

The origins of Gypsies/Roma/Travellers: Limitations of a standpoint theory approach.

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Abstract

Using the exonym currently politically correct in UK translations of EU policies, the author discusses the extent of possibilities for explaining theories of the origins of Roma/Gypsies/Travellers by the social interests and situation of the theorists. In doing so, he will take account of his own experience of being asked by Travellers/Roma/Gypsies to offer or defend a position “as a Gaujo/Gajo”, or “as an academic” or “as a sociologist” or “as a Christian”, and of debates in the June 2008 UK government-funded Gypsy Roma and Traveller History Month.

Introduction – The shifting Rules of the Game

Just as most Irish Travellers in England start their account of their own ethnicity by insisting they are not Gypsies, I will start this paper by saying I am not a historian, even though the paper is *about* history. I am not assessing the evidence in favour of this or that hypothesis about the origin of the Roma, but rather trying to gain an idea about how the *rules* for what counts as evidence, and the meaning of what counts as a statement about the origin of what kind of an entity, may be changing.

In doing this, I also wish to warn, I am not saying that history is *just* a socially-constructed mythical back-projection of current realities. Every atom in the universe, and, within and between atoms, every material particulate and force, has a precise spatial and chronological locus going back to any date we can imagine, and whatever historical narrative we adopt, “nor all thy Piety nor Wit Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line, Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.” (Fitzgerald, 1859). Of course, historical narratives *are* socially-constructed mythical back-projections of current realities, focused by the interests, the standpoint, of the narrator; but they only effectively support those interests if they meet inter-subjective criteria of plausibility – of whether the narrative seems likely to be close to the real events to all the stakeholders in current historical debates. Successful historical revisionism is about increasing plausibility; it is only unsuccessful, implausible revisionism, such as that of holocaust deniers, that is reviled. But those criteria change, and perhaps grow more, rather than less demanding, as new stakeholders join the debates.

The author’s standpoint?

These reflections were provoked by the request of a friend, a Rom translator, poet and educational social worker whom I greatly respect, to write a paper “as a Christian” on the origins of the Roma. At one level, this is an outrageous request. My religious faith surely has no bearing on the truth or falsity of any hypotheses about the origins of the Roma. Am I perhaps supposed to come up with a narrative that is a riposte to those who are emphasizing the role of substantial Muslim populations from the earliest Romani history up until the present? Is my religious faith supposed to act as an extra guarantee of sincerity (or good faith) to co-religionists? Or am I merely supposed to select and highlight those developments which point to the grace of God and what Christians would call his redemptive power in history

(things which I am not so shy about doing in a Christian, or even an inter-faith religious setting.) ?

At another level is is a challenge to examine my own intellectual practice critically. Is it really the case that as scholars we can look just at the facts in such an impartial way that no-one could guess our religious beliefs or non-beliefs? If I find the work of the Dom Research Centre in Cyprus, founded as a religiously neutral scholarly institute by Baptist missionaries, rather engaging and sympathetic, while Professor Yaron Matras finds them rather suspicious, is that just down to the difference between his sceptical positivism and my philosophical relativism, or is the fact that I am a Baptist, and he is not, at least relevant? And does it make any difference if I ask that question here in the US, where the last two presidents called themselves Baptists, as opposed to in England, where Baptists are an eccentric and historically persecuted minority of relatively low social prestige?

Origins as a question of faith ?

However much we seek to put religion and (in the case of the GLS, also politics¹) to one side, the brute fact remains that if our religions involve not merely moral orientations and comfortable rituals, but also belief systems, then those belief systems contain numbers of assertions of fact which are logically incompatible with assertions of facts in other religious or anti-religious belief systems.

Ever since the emergence of differing but co-existent religions, however, it has been argued that a moral consensus can be established within which these differences of belief are irrelevant. Perhaps still the most elegant and concise statement of the position that today we call “methodological atheism” is Confucius’ injunction (Waley, 1938) to the educated person to pay respect to religion “as if it were true”. Both methodological atheism and Confucius’ original saying, are imperative utterances, not statements, which neatly side-step issues of truth and falsity. They both assume, however, that that the ontological content of acceptable religious assertions of fact can all equally underpin the practical culture of life, and I shall argue that this is only sometimes true. In particular it may not be true when assertions about the origins of ethnic groups contain faith-like assertions about ethnic identity.

Built into any kind of Christian understanding of the world as created by God is the conception of there being a unitary human history. Whether or not we believe in the literal historical Adam, we Christians are deeply reassured by scientific validation of a mitochondrial Eve; in every mainstream version of Christianity, humanity shares a common ancestry; throughout the New Testament comes the assertion that our common humanity is more important than our divergent nationalities or ethnicities, and implicit in that is the suggestion that we share our origins. In that sense, any historical narrative about the origins of particular peoples suggests that that origin is only partial rupture; “the ancestor of his people” always himself had ancestors, save Adam and Eve who are the ancestors of us all.

¹ Here again social background may be telling. Over the last two centuries, in English-speaking “polite” society (i.e. the dominant class) one of the guarantees of the non-recrudescence of religious wars, and the peaceful transfer of power in a parliamentary system is the convention that ‘polite conversation’ eschews the subjects of politics and religion. As someone hailing from a hopelessly aspirational lower-middle class family within which politics and religion were the most important things we ever discussed, I maybe never really learned the lesson that for social advancement the most important thing is knowing when to keep quiet, and when notions of truth are irrelevant. After all our gracious Queen is an Anglican in England, but a Presbyterian in Scotland, thus deftly demonstrating the irrelevance to the maintenance of social order not merely of scientific, but of any postivistic notion of the consistency of truth.

This mirrors the narrative about the origin of Christianity itself. Christianity, like Buddhism and Islam, and unlike Judaism and Hinduism, has an identifiable historical origin as a new religious movement, rather than being part of the culture of one particular ethnic/national group. In each case, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism embody in their historical narrative a critical account of how they relate to their predecessor religious traditions which continue alongside them, differentiated from them.

Embedded within my philosophical approach, as I argued in my (1998) inaugural lecture, is a Berkleyan ontology (Berkeley, 1734) which suggests that that consistency in the existence of things is assured by their presence in the mind of God. This faith position may not be a *logical* component of my epistemology – but it must at least make me psychologically less worried about epistemological uncertainty. So, I am not too worried to admit that as a Christian I may be looking for particular elements to satisfy me in an origin narrative which combine also to give and conform to explanations of the diversity of humanity within its unity. I am not looking for narratives of how God made “us” or anyone different from everyone else. I am not surprised that the explanations offered by origin narratives are only ever partially satisfying.

A Romani standpoint?

So far, so unoriginal. Feminists have long taught us that a woman’s standpoint may be different, and in doing so have rewritten the social and historical sciences over the past fifty years. The question that then arises is, to what extent is there a distinct Romani standpoint, creating a distinct Romani historiography.

June 2008 was Gypsy/Roma/Traveller History month in England and Wales. The idea of such a month, following the example of Black History month, had been floated for some time by some of the smaller Gypsy/Traveller organisations. One London TES leader, Rocky Deans, had been organising a local Black History Month for some time. Towards the end of 2007 the section of the Department of Children, Families and Schools concerned with Traveller Education found that it had a surplus in its budget that had to be disposed of before the end of the financial year in April 2008. The civil servant primarily in charge, Sheila Longstaff put out feelers, and with the support of Arthur Ivatts, the long-serving retired HMI (Her Majesty’s Inspector) who now acts in a consultancy role, the Schools Minister, Lord Adonis and senior leaders of county Traveller Education Services were consulted. The Leeds Traveller Education Service leader, Peter Saunders, who had a track record of organising successful regional exhibitions and events, agreed to co-ordinate an effort to put Gypsy/Roma/Traveller History into schools with a budget of £50,000, and Lord Adonis provided a strong letter on behalf of the government endorsing the History Month for June (the last month of the School Year, on the expectation that “the community” would implement the month. In order to meet this expectation of strong community involvement, Peter Saunders and Sheila Longstaff² called a national meeting at the DCFS headquarters in London to which all Local Authority Traveller Education Services were invited to send a representative (expected to be a teacher) who had to bring with them “a member of the [Gypsy/Roma/Traveller] community.”

Involving the Community

² Sheila Longstaff was replaced in office by Graham Pepper early in 2008, following the general civil service principle of rotating civil servants in their assignments so as to give them a variety of experience – and to ensure they don’t “go native”. In this context the imperialist connotations of the phrase “go native”, to which I usually object, are probably appropriate.

This method of involving the community was, I think, a valiant attempt to try to gain GRT representation but avoid becoming entangled in the disputes between Gypsy organisations, who have a tendency to accuse each other of not being representative, and limit the number of people attending the national steering committee to a reasonable number whose travel expenses could be financed from the DCFS budget. It was almost bound to backfire.

Some of the GRT community members invited were members of Gypsy organisations, and urged that their organisations be invited in their own right. Some were not, and were denounced as unrepresentative those who had been invited. While representative of organised English Gypsies, Irish Travellers and immigrant Roma mostly accepted that the month was about all of their communities, they were not prepared to be represented by members of other communities. Some of those invited by TES representatives were, like myself (then secretary of the Gypsy Council as well as the GLS) and Sylvia Ingmire, co-ordinator of the Roma Support Group, Gaje working with Roma/Gypsy/Traveller organisations – and we in turn often sought to cover our backs by involving GRT members of the organisations we came from,³ so that we should not be accused of being Gaje speaking for Roma, or Gaujos speaking for Gypsies, or Buffers speaking for Pavees. The junior civil servants charged with creating an accurate list for security purposes of these attending a meeting in a ministry building went frantic with irritation as the list changed again and again, and then on the day, the security guards became frustrated as people on the list failed to show, and several not on the list turned up.

Meanwhile it became apparent no-one had invited what should have been the most obvious GRT organisation of all, the Romani and Traveller Family History Society. Founded a little over ten years ago by the redoubtable Janet Keet-Black, this organisation maintains a dues-paying membership of between 600 and 700 members, the vast majority of GRT descent. It has built up a dedicated, stable elected committee of whom only one – Robert Dawson – has been substantially involved in other Gypsy politics. This committee has developed considerable expertise in bringing together and helping both its two major constituencies – Travellers still embedded in their community who want to track down relatives – and settled folk who have found Gypsies in their family tree and don't know what to make of them. In times past, encounters between people in these situations have been marked by fear on one side and contempt on the other, Travellers regarding people who “have just found a Gypsy grandmother” as inauthentic wannabes, and the latter, still victim of the host-communities, distrust of Gypsies, wondering whether they have uncovered a hereditary taint.

By supporting each other in being absolutely confident of their own identities, the committee are able to help both sides understand each other – and then to understand how each came to be where they are – to reconstruct an understanding of what it means to be Gypsy which includes both situations. People meet relations they never knew they had. Their descriptions of themselves as a self-help society is spot-on. At their study days, in halls decked with exhibitions of family photos from fairs, markets and hopping field ago, little old ladies, in twin-sets and pearls, who discovered their Romani ancestry late in life pore over copies of 19th century census returns next to middle-aged scrap-dealers, self-consciously old-fashioned in their *diklos*, dealer-boots and wide braces, both lost in a dream of their common ancestors. And together they make the discovery that one cannot make sense of the lives of one's

³ Actually I covered my back by insisting that I was there only as a Professor of Romani Studies, and that all the GRT organisations should be invited in their own right, especially the Romany and Traveller Family History Society.

ancestors without also making sense of the times in which they lived – they progress from family history to general history. And one cannot understand the history of Gypsies/Roma Travellers as human beings like oneself, members of one's own family, without coming to some kind of political understanding of the present.

But as an organisation the RTFHS is resolutely non-political, and determined to keep out of the squabbles of Gypsy politics. Whereas the other Gypsy organisations were left off the invitation list for fear of their political offensiveness, the RTFHS fell beneath the radar because of its political inoffensiveness. Agreement to invite them to take part was only given on 10th March 2008.

A series of rows

All of these contradictions became apparent at the first meeting of the steering group for the history month. A substantial plan of action had already been set in place – it had had to be in order to make a proposal to justify the grant in the first place. This plan was geared to activities that could take place in schools. An art competition was organised, kick-started by specially commissioned work from four artists⁴. The commissioned work and the entries to the competition were to illustrate themes from Gypsy/Romani/Traveller History, and guidance was to be given to schools via notes and special magazine flyers, distributed with the aid of the magazine Travellers Times, so that they could organise their own GRTHM events, possibly with extra financial help from their own local authorities.

There were two major points of criticism at the earliest steering group on 8th February (a) the absence of co-ordinating information so that people could learn of other events around the country and (b) the relative lack of involvement or consultation of GRT organisations and individuals, which was consolidated around two poles, one in the North led by Tommy Collins of 'Justice for Travellers' in Leeds (which since it seemed to be built mostly around personal animosity to Peter Saunders, was relatively ineffectual), and one in the south built around the campaign of Joe Jones of Canterbury and his International Gypsy & Traveller Affairs Southern Network, together with his grandson, the charismatic child prodigy Bluey Jones, who argued that GRTHM should be in April so that it contained Roma National Day on 8th April, rather than being put in June for the convenience of teachers.

In the event, resolving the second problem provided the solution to the first. Jake Bowers, the English Romani journalist fronting "Rokker Radio" was elected to chair the meeting, and it was agreed that some of the budget should be spent on hiring a co-ordinator through Jake's "Gypsy Media company"⁵. After open advertisement the appointee was a genuine heroine, Patricia Knight, the Romani mother who had blown the whistle on the Firlle outrage,⁶

⁴ Delaine LeBas, Damien LeBas, Daniel Baker and Ferdinand Koci..

⁵ The DCFS in the event found extra money to fund the appointment

⁶ Firlle is a little village in that part of the county of Sussex near to Lewes that maintains very strong traditions of public bonfires to celebrate the anniversary of Guy Fawkes' failure to blow up the English Parliament as part of a conspiracy of Roman Catholics. In 2003 the villagers included a mock-up of a caravan with the number-plate P1KEY, and figures of women and children inside, which was then burnt (Townsend 2003). Since the nature of the effigy to be burnt was kept a secret in advance, Mrs Knight took her own children to the event in all innocence. She reported the matter to the police, who arrested all 12 organisers including the local squire. Although they were eventually let off with a warning, she suffered a campaign of abuse and was herself burnt in effigy in Lewes the following year. With quiet determination, and support from other educated Romani people living nearby, she went on living in the village, engaging in quiet community reconciliation, backed by a new and energetic vicar. "Out of the strong shall come forth sweetness!"

someone unusually free of enemies in Gypsy politics. She had good links to the Romany and Traveller Family History Society. In addition several GRT activists around the country took part in regional co-ordinating groups, notably Candy Sheridan who has recently been elected co-chair of the Gypsy Council. In addition, the Roma Support Group⁷ was given extra money by the DCFS to organise concerts in London and Leeds featuring performers from the Polish Romani, English Gypsy and Irish Traveller communities. There was thus created a nucleus of GRT activists who had a personal interest in mounting a critical defence of GRTHM within GRT communities, arguing that there should have been more consultation, and that maybe next year the month should be April, but the opportunity this year should not be missed.

The controversies continued, often with that level of vigorous personal vituperation which always adds spice to the subject matter of political scientists, and which is by no means peculiar to Gypsy organisations. But they spurred on the participants to ever greater efforts. Tommy Collins and his organisation played a full part in events in Leeds, all the better, apparently, to be able to denounce them as a disaster afterwards. The Jones clan and their organisation, by contrast, resolutely boycotted GRTHM events, but organised other successful events in competition, an approach as constructive in effect as it was unreconciliatory in tone.

The official report of GRTHM will be delivered soon by Patricia Knight, and it is not the purpose of this paper to pre-empt it; I have, I hope, written enough to show how history is the plaything of its own peculiar kind of politics. Most of the activities treated history as a kind of given – a pre-determined resource harvestable from books or reliable websites or people old enough still to have been alive when history was still happening, and mentally internalised (“learnt”) and then used – as a source of pride, inspiration or raw material for art work or song lyrics. It is time to turn back to the content of history. How did we do that?

GRT intellectuals and the content of history

On and outside the steering committee I tried to stick up for the role of the university by reminding that before history could be used, it had to be written, and this was not a simple, or uncontested matter, and indeed, in the 15 years since we thought Fraser (1992) had said the last word, it had all actually been falling apart. No, Bahram Gur’s musicians could not possibly have been Roma, and they probably weren’t even musicians, but archers; and no, Livia Jaroka was not actually the first Romani MEP. People would sometimes look at me strangely, as though I was weird to be disputing the truth of a story. Like the religious bigot who refuses to lie to his child about Santa Claus, or the bishop who read the first edition of Gulliver’s Travels, and opined that it was well enough written, but for his part he did not believe a word of it, I was missing the point. In turn, I argued that the power of Black History Month came from the prominent role of revisionist Black historians informing the school activities, and student film-makers and multi-media presentations, de-naturalising, de-inevitablising the stories of slavery and imperialism. The power of history did not actually originate with community activists activating or teachers teaching, but with historians rewriting. So, with the support of the Greenwich Traveller Education Service we set about organising an academic seminar in which, without us actually saying so, all the featured

⁷ The RSG is the largest group working with immigrant Roma. It is chaired by Rosa Kotowicz, a Polish-Lovari Romni, and its co-ordinator is Sylvia Ingmire, an Anglo-Polish intellectual.

academic speakers would themselves be members of GRT communities. The title was “All Change! Recent debates over the history and origin of Gypsies/Roma/Travellers”.⁸

A range of positions

Did the speakers present a specifically Romani view of history and Romani origins to set beside the Gajo theories? On the contrary, the speakers distributed themselves across the spectrum of opinion. The most conservative position, perhaps was taken by the Belorussian Rom, Valdemar Kalinin who in his paper on Roma in Russia, as in his published writings (Kalinin 1994,2000) assumes that Roma are uncomplicatedly an ethnic group of Indian origin, and that variations in their culture are caused by acculturation of the original stock to Middle Eastern and European influences, and that one can therefore determine fairly simply which of the diverse populations on the GRT spectrum are Romani (and a very good clue is whether or not ordinary members of that population claim to be Romani.) The most radical position was taken by an English Gypsy, Brian Belton, who has also been involved in popularising the new Black history for educational purposes (Belton 2007. In his Ph.D.Thesis (redacted into Belton 2005a and b), he broadly follows the line taken by Lucassen et al (1998) and Mayall (, arguing that ethnicity is socially constructed, and the concept of a Gypsies being the Romani ethnic group derived from India is no more than a kind of post-racist tidying up of the narrative developed after the racialisation of Gypsies and the European vagrant stratum crystallised by Grellmann(1783). His position, however, has continued to develop as he has confronted criticism and has blocked more obvious holes in the presentation of his argument. In his presentation at Greenwich he distanced himself to some extent from the Dutch school, emphasising that the root of his argument lay in his own experience of growing up in Canning Town, and the way in which one accepts, rejects or manipulates the stereotypes put upon one, and that the Willems’ social constructionist approach provides a much better way on understanding these notions of origin built into identity than the romantic Gypsyologist tradition. His London audience of teachers and community activists was gripped by the vividness of his descriptions; the Mayor of Greenwich who had come on an official visit, was brought up in the same neighbourhood at the same time and paid emotional tribute to the power and truth of Belton’s picture, including the ambiguous social status of Gypsies/Travellers.

Equally affected was the overseas lead speaker, Ian Hancock, whose own early childhood in the rougher parts of postwar Chiswick and Battersea was not so very different. His paper was a further step in a movement away from the conservative position, a movement first openly signalled by the self-criticism of his 2003 paper (Hancock 2005). Despite some differences (which can be magnified in debate at close quarters) there was a confluence between his current position⁹ and that of Adrian Marsh, who spoke after Hancock. To attempt a very rough summary (which runs the risk of being repudiated by both of them) this position takes a middle position between the conservative ethnicists and the social constructionists. It suggests that the process of original social construction must have happened more or less as the Dutch School suggests – except that the Gypsy identity assumes what is recognisably its current form, at least for the bearers of it, not in the *Deutschsprachgebiet* in the 18th century, but in Anatolia in the 12th century. It posits social construction, (or ethnogenesis,) as a

⁸ Again, I warn that this paper is no more the official report of that seminar than it is of GRTHM as a whole. Damian LeBas Jr. is editing the proceedings for UHP. When his book and Knight’s report on GRTHM are published this paper will be thoroughly superseded.

⁹ It is remarkable how many of Hancock’s critics fail to acknowledge how his position has changed, as though a man should be nailed to his early opinions lest he confuse his readers.

process which must itself be plausibly historically dated, and is not identical to the “racialisation” pointed to be Lucassen et al. (1998) which of course could only take place ideologically after “race” in the conceptualisation of “scientific racism”, had been invented.

The emerging Hancock-Marsh position attempts to use social constructionist theory to answer a question which no version of the conservative position really even posits, except in the most stylised and implausible way, divorced from historical circumstance, which is why Indian language-speakers should have left India and re-grouped in the middle east.

The standard version of the conservative position of traditional Gajo scholars suggests that the word Rom itself is derived from the word Dom. It patterns linguistic evolution on biological evolution (which always diverges and never converges) and suggests that the evolution of ethnic identity follows this same “family tree” pattern of the origin of languages one from another, with no more explanation of the root cause of change and diversity than biology’s own black box: “random mutation”. So Dom are posited as one among the Indian “pariah” groups who moved north along trade routes and ended up in Europe, trading all the way. The fact that Romani has now been demonstrated not to be a derivant of the existing Domari language (Hancock 2005) can be accommodated by suggesting both contemporary Rom and Dom are descendants of proto-Dom who existed in India prior to the 8th century, as though we could simply project back the identities of the last couple of centuries into the remote past.

There is also a Romani nationalist variant of of this conservative position which simply replaces the “pariah” element with a warrior element, of Jats or Rajputs. The picture of a commercial nomadic caste trading its way is replaced by that of a warrior caste rampaging its way.

Revisionist critiques of the conservative position

The problem with both these pictures is that both are fantasy products of the western orientalist mindset that simply fail to grasp their impossibility within the interdependence of caste society. Perhaps I can dramatise the difficulty by reporting a conversation with a Baluch aristocrat, studying in England, who was himself a nomad born in a tent. The difference between his situation and a commercial nomad situation, however, was that his father owned not only all the camels he herded, but all the land across which he herded them, and the villages on the land; and the villagers themselves and the commercial nomads who also travelled the roads were his dependents. He was well acquainted with these latter, who also included Dom musicians and dentists (one of who had circumcised him as a child). So he listened with interest to my answers to his questions about how English Gypsies lived, and at the end posed a question which took my breath away, because it is, I now think, a key question to understanding the last 500 years of European Gypsy history. He said “I don’t understand; how can the Gypsies survive in England with no-one to protect them?”

His father protects his own Dom and other Gypsies as if they were his own family. They are able to go in tiny numbers to trade and earn money because if any man offered them harm, my friend’s father would be bound upon his honour to avenge it. Barth (1961) reports the same of a Gypsy group in Persia; Marsh and I (2007) found the same relationship between Dom and Kurdish notables in south-Eastern Anatolia until those relationships are disrupted by the Emergency, crowding previously rural Dom into the cities. Feudalism essentially consists of relations of loyalty in which service flows in one direction and protection in the

other. Blacksmiths, musicians and horse-traders need protectors; but equally warrior-aristocrats need a whole raft of other people to sustain their life-style.

This critique, defended more fully in Marsh's PhD¹⁰ suggests that Romani emerges as the command language of Hindu militias taken west from India in the first instance by the Ghaznavids, maintaining their Hindu identity to ensure that they did not switch allegiance to any of the other Muslim warlords. Such militias would have been like all medieval armies, a "society on the move", and a Hindu society on the move would include a whole variety of castes of different social standing, including many of the commercial nomadic groups whose skills would be vital to an army; they might have many languages; but the working members of families at least would need to know the command language, and use it for working communication. Their identification as one overall ethnic group would have come only after they were to be seen by other people in Anatolia as a group (even if immigrant) within Anatolian society, as opposed to an external force, and then they would have both looked like *Dom*, (as they still do) and become liable to both the "Egyptian" and "Athinganoi" stereotypes which originated centuries earlier in Byzantine discourses.

Such a critique offers some answers to the "why" questions; the debates over their plausibility will doubtless take several years yet. It also has the effect of disaggregating¹¹ some of the questions which were rolled up into one question within the conservative position which assumes, as it were, that the Gypsy syndrome is a single phenomenon with a single aetiology, that the questions "Where does the Romani language come from?", "Who are the Roma?" and "What is the origin of the Gypsies?" and "Why do the majority (but not all) of the commercial-nomadic groups of northern Europe seem to share a common ethnic heritage?" are different ways of asking essentially the same question." Grellmann (1783) gave the explanation that Gypsies shared common racial characteristics, an answer which by its completeness both validated the question and embedded it, as a single entity, in European discourses. The racist answer has all but collapsed¹², but the question to which it was the answer has gone marching on. There is, no logical reason why the answers to all the questions have to coincide. The Romani language may well have come more from one section of the Roma than another. The historical tendency of commercial nomadic groups to emerge, drawing on a variety of recruits, in societies developing a clear urban-rural distinction, and then taking on distinct ethnic characters of their own, can be observed across the globe (Acton 1995). The ancestors of today's Romani speakers may have included, like today's Romani populations, both those with and those without nomadic cultural traditions. And Romani speakers in 12th century western Anatolia and the Balkans may well have walked into, and even adopted, pre-existing stereotypes such as that of Egyptian fortune-tellers, rather than simply being labelled "Egyptian" through some arbitrary whim of the Greeks. They may even have absorbed smaller populations of *Dom* on whom such labels may already have been settled; to Greeks, Turks and other Europeans they must have appeared very similar, even as *Rom* and *Dom* do to us today. This has the advantage of offering an explanation for what have seemed to be references to *Roma* in Greek sources dating before a time that we imagine the Romani language to have developed. We can see such absorption of a smaller by a larger Gypsy-labelled community at other periods, such as the absorption of small *Rudari* groups by *Romanichals* in England and North America over the past century.

¹⁰ Currently in the process of minor corrections.

¹¹ Hancock's (2005) self-criticism, broadly reiterated in Greenwich this year, is almost a catalogue of these disaggregations.

¹² unless the thugs running Italy manage to revive it.

The remaining speakers at the Greenwich GRTHM seminar did not address the historicity of these positions so much as their consequences for Romani historians and their methodology. Damian Le Bas Jr. is perhaps the only young Gypsy scrap metal dealer recently to have obtained a first class honours degree in theology from Oxford. He drew on his Old Testament studies to examine the ways in which the concept of diaspora could be used by Romani intellectuals to help structure their own historical narratives, not because Romani history is unique, but because Romani history is everybody's history, and we have to use common, inter-subjective concepts to explain our parts in that history to each other.

Janet Keet-Black was the last speaker. She emphasised that the search for family history was a search for realities to replace uncertainty and romantic myth. People were not looking for comforting myths or romantic illusions: they were not seeing Gypsy life from the outside, as exotic, but from the inside, as people like them. That meant that the Romani and Traveller Family History Society had a responsibility to teach people to be rigorous in their research, to triangulate sources, to recognise common errors. Just because they were amateur historians, it didn't mean their research was any less reliable than that of professional academics¹³.

Academic conferences she had attended spoke about Gypsies as if they were objects, spoke down to Gypsies present. The present meeting was different: reasonable, educated people talking about themselves; we could never go back to the way it had been; history could set people free. She introduced Michael Wayne Jones who had been a member of the RTFHS for just a few years. He spoke about how, after not knowing of his ancestry, he had been able, once he knew the Romani connection, with the help of the RTFHS to locate information and he spoke movingly about his forbears, and how this information made things about his parents and grandparents, and their decision to conceal their background, click into place. This was not about any mythical Romani soul; it was about knowing his personal origins, how he and his family had come to be. He was not a different person for knowing this; he was still everything he had been before, but he was able to locate himself, to understand how he came to be who he was in a way not possible before.

He was not claiming some mystic inner knowledge; but he was glad to be able to stand alongside Janet and declare that he too was a Gypsy.

Gegory Kwiek who had deftly and diplomatically chaired the whole session also paid tribute to the sense of common purpose – and then asserted that while he was and would always be proud to be a Rom, he would never ever say that he was a Gypsy. At the same time what he had heard that day enabled him to understand how English Romani people came to assert this so strongly.

Where does all this leave standpoint theory? As we have seen a particular standpoint does not necessarily commit you to a particular theory; the range of theories cross-cuts the range of standpoints. But the arrival of additional standpoints narrows the presentation of those theories; it constantly tightens and refines the conditions under which they can achieve plausibility, because it adds to the questions which must be answered somehow before plausibility can be achieved. Standpoint theory cannot substitute for traditional epistemology; it is not a licence for unanchored relativism; no-one's standpoint gives them the right to declare true just what they would like to be true without the effort of painstaking historical

¹³ She gave as example archival records she had found which disproved a speculation I had made about the origins of the use of the word "Traveller" to describe English Gypsies – an example which is perhaps less than surprising to the GLS members here present who are acquainted with my work and its flaws.

research; its value, as Keet-Black asserted, is the impetus it gives to ever more hard work to free us from dependency on easy answers.

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