

# Acceptable hatred

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Beneath the enduring hostility to Gypsies lies an ancient envy of the nomadic life

Imagine an English village building an effigy of a car, with caricatures of black people in the windows and the number plate “N1GGER”, and burning it in a public ceremony. Then imagine one of Britain’s most socially conscious MPs appearing to suggest that black people were partly to blame for the way they had been portrayed.

It is, or so we should hope, unimaginable. But something very much like it happened last week. The good burghers of Firle, in Sussex, built a mock caravan, painted a Gypsy family in the windows, added the numberplate “P1KEY” (a derogatory name for Gypsies which derives from the turnpike roads they travelled) and the words “Do As You Likey Driveways Ltd - guaranteed to rip you off”, then metaphorically purged themselves of this community by incinerating it. Their MP, the Liberal Democrat Norman Baker, later told BBC South East that “there is an issue about the rights of travellers which has to be respected, but also the duty’s on travellers to ensure that they treat the areas in which they are living with respect ... That did not happen in Firle earlier this year which is why the Bonfire Society has taken the act that they have.”

Racism towards Gypsies is acceptable in public life in Britain. Last month the Now Show on Radio 4 satirised “pikeys” running fairgrounds “with no safety documents”. It would surely never crack jokes about “pakis” or “yids”, or suggest that members of another ethnic group typically engage in dodgy business practices. When Jack Straw was home secretary he characterised Gypsies as people who “think that it’s perfectly

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OK for them to cause mayhem in an area, to go burgling, thieving, breaking into vehicles, causing all kinds of other trouble including defecating in the doorways of firms and so on”.

Now all these people would doubtless claim that they are attacking not a race but a lifestyle. Jack Straw, for example, explained that he was not talking about “real Romany Gypsies ... who seem to mind their own business and don’t cause trouble” but about “people who masquerade as travellers or Gypsies”. It is, of course, true that not all traditional travellers are ethnic Roma, and not all Roma are travellers. But the same could be said of Judaism, which embraces both an ethnicity and a religious culture. We recognise that there is no moral distinction between attacks on Jews by people who object to their way of life and attacks on Jews by people who object to their race. We also recognise that racism is a matter of characterising a community by the behaviour of some of its members.

The persecution of Gypsies has often been accompanied by questions, like Straw’s, about their authenticity. In 1554, a British law explained that people calling themselves Aegyptians were in fact “false vagabonds”, and condemned them to death. The report on the “Gypsy question” presented to Heinrich Himmler, which recommended their confinement to labour camps, asserted that “most Gypsies are not Gypsies at all” but “the products of matings with the German criminal asocial proletariat”.

One might have hoped for a particular sensitivity about the rights of traditional travellers. Between a quarter and half a million Gypsies were killed during the Holocaust: in many parts of Europe, the Nazis almost succeeded in eliminating them. Throughout eastern Europe, the Roma are still denied employment, herded into ghettos and beaten to death by skinheads. In Britain, some 67% of traditional travellers’ sites were closed between 1986 and 1993. In 1994, the government released local authorities from the duty to provide sites for travellers and introduced new laws penalising people who stopped without permission. In one act of parliament, it effectively destroyed their way of life.

So why, despite so much evidence of persecution, are expressions of hatred towards Gypsies still acceptable in public discourse? Part of the reason is surely that they are trapped in a vicious circle: excluded from public life by racism, they are poorly placed to defend themselves against it. But it seems to me that there might be something else at work as well, the residue of a deeper and much older detestation.

The conflict between settled and travelling peoples goes back at least to the time of Cain and Abel. Cain was a farmer, a settled person; Abel was a herder: a nomad. Cain killed Abel because Abel was the beloved of God. The people who wrote the Old Testament were nomads who had recently settled, and who looked back with longing

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to the lives of their ancestors. The prophets' constant theme was the corruption of the cities and the purity of life in the wilderness, to which they kept returning. All the great monotheisms were founded by nomads: unlike settled peoples they had no fixed places in which to invest parochial spirits.

Yet the city, despite the execration of the prophets, won. Civilisation, from the Latin *civis*, a townsman, means the culture of those whose homes do not move. The horde, from the Turkish *ordu*, a camp and its people, is its antithesis. It both defines civilisation and threatens it. We fear people whose mobility makes them hard for our settled systems of government to control. But, like Cain, we also appear to hate them for something we perceive them to possess: the freedom, perhaps, which the prophets craved.

Of course, today the settled people are often more mobile than the traditional travellers. Across eastern Europe, Gypsies have been sedentarised by decree; in Britain they have been settled by the enclosure of their stopping places. Many of the Gypsies who travel across Europe today do so because they have been driven from their homes: Queen Mary's "pretended Egyptians" have been transformed into "bogus asylum seekers".

Yet, as our continued romanticisation of the Gypsy, or bohemian, life suggests, we appear to suffer still from a residual envy. We are a migratory people (our ancestors, in the savannahs of East Africa, were forced to move from place to place as the rain moved on) with the brains, the legs, the senses of creatures who were designed never to stay still. The lives of those we associate with perpetual movement often appear (whatever the reality may be) to be more desirable than our own. When the starving traveller in Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Crossing* arrives in town, the people there "beheld what they envied most and what they most reviled. If their hearts went out to him it was yet true that for very small cause they might also have killed him."

Envy lies at the root of racism. Racists associate Jews with money and black people with sexual power, but our hatred of Gypsies may arise from a still deeper grievance, the envy of a people whose instinct for continual movement is frustrated by the constraints of the humdrum settled life. We wish, like Cain, to rise up and slay our brother, as the horde, not the civilised, are the beloved of the God of our creation. Could it be that it remains acceptable to hate Gypsies because it remains acceptable to romanticise them? #