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**THE GYPSIES AS THE ORIGINAL SIN
OF MODERNITY**

**CYGANIE JAKO PIERWOTNY GRZECH
NOWOCZESNOŚCI**

Abstract

At the end of the 15th century, chroniclers throughout Western Europe reported the arrival of strange brown-skinned people, wearing unfamiliar clothing and speaking a foreign language. These foreigners posed as Christians and claimed to come from Egypt. They soon scattered to all European countries. The earliest records show that the first groups aroused great sympathy among the native population; but the more numerous they became, the more the original curiosity and goodwill towards the nomads faded in the eyes of the settled population.

Familiar images and stereotypes are found in the descriptions of nomadic groups in the chronicles dating from as early as the 15th century. Gypsies, for example, are said to be plagued by an uncontrollable wanderlust. The construction of and response to natural vagrancy in those parts of Europe that experienced the transition from feudalism to capitalism suggests that the development of the “internal outsider” was an important part of the construction of a settled European identity. The work ethic, the morality of property, and civilisation were demarcated as different from the nomads. On the other hand, the emergence of the work ethic went hand in hand with the denigration of those nomads, who seemed to reject it and thus posed a threat to its legitimacy.

The constant repetition of negative images and suspicions against members of migrant groups fuelled resentment and indelible hatred. This, in turn, led to demands for stricter measures against the group; but those were never and nowhere clearly defined. Legislators responded to these demands by legalising prejudice and superstition. The persecution of the Gypsies led to a self-fulfilling prophecy. The

more people perceived the Gypsies as criminals, the more attention they paid to the cases that confirmed their expectations.

Keywords

Auschwitz, Egypt, Europe, the Gypsy, internal outsider, the Jews, modernity, the Other

Abstrakt

Pod koniec XV w. kronikarze w całej Europie Zachodniej donosili o dziwnych ludziach o brązowej skórze, nieznanym stroju i obcym języku. Ci obcy ludzie udawali chrześcijan i twierdzili, że pochodzą z Egiptu. Wkrótce rozproszyli się po wszystkich krajach Europy. Z najwcześniejszych przekazów wynika, że pierwsze grupy przybyszów wzbudziły dużą sympatię wśród rodzimej ludności. Im jednak było ich więcej, tym bardziej pierwotna ciekawość i życzliwość wobec nomadów blakły.

W opisach grup nomadów pochodzących z XV-wiecznych kronik odnajdujemy już znane obrazy i stereotypy. Mówi się tam na przykład, że Cyganów dręczy niepo- hamowana żądza wędrówki. Reakcja na to w tych częściach Europy, które doświadczyły przejścia od feudalizmu do kapitalizmu, sugeruje, że „wewnętrzny outsider” był ważną częścią konstrukcji ustalonej tożsamości europejskiej. Etyki pracy, moralności własności i cywilizacji nie łączono z nomadami. Z drugiej strony pojawienie się etyki pracy szło w parze z oczernianiem tych nomadów, którzy zdawali się ją odrzucać i tym samym stwarzali zagrożenie dla jej legitymizacji.

Ciągle powtarzanie negatywnych obrazów i podejrzeń wobec członków grup migrantów podsycalo niechęć i nienawiść. To z kolei doprowadziło do żądań wprowadzenia bardziej rygorystycznych środków wobec grupy, ale nigdy i nigdzie nie zostały one jasno określone. Ustawodawcy odpowiedzieli na te żądania, legalizując uprzedzenia i przesady. Prześladowania Cyganów doprowadziły do samospełniającej się przepowiedni. Im bardziej ludzie postrzegali ich jako przestępców, tym większą uwagę poświęcali przypadkom potwierdzającym ich przeświadczenia.

Słowa kluczowe

Auschwitz, Egipt, Europa, Cyganie, wewnętrzny outsider, Żydzi, nowoczesność, Inny

We begin our journey into the wisdom that there is no white without black, no fortune without misfortune, with a short walk down memory lane. At the end of the fifteenth century, chroniclers recorded throughout Western Europe a strange people with brown skin, unfamiliar clothing, and foreign

language. These strange people posed as Christians and claimed to come from Egypt. They soon scattered to all European countries, where they angered almost all the natives, “because of their lazy wandering and even more because of the fact that they cheated the workers of this or that and only poorly distinguished what was mine and what was yours” (Jurčič 1864: 8).

Soon after their arrival on the Old Continent, it was fashionable to confuse them with Egyptians and pilgrims who were forced to emigrate for religious reasons. This misunderstanding stemmed from the tales of the Gypsies themselves. In order to protect themselves from unwanted curiosity seekers, the members of the nomadic groups explained their way of life with various invented stories. According to a story already found in mediaeval sources, they declared that their ancestors were related to the Pharaoh (Solms 2001: 104–5). The Egyptian connection was deepened by the claim that they learned their magical arts in Egypt, since the country was known for such skills (Okely 1983: 3).

They interpreted their eternal pilgrimage from place to place as penance for their ancestors’ apostasy from the Christian faith. The most popular story they liked to tell was that they refused to give refuge to the Holy Family during their stay in Egypt, whereupon they had to wander around the world for seven years as penance (Grellmann 1783: 166–67). Another legend states that the Gypsies were descendants of Adam and the first woman created before Eve. That is, they were born without original sin and, unlike the rest of humanity, were not condemned to work or suffer other punishments (Liégeois 1983: 19).

There was also a story that linked their nomadism to crucifixion. Their ancestors are said to have forged the nails with which Christ was crucified. According to one version, three were used, and the fourth, a piece of iron bleached red, haunted them and their descendants throughout the world: they could not cool it or escape it (Liégeois 1983: 18). According to another version, they forged one nail too few because they wanted to alleviate the suffering of Christ (Solms 2001: 104).

They also had other creative explanations for their nomadism. When Sebastien Munster asked some Gypsies in the early sixteenth century why they did not give up their nomadic life even though the time of their penance was over, he was told that “the road was closed to them, which prevented them from returning to their land, even though the time of their penance was over” (Munster 1575: II, 881).

Such and similar stories are said to have moved the pope and also the Hungarian king Sigismund, who gave them written permission to travel safely through his country (Tyrnauer 1991: ix). According to some accounts,

authentic papal letters to the “Egyptians” have also been preserved (Vaux de Foletier 1961: 17; Liégeois 1983: 19).

The demand for their alleged supernatural powers to perform magic, predict the future, or heal never abated among the Christian population. Despite the efforts of many preachers to dissuade the God-fearing faithful from “false” fortune-tellers who only exploited people’s gullibility, the belief that Gypsies “bring good luck” and “also have something magical” never completely disappeared (Đorđević 1984: 124). Even the alchemist and physician Paracelsus appreciated their palmistry. On the other hand, their involvement in black magic contributed to the image of their connections with satanic forces. It was common knowledge that they were black-skinned, and this was the colour that European popular belief associated with the devil.¹ No wonder, then, that some traditions, both among Gypsies and non-Gypsies, believed that they were directly descended from the devil (Čajkanović 1941: 110).

Attracting scholarly attention

From the earliest records it appears that the first groups aroused great sympathy among the local population. Thus, the chronicler of Braşov (Transylvania), where “Herr Emaus aus Agypten” arrived with his 220-strong group in 1416, reports that the town gave them some food and money as alms (Jauk-Pinhak 1989: 12). But the more numerous they became, the more the original curiosity and goodwill towards the nomads faded in the eyes of the settled population. Wherever they went, groups of nomads in Europe were persecuted by prejudice and empty faith. They were accused of begging, theft, child stealing, espionage, and black magic (Grellmann 1783: 166–67). The most pious recognised in them the descendants of Cain, who, like their distant ancestor, deserved the worst punishment (Clébert 1967: 20; Marselos 1989: 90;

¹ See e. g. *En regišter ... Ena kratka postila* by Primož Trubar, published in 1558. Trubar was against the building of churches. When a woman in Lower Styria told that two saints came to her every night, they spoke to her and ordered that a church be built in their honour on the nearby hill. He sent his vicar to her to ask her in what garb the two saints came to her. She replied that “two beautiful black men” always came to her at midnight. To this the vicar said, “Do not say that they are black, but that they are white, for the devils are black, the saints are white.” To this she replied: “Yes sir, I mean they are white” (Vinkler 2012: 341).

Solms 2001: 92, 104). They justified their concerns citing words of Cain: “and it shall come to pass that every one that findeth me shall slay me” (Genesis 4: 14).

The origin of the Egyptians has also attracted the attention of scholars. The German naturalist and anatomist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach supported the thesis of Egyptian origin by discovering similarities between Gypsy skulls and those of the ancient Egyptians. Evidence that the Gypsies were descended from the ancient Egyptians was also found by the “poor man’s lawyer” Samuel Roberts of Sheffield in the prophecy of Ezekiel: “I will scatter the Egyptians among the nations and disperse them throughout other lands” (29:12; 30:23). Despite such evidence of the Egyptian origin of the Gypsies, many have seriously doubted it since their arrival in Western Europe. Sebastien Munster, for example, dismissed the story that they were penitents from Egypt as a “fable” (1575: II, 879). The Egyptian origin of the members of these groups was rejected by Thomas Dekker, among others, who was convinced that “they neuer discended from the tribes of any of those people that came out of the Land of Egipt” (Dekker 1608: G4).

The Egyptian name, according to Judith Okely, was only an assumed identity for many people without foreign origins (1983: 3). She quotes the words of an early seventeenth-century pamphleteer who declared that “they goe always never under an hundred men or women causing their faces to be made blacke, as if they were Egyptians” (Okely 1983: 4). It seems that they did this for professional reasons. By presenting themselves under the Egyptian identity, they sought to earn a living as fortune tellers, connoisseurs of miraculous cures, etc., both among the “common people” and the nobility. As we know, for centuries Egypt was considered the “fountaine of all Science, and Arts civill” (Blount 1636: 3). On the other hand, they endeavoured in this way to secure freedom of movement as pilgrims and penitents (Okely 1983: 14).

Uncontrollable *Wanderlust*

In the descriptions of nomadic groups in the chronicles of the fifteenth century, we already find familiar images and stereotypes. One of them says that Gypsies are plagued by an uncontrollable *wanderlust*. Supposedly, the nomadic way of life was in their blood. It was as natural for them to wander as it was for the majority of the population to lead a sedentary life (Mayall 1988: 15, 75–6). It was, as Ferenc Liszt put it, a consequence of their “insatiable thirst for liberty” and their “frantic desire to enjoy every moment of his existence” (Liszt 1926: 71). The image of the Gypsy as a wanderer was so

appealing that those Gypsies who adopted a sedentary lifestyle were either disregarded or considered “impure blood” (Mayall 1988: 11, 15, 130).

This image, however, made them conspicuous and thus vulnerable to attack. The construction of and response to natural vagrancy in parts of Europe that experienced the transition from feudalism to capitalism suggests that the development of the “internal outsider”, as Angus Bancroft suggests, was an important part of the construction of a sedentary European identity. First, a unitary nation-state was created that guaranteed property rights. The work ethic, the morality of property, and civilisation were demarcated from the nomads. On the other hand, the emergence of the work ethic went hand in hand with the denigration of those nomads who seemed to reject it and thus posed a threat to its legitimacy (Bancroft 2005: 16–7).

In medieval Europe, the oppressed were bound to their landlord; they needed his permission to leave their home. Groups of “slanderers” not only eluded classification in the valid social hierarchy, but were a clear violation of the social order and proof of its weakness. According to the principle that words move and examples draw, freely roaming groups of people represented a serious threat to the unchanging world created by God.

The Gypsy way of life was considered the opposite of a healthy and moral way of life until the end of the nineteenth century. At that time, some critics of modernisation and progress began to look for an expression of authenticity and vitality in the qualities that the majority believed were characteristic of the Gypsies. The primitive characteristics of the group, a symbol of their anti-modernity, were seen as a sign of positive resistance or indifference to the forces of progress and civilisation. As they became increasingly dissatisfied with the materialism of the industrial age, they looked longingly at the life of the Gypsy in the freedom of nature, seeing in it the very opposite of the cramped city life. In their eyes, the image of the Gypsy became a metaphor for a carefree life without the restrictions and prohibitions of a settled society. According to this view, Gypsies had voluntarily and consciously turned away from the constraints of urban life, routine business and work, normal conventions, the pursuit of wealth and personal aggrandisement, and the normal comforts of material progress (Mayall 2004: 131).

The constant repetition of negative images and suspicions against members of travel groups fueled resentment and indelible hatred. This, in turn, led to demands for stricter measures against the group, but these were never, and nowhere, clearly defined. Legislators responded to these demands by legalising prejudice and superstition. Legislators not only criminalised their way of life, but also forbade them from changing it. The most important

prohibition directed against the Gypsies was banishment as a punishment. Not only was nomadism forbidden, but also settlement, as Gypsies were often forbidden to settle or build houses, and non-Gypsies were forbidden to sell to Gypsies. They were also not allowed to move in groups of more than three or four. Those of them who managed to evade the strict rule of law risked severe punishment for a lifestyle that was forbidden by law. Punishment also threatened anyone who helped them or even hid them (Liégeois 1983: 94). Thus, they were pushed to the margins of law and order and made guilty by their very existence. Regardless of all the inconsistencies, the law was precise: those who did not abide by the dictates of the law came into conflict with it. That is, if the law says you are a criminal, you are a criminal; if not, you are again in conflict with the law, that is, you are a criminal (Jezernik 1979: 270).

With the most radical measures (from expulsion from the territory of a country to the mass imposition of the death penalty), the legislators did not achieve the desired effect, namely the removal of the traveling groups without a permanent residence. "As if hiding underground," Podgoričan wrote, "to escape a cruel death, the Gypsies reappeared each time immediately after the furious storm of the first passion had subsided" (Gorenjec 1872: 199). The laws defined the Gypsies as a social evil, but could not eradicate it because it was rooted in the foundations of a hierarchical society in which the Gypsies were at the bottom of society. The main source of survival for members of Gypsy groups was the successful exploitation of certain economic niches, especially the pursuit of activities that others were not allowed or willing to do. If they were exterminated, a number of much-needed jobs would be eliminated.

For centuries, settled Europeans had distinguished between members of "civilised society" on the one hand and "primitives," "barbarians," and "savages" on the other, in order to define themselves as civilised people. To do this, they needed their counterpart, their Other, and the nomadic Gypsies served this purpose admirably. It was as if they represented in an extravagant and colourful way all that had been rejected by the settled population (Kristeva 1991: 201; Port 1998: 153–54; Jezernik 2004: 29). In short, if the Gypsy did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him. In order to be able to imagine themselves as civilised, the sedentary majority needed an antithesis to recognise and confirm their own ideas. Thus the Gypsy, "the child of nature," "the man of freedom," or, even more poignantly, "a descendant of dirty, mannerless thieves," served as a kind of mirror in which they could admire their own image as a contrast (Jezernik 2001: 349–50).

Legalisation of illegality

In the Middle Ages, not all the population enjoyed freedom of movement, yet social and economic conditions created the surroundings for the formation and existence of organised traveling groups. Already in the fourteenth century, there was a growing number of “vagabonds” who had fled the village or the farm to which they belonged. Among them were a variety of performers, peddlers, peasants out of bond, preachers, mendicants, and pilgrims who organised themselves to take advantage of the economic opportunities on the road. “Egyptians,” who appeared to come from a mysterious foreign land, were most successful in presenting themselves as exotic fortune tellers and gaining freedom of movement as pilgrims and penitents (Okely 1983: 14). Because of their interdependence with non-Gypsies, they always had to adapt and change in response to changes in the dominant economic and social order. Obviously, many of them were successful in this, because we can see that persons who called themselves “Gypsies” at the end of feudalism still flourished in the age of industrialisation and capitalism (Okely 1983: 30).

At the end of the eighteenth century, the Industrial Revolution led to unstable labour relations and thus significantly increased the mobility of the population. Due to the instability of the labour market, many workers constantly moved from place to place. In everyday life, migration was widespread, but sedentariness was still the norm, and fear of the mass of uprooted and clandestine poor was widespread. It portrayed the poor immigrants in the eyes of the bourgeois ruling class as pathological nomads who did not like to work and wanted to live by stealing and begging (Lucassen, Willens and Cottar 1998: 66–7). The treatment of vagrancy and Gypsies during the transition from feudalism to capitalist modernity suggests that the development of the internal outsider was an important part of the construction of a settled European identity. The work ethic, the morality of property, and civility, were demarcated against the wandering Gypsy (Bancroft 2005: 17). It was important because all members of a settled society were potential nomads. Sedentarism was the accepted norm, but it was not always and for all the desired solution. As Sigmund Freud suggests, one need not forbid what no one wants to do; but what is most strictly forbidden is an object of desire (Freud 1973: IV, 192).

The persecution of Gypsies led to a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more people saw them as criminals, the more attention they paid to the cases that confirmed their expectations. Gullible people soon suspected that the

nails with which Christ was nailed to the cross had been forged by Gypsies. Stories to this effect circulated throughout Europe and were often spread by the Gypsies themselves. In the East, it was said that the Jews had ordered four nails from the Gypsies for Christ's crucifixion, and that the fifth nail, which was driven into Christ's heart, caused such pain that he cursed the Gypsies to fornication and a life of misery (Đorđević 1984: 126). Among the stories about the crucifixion there were also versions invented and spread by the Gypsies themselves, apparently at least some as positive counter-stories. For example, the Jews allegedly drove one nail into each of Christ's hands and feet, while they wanted to drive the fifth into his navel. However, a gypsy found himself here and stole this nail. When Christ saw this, he commanded that there should be thieves in the world (Đorđević 1984: 126; cf. Risteski 1991: 172). The lesson of the story is that the Gypsies steal because it was the will of Christ, and therefore it was natural for them to do so.

In the fifteenth century, accounts of the Gypsies are found in the chronicles of almost all European countries. However, the initial curiosity and goodwill of the settled population were soon replaced by hostility and persecution. Decrees and laws often permitted the killing of Gypsies. The practice of "Gypsy hunting" was widespread, and in Denmark as late as 1835 over 260 men, women, and children were killed in such a hunt. In Hungary in 1782, nearly 200 Gypsies were arrested, accused of these crimes, and tortured until they confessed. As a result, 18 women were beheaded, 15 men were hanged, 6 men were broken on the wheel, and 2 men were quartered. Another 150 Gypsies were awaiting death in prison when the emperor sent a commission of inquiry that determined that the confessions were false: The people they had supposedly eaten were still alive (Kenrick and Puxon 1972: 33).

Hans Günther, known as *Rassengünther* (Race Günther) or *Rassenpapst*, claimed in his book *Rassenkunde Europas* that the Gypsies, who retained some elements of their Nordic homeland, absorbed the blood of the surrounding peoples in the course of their migrations and thus became an Oriental, West Asian racial mixture into which Indian, Central Asian, and European blood strains were mixed (Günther 1929: 92–3). Similarly, in an essay entitled *Volk und Staat* (People and State), Robert Kroeber stated that contemporary Jews and Gypsies were far removed from the Nordic race, because their Asian ancestors were "quite different from our Nordic ancestors" (Tenenbaum 1956: 400). As a result, the Gypsies were classified as "asocials," that is, a vagabond people who should be eliminated from Aryan society. Against this background, Robert Ritter conducted a survey of all German Gypsies in 1937; he was supposed to record and examine 30,000 people at that time.

The results of the survey confirmed his hypothesis that most of them were not Gypsies at all, but “products of mating with the German criminal asocial subproletariat.” In January 1940, he proposed as the only solution to the so-called Gypsy question that the great mass of asocial and good-for-nothing Gypsy mongrels be gathered together in large labour camps, where they could be educated to work and the further breeding of this population of “mixed blood” would be forever prevented (Müller-Hill 1988: 58–9).

Pygmalionic power of imagination

The Nazis had initially forbidden Gypsies to move freely, and from 1936 “vagabonds” were imprisoned for “re-education.” In 1937 and 1938, all wandering Gypsies in Germany were placed in residential camps near major cities. The following year, thousands of Gypsies were deported from Germany and the German-occupied territories, first to Jewish ghettos and then to concentration camps in Poland (Hoess 1959: 124–25; Kogon 1959: 46). In 1942, a special Zigeunerlager (Gypsy Camp) was established in Auschwitz. They were to be deported there and held there for the rest of the war. Between February 26, 1943 and July 21, 1944, 10,094 men and 10,849 women were registered. Of all the Gypsies deported to Auschwitz, almost two-thirds were from Greater Germany, representing nearly 14,000 of the names registered in the Gypsy Camp. The second largest group came from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, about 4500 persons or 22% of the Gypsy Camp inmates. The third largest group came from occupied Poland, about 6% or 1300 persons. Among them were also smaller groups of Gypsies from the Soviet Union, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Lithuania, and France. They suffered terribly from food shortages and disastrous hygienic conditions. In the seventeen months of its existence, at least 20,078 of the total 20,943 registered prisoners died of starvation, disease, or gassing (see Jezernik 2001: 354).

In Diderot’s *Encyclopedie, ou dictionnaire raisonne des sciences, des artes et des metiers*, Gypsies were defined as vagabonds who claimed to be able to tell fortunes by examining their hands. Their talent laid in singing, dancing and stealing. Almost two hundred years later, in the Gypsy Camp, this was empirically proven for future generations, for example in museums established in concentration camps. The first of these exhibitions was set up in Block 2 of the Dachau concentration camp in the early 1930s. It contained all kinds of photographs and pictures of human heads and skulls, busts made of wax or plaster, and statues of “criminal types” made of plaster. The pictures

shown were quite unworldly. For example, a Gypsy with a stuffed chicken under his armpits, which he had probably stolen and paid for with his life, and so on (Jezernik 2007: 11).

On the other hand, however, this idea strongly attracted Germans with a kind of Pygmalion power, all the more so because it represented nothing but an image of their own suppressed nature. However, as we have seen, the otherness of the Gypsies was in many cases nothing more than social mimicry; the Gypsies, who had learned through the centuries that they could find their place on this earth most easily if they adapted to the demands of the environment, adopted an image that was forced upon them by the rest of the world as a kind of protective mask (Jezernik 2001: 361). If there was no room for Gypsies in the Gypsy Camp, it was large enough to house a construction that provided “civilised people” with a scapegoat and a reference point for defining their identity. The Gypsies in the concentration camps were forcibly denied their freedom of movement, and the establishment reinterpreted their desire for it as evidence of their romantic and free spirit. Since they were not given adequate food rations to survive, they had to keep their heads above water through theft or prostitution, and thus theft and sexual intemperance became part of the construct. Since they were denied water and other necessities of life, uncleanliness also became part of the construct (see e.g. Crowe, Kolsti 1991: 5).

As we have seen, if the Gypsy ever existed before, the Nazis took care that it didn't survive Auschwitz. But Europeans were desperately in need of an opposition, and the Gypsies danced to their tune. Not at all surprising then, that when the war was over the same tune kept on. In Buchenwald, after it has been liberated on April 11, 1945, some former internees cleared the floor and persuaded two Gypsy girls to do exhibition dances:

These two girls were young and turned and twisted themselves to the strains of dreamy Gypsy music. I fell too fascinated even to move. Probably they were thinking of the same as I was: – of the Gypsy people, this peculiar people that knows no home yet ardently loves its family; a people that, however weil you know it, would remain a mystery. It was the first time that I had seen Gypsy girls all that near to me. I just stared (Geve 1958: 244).

The social power of underprivileged

Distinction from the sedentary majority, including deviant behaviour, placed them at the bottom of the social scale, but because such behaviour conformed to the stereotypical image, it tended to be tolerated by the majority. Such behaviour also gave them license to act according to the stereotypes. The Gypsies were marginalised and had no access to the traditional routes to power. Therefore, they were forced to use the source of their marginality to their advantage. They transformed marginality into a space of power, a space of weak power to be sure, but a space of power that was inaccessible to others (Belton 2005: 96). The itinerant groups who lived scattered and disconnected lives tried to be as inconspicuous and flexible as possible. Experience taught them that conspicuousness led to rejection and punishment and they knew they had to bend so as not to break and learned how to use the externally imposed image as a protective mask (Liégeois 1983: 13; Jezernik 2001: 361). Or, as a Gypsy saying goes, "If you want to survive, you should be a devil!" (Tomašević, Đurić 1988: 21).

Their demarcation from the settled population was in many cases merely social mimicry. Therefore, they kept inventing new stories that people liked to listen to and with which they could explain and enable their lifestyle. When they appeared in public, they acted as actors, fortune tellers, or whatever was expected of them. All this contributed greatly to the fact that people knew more about the peoples who lived on the other side of the world than about the groups of people who moved between them.

How people imagine themselves and the world they live in is a very important question for any individual, but the answer to it usually says more about how he/she reads his/her environment than about themselves. When Gypsies responded to stories about them, they usually did so because they were saying what their listeners wanted to hear. However, by (seemingly) adapting to their surroundings, they were also trying to maintain their independence. Marginalisation creates its own logic that causes the victim to trigger a defense mechanism of identification with the aggressor (Caruso 1969: 144). Identification with the aggressor causes the victim to introject the norms and values of the holders of social power, so that the stories told by the Gypsies say much more about their surroundings than about themselves.

“Water washes everything except the black faces”

The most common stereotype associated with “Egyptians” is related to their appearance. In the last two centuries, Gypsies throughout Europe have been described as dark-skinned people with curly black hair and coal-black, dark eyes dark with a beautiful shine, high foreheads, crooked noses, and snow-white teeth, as well as slender and flexible bodies. Such a description is already found in Heinrich Grellmann’s ethnographic report from the summer of 1783; later ethnologists, historians, literary figures, and visual artists adopted it. The external appearance played an important role in the formation of the image of a Gypsy as a complete stranger. For the white skin was an object of admiration, and the dark skin “should be disliked” it was said (Jerningham 1873: 363).

European folklore abounds with references to the skin colour of Gypsies. For instance, a Greek proverb urges, “Go to the Gypsy children and choose the whitest.” And a Yiddish proverb states, “No washing ever withens the black Gypsy” (Hancock 1987: 13). A similar proverb is used in Yugoslav languages and says, “Water washes everything but black faces.” And another explains why the black colour is so important, stating, “Even if he has a black face, he is not a Gypsy.”

If there was no doubt about the dark complexion of the Gypsies, opinions differed as to the cause. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, it was believed that those who called themselves *Egyptians* took on not only a foreign name but also a foreign appearance: “for no Red-oker man carries a face of a more filthy complexion, yet they are not borne so, neither has the Sunne burnt them so but they are painted so: yet they are not good painters neither, for they do not make faces but marre faces” (Dekker 1608: G4). Almost two centuries later, Grellmann held a similar opinion to Thomas Dekker, with the difference that, in his view, the Gypsies did not intentionally blacken their faces, as their colour was a consequence of their way of life:

The Laplanders, Samoieds, as well as the Siberians, likewise, have brown yellow-coloured skins, in consequence of living, from their childhood, in smoke and dirt, in the same manner as the Gipseys: these would, long ago, have been divested of their swarthy complexions, if they had discontinued their filthy mode of living. Only observe a Gipsy from his birth, till he reaches man’s estate; and you must be convinced that their colour is not so much owing to their descent, as to the nastiness of their bodies. In summer, the child is exposed to the scorching sun; in winter, it is shut up in a smoky hut (Grellmann 1783: 30).

The British monogenist James Cowles Prichard did not agree with Grellman. In his opinion, man had differentiated himself through the process of self-domestication: “The more civilized the people have a large stature, and better form and a lighter complexion” (Prichard 1813: 545). Nevertheless, Grellmann’s view prevailed, especially among authors who referred – explicitly or implicitly – to his work. The historian John Hoyland, for instance, reaffirmed the Elizabethan conviction that dark skin was acquired, claiming that: “Gypsies would long ago have been divested of their swarthy complexion, had they discontinued their filthy mode of living” (Hoyland 1816: 39–40).

In fact, the image of the dark-skinned and black-haired Gypsy only partially corresponded to the facts, for Gypsies did not really differ in appearance from average Europeans. They were dark-skinned and black-haired, as well as light-haired and blue-eyed. But Europeans simply ignored the facts that did not fit into the preconceived image as “atypical of Gypsies” or eliminated them as a result of “mixing with the surrounding population” (Pogačnik 1968: 285). Worse, evidence of light-haired and blue-eyed Gypsy children led to accusations of child stealing and claims of dilution of pure “black Gypsy blood” (Mayall 1988: 82–3). Those whose appearance did not conform to the stereotypical caricature did not fare well. “How dare you lousy gypsy brat be blond?” they were yelled at. “Your mother must have been quite a whore!” (Geve 1958: 81).

The roots of this colour blindness go back to an old prejudice for which empirical science had already collected a lot of “evidence” by the end of the eighteenth century. The physician and surgeon Charles White argued in 1779 that Europeans, Asians, Americans, Black Africans, and Hottentots formed “a fairly regular gradation,” with the European at the head and the Black African on the other side, “approaches the ape” (White 1799: 83). The vitality of stereotypes and prejudices was so strong that they persisted over the centuries, defying both contrary evidence and observers’ own experiences. Former Auschwitz prisoners, for example, often stated that the notorious war criminal Dr. Alois Mengele was “very Aryan-looking” or as “tall and blond,” when in fact he was a *Zigeunertyp*, no taller than 160 centimetres, with dark hair and a “swarthy, almost gypsylike complexion” (see Jezernik 2001: 352; 2004: 31–2).

The black mirror of the white men

The image of nomadic groups in Western Europe during the transition from feudalism to capitalist modernity shows the important role that the internal outsider played in this process and, consequently, in the consolidation

of the identity of European populations as permanently sedentary societies. The identities of individuals or groups are always relative. This means that individuals and groups of people always identify themselves through their difference from others: I am not he/she; We are not they. The way individuals and groups define the Other is therefore essential to how these individuals or groups define themselves. The formation of identities is based on a regulatory narrative that creates and excludes Others. In this way, they created and maintained Europe as a space of ideological inclusivity and exclusivity from which nomadic groups were simultaneously excluded and in which they were necessarily present. European identity can be said to have emerged in opposition to foreign groups, and throughout the new European century the Gypsies, along with the Jews, were constant outsiders. They were the first “blacks” for Europe (Bancroft 2005: 153).

It is precisely the permanence and immutability of the Gypsy image that proves its importance in the identity formation of the settled majority. Negative stereotypes about the nomadic Other served generations of the settled population to shape their own sense of belonging; this is still true, at least in part, today. The members of the settled majority, who wanted to be civilised, orderly, good, moral, and the like, needed their opposite. And this was found in the itinerant groups as the complete opposite of all the qualities in virtually every possible area (lifestyle, religion, appearance, origin) of which the members of the Western European settled societies were proud. For several generations they served as a pedagogical tool in the education of children, with special care taken to implant in them the frightening stereotype of the Gypsy as the kidnapper of (naughty, disobedient, etc.) children.

In the age of modernity, the differences in history and the diversity of geography gave rise to the construction of the image of the Gypsies as the antithesis of the ever-changing world. They were portrayed as free-living and free-loving, with a sexual appetite matched only by their *wanderlust*, itself a product of black blood or *kalo ratt*. His wild nomadic spirit was cradled and could neither be controlled nor denied: “There is a gypsy power stronger than all others, a power that severe old ties, and that is their unsubjected wandering instinct” (Mayall 1988: 76). Everything seemed to change except the Gypsies. It did not matter whether this image corresponded to the facts or not. Their behaviour, which did not conform to stereotypical expectations or even contradicted them, was normally perceived as an exception that confirmed the rule.

Not every story is a narrative because not all narratives meet the essential criteria for telling a story: a beginning, a core, a conclusion, and a moral.

A story is more than just a collection of words that make it up. On the other hand, stories are not mere snapshots of reality, but collective constructions with the help of which groups of people form a picture of the world and give meaning to what happens in it, interpret it. Therefore, any story, even an apparently ahistorical one, reflects the time and place in which it was created, and it always reflects the social, economic, cultural, and political conditions under which it was created (Jezernik 1979b: 239). Two levels of meaning intertwine in narratives. While one refers to the real world, the other (the value level) contains a message from the storyteller to the listener that contains the lesson of the story or makes sense of the story (Daiute, Lightfoot 2004: xii–xiii). When we talk about the narrative about Gypsies, we are mainly interested in the evaluative level. The truth or falsity of this narrative in terms of its correspondence to the facts is of secondary importance, because even a fable and/or an untrue story has (perhaps) real, material, and symbolic implications, even though it may contradict the actual situation. Therefore, we can say that the Gypsy is a product of the narrative and does not exist outside of it. In other words, a Gypsy is someone who behaves in a way that is expected of Gypsies in the wider social environment. Thus, they are the product of the collective knowledge of what Gypsies look like, how they live, and what they do. This collective knowledge is embodied by the person who plays the role of the Gypsy. Acting in this role serves to maintain the prevailing understanding of what is decent and appropriate for a Gypsy and what is not (anymore). The narrative about Gypsies therefore says much more about the majority society in which this image was developed and maintained than about Gypsies as flesh-and-blood people.

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