In Anglo-Saxon anthropology the study of ethnicity has come to occupy a central role in the positioning of the field vis-à-vis its neighbours – sociology and political science in particular. Ever since the publication of Frederic Barth’s edited collection, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), which itself proposed that the study of ethnicity could lead to a radical shift in the social facts and processes that anthropologists explain, a large part of anthropological research in the modern world has concerned the ways in which ‘ethnic relations’ are structured, represented and politicised. Barth’s foundational writing on ethnicity was in part inspired by his own, doctoral, work among the Swedish Tattare (a Gypsy population), and in a similar fashion today, those who carry out research on Gypsy peoples have the potential at least of transforming social science approaches to ‘ethnicity’. This is not just a matter of addressing this hugely important social and political issue in contemporary Europe, but that the nature of the Romany adaptations provide a deep challenge to cherished social scientific notions of ‘ethnicity.’

In this brief essay I would like to survey the various ways in which anthropologists have approached issues around Romany or Gypsy populations and how those approaches have in turn influenced the broader comparative sociology of ‘ethnicity’. Roma and Gypsies are, I would argue, populations that do not fit. They live for the most part in communities that display the kind of social and cultural homogeneity that was one of the original attractions for anthropologists of working in the relatively ‘undifferentiated’ social settings found in tribal populations. But whatever the idiotic commentaries of journalists and other about their ‘tribal life’ Roma are clearly not representative of the traditional ‘tribal’ model of early anthropology. At the same time, while they form populations with family resemblances to one another, yet they do not form a people. And it is this, above all, that poses the challenge to models of ethnicity burdened by methodological nationalism.
Why did Roma and Gypsies emerge so late as a legitimate field of study?

Although the field of Romany studies is now respectably represented within anthropology and sociology by full time academics in various departments across Europe, one of the most curious aspects of this field is that for most of the history of these disciplines professional scholars ignored the potential theoretic returns from studies of Roma and Gypsies. In the early 1950s Frederik Barth’s thesis on the Tattare, a Gypsy population, of Sweden was failed at his Norwegian defence, in part it seems because of the peculiarity of the topic.\(^1\) And thirty years later Judith Okely noted in her path-breaking (1983) study how she had to chart a course away from the dominant ‘Gypsiologist’ paradigm where ‘racial theories’, which had long been discarded in the mainstream academy, lived on unchallenged.

It will be instructive to consider the reasons for this total neglect of a subject that in so many ways today just seems to present itself to our students and colleagues alike as obvious material for anthropological enquiry. The first reason for this century long lacuna, at least within anthropology, lies in the origin of the field and the peculiar place within it of the study of so-called ‘hunters and gatherers.’

Anthropology emerged in the late 19\(^{th}\) century, at least in its British formulation, to answer what was in effect a new problem in social and historical enquiry. After the success of Charles Darwin’s treatises *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and then *The Descent of Man* (1871) proto-anthropologists could take for granted the assertion of humanity’s animality. Although the mechanisms and course of evolution were still a matter of debate, the emerging field of biological evolutionary study was going to account for how humans emerged from an ancestor that we must have shared with the primate populations. At the same time there were available a series of competing explanatory schemes to explain how humanity had moved from the dawn of civilisation in ancient Greece to the modern epoch. Historians were already engaged in constructing models and descriptive accounts of this process. But what of the period between ‘the last ape’ and ‘the first Greek’, between Neanderthal man (the first

\(^{1}\) The fact that he had not completed a full twelve months field research was also a factor since his committee, following E. Evans-Pritchard’s instructions from Oxford, insisted on this as the minimum necessary in this new field.
skull of which was named as such in 1863 – and, wrongly we now believe, taken as a progenitor of early Europeans at that time) and Homer? What happened in this great swathe of time to shift shuffling, grunting ape-man into the eloquent artist and manufacturer of modern humanity? This is one of the questions that, quite rightly, lay at the foundation of early anthropology.

And, of course, the fortunate coincidence that large parts of the planet had been opened up to investigation by processes of colonial ‘pacification’ and development of relatively rapid transport provided a ready laboratory for a discipline whose task would be to fill this gap between the disciplines named ‘biology’ and ‘history’. And if we think of the great early works of either British or French anthropology we can see the influence of this model. Marcel Mauss’ essay, ‘The Gift, on the form and logic of exchange in archaic societies’ provides merely the most widely taught exemplar of this style of argumentation. In this, Mauss attempts to construct an evolutionary account of exchange in which Roman law represents the beginning of the modern/civilised and various savage societies of Melanesia and Polynesia provide evolutionary stages on the way there (with India standing in lieu of Greece in this case as the pre-Roman, but literate civilisation).²

Now, for better or worse, this model of doing anthropology disappeared, as the discipline was institutionalised in the first decades of the twentieth century. Bronislaw Malinowski’s rejection of what he called ‘historical speculation’ for tribal societies that lacked written records, and his insistence that all data could be interpreted in the light of other data collected synchronously, put paid to evolutionary approaches, at least within British Anthropology. His successors and pupils became Africanists, or Melanesianists or Americanists, and, somewhat later, even Europeanists. Ethnographers thus became identified with the study of regions of the world and their current inhabitants rather than with periods of human history they were trying to account for. This remains true with one notable exception.

However, while most of my colleagues attend an annual regional conference like the Congres Internationale des Americanistes, those who study small bands of people

² See Parry (1985) for a critique of the use of Indian material in this evolutionary model.
who currently or have recently provided part of their means of subsistence through foraging and hunting, prefer to meet in conferences of ‘Hunter and Gatherer’ studies. This is an oddity as we do not find general anthropological meetings devoted to say ‘swidden farmers’ or ‘industrial farmers’ or ‘manufacturers.’ Of course there are economic or development-oriented gatherings organised around such technologies, but the notion that the technology of food acquisition determines a whole social form captures few imaginations in anthropology today. The only explanation, then, of this peculiar continuity lies in the residual trace of the original evolutionary framework into which anthropological data was once conceived as a contribution. Moreover, Hunter-gatherer studies are not some marginal speciality of our discipline. To take just two examples, James Woodburn’s ethnography of the Hadza of Tanzania provided one of the key planks from which Ernest Gellner – Woodburn’s colleague at the London School of Economics’ - constructed his model of pre-tribal society, as the first stage of his long-\textit{durée} account of human history (1989). Likewise, studies on property and political regimes emerging from Hunter-Gatherer conferences have had an influence far beyond their limited field (e.g. 1997), providing profound material for reflection on societies without ‘private property’ in our sense of the term at least.\footnote{Actually, the technological determinism that appears to lie behind these meetings is somewhat muted. As James Woodburn pointed out in his 1981 Malinowski Lecture, there is in fact little sociological unity to Hunter and Gatherer societies – with enormous contrasts between the value orientation of African Savannah or jungle dwellers and, say, the Australian aboriginal communities (1982, Man (N.S.) 17, 431-51).}

It was in part, I suspect, because of this role of Hunter-Gatherer studies that the ethnography of Gypsy populations took so long to emerge. For one of the most striking things about the dominant Gypsy niche in Europe is its similarity to that of some of the hunter-gatherer populations. Indeed, at the outset of my doctoral work, James Woodburn, who had taught me as an undergraduate at LSE, advised me that, in his view, there were important similarities between the Gypsies and the hunter and gatherer way of life. This is a point that several of the early ethnographers also made (e.g. Okely, 1983: 52-3; but see also, in a very different mode, Vekerdi, 1981).

The problem for anthropologists of the pre-Okely period was the total lack of fit between the role allocated to Hunter-gatherers within the discipline (as time-warp
representatives of early stone age civilisation) and the urbanised, motorised and, in truth, somewhat domesticated way of life of the European Gypsies.

The Gypsies posed one more obvious ‘problem’ that made it hard for students to image them as a viable subject of ethnographic enquiry in the mid twentieth century. Ever since Radcliffe-Brown had articulated his notion of anthropology as a natural science of society, at least one dominant school of British anthropology had assumed the object of study was ‘societies,’ naturally existing entities with an organic unity (and not one arbitrarily imposed by the observer). Misreading Durkheim’s call for the construction of a social morphology, Radcliffe-Brown encouraged the belief that ethnographers could find more or less clearly bounded socio-cultural systems. Using a zoological model of comparison of species, anthropology would then provide a comparative sociological anatomy. Of course, though this was not so clear at the time, this model of social structure relied on an image taken from the world of nation-states with people ‘a’ on territory ‘a’ and people ‘b’ on territory ‘b’. As early as Evans Pritchard’s 1940 study, *The Nuer*, it was becoming clear that this was a naively positivist model of social structure. But despite Edmund Leach’s total reworking of the paradigm of social group (1954), the idea that ethnographers studied bounded cultural communities carried on powerfully within anthropology. Later work on urbanisation in Africa, for example which talked of culture-contact and used melting-pot models, implicitly reinstated neatly bounded groups outside of the cities in their rural hinterlands.

Gypsies, fairly obviously, did not fit this kind of ‘one culture-one territory’ model at all. Their populations always spoke the mother tongue of the state they lived within (even if they sometimes spoke another language). In many other respects too they resembled the populations amongst whom they lived. Nonetheless they were seen and saw themselves as a distinct population. They were, as Judith Okely later put it in a memorable phrase, people who lived in ‘liminal areas’ ‘neither in open fields nor in the thick of the woods’ (1983: 101) behind the gaps in the hedges,’ inside-outsiders.

There was I think a third reason that made anthropologists wary of approaching fieldwork in this area – and this emerges from the story of the one piece of research that was completed by a professional anthropologist in the 1960s; a somewhat
unconventional study and one that would certainly not have passed muster with Evans-Pritchard’s standards of ‘proper fieldwork’. But it was executed by an anthropologist who had already won his spurs, and more, with notable fieldwork in central Africa.

In the summer of 1961, Luc de Heusch, an already prominent Belgian anthropologist and disciple of Levi-Strauss, took part in a journey across Europe that formed the basis of a remarkable, if short, study, or rather set of commentaries on various Romany families he was introduced to, (later published as, 1966). The point of the story lies less in de Heusch’s important, if miniature, observations than in the backstory to this adventure. De Heusch was more than competent in several central African languages by this stage of his career but he had no central European tongue and no Romany. His guide, intermediary and translator, Jan Yoors, was another Belgian of his own age who had spent several years of his adolescence living with a Lovara Romany family in the low countries (see Yoors, 1967 and 1971). De Heusch’s own account of the journey (that was in part funded as a recce for a proposed documentary film) has Yoors taking him on a search for the family with whom he had lived in the 1930s and the head of the family, in particular, a man called Yanko.

Setting off from Brussels the pair of explorers moved down the Danube, across Hungary, into then Yugoslavia and as far as Istanbul, without ever quite picking up the trail of the elusive Yanko. The odd thing about this journey is that Yanko was at the time one of the most famous Kelderash Rom in northern Europe. It would have taken Yoors no more than two phone calls from one of the café’s frequented by the Rom in Brussels to have found a contact for his former protector. The assumption has to be that Yoors, confronting the challenge of introducing the eminent but perhaps rather formal professor of anthropology to his Romany companions, decided that discretion being the better part of valour, it would be better to lead his learned friend on something of a wild goose chase down the Danube.⁴

The point is that the traditional ethnographic method – reliant on the notebook and scientific gaze - and the study of a population whose fundamental strategy is to

⁴ Patrick Williams, personal communication.
maintain a distance between themselves and the non-Gypsies and cultivate a certain invisibility, do not sit so easily together. It took a new, younger generation of anthropologists, who had an inherited confidence in their method – thanks to the very rigour of their predecessors’ work – to adopt a more informal and soft-pedalled approach to ethnographic investigation.\(^5\)

The result of the more or less systematic abandonment of the field by professional anthropologists was that, until the 1980s, Romany studies in Britain, France and America was a field overwhelmingly dominated by the approach of folklore and, moreover, its amateur incarnations. The only English-language journal in the field was then appearing at best occasionally, as its elderly editors gave up the ghost without having found a younger generation to replace them, with the solitary exception of the British civil servant, Sir Angus Fraser. It is for this reason that Judith Okely spent a fair part of her early work clearing what must have felt like the Augean stables of this antiquated approach (1983).

And, just as Michael Herzfeld demonstrated with reference to Greek ethnology (Laotika), Gypsy-lore was a ‘discipline’ that had never got beyond the use of peoples of the modern world as props with which to stage the nation’s past (1982). It is interesting, that unlike the anthropologists, the folklorists were in one sense unfazed by the hybrid, composite nature of Romany culture: while the former cleaved to the a model of closed and bounded cultures, folklorists were happy to accept that a mixing of ‘old’ and ‘new’ elements had taken place. But, and here they reinserted the myth of original, autochthonous, pure cultures, they insisted that their training enabled them to distinguish the pure from the impure and weed out the hybrid from their data and analyses. Thus their work was largely concerned with a search for ‘real Romanies’ who spoke Romany, and with identifying the ‘mixed breed’, or ‘didicoi’ as they were contemptuously known in English. In consequence, and here echoes of anthropological primitivism are all too obvious again, the more isolated the Gypsy population the more pure they were imagined to be. Industrialism was thought to be the enemy of their way of life, as it would corrupt their pure nomadic world.

\(^5\) See also Judith Okely’s recent paper on doing fieldwork ‘without notes’ (2008)
One can see that it took some courage indeed for a doctoral student at Oxford in the 1970s to declare that her field of study was a mere 60 kilometres up the newly opened motorway from London to a parking lot on the edge of a main road. Neither academic field nor physical location promised much. In Bernand Arcand’s unforgettable remark, it would have seemed to many of her contemporaries that Ms Okely had chosen neither ‘a good tribe nor even a good beach’ – but how wrong they would have been! In fact, ‘the tribe’ chosen by Judith Okely was so good-for-thinking that there has since been a veritable flowering of work on Romany communities.

**Anthropological Approaches – three traditions and their overlapping trajectories**

Judith Okely was not entirely alone in her sense that this was a field ripe for new approaches. Just prior to her engagement a young sociologist had provided a powerful early study in the history of British race relations that presented the emergence of Romany ethnic politics in the context of 20th century public policy and struggles for recognition of minority rights (Acton, 1972). From the point of view of this essay, focussing on the anthropology of Romany communities, Acton’s work is important above all for the way he provoked Okely to take an opposing and contrastive stance and stress the unique contribution of participant observation as a method: the ability gained through shared experience to provide something like an ‘insider’s view’.

Beyond this, however, Acton played a crucial role in legitimising the study of Romany communities and their political organisation in the field of sociology (as

---

6 The remark was actually made in respect of a fieldwork among Bradford Asians that the prospective fieldworker had failed to observe the injunction that if you cannot get yourself a good tribe you might as well get yourself a good beach!

7 At more or less the same time as these Okely at work in the UK there were two other texts published about American Roma at least one of which remains one of the best ethnographies ever written about Rom (Gropper, 1975) but neither of which had the intellectual impact of Okely’s work (See also Sutherland, 1975). I. Marek-Kaminski’ extraordinarily inventive and creative studies of Polish Roma have been noticed only by the specialists (1983).
Okely was to do within Anthropology).\(^8\) In this respect, Acton made two great contributions. First he launched the study of Gypsy politics as those of an ethnic minority like any other, a particular case of ethnic mobilisation within the British polity. Though the Gypsy population in the British Isles is statistically almost insignificant (travellers number roughly 0.01% of the total population) conflicts over access to land use have been intense and publicly prominent. As an early campaigner for new legislation to provide powers to force local authorities to offer land to Gypsies to stay on Acton was able to provide a focus for all concerned with these issues.

Acton also laid siege to and utterly demolished the castle of the Gypsy Lorists with their motte and bailey constructed from the pure Romani and Didicoi distinction. After Acton, it was clear that the ‘pure Romani’ were the Gypsies over the hill one saw on holiday and the dirty family down the road, living in the lay-by on the way to work were inevitably, the Didicoi – so one man’s Roma were another man’s ‘bastards’ or ‘hybrids’. In other words the distinction had no sociological value whatsoever, whatever its interest as an object in the sociological analysis of non-Gypsy representations. This was serious scholarship combined with engaged politics.

Okely, by contrast, developed in a department of Anthropology with the strongest unbroken tradition of leading anthropological reasoning (before this was driven underground by the antics of its own leading members). Her department was also more open than most to innovative approaches and fields of study at this time. Indeed, though the dominant intellectual figure in Oxford had in his later career restricted the goal of anthropology to the rather limited task of translating concepts from one culture to another, in his earlier work Evans-Pritchard had demonstrated a profound understanding of what a Durkheimian comparative sociology might look like. Opposing the positivist naturalism of Radcliffe-Brown, with its attempt to find empirical phenomenon like the anatomical structure of the human skeleton in social life, Evans-Pritchard demonstrated that Nuer social structure was better understood as a series of conceptions of what constituted the social in Nuerland. The ideas of the

---

\(^8\) Acton’s broader contribution also derived from his long term practical commitment to field-building and his heroic seminar work from his offshore base in the University (former Polytechnic) of Greenwich.
lineage and segmentary opposition – rather than the organisation of offices and persons on the ground – should be the object of sociological analysis because they were the true ground of social life. Evans-Pritchard observed, that in real life the empirical pattern of human settlement and social interaction was extraordinarily diverse and complex. In his fieldwork area, to take one example, two different ‘tribes’, Nuer and Dinka, lived and worked side by side. But conceptually, Nuer operated as if the Dinka did not exist amongst them and conceived their social structure in the segmentary terms he described.

In British anthropology the intellectual sophistication of this stance was, in some respects at least, unique. Its influence on Judith Okely can only have been indirect, mediated by teachers like Shirley Ardener and the Lienhardt brothers. From where I write, some decades later, it seems that this notion - that a social system exists fundamentally in the conceptions of it actors and should never be reduced to the expression of some putatively more real facts on the ground - must have liberated the whole field. From this perspective the lay-by outside Coventry is no different from the swamp in the Wadi – it is just one other physical location where humans, with similar imaginative capacities, can set about trying to construct meaningful and enduring social relations among themselves.

Judith Okely’s most renowned contribution was, of course, the hypothesis that English Traveller Gypsy culture might have an indigenous origin at least as significant as the role of any foreign, ‘imported’ culture. I am not sure how Judith would see this argument now, but 25 years later it seems to me that at least part of the inspiration of this stance was to reject and effectively bin the obsessive and totally paralysing concern of the folklorists with ‘origins’ and, in particular, exotic origins. Okely’s explicit value judgement was that it makes no difference whatsoever whether a way of being in the world comes out of a distant or a local history – the origins of a way of life should have no bearing on one’s assessment of its value or the right of its bearers to hand it on to their children. As she pointed out, the wretched notion of the ‘bastard’ or ‘hybrid’ in the lorists work was the direct descendant of ideas that the Nazi racial scientists latched on to.
Okely demonstrated she had found a culturally coherent value system articulated around a series of tightly interrelated symbols, most importantly those associated with personal and political autonomy. Autonomy in work, which meant self-employment; autonomy in politics – the absence of leaders and reliance on tests of physical prowess to resolve disputes and autonomy in residential and kinship arrangements, which she saw as one basis of Traveller mobility; these values lay at the heart of social arrangements, much as lineality and segmentary opposition lay were the foundation, according to Evans-Pritchard, of Nuer social arrangements.

But Okely also drew on two more recent and related models of ethnic relations to provide a radically new way of conceiving relations beyond ‘the tribe.’ In 1954 Edmund Leach, in trying “to understand why Kachins should be different from Shans” (1954: 288), introduced a whole new way of thinking about ‘ethnic’ or ‘tribal’ relations. In his iconoclastic hands, the protestations of members of ‘ethnic groups’ (e.g. to common origin or common ‘culture’) are viewed in a sceptical, irreverent light through being placed in a wider historical context (1954: 12). Leach did not wish "to represent the variations of Kachin culture as characteristics of 'tribal' entities of any scale" (1954: 292) believing that the nature of communities people live in "is a question, in part at any rate, of the attitudes and ideas of particular individuals at a particular time" (1954: 286), and that the ethnographer’s job was to describe the ins and outs of an ideology, and through that, show how in this case life on the ground reflected "differing forms of a compromise between two conflicting systems of ethics" (1954: 292) rather than the working out of some integrated ethno-cultural logic.

In Leach's work, the features of the culture of a people (language, local organisation, religion) that become important in a people's discourse depend on the political context in which they are acting (1954: 290). He specifically argued that “the significance of language for group solidarity is not something that can be determined from first principles...." (1954: 46). In fact, the precise idiom of solidarity or social connectedness that is used in a people's discourse is highly important since "the transition from Kachin-type organisation to Shan-type organisation involves the substitution of a relationship based either on common lineage or affinal dependence"
for one conceived as landlord-tenant (1954: 288), that is a change in the ideology of the relations that link people together in communities (1954: 13).

As Frederik Barth has noted, it took a while for Leach’s iconoclastic stance, the ‘politics and ecology model’ as he labelled it, to seep into the discipline and this occurred in part through Barth’s own work.\footnote{see, the interview conducted by Alan Macfarlane at http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/ancestors/barth.htm} Barth’s own initial recognition derived, it seems from his time among the Swedish Tattare. He now argued that in a post Highland Burma world we could no longer assume 'that cultural variation is discontinuous', and so a loose uses of the term 'culture' to describe the object of anthropological study was no longer acceptable. The term 'culture' did not describe any discrete phenomena, could not be attributed to discrete human populations on the ground. Nonetheless he was convinced it would be possible to 'operationalise' the concept, in the sense of shared patterns of behaviour. This could be done by studying groups on the ground that used features of their cultural behaviour to mark themselves off from other like groups. Such groups would use “a limited set of cultural features" to define themselves so that most of the "cultural matter" associated with [them] is not linked to the group's boundary” (1969: 38). Cultural items of such groups (language, religion, clothing) can change, or disappear so long as a set of boundary markers is maintained. Furthermore, as Leach had argued individuals and groups can cross these ethnic boundaries, change their own affiliations, leaving the boundaries intact. Like Leach, Barth talked of ethnic categories as being "an organizational vessel that may be given varying amounts and forms of content in different socio-cultural systems" (1969: 14). He suggested that "tribe, caste, language group, region or state all have features that make them a potentially adequate primary ethnic identity for group reference" (1969: 34).

Since English Traveller-Gypsies, like other Romany populations in Europe, spend an inordinate amount of time stressing the boundaries between themselves and the non-Gypsies, or Gorgios, Barth’s model seemed ready made for dealing with this kind of society. Moreover it was possible to combine Barth’s focus on boundary maintenance with Mary Douglas’ profound insight that notions of cleanliness and dirt provide moral classifiers for dividing up social environment. Far from being primitive forms
of awareness of hygiene, ideas of pollution symbolise important social boundaries. Again, the fact that Traveller-Gypsies, like other Roma, put great stress on their own cleanliness and the lower standards of the Gorgios, allowed Okely to draw on Douglas’ work to revolutionise the way Romany cultures could be described. One of the old saws of the folklorists had been to stress the superstitious beliefs of the ‘pure’ Romany speakers in notions of pollution and ritual cleanliness. Thomas Acton had also dealt with this issue, arguing that such customs were better understood as a pragmatic response to the hygienic challenges of life on the road, without running water and so on. Okely saw, however, that if you put together Barth and Douglas you could dispose of the distasteful orientalism of the Lorists with their accounts of ‘magical beliefs’ and also avoid slipping into the kind of anti-cultural special pleading of an Acton. She provided in stead an account of English Gypsy ethnic distinctiveness that made not just symbolic but a kind of plausible psychological sense.

In `Okely’s hands, the Traveller woman’s body became the symbolic medium through which an ethnic boundary between insider (pure) and outsider (impure non-Gypsy or Gorgio) could be lived. Animal symbolism reinforced this sense of living in a Manichean world with non-Gypsy pets, like the cat, treated as polluting and Gypsy-like creatures that lived in the shadows in between civilisation and the wild (the hedgehog, for instance) acting as a kind of totemic animal. This was a brilliant synthesis of theory and data and one that had a marked influence on authors, like myself, in the next generation.

Acton’s work had come straight out of what were the beginnings of ethnic and racial studies in Britain. He had noticed that the Gypsies spoke his own language, watched the same TV programs and were in many ways members of British society. There was in his work an almost embarrassed attempt to stress the ordinariness of Gypsies, their lack of cultural distinctiveness. Okely re-enchanted the British Gypsies and today, even in sociology departments and programs, it is Okely’s account of these matters which holds sway.

The Franco-Italian approach

---

Although widely respected in the field as the pioneer who struck out first into what had been ethnographic terra nullis, Okely’s socio-structural approach has had no monopoly in attempts to account for Romany ethnic distinctiveness. In particular what one might call the Franco-Italian school, Leonardo Piasere and Patrick Williams above all, being aware that the British tend to relegate ‘culture’ to a by-product of social structure (pollution beliefs as expressive of social boundaries, for instance), have set out in a slightly different direction that leads them away from a primary focus on how the ethnic boundary is maintained. In fact, the overarching and dominant influence in their approach to Romany ethnicity was Louis Dumont’s notion of holism and hierarchy. Dumont himself had, of course, been inspired by his reading of Evans-Pritchard’s early work but not in the way the English followers had understood it. In his reading, Dumont saw in The Nuer an early attempt to grasp the socio-cultural logic of a holistic system of value. As Dumont had argued, any holistic approach inevitably involves a hierarchy of values in their orientation towards and reproduction of ‘the whole system.’ And his French disciples (Piasere did his PhD in Paris at more or less the same time as Williams) in our field likewise tried to grasp what Williams called ‘le système Tsigane.’

This is why Williams spends considerable time in his doctoral work, published as Marriage Tsigane (1984) attempting to define just what to include and exclude from this ‘système’, noting that no coherence and no system can be found trying to integrate the notions of Tsigane and Rom. They belong in effect to two parallel but coterminous universes of meaning. The only system of classification that the ethnographer of the Rom can concern himself with is that which articulates a ‘whole’ around the notion of Rom, the opposition to the Gaze allowing them to construct a closed, invisible world of their own in the midst of another world. Williams demonstrates this with his two tour de forces in the first and last chapter of this work where the request for a bride (the ‘marriage’ of the title) is first described and celebrated as a moment when the whole value scheme of Romany social life is brought into view for both the analyst and the people themselves. 

---

12 Williams was, one can infer, influenced by Gropper’s great ethnography of New York Romany families – probably the most accurate single general ethnography written about the Roma by someone who had years of experience working with her
At the heart of William’s work lies an ethnographic insight encapsulated in an article contrasting economic strategies in Paris and New York: whenever possible, the Rom tend to seek invisibility, to find a curtain behind which the non-Gypsies cannot observe them and will never know the wonderful secret and pleasure of their true way of life. Williams wrote his doctoral work aware of Okely’s but it was only at the 1986 conference of the journal *Etudes Tsiganes* in Paris that Okely, Piasere and Williams met up. And it was only with the publication of Williams’ second monographic work (1993) that he articulates, in an entirely indirect fashion, his dissatisfaction with the British socio-structural approach. The moment arises in a chapter where he turns to consider the ‘Manus among the Gadzos.’ Williams notes that in this context, ‘there is a temptation to see specific traits in terms of adaptation. After all, it is hard to overlook the fact that Manus affirmation has to occur in the midst of another society, and thus there cannot fail to be some correlations between the nature of this society and the nature of this affirmation, or, more precisely, between the nature of the latter and the fact that it is expressed within a world defined by others. But I don’t think that these correlations can be limited to a deterministic interpretation (2005: 29).’

In other words, in the gentlest possible way Williams reject the ‘deterministic’ explanations of those like Okely, Stewart and others who would derive or, in his eyes, reduce the Gypsy or Romany way of life to a response to their economic or political niche and their relations with the non-Gypsy world. And here Williams makes a crucial, if subtle distinction. It is absolutely true he says, that the Manus live ‘in the world of the Gadzos’ but not ‘in the same world as the Gadzos.’ So they relate to the whole world outside their own, nature included, through their relations with the Gadzos. But, while co-existing with the Gadzos the Manus detach ‘themselves from them,… put[…] themselves at a distance, which precisely cause them to become Manus and the Gadzos to become Gadzo.’ (2005: 29). All of which reminds me – though I have no reason to think he knew this tiny remark in a fifty year old text still informants. Gropper’s work is memorable above all for the detail and depth of the ethnographic observation, but her theoretical stance – a Boasian concern with the cultural integration of Romany values – fits well with a Dumontian holism.
much read in British Anthropology - of Edmund Leach’s assertion that Kachins and Shan though both forming ‘groups’ in some loose sense were not really the same sort of thing, and that to call both these identities ‘ethnic’ would miss a profoundly important aspect of the change involved (1954: 288). Indeed, in the strict academic sense of the term, it is meaningless, at least for the Manus, to talk of them as an ethnic group like any other in France, for they do not conceive of themselves as the structural equivalent of the Bretons or the Italians of Savoie, or the Catalans of south-central France.13 The challenge this poses to traditional theories of Roma as an ethnic minority like any other (as in Acton’s account but more recently say Vermeersch [2006] and above all Barany [2002]) should not be underestimated.14

Williams’ work has begun to attract an ever wider range of scholars who, while in no sense imitating him, adopt a Dumontian approach to grasping a cultural logic and view Romany value systems as phenomena sui generis rather than determined by the relationship between the Gypsies and the non-Gypsies. Of those professional anthropologists who still work on Romany issues (and publish in English, French or German), Paloma Gay y Blasco is perhaps the senior figure with Elizabeth Tauber bringing young talent to this approach.

Gay Blasco’s contributions to the study of Spanish Gitanos are noteworthy for a number of reasons. First and foremost is her rigorous demonstration of the construction of the Gitano notion of the person around a set of values that are to be understood in their own right and not as a reflection of deeper social and political

14 Indeed as a result there is a significant difference in the relationship between the position of ethnographers of the Roma in general and Roma activists and, say, anthropologists of the 1950’s and 1960’s and the decolonisation movements with which they were able to align themselves with greater ease. While fully aware that the Kenyattas and Nkrumahs were members of a new elite, anthropologists could see that the national projects being articulated offered an inspiring vista for the post-colonial future. I can think of no anthropologist working with Roma who shares those kind of fairly uncritical romantic feelings about the self-declared ‘Roma Rights’ movements. Indeed on numerous occasions anthropologists have had to point out the dramatic difference between the huge and transformative effects of genuinely successful mobilisations of Roma – like those associated with the neo-protestant churches – and the almost total irrelevance of the ‘ethno-political’ movement.
facts and her re-working of the notion of ‘symbolic boundaries’. In particular, understandings of male and female gender, conceptions of the righteousness of male behaviour and the modesty of female behaviour ground and constitute Gitano practice. That is to say, contra Marxian or other materialist approaches, they are not a product or expression of practice. Blasco gives numerous demonstrations of this theoretical stance, but her examination of ideas and practices around conception and the construction of a specifically Gitano female body provide a splendid point of entry to those unfamiliar with this work (1997).

Blasco’s work also began to formalise an insight, still not fully articulated to which, perhaps, she will again return: the absence of any sense of ‘society’ among the Gitanos. This is a central topic for understanding Romany sociality. I, for instance, had talked lazily in my doctoral thesis title about the ‘preservation of Romany community’ under socialism, and had struggled over the irrelevance to my experience of the ‘community studies’ then fashionable in British Anthropology (Cohen, 1985). I knew full well that there was really no coherent local notion of community in Harangos which I was translating by the English term. There were no fixed groups which came together or were represented in any context that could provide the correlate of the notion of Community. And yet I clung to the notion. Blasco, however, confronted the lacuna head on. For her the Gitano world is constituted by the construction of the male and the female. This is a point that Tauber also picks up with her observation that the term widely used in politically correct speech, Roma & Sinte means in English, Roma and relatives since the term Sinte is used in German Romany to mean ‘related persons’ as in the common phrase ‘amare Sinte’ (our family). There are a number of things which follow from the lack of any social order over and above the network of relatives each individual person constructs, but of most immediate importance is the enormous challenge posed to any person or movement that wants or claims to represent ‘the Sinte’ or ‘the Gitanos’ as an ethnic group of ‘people’—since the very notion is incoherent.

Blasco’s work on the gendered Gitano body also provides important evidence, in my book, against the strong case put forward by Williams for the sui generis character of Romany representations. In part perhaps because of my initial research in the socialist period in Hungary, I have always found it hard to see the Rom I know controlling the
range and forms of involvement with (dominant) others, or the terms of their relationship with the Gadzos. Or to put this more poetically. I am constantly struck by the contradiction among many of the families I have known for over twenty years now between their relative poverty and their proud self-understanding as princes in their own world. I recognise, of course, that the social is our understanding and imagination of it – a nation only exists if it is imagined and having imagined people as co-nationals one behaves to them according to understandings that only arise through their cultivation in institutional settings that are grounded in the notion of ‘nation.’ And yet, I would insist, that what we might call humans rarely live with one holistically organised set of mental models, be it ‘nation’ or ‘Gitanoness/ Romanipe’ and so on.

In this light, consider the fact that Blasco notes, in an examination of the manipulation of biology by the Gitanos, that the ‘emphasis on proper sexual behaviour gains much of its strength through comparison with the Payo life-style. To the eyes of the Gitanos the Payos break all the moral rules and particularly those that have to do with relations between men and women…’Evils’ such as pre-marital sex and divorce are thus rampant among Payos because the women lack self-control and the men fail to control them’ (1997: 525). At first sight this is a familiar point from the literature. As Blasco herself notes, Okely pointed out the way this kind of disdain of the non-Gypsy constructed ethnic specificity in an early article. What I would point to here, however, is another familiar feature of this type of claim. In post-Franco Spain, the Gitano stance is, in a certain way, a claim to Spanishness, or at least a conservative version of that. Like the Rudari Gypsies in Romania, who claim to descendants of the Dacians (and thus more Romanian than the Romanians) and the Hungarian musicians who take such pride in having been ‘ambassadors for their country’ under socialism (Jaroka, nd.), to my eyes this looks distinctly like a claim not just to moral superiority in general, but moral superiority in terms which the non-Gypsy population recognises.

If I am right Blasco’s account does not fit so easily with the notion that Gypsies survive by cultivating disdain and ignorance of the world of the Gadzos. And so, I see in gestures like the proclamation of Dacian ancestry among Romanian Rudari and Baiese, or the implicit assertion that the Gitanos are the truest Spaniards, claims to
belong to the world in a different mode than that of Rom v. Gadzo, a recognition of
another, shared way of seeing the world.

There is, however, a delicate balance to be maintained here. Are the extraordinary
palatial houses of the Cortorari in Romania – each new one built higher than its
predecessor so it may be better visible to the Romanians in the centre of the village –
an attempt to display their wealth and so gain prestige among the Gadzos or is that
very attempt a kind of camouflage for the real source of social worth and value in
these communities – the family heirlooms, that is the pewter beakers that contain a
kind of mana embodying the virility, fertility and luck of the patriline, and which
these Romany families invest in even more heavily in than their houses? And while
the houses are visible to all, but in some ways I suspect of less interest to the Rom, the
cups are invisible almost all the time, often hidden among the non-Gypsies who
barely suspect the true nature of their importance. Working one’s way interpretively
through these kinds of questions, in order to understand the sources of social
connectedness among Romany communities, requires the kind of ethnographic skill at
uncovering modes of hidden cultural intimacy that Patrick Williams’ work
exemplifies.

Identification as the source of identity?
There has emerged in the past few years one radically new approach to our field
offered by the three Dutch scholars, Wim Willems and Leo Lucassen and Anne-Marie
Cottar. And while few anthropologists and even fewer linguists would be convinced
that their post-foucaultian stance can provide the whole story of the formation of
Roma social formations across Europe in the last five or six hundred years, they have
brought a whole new perspective to those who would write histories of Romany
populations in Europe.

It is the theoretical contribution of Leo Lucassen that is perhaps of greatest relevance
to revitalising the study of ‘ethnicity.’ Cottar’s work uses a socio-ethnographic
approach to an indigenous traveller community in the Netherlands (the
wohnwagenbewohner) and Willems mixes literary and intellectual history to account
for the emergence of the field of study known as Gypsy Lore that has, in our time,
become Gypsy or Romany studies. Lucassen’s however is the most original stance,
approaching the field from an interest in the official treatment of migrant labourers and the mobile self-employed. What he shares with his colleagues is a sense that the construction of a generic ‘Gypsy’ identity is the work of fantasy of folklorists, ethnographers and those who follow them, providing a kind of phantasmagorical smokescreen for the real work of identification, the labours of police forces who, over the past two hundred years, have put so much effort into determining who is and who is not ‘a Gypsy.’ This is, from the point of view of young Romany activists, a potentially liberating insight: the history of the Gypsies is as much a history of those who classified people as ‘Gypsy’ as of those thus labelled.

Lucassen’s approach could be summarised as a radical re-statement of Okely’s iconoclastic hypothesis that the indigenous origins of English Traveller-Gypsy identity were as important as any foreign or exotic ancestry. His doctoral work, on the development of the police category of ‘Zigeuner’, looked at the development of the system of ‘wanted notices’ and police circulars devised to deal with the mobile population of criminals and travellers who tended to evade identification through being able to change names and even paper-work from one jurisdiction to another. Lucassen observed that in the archival sources only some of the people whom the police came into contact with because of their status as migrant labourers ended up being classified as Zigeuner. He was struck by the fact that there is nothing to distinguish the people who appeared books like Dillman’s synthetic ‘encyclopaedia’ of Gypsy families, published by the Bavarian ministry of the interior (1905), in socio-economic terms from others who do not appear there with the Z letter by their name.

The same ambulatory occupations provided a livelihood, the same routes were taken through the countryside, the same conflicts arose with the local authorities when migrants were reduced to begging whenever there was not enough work on offer in the area they have ended up. The only significant distinguishing feature was that those people who travelled in families rather than as single men (or, occasionally, women) tended to be labelled Zigeuner. And why, Lucassen wondered should this be?

The history of poor law and welfare arrangements make abundantly clear that since the care of the poor was the responsibility of their own locality, local authorities had a significant interest in finding ways to exclude categories of people who might otherwise fall on their charity. And while it might be easy enough to encourage an
individual labourer to move on – and, if they were incapable of so doing, it did not cost so much to provide temporarily for them – the question of what to do with families with small children, who could call on Christian sentiments of pity for the destitute, was altogether more intractable.

It was, in brief, such migrant labourers and their families who fell foul of the way welfare support was organised and who formed part of that ‘hard-to-identify’ mobile mass whom the early police forces targeted for identification, who became the ancestors of the Zigeuner of the German lands (and, by extension, the Gypsies of Europe). Since they are treated as a pariah group, soon enough they acquire the sense of having something in common with others like them. Identity, in this case at least, is little more than an effect of identification.  

There is no question that this approach provides crucial data on the approaches of state employees towards the Gypsies. Lucassen also demonstrates that there is in fact of wealth of sources for constructing aspects of the history of those so classified. There are, however, limits to how far you can take this sort of analysis. Thomas Fricke, in his doctoral work – that is sadly almost unavailable due to the small print run of his publisher – provides an extraordinarily rich picture of the lives of all kinds of migrants whose lives appear in the official archives (1996). Precisely because his chronicle covers a range of the vagrants, nomads and travellers of the late 18th Century, some of them stand out. A letter he cites, written from a prison cell in what reads like a privately invented script tells the author’s wife, in their native tongue, Romany, of his misery, hunger and fear. Languages are almost invariably handed on in families and the notion that the author of this letter shared nothing but his official label with the speakers of German Romany today simply beggars belief. In other words, whatever the undoubted role of stigma and procedures of stigmatising and categorising as ‘Gypsy,’ this will take us not very far into understanding what it has in the past and does today mean to be Rom, to have ‘sinte.’ By taking a ‘constructionist’ position to its logical conclusion Lucassen has in effect demonstrated how wrong it would be to argue for a purely indigenous origin of Romany populations in Europe.  

---

15 The influence of this approach on the sociologists Janos Ladányi and Ivan Szelényi (especially, 2003) is of course transparent.
Roma and the anthropology of ethnicity in eastern Europe today

For the past forty years, anthropological approaches to Roma and Gypsy populations in the British and American schools of social anthropology have overwhelmingly been concerned with explaining the survival of the Gypsy way of life and of the population associated with this. As we have seen three types of explanation have been offered: historical explanations which focus on the distinct origins of Gypsy populations and treat them in effect as a ‘foreign’ ethnic group with a distinct ethos; structural explanations which locate the persistence of Gypsy populations in the way they have occupied particular niches within the changing European division of labour; (a subset of these structuralist approaches are the Foucault-inspired positions that focus on the effects of the labelling strategies used by state institutions); and, finally, culturalist explanations which look at the internal coherence of Gypsy or Romany value systems in a self-declared ‘holistic’ approach. Each of these approaches illuminates aspects of Romany and Gypsy experience and each comes up against the limits of a notion of ethnicity drawn from a model of autonomous and quasi-autochthonous nation states. In this sense, what the Roma and Gypsies teach us is how much of an ideological notion the very notion of ethnicity is itself.

As Csaba Pronai recognised many years ago, one of the bridges which any Hungarian (or indeed east European) anthropology has to build is one that crosses the field of Romany studies. With that work in mind, and with Pronai’s protégés and students like Kata Horvath and Cili Kovai now entering productive careers of their own, alongside more senior scholars like Peter Berta – as well, of course, as a host of extremely talented, qualititative sociologically trained researchers - where should a socio-anthropology of the Roma be headed and what might anthropology have to gain from a fuller engagement with this diverse field?

Anthropology in general is at a bit of a cross-roads – as will become obvious in retrospect, twenty years hence. There are strong pressures towards what in reality are regional studies under any other name (and I particularly include those who focus on the supposedly novel processes of ‘glocalisation’ in this category); there are also strong pressures to rendering much anthropology policy oriented (which at least has the benefit of bringing true expertise to real problems). What is also emerging or re-
emerging are two main ways of thinking comparatively and in the long-term about human social formations. In both these directions, an anthropology engaged with Roma might make very significant contributions.

Let me just point to three issues: the study of nations and ethnic groups has, as many have noted, been deeply undermined by the nationalist assumptions of researchers. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the notion that each ethnic group has its own peculiar genius, its geist or spirit, something which it brings out of its own breast as a mother produces milk for her babies. The essential feature of this spirit is that it is unique, original, and uncopied by others. In reality, human history affords no such populations – the real processes of human history involve an endless exchange and transfer of ‘cultural patterns’ from words, through languages to political and religious institutions. It is my contention that the study of cultural creativity and social diversity might be powerfully re-charged through study of a population who – unlike most Europeans, swept along in the nationalist mythology – are not only uninterested in their own supposedly unique cultural genius but moreover positively celebrate their ability to adapt, adopt and mimetically assimilate practices they find among their neighbours. Nationalist ideology makes us see this as trivial and uninteresting, but of course most of human history (including the spread of the modular ‘national idea’) illustrates the central role of mimesis in human history. There is nowhere better in Europe to study the workings of this foundational human capacity than among the Roma.

Second, Romany populations provide a series of strange paradoxes to any social theory that wants to think in long-term social, quasi-evolutionary, history – inverting the very puzzle that prevented anthropologists engaging with Gypsies might enable us to rethink the relationship of social form and ecological niche.

Finally, for the study of the micro-processes of the transmission of culture, one of the key areas where anthropology may have something to contribute to whatever becomes of the social sciences in the century ahead, Romany populations provide an incredibly important and rich resource. It is widely claimed (Fabion, and Said to name just two examples) that anthropologists used to work in far flung places out of a misplaced exoticism of the distant. But one of the reasons they worked in ‘simple’ societies was
because of the relative homogeneity of distribution in them of cultural schema and representations. It is possible in such social environments to focus on particular issues of the process of culture that are obscured in conditions that Durkheim characterised as 'organic solidarity.' Many Romany populations in Europe today, thanks to their political and social position in the wider world, likewise present the social researcher with opportunities for understanding fundamental features of human culture – the opportunity is here for the taking.


Barany, Zoltan, 2002 The East European Gypsies: Regime Change, Marginality, and Ethnopolitics, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press


De Heusch, Luc 1965 *A la découverte des tsiganes : une expédition de reconnaissance.* (1961). Etudes ethnologiques 3, Institut de Sociologie, Université Libre de Bruxelles

Dillmann, Alfred (1905). *Zigeuner-Buch.* Munich: Wildsche


Herzfeld, Michael 1982 *Ours Once More; Folklore, Ideology and the making of Modern Greece*, Houston: The University of Texas Press.

Jaroka, Livia nd Draft thesis: Romany identities in the post communist VIII District of Budapest. PhD in preparation at University College London.


Sutherland, Anne 1975 *Gypsies: The Hidden Americans*, London: Tavistock


Thompson, T.W. 1924 ‘English Gypsy death and Burial customs’ *JGLS (3)*, 3, pp. 5-38 and 60-93.


