at play.

Accommodating nomadism

For a progressive future we need to, as McVeigh (1997: 24) powerfully puts it, 'begin to think creatively about ways in which the continued difference between sedentary and nomad can be rendered less antagonistic.' It is now important to facilitate a serious discussion between those parties who seem to be either 'for' ethnicity and those who are 'for' nomadism. In doing so we need to recognise the fact that Gypsies in most Western European countries, whether travelling or settled, are 'nomads'. This is not just a 'state

> **"The most significant development in criminal justice in the last decade was the punitive chain reaction following Labour's sacrifice of principle for expediency on law and order after 1992."**
>
> *Professor David Downes, Director, Mannheim Centre for the Study of Criminology and Criminal Justice LSE.*

of mind', but often their economic status and social identity is defined and mapped-out by their traditional nomadic life-style and culture, even when, out of choice or through paternalist policies of social inclusion and normalisation, they are permanently or temporarily sedentarised. For this reason, it is perhaps through their predisposition towards nomadism, rather than (or as well as) their ethnic identity, that they are perceived as a threat by states and governments. During communism in Central and Eastern Europe, it was the wheels of the bow-topped wagons that the authorities removed; nomadism was a powerful symbol and metaphor of movement and independence from the state.

In terms of acceptance as an ethnic grouping by the governments of the world, Gypsies and Romanies have had their own internal 'signifiers' of identity. Are they one ethnic group, Romani, or many?: Tsiganes in France; Zigeuner in Germany; Ciganyok in Turkey; Gitanos in Spain; Ejiftos in Greece; Farao Nepek in Hungary; Woonwagenbewoners in Holland, Minceir in Ireland - then there are the Sinti, the Manouches, the Jenishe - it is a long and complex list that is defined by both Romanies and outsiders. The central question is whether ethnicity in terms of racial groupings is the most helpful and inclusive way in which Europe's (and indeed the world's) travelling population should identify itself.

Moving on

As Year 2000 arrives, all groups who travel are under both physical and legislative attack. It is an appropriate time to rethink narrow and ethnically exclusive definitions of who is a 'Traveller' and who is 'Romani'. So often, these subtle 'ethnic' differences, in the eyes of the law, have rendered one group as 'pure' and the others

as 'half-castes', unworthy of legislative protection (Kenrick and Clark, 1999:90-91). At the very least it appears to be divisive and perhaps even flawed; by behaviour, dress, language and social codes, Travellers are already a culturally and socially diverse grouping. So, it seems reasonable to call into question the efficacy of the Romani and Traveller community trying to adopt measures of 'true' ethnicity rather than taking nomadism (perhaps as well as ethnicity?) as the basis for a combined campaign for human rights. It may be prudent, instead, to argue for the 'Right to travel - right to stop - the right to a place to stay without constant fear of persecution because of their lifestyle' (FFT mission statement). This places questions about human rights and social justice at the heart of the matter.

This is, of course, not to make light of the idea of 'ethnic difference' and the perceptions/actuality that individuals and groups have of their common ethnic identity. Likewise, we acknowledge that 'ethnic nomads', such as Gypsies, do not necessarily escape racism by moving into a house. Racist graffiti can still be daubed on walls. However, in an age when European legislation makes little distinction between the travelling 'ethnic nomad' and 'nomad' we argue that the immediate priority is to challenge ideas around private/public space and the notion that, somehow, 'true ethnic' nomads are more deserving of civil and human rights than the 'undeserving' gaujo (non-Gypsy) nomads.

For example, the new Travellers of the UK have themselves now spread out across Europe with particular congregations in Spain, France and Portugal. (Dearling, 1998). They only have a 'history' of some thirty years having evolved out of the festival scene, squatting, and environmental protest. As with

Gypsies in the year 2000, they have a range of customs and lifestyles and they are adapting to the societies they live in. It may be that the new Travellers living in benders, tipis, vans and permaculture plots throughout Europe, are yet another section of the community that non-Travellers need to demonise; it is their nomadism that is the 'problem'.

Nomadism as the uniting 'identity'?

At a personal level, we frequently find ourselves caught in the middle; between the campaigning organisations working within the different Traveller and Gypsy communities, and the academic worlds of Traveller/Romani studies. We in no way wish to discredit the significance of the Romani/Gypsy identity, its history or its culture - far from it - but at the same time we hope that Gypsy activists and leaders and indeed those involved within the Traveller/Romani scene will see value in an 'inclusive' approach towards all those who wish to lead a travelling life, or indeed, all people who choose to develop a range of positive cultural identities and lifestyles. Gypsies and Travellers need to be supported in their assertion of human rights, rather than resorting to potentially destructive divisions within the Travelling communities based on notions of 'pure' racial identity and ethnicity (but, crucially, not at the expense of retaining 'difference').

The rationale for Gypsy/Romani groups obtaining recognition as 'national ethnic minorities' in countries like Slovakia, Romania and Hungary has been based on the belief that this will give the minority population a higher ethnic 'rung on the ladder' towards acceptance and status within those nations. As a strategy, this could be flawed and naive, and might further stigmatise Gypsy identity. It would still leave the Roma as second or third class citizens in many European states, facing discrimination reinforced by their separate identity; their 'otherness'. One argument is that the Roma should adopt a strategy for inclusion as a 'transnational' community. This seems a more likely way to combat social exclusion, persecution and harassment. Indeed, it would be preferable if all Travellers were

regarded as equal members of the human species vis-a-vis house-dwellers. This would redefine the dominant arguments which are based primarily on 'race' and ethnicity and re-conceptualise the debate in terms of nomadism as well. At present, this division is driving apart those who should be fighting on the same side, but are not, because of bitter 'ethnic' splits and arguments. Let us put our heads together and try to start a new debate focusing on nomadism, as well as ethnicity.

∎

*Colin Clark is a lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne and **Alan Dearling** is a Research Fellow at the University of Luton, Centre for the Study of Crime, Neighbourhood and Social Change.*

References:
Chaliand, G and Rageau, J-P, 1997, *The Penguin Atlas of Diasporas*, London: Penguin.
Clark, C, 1997, *'No Sanctuary for Romanies'*, The Newcastle Journal Newspaper, 30 October, p8.
Clark, C, 1999, 'Why I believe... Jack Straw's Comments About Gypsies are 'Stereotypical Tripe'', *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 27 August, p14.
Dearling, A, 1998, *No Boundaries: Britain's new Travellers on the road outside of England*, Lyme Regis: Enabler Publications.
Kenrick, D. and Clark, C, 1999, *Moving On: The Gypsies and Travellers of Britain*, Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press.
McVeigh, R, 1997, 'Theorising Sedentarism: the roots of anti-nomadism' in Acton, T (ed), *Gypsy politics and Traveller identity*, Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press.