

Review Article

GYPSIES: The Hidden Americans. Anne Sutherland. Tavistock Publications 1975. £6.90

Field work with the Gypsies raises, in an extreme form, questions which anthropologists more easily evade elsewhere: namely the reliability and status of the information and events as presented to the outsider. The anthropologist cannot establish a new 'objectivity' independent of the historical role of the outsider. Gypsies have survived as a separate ethnic group while maintaining regular economic and political interaction with gaje (non-Gypsies and outsiders). In communication with gajes, the Gypsies will be suitably flexible. Questions stimulate chamaeleonic answers. Even more disappointing for the anthropologist, Gypsies have a vested interest in preserving their secrets and can hardly be persuaded of benefits arising from gaje knowledge of them. Participant observation among Gypsies should minimise any intervention which draws attention to the observer's real interests.

It is not surprising that systematic or original material on Gypsies is gold dust, despite the massive bibliographies. Scholarly gypsiologists have lifted and distorted others' field work or generalised from a single encounter. Theoretical understanding of ritual taboo or nomadism has emphasised 'Eastern origins' or genetic determinism. More recently sociologists and educationalists have tried to intimidate us with concepts of 'underdeveloped marginality'¹ or 'cultural deprivation',²

Anne Sutherland has avoided these temptations and deceptions. She makes explicit her official role among the Gypsies as female gaje teacher, and explores both its limitations and potential. By pointing to those areas where her material is less complete, she lays herself open to the recent criticism in RAIN³ that her ethnography is 'rather thin'. I can only marvel at the quality of her ethnography.

Sutherland takes as axiomatic the ideological distinction between Gypsy and gaje. She reveals the American Gypsies' remarkable adaptation, not projected disintegration, in an advanced industrial setting. Policy makers in England and elsewhere should note that the majority of Gypsies or Rom in Barvale, California are 'housed', but neither assimilated nor sedentary. The average family travel 42% of the time, camping in station-waggons, motels and relatives' houses from Alaska to Hawaii. The Rom have adopted American symbols but reinterpreted them. For example, the Gypsy leaders sport a gold sheriff's badge. Thanks to modern technology, any Gypsy temporarily banished for ritual uncleanness can speak to other Gypsies by telephone. Since Gypsies were supposed to disappear with development, they remain unidentified by many Americans. Rom fortune tellers disguise themselves more profitably as Indians.

To other Americans, looking from the outside, the Rom may appear demoralised. But the Rom's model of themselves is different. Recourse to welfare, a stigmatised activity for gaje, is something to be exploited by Gypsies, just as begging in the past. Illiteracy appears to be no handicap in manipulating bureaucracies. Contact with the police is not a sign of harassment but a weapon used by a Gypsy 'big man' against his rivals. The Gypsies retain their own legal machinery - for example the Kris, the gypsy trial, which some gypsiologists have considered defunct. Here Sutherland offers analysis of its workings and detailed case studies - something which few have done before.

A major contribution is her discussion on pollution. Scattered references to taboos exist in the literature but almost no-one has recognised the crucial relationship between pollution and the Gypsies' maintenance of an ethnic boundary. Ritual beliefs reflect and reinforce the Gypsies' independence from the larger society, and cannot be classed as neutral 'culture' in any programme of liberal integration.

Sutherland, as a woman, gained access to ritual beliefs (the responsibility of Gypsy women). As head teacher in a school for Rom, her status was useful for insights into political rivalries. But her direct observation of the Gypsies at work was inevitably limited, especially as she could not travel with the families. There are some intelligent comments on co-operation in work and avoidance of wage-labour.

However, it is important to know to what extent the Gypsies frequenting Barvale succeed in exploiting a special economic niche, with their variety of occupations. We do not know whether, on their frequent travels away from Barvale, the Rom found ample or limited work opportunities. By comparison, the graphic and hilarious accounts of Welfare obtained in Barvale may inadvertently exaggerate the importance of this source of income compared to others.

Sutherland has concentrated on the Gypsies' internal organisation, to discredit popular classifications of the Gypsies as a pariah group. This may be a necessary starting point. But the internal coherence of Gypsy society is not independent of the encompassing host society, upon which the Gypsies rely for their livelihood, and where access to territory is subject to gaje approval. Despite the important categories and sub-divisions within Gypsy society, the dominant categories are Gypsy in opposition to gaje. A theory for the internal society should include its interlocking points with the larger society and beyond. Stereotypes on both sides are useful pointers. They may be inversions of the ideal or reinterpretations of empirical information, not images created in vacuo.

Meanwhile Sutherland's book sets an example for future studies of Gypsies anywhere. Well versed in her discipline, she displays an astuteness to match the Gypsies and has raised the level of analysis in gypsology - a subject which includes our fantasies.

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References

1. 'Values among under-developed Marginals: the case of Spanish Gypsies'. P. Goulet and M. Walshok in Comparative Studies in History and Society. Camb. Univ. Press. Vol.13 no.4 October 1971.
2. Children and their Primary Schools. Lady Plowden. see Vol. 2. Appendix 12 for section on Gypsies. H.M.S.C. 1967.
3. RAIN. May 1975. Review by Roger Ballard.