

‘Gypsy Invasion’: A critical analysis of newspaper reaction to Czech and Slovak Romani asylum-seekers in Britain, 1997

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Following Canadian efforts to prevent Romanies from Slovakia and the Czech Republic entering its territory, in October 1997, Romani families from the former Czechoslovakia started to arrive at the port of Dover in Kent, England. They were attempting to claim political asylum in the UK due to the high levels of institutionalised racism and discrimination which forced them to flee their home countries. The reactions these families received from most sections of the British press were vitriolic and overtly hostile. It is this newspaper coverage that will be unpacked, examined and critically discussed in this article. Importantly, we regard the newspaper texts not simply as material for a contemporary case study, but as an object of analysis which is both a product of a particular historical moment, and simultaneously a recent manifestation of a longer historical project to construct Roma people in censoring and censorious ways. For all that, our analysis reveals very little of the struggles and experiences of these asylum-seekers, but everything about British xenophobia, anti-Gypsyism, and the (a) British way of life.

Introduction and context

The early years of the twentieth century should remain nearly as memorable in Gypsy history as the early years of the fifteenth, to which they afford a welcome and instructive parallel (Winstedt 1913: 244).

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The opening sentence of Eric Otto Winstedt's lengthy article published in the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* in 1913 is worth recalling in the context of this article. We feel sure that if Winstedt was with us today he would, like us, also argue that the latter years of the twentieth century have been just as memorable as the early years of this century for 'Gypsy history'. These latter years have also afforded an 'instructive parallel' we believe, to use his expression.

Winstedt (1913) in his paper was concerned with the 'plain unvarnished facts' in telling of his encounters with the 'Gypsy Coppersmiths' during 1911 and 1913. However, his account, and others like it (for example, Holmes (1980) retrospectively on the earlier 'German Gypsies invasion' of 1904–1906 or Yates (1942, 1943) and Myers (1943, 1945) on the 'Greek Gypsies' in South Wales during 1929 and 1942), do provide us with an insight into the reaction of those around him to new immigrants entering Britain generally, and to new immigrant Gypsies in particular (1).

It is the purpose of this article to investigate the types of reactions that one specific and, we would argue, quite unique 'Gypsy Invasion' generated in British public and press discourses during the latter part of 1997. To be clear, this is *not* primarily an article about the Romani asylum-seekers from the Czech Republic and Slovakia themselves; it is an article more about *gadzhe* (non-Gypsy) reactions to them. Liégeois (1994: 199) captures this idea very clearly when he says:

The image of the stranger and of the strange, updated every few years, exposes the fears and worries of those who create it, by giving shape to the group's idea of its 'opposite' whenever we look at how Gypsies and Travellers are treated, we are at the same time looking at the social history, the politics and the psychology of those who are reacting to them.

At this point it is prudent to note that there is always a danger in isolating one specific moment in time for analysis such as we intend. However, by providing the necessary context and using an appropriate methodology, it is hoped that some critical insights will be gained into how this event fuelled the reaction that unfolded. It goes without saying that this will be a selective investigation. We have taken for analysis most, but not all, of the leading British daily and Sunday newspapers during a two week period from mid to late October 1997 (20 Oct. 1997–30 Oct. 1997). Ireland was also a destination for groups of Romanies during this period though we have not analysed the Irish press reaction due to restrictions of space and lack of materials. Nonetheless, by critically examining the British press coverage we

feel able to offer some informed thoughts on why such discourses appeared during October 1997 as a reaction to, if we can borrow Winstedt's words again, 'huge bands of wanderers . . . the Gypsies' (p. 244).

Romani migrations in Europe: A brief history

Gypsy migrations came about both as the outcome of dynamic change in order to adapt to new circumstances and as a response to historical opportunities. (Reyniers 1995: 8)

At the start of the twentieth century Western Europe witnessed many population movements both between and within its many countries and nation states (Giddens 1985). The reasons for such movements were many and complex. Suffice to say, groups of Romanies were amongst those on the move in countries such as France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland and the newspapers commented on the Gypsies and their migratory ways. As Matras has noted:

Migration forms a repetitive pattern throughout Romani history. It is part of the collective recollection and cultural and historical legacy of the Roma as a nation. (Matras 1996: 5)

It is widely acknowledged, and documented, that the Roma were subject to persecution, harassment and expulsion from around the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century causing them to leave their areas of residence (Fraser 1992; Liégeois and Gheorghe 1995: 7–10). Earlier episodes are deemed to have been very likely, with scholars such as Ian Hancock (1987) suggesting a connection between the Romani migration into Europe and the Islamic victories in Northern India during the tenth century. Likewise, connections are frequently made between the fall of the Byzantine Empire and Ottoman conquests and Romani migrations from the Balkans to North and West Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The exodus of groups of *Vlach* Roma (including *Kalderash*, *Lovari* and others) from Romania toward the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was in part connected to the abolition of Romani slavery and the resulting freedom of movement (Hancock 1987). The descendants of those migrants are now located in most parts of Europe and the Americas. Romani refugees from Central and Eastern Europe were displaced during the Second World War and many have opted to stay in the West. In some parts of the East, the migration of Roma from was enforced by government post-war industrial-

isation policies, such as the shift of Roma from Slovakia to Bohemia in the late 1940s and 1950s (Powell 1994: 113).

More recently, the types of Romani migration patterns have changed and these need to be examined. Matras (1996: 5–6), in a recent report for the Council of Europe, has usefully summarised these patterns as falling into three phases:

- Phase 1: Pre-mid 1970s. This phase allowed for recent migrants to not only find employment and take up residence permits but also, in some case, to be granted formal and substantive citizenship rights.
- Phase 2: Late 1970s–early 1990s. During this phase migration was only possible by entering and staying illegally or by applying for political asylum.
- Phase 3: Post 1992–1993. This phase started with the introduction of regulations which concerned ‘safe countries’ of origin and transit and provisions for the speedy refusal of asylum applications and readmission to the countries of origin or transit. For Eastern European Romani migrants during this phase this has involved either entering the West on tourist visas and ‘overstaying’ or entering illegally.

It is evident from examining the history and phases of Romani migration patterns that these differ from general European migration trends and routes. This is due to a number of reasons. Mainly, it is because Romani migration is often triggered by external developments which specifically affect the community. These external developments can take a number of forms but include events such as social conflict and ethnic tensions, violence or change in socio-political status (such as the citizenship law changes in the former Czechoslovakia during the earlier part of the 1990s (Bancroft 1999; O’Nions 1999; Young 1999: 42; Rooker 1995). In addition to these external factors are also other ‘push’ factors, such as Romani non-confidence or non-identification with the state institutions of the current ‘host’ society (Matras 1998). Taken together, the high risks of emigration seem minor compared with the dangers and threats of staying in a country which rejects them at all levels and has historically marginalised and segregated them, as has the former Czechoslovakia (for examples of such treatment see Kostelancik 1989; Ulc 1991; Kalvoda 1991; Brearly 1996: 19).

Prior to the events of 1997, which saw Roma from the former Czechoslovakia emigrate to Canada then Britain, other Romani migrations were taking place. The main countries of origin of Romani migrants who travelled to

various countries in Western Europe since about 1990 have been Romania, Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. It is estimated that the total number of Romani individuals from these three countries who have applied at least once for political asylum in Western Europe is anywhere between 50,000 and 150,000 (Matras 1996: 7). Small numbers of Romani refugees, from a group known as the *Serbaya Kalderash*, from Bosnia and Serbia have arrived in the UK since 1990 (Acton 1996). What is also apparent is that similar numbers, if not more, have been prevented from crossing the borders into Western Europe since the collapse of 'actually existing socialism' at the beginning of the 1990s. Other countries whose Romani populations have headed West in recent times include Bulgaria, Croatia and Poland, although figures here have been much lower than for the main three countries.

The favoured Western locations for Romani migrants have been Italy, Germany, France and Austria, with some movement into Sweden, Spain and the Netherlands. In June and July 1999 small groups of Romanies from Slovakia arrived in Finland claiming political asylum, though the first group of 150 that arrived had their applications for asylum almost instantly rejected (Radio Free Europe 1999a, 1999b). What is quite relevant for the following discussion is the fact that many, if not most, of these Romani migrants have since returned to their countries of origin, usually as a result of their asylum applications being rejected.

The Czech and Slovak Romani emigrations of 1997

The immediate stimulus for the migration to Britain from the Czech and Slovak Republics was a programme on the private Czech Television channel, Nova. The documentary entitled *With Your Own Eyes* and screened on September 30, depicted the progress of a Romany bricklayer, Radislav [*sic*] Scuka, his pregnant wife and five children from Kosice in Eastern Slovakia to Dover, where he claimed asylum. (*The Times* 21 Oct. 1997: 11).

During the first few days of the press coverage of the Romani migrations into Britain, the majority of newspapers had made clear that it was a TV programme that was the main trigger for the 'invasion'. It was in August 1997 that first reports were being circulated that Roma from the Czech Republic and Slovakia were seeking political asylum in Toronto, Canada. This movement, like the following British one, was also said to have been triggered by a TV programme on the private channel TV Nova. In the programme, Czech Roma who had made it into Canada were interviewed

and spoke of the high quality of life, good treatment and work opportunities available to them in their new host country. The sudden arrival of a few hundred persons from the East was covered intensively by both local, national and international press agencies. The initial central discussion point in the Canadian press concerned the humanitarian aid to the refugees, though this also led into an examination of the domestic situation of the Roma who were still living in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Much analysis of the anti-Romani citizenship laws was undertaken by the Canadian press, as well as far-right violence and racism towards the Roma and the authorities indifference to the discrimination faced by the Romani minority in the labour market, housing and other social services. According to the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board, 1210 asylum applications were made from the Czech republic during 1997 (Matras 1998: 3).

Czech and Slovak Romani asylum seekers continued their route into Canada until October 1997. At this point, with new visa requirements in place for Czech and Slovak citizens wanting to enter Canada, Britain became the country that the Romani asylum seekers started to travel to. They arrived in Dover during October and November 1997 to hostile newspaper reactions. The question of motivations for this migration again took centre stage; TV Nova, as the quote from *The Times* above indicates, was largely, and certainly initially seen, as the *only* factor behind the Romani exodus to the UK. There was little mention of the political problems in the Czech and Slovak Republics, human rights violations, the anti-Romani citizenship laws (O'Nions 1999; Rooker 1995) or far-right racism and local-authority indifference to anti-Romani discrimination. According to official figures from the Home Office, some 400 Czech and Slovak nationals applied for asylum in Dover between 1 February 1997 and 31 January 1998. With 600 dependants included in these applications, the total rises to approximately 1,000 persons (Matras 1998: 3).

One of the main issues that needs to be examined now is *why* did just over 1000 Romani asylum seekers generate the kind of press coverage in Britain during the first two weeks of their arrival? How did such a relatively small number of powerless and impoverished immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe create such a furor when larger numbers of immigrants and asylum-seekers who have also arrived recently in Britain from countries such as Somalia, Nigeria and the former Yugoslavia have not caused such outrage, disdain and moral panic? Claude Moraes, from the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, had this to say on the matter:

This has produced more hostile calls than we have ever had before. There is an instinctive reaction just because they are Gypsies. They [the newspapers] really, really hate them. It seems to be some kind of combination of Gypsies—*who everybody thinks they know*—and in some kind of way the garden of England, Kent, being *violated*. It is vile stuff. [Interviewed by *The Guardian* 22 Oct. 97, our emphasis].

We shall explore this theme of the specific anti-Romani nature of the newspaper reporting later in the article when we come to examine why the press coverage took the forms that it did. We will now proceed to examine this complex issue in a systematic and critical fashion beginning with a short section of the methodology we employ to both read and write about the press coverage we are studying. We go on to assess the types of language and imagery that was used by the newspapers to tell 'us' ('British' non-Romanies) who 'they' (the 'foreign' Romanies) were.

Reading representation

In this section we outline our methods of reading (and writing about) the press coverage of events at Dover in October 1997. We do so by drawing up a comparison between our approach and that employed in more critical newspaper texts. Consider, for example, James Walsh's article, 'Outcasts of Europe' published in *Time* (3 Nov. 1997: 43); he writes:

The truth for Gypsies . . . is much more likely to be the way they describe it. In Central and Eastern Europe today, *real* Roma life consists of unemployment, slum housing, discrimination and mob attacks, the likes of which seldom make it into news stories farther West [emphasis added].

In this article, Walsh explores the various 'charges' made against Czech-Romani asylum seekers, and goes on to refute the 'facts' on which such 'charges' are based and sustained. For Walsh, the detailing of the conditions of Roma life, gleaned from reporters based in Central and Eastern Europe and Canada, as well as personal testimonies, is intended to reveal the 'truth' about Romani migration and the racism which drives and directs it. What he ignores, however, is the possibility that the alternative information and evidence he presents, may be as 'unreal' as that which he seeks to challenge and undermine, and as contingent upon his subjective perception of Romani 'reality' as the distinction between burnt orange and amber. Having said this, of course, what more can he do as a self-appointed intermediary for the Roma in telling their 'truth' to the 'outside' *gadzhe* world? Walsh

reports the 'truth' as it is being told to him by his (Roma) informants; he is being relied upon by his informants to communicate *their* message.

A second critical text, 'Asylum' by Alan Travis and Ian Traynor appeared in *The Guardian* (22 Oct. 1997); the authors argued that:

You might think from a perusal of the British papers this week, that thousands of illegal 'scrounging gypsies' . . . had just swept across the European plains to stage a full-frontal assault on the White Cliffs of Dover. *The facts themselves* point in a different direction. Britain is not the most popular destination for the world's migrants; we don't even make the global top thirty . . . We are, however, a nation that finds it hard to place the arrival of several hundreded Czech and Slovak gypsies in anything like its *proper* context. [emphasis added]

In this article, Travis and Traynor present an alternative, quantitative account of Romani migration, in an effort to correct tabloid claims of a 'Gypsy invasion' (see also Clark 1998). Visualised in a variety of maps, charts and figures, the authors provide an overview of the volume and trajectory of refugee movements around the world so that a 'realistic' appraisal of the level and scale of the 'Dover deluge' can be made. On the strength of this statistical analysis, the authors are then able to position contemporary events at Dover within the 'proper context' of global human migration; a move which renders the bulk of British media accounts as over-stated, hysterical, distorted, and simply 'untrue'.

The key to these critical, journalistic accounts is that they both attempt to 'set the record straight' and construct a version of events predicated on the 'real facts', the 'true figures', the 'genuine Roma' and/or the 'proper context'. Such an approach implicitly centres other newspaper accounts as distorted, sullied and false, and it works towards a punch-line which is the revelation of the 'truth' behind people and events. However, whilst agreeing with much of what both Walsh and Travis and Traynor have to say on the issue, we have, in our reading, consciously tried to avoid any recourse to a supposition of distortion or misrepresentation; such an hypothesis rests on the claim that there is (somewhere, somehow) a 'pure' narrative to be told, free from stereotypes. Moreover, we are not moved to correct 'false' representations or add material which has been omitted and/or ignored. Instead, we want to come to terms with the potential 'truth' of the press discourse which surrounds the arrival of Romani asylum-seekers at Dover. This involves a fuller engagement with the discursivity of press reports than was demonstrated in the articles discussed above, and it locates our approach within a Foucauldian theory of discourse. That is, rather than assess the extent to which the newspaper version of events relates to some putative reality, we

examine the ways in which such accounts may be nonetheless read (by the majority) as 'real'; how certain ways of thinking about events at Dover acquire authority and plausibility; how the arrival of asylum-seekers in the UK was made meaningful (to the majority) in the specific historical context of the late nineties; and how meaning and knowledge produce and sustain existing power relations. As Foucault (1980: 131) argued:

Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is, types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned . . . the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

There is no single theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between 'texts' and their readers, neither is there a specific methodology for 'reading representation'. Different theorists have approached the issue in different ways, depending on the types of texts examined. Even so, most authors share the view that a 'text' achieves plausibility by reflecting readers' 'own frame of reference' so that they 'share the perspectives of the text', (Atkinson 1990: 15). Eco (1979: 7) sums this up well: he states, 'to make his [*sic*] text communicative, the author has to assume that the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by his possible reader'. Put another way, he argues that representational strategies 'make us fond' by drawing on the 'common opinions shared by the majority of readers', (*ibid*: 161); they invite co-operation by appealing to shared values; by deploying a 'common frame' and an 'intertextual frame' of references and inferences (*ibid*: 20–21); and by mobilizing a 'patrimony of knowledge', (Eco 1972 cited in Sparks 1992: 111). As Atkinson (1990: 2) has argued, 'we read, and read into the text based on our own background knowledge and assumptions', and constantly seek to dovetail the narrative with other dimensions of our beliefs and consciousness about (in this context) the world of Romani asylum-seekers and its relationship to the (a) British way of life. Thus, Sparks asserts that:

. . . the text's 'disclosures' are not usually very surprising from the point of view of the knowledgeable (reader). Rather they serve to return us to a known, premised situation of which we have already grown fond. Within this world only certain sequences of events are really plausible or justifiable. (Sparks 1992: 114)

That there exists a tacit and shared (Western) knowledge of 'Gypsies' has been pointed out by Hancock (1997: 37); as he puts it, '(p)eople who never met a Gypsy in their lives are nevertheless able to provide a fairly detailed picture of how they think Gypsies look and how they live'. This 'detailed

picture', crucially, varies across time and space and the images to be found of 'The Gypsy' are usually polarised in two camps; either a 'romantic', 'care-free', 'entertaining', 'exotic' figure *or* a 'rebellious', 'wandering', 'immoral', 'lawless' 'vagabond'. Such 'pictures' are reconfigured in diverse ways at particular historical moments, given certain conditions which favour one 'picture' over another. We contend, for example, that at the beginning of October 1997, the British public—aside from a few stereotypes—had no detailed knowledge of Czech and Slovak Romani people, their history, lifestyles, their aspirations and the complex political conditions which forced some of them to seek asylum in the UK. Yet, by the end of the month, the vast majority of the population was convinced that the 'Gypsies' were 'gold-diggers searching for an easy life' (*Daily Mail* 24 Oct. 1997); that they should be 'kicked out of Britain' (*The Sun* 24 Oct. 1997); and that their status as political refugees was both 'cynical' and 'bogus' (*Daily Mail* 21 Oct. 1997)—they were, instead, 'cuckoos in the nest' (*Independent* 21 Oct. 1997) and 'purely economic refugees' (*Daily Star* 22 Oct. 1997). In a very short period of time, then, 'Gypsy as bogus asylum-seeker' was produced as a plausible 'news' subject and the British public 'knew' who Gypsies *really* were.

In the remainder of this paper, we map out the contours of the press discourse noting firstly, the range of statements made about events at Dover which provide readers with a knowledgeable ability of the issue. Secondly, we examine the press representations of actual people—'subjects'—who display attributes or behaviour which 'fits' readers' developing knowledge of asylum-seeking. We go on to consider how readers' knowledge of people and events acquires authority, a sense of embodying the 'truth of the matter'. Finally, we explore the 'rules' which make it possible to talk and think about 'Gypsy asylum-seekers' in certain ways and not others. Through these analytical steps, we hope to delineate a specific 'Romani Other' which is both historicised and contextualised. At the same time, we show how this construction tells us much about the 'normality' and complacency of the dominant symbolic order, and how it facilitates the binding together of readers into one 'imagined' ('British') community' from which all those who are 'Other' ('foreign') can be sent into exile.

Marking boundaries

Mr Klima (the journalist behind the TV Nova programme *With your Own Eyes* about the Czech and Slovak Romanies leaving for Canada and Britain) insists he is

not the 'initiator of this immigration wave or a travel agent masterminding the exodus of gypsies'. 'If I hadn't done the documentary it would only mean that the same turn of events would have happened two or three months later' (*The Independent* 21 Oct. 1997: 13).

Each of the newspapers sought to examine the reasons why Britain was being 'lumbered' with Romani asylum seekers from the Slovak and Czech republics. As we argued earlier, Klima's documentary remained the main focus of press attention, but it was the programme's (presumed) reception amongst a Romani audience which took centre stage in the newspaper debate. A number of headlines, therefore, encouraged readers to regard the programme as the primary source of misinformation about UK living conditions; Klima's otherwise run-of-the-mill documentary was reconstructed as a pernicious catalyst of a growing and widespread Romani 'ignorance' of the British way of life, its cost of living, welfare policy and even its weather:

'Gypsies lured by TV portrayal of "good life"' (*The Daily Telegraph* 20 Oct. 1997); 'The lure of promised lands' (*The Independent* 20 Oct. 1997); 'Jarda says that in Britain chickens cost £1 and the government hands out money every week. So how long before the other million gypsies like him abandon their grim poverty and head for Dover?' (*The Daily Mail* 20 Oct. 1997) 'Sun, sea and singing for TV's Romany exiles' (*The Guardian* 21 Oct. 1997).

As if to reinforce the poverty of Romani knowledge of the UK, several newspapers reported interviews with a variety of different Romani groups. *The Guardian* (20 Nov. 97), for example, alerted its readers to the views of a group of Prague teenagers, pointing out that these youngsters saw the UK as the land of Mr Bean, green football pitches, manicured lawns, Princess Diana, kindly women, and white fans cheering on black football players. The stereotypical assumptions embedded within these claims were not really at issue; rather, they served to underline (some) readers' developing awareness of a Romani population which was not entirely enlightened or informed about current social and cultural attitudes in Britain. Whatever the 'truth', the ideal of manicured lawns and green football pitches seemed eminently preferable to neo-Nazi skinheads and racist police officials.

At the same time, much of the press acknowledged and commented on the destitution and hardships endured by Czech and Slovak Romanies, and the broadsheets in particular reported on Romani housing conditions, discriminatory employment practices, the inadequacy of income levels, and the pervasiveness of skinhead attacks, police indifference and harassment.

However, it is unlikely that such reportage seriously sought to raise readers' consciousness of institutionalised anti-Romani racism. Given that press statements of Romani life in Central and Eastern Europe also referred to their everyday behaviour in derogatory and explicitly condemning terms, the combined impact was to muddy the waters of the Romani claim to live in conditions of intolerable and unrelenting persecution (2). So, for example, while *The Observer* (26 Oct. 1997) reported that 'Gypsies have been murdered, raped and firebombed', the article also included a cameo of family life in Medzilaborce, eastern Slovakia:

. . . a settlement of shacks where satellite dishes sit on corrugated-iron roofs. Children in thin canvas shoes play in the mud, the women cook dog meat on an open fire, but all the men are drunk on the proceeds of the unemployment benefit which arrived yesterday.

Thus, far from sustaining any sympathy for the Romani cause, these kinds of inclusions encourage readers to see it as an economic project rather than a political one, and to condemn Romani asylum-seekers as 'mere economic migrants rather than real refugees' (*Express on Sunday* 26 Oct. 1997).

At the same time, readers are confronted with a contrastive framework of inferences about the 'Gypsy at home' and his/her British counterpart. There is an implicit invitation to identify *difference* between readers' own lifestyles and those of the Romani—in the quotation above, for example, a powerful opposition is implied across a diverse range of normative beliefs about residential standards, child care arrangements, cuisine, cooking methods, the household division of labour, consumption patterns and leisure activities. Indeed, the headline for this article foreshadowed the construction of British/non-British difference, encouraging readers to expect and seek out contrasts between 'Us' and 'Them'; 'No Gypsies please, we're British' imposes a binary logic, in Derrida's terms, a 'violent hierarchy' (1978: 41), which makes it *impossible* to be both Gypsy and British.

Press accounts of Romani lifestyles were invariably generated through first-hand, field reports from the Czech and Slovak republics. An important effect of this kind of direct journalism is the sense of 'realism' which it conveys, but it is not the only effect. For example, the similarities in journalists' descriptions of Romani living conditions across the different regions, towns and cities of Central and Eastern Europe implies not only the 'sameness' (and homogeneity) of Romanies and their communities, but also, and crucially, their 'everywhereness' and, therefore, their *collective* desire to flee

impoverished conditions. Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of the press coverage was the 'numbers game' (Clark 1998: 35–6) wherein estimates of the potential population shift was the principal medium for the press construction of the 'size' of the problem. Estimates ranged from the vague ('scores'; 'hundreds'; 'thousands') to the specific ('800 in last three months'; '600 last week; 800 in Kent'; '3,000 gypsies head for Britain'). It was clear that no one newspaper source had a clue as to the 'true' numbers of Romanies who had fled, or were fleeing the Czech Republic and Slovakia. However, it is precisely the speculative basis of quantification, rather than exact measurement, which leaves readers free to fill in the gaps and clarify the ambiguities in terms of their own beliefs about the level and scale of Romani (and other groups') diaspora. Thus, some letter writers talked about 'the flood of Slovakian gypsies' (*The Sun* 22 Oct. 1997), while others referred to 'the trickle of refugees' (*The Guardian* 22 Oct. 1997).

The same kind of speculation was evident in press assessments of the absolute 'costs' of the problem, and again, estimates ranged from 'up to £10 million' (*The Express* 21 Oct. 1997); '£20 million' (*The Sun* 21 Oct. 1997); and 'up to £2 million' (*The Daily Telegraph* 25 Oct. 1997). But whereas the 'numbers game' was never quite settled, the question of 'costs' was anchored in and made meaningful through other discursive routes. For example, newspaper articles consistently informed readers of the range of services and types of welfare provision made available to asylum-seekers arriving at Dover. Typical of this approach was a series of articles published in *The Times* (21 Oct. 1997: 10); amongst other things, readers are informed that:

Those who claim asylum immediately on arrival . . . are allowed a range of state benefits, including income and child support of up to £100 a week, access to schooling and National Health Service treatment . . . The council has placed 200 children in schools in east Kent [and] has had to provide interpreters and education welfare officers to help the children settle down at schools in the county . . . The council's social services department has also had to provide emergency clothing and shelter and [was] forced to open a previously closed centre to house the sudden influx of Czech and Slovak families.

There is nothing inherently perjorative to Romani asylum-seekers about this account. However, readers can only make sense of these statements by locating them within their existing knowledge and experience of UK welfare provision. For the majority of readers this might include overcrowded class sizes, rising hospital waiting lists, the closure of local authority residential homes (for the elderly, severely disabled and those with mental health prob-

lems), increasing homelessness and the pervasive threat of unemployment and redundancy—as *The Daily Star* put it, this was ‘the truth about the misery of life in Britain today’ (21 Oct. 1997). Thus, far from providing a neutral description of the welfare assistance given to asylum-seekers, these kinds of accounts remind readers of their own forbearance in the face of cutbacks in service and benefit provision, and prompt them to recognise an asymmetrical (and unfair) distribution of available welfare resources. *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*, for instance, published numerous letters which pointed out the anomalies:

Could someone please explain to me how these gypsies can claim £44.24 weekly when my pension is £29.56 per week. People coming here from overseas fare better than those born and bred in these shores. (*The Sun* 22 Oct. 1997)

There are thousands of homeless British people who would benefit from the things we are giving to these immigrants. (*The Sun* 22 Oct. 1997)

We’re struggling to maintain our health service and cannot justify taking more people into the country to put a greater strain on that service. We have a duty to provide for our own people who have contributed National insurance all their working lives. (*Daily Mail* 24 Oct. 1997)

These assertions continue to mark out the line of division between ‘British’ and ‘Gypsy’ by adding deserving/undeserving, giving/taking, forbearing/unrestrained to the list of oppositions. At the same time, readers are encouraged to identify with a united commonwealth of ‘British tax payers’ and through this membership experience a form of ‘group victimisation’. That is, reinforced by continual reiterations of British tolerance, democratic traditions, goodwill, generosity and collective hospitality, readers may readily accede to press claims that ‘three hot meals a day, free schooling, centrally-heated accommodation, courtesy of the *British taxpayer*. . . (is) . . . an abuse of *our* generosity’ (*The Mail on Sunday* 26 Oct. 1997; emphasis added). Through this reporting, the values and ideals of the ‘British’ spirit remain intact while those of the Romani asylum-seekers are pushed further outside the boundaries of acceptability.

Further press reports sought to intensify the negative imagery of the ‘Gypsy’ character. Here, the *initial* construction of asylum-seekers as *passive recipients* of an (over-)generous welfare system gave way to accounts which denoted them as *active subjects* who perpetrate ‘a calculated abuse of our hospitality’ (*Daily Mail* 24 Oct. 1997); and who ‘intentionally come over here to take our money’ (*The Observer* 26 Oct. 1997). Indeed, in an article

entitled, 'Script for a Scam', the *Daily Mail* (24 Oct. 1997) highlighted the 'orchestration behind the flood of Czech and Slovak immigrants' and denounced the Romani struggle as 'blatant organised fraud and part of a well-organised criminal racket'. If readers harboured doubts about such claims, it was not through any lack of effort on the press' part to convince them otherwise. Indeed, the allegation of 'gangsterdom' opened up a new and fruitful line of inquiry for more investigative journalists and we discuss this a little further below.

Despite their allegations of a 'Romani criminal conspiracy', certain broadsheet newspapers made it clear that the primary 'real villain' in this affair was the European Union, and it was this institution which should remain the main focus of British taxpayers' scorn and fury. As *The Times* (21 Oct. 1997) confidently announced, 'what is really at issue here is . . . the appalling mess which the European Union has made of asylum policy'. The 'quality' press were keen to inform their readership of the legal and political framework of EU asylum policy. In particular, some press accounts pointed out that Britain's commitment to the Dublin Convention (3) created the political conditions for the 'free movement' of asylum-seekers across Europe, and that it was precisely these conditions which enabled Romanies to enter Britain in such a relatively unimpeded and unregulated way. Various descriptions as 'inadequate', 'lax', 'cunningly drafted', 'dangerous', 'absurd' and 'nonsense', the bulk of Euro-sceptic broadsheets used the Dublin Convention to attack the EU as an institution, to discredit the political process of European integration, and to articulate the tensions of British-EU relations. However, Euro-sceptic tabloids, such as *The Sun*, framed the issue in more metaphorical terms, and lost no opportunity in exploiting every angle of the story to further buttress its view of asylum-seekers. Consider the headline 'EU law is a gypsy curse' (*The Sun* 24 Oct. 1997); here, the metaphor, 'gypsy curse', posits a supernatural force behind the production of asylum legislation. Since the source of this power emanates from the 'Gypsy Other', the headline conveys the sense of a people who can exert pressure over (democratic) EU member states in surreptitious, sinister and inexplicable ways. The operation of metaphor involves a process of selection; from the metaphorical resources which *may* have been used to describe the inadequacy of asylum law—such as, 'Brussels bungle'; 'open ticket'; or even 'a gypsy blessing'—*Sun* readers encounter only that which constructs a direct opposition between the *democratic* power of 'British-European' and the *supernatural* power of 'Gypsy'. The sense of difference that is produced is

profoundly ideological in its effects. The metaphor of ‘gipsy curse’ relegates the Romani to an (under)world of secrecy, denunciation, sorcery and darkness, and imposes on them values which are alien and contradictory to those represented as fundamental to British society - openness, honesty and accessibility.

The construction of ‘difference’ between ‘Gypsy-ness’ and ‘British-ness’ marks out a field of possibilities for understanding the people caught up in events at Dover. Thus, from an initial position of (relative) ignorance, in a matter of days, readers were able to position the Czech and Slovak Romanies within a range of discourses which render them visible, meaningful and ‘knowable’ as ‘bogus asylum-seekers’; as an ‘omnipresent’ and ‘homogenous’ people; as ‘undeserving’ of assistance, and ‘grasping’ and ‘unrestrained’ in their requests for help; as harbouring ‘exploitative’ intentions; and as an organised ‘conspiracy’ of ‘sinister’, even ‘supernatural’ interests. At the same time, readers are enticed to (re-)constitute their own subject positions as ‘generous’, ‘tolerant’ and ‘enduring’ members of an (imagined) ‘British’ community marked by its ‘collective hospitality’, ‘egalitarian’ resource distribution and ‘democratic’ way of life. From this standpoint, ‘Gypsiness’ may be recognised not only by its ‘difference’ from ‘Britishness’ but as a serious and dangerous ‘threat’ to the existing social order.

The Romani asylum-seekers as ‘discursive subjects’

On 25 October, the *Daily Telegraph* reported an interview with Evelyn Reynolds who had been active in organising a local petition to end the ‘handouts to the gypsies’; she argued:

I’m not saying that all these gypsies are the same. There may be genuine cases. But it is the ones who are just hoping to get a free ride on the gravy train that we are talking about.

In this comment, Ms Reynolds entertains the possibility of ‘difference’ *within* the socio-political category of ‘Gypsy’ where ‘difference’ is predicated on the distinction between the ‘bogus’ and the ‘real’ asylum-seeker. Our argument is that neither she nor other readers are given the discursive material to make that distinction. There are clearly some letter-writers who believe in the ‘existence’ of ‘genuine’ Romani asylum-seekers—such as ‘sceptical’ of London (Ian Stewart, *The Guardian* 22 Oct. 1997)—but such characters are invariably erased from the narrative, and readers may sometimes

encounter only those who perfectly embody, personify and symbolize the emerging discourse. As Foucault (1977: 25) has argued:

The body is . . . directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.

Thus, in his opening statement, David Jones, reporting ‘live’ for the *Daily Mail* from the *Pride of Burgundy*, introduces the reader to the Palazov family who, he claims, ‘are beyond doubt, the smartest passengers aboard’ (22 Oct. 1997). Though inexperienced (we assume) as a fashion columnist, Jones nonetheless indulges in a detailed description of the clothing and appearance of each member of the family; he writes:

Grandmother Zladica Palazov, 46, was rigged out in a brown trouser suit. When she removed her jacket on the sun-deck, the sleeves of her white silk blouse billowed in the gentle Channel breeze. Ivela, her daughter-in-law, had chosen a simple denim pinafore but her children, from three to fourteen, were all in Le Coq Sportif, Adidas and Nike . . . Her husband, Michal, sported pointed black cowboy boots that offset his Zapata moustache.

There is a (slight) sense in which Jones’ expose of the Palazovs’ dress sense might enable readers to see Romani asylum-seekers in a more ‘respectable’ light, or at least as *political* refugees rather than *economic* migrants. Similarly, other reports of families who had ‘abandoned a good house, secure job and a car to seek a new life in England’ (*The Times* 23 Oct. 1997) may have promoted greater sympathy for the Romani claim to political asylum. However, readers find little else to support this view; as one Dover resident put it:

We are always for anybody who flees for their lives, but the people I’ve seen who arrived at the weekend, don’t seem the least put out. They were smiling and laughing. They did not seem like people who have been under stress for weeks. (*Daily Mail* 20 Oct. 1997)

Indeed, the press lost few opportunities to point out the most minute details of physical and material appearance, as well as demeanour which ‘fit’ the claim that ‘this dubious army of foreign refugees is . . . cynical and bogus’ (*Daily Mail* 21 Oct. 1997). For example, *The Independent* talked of chemists handing over prescriptions to ‘hands covered in more gold than Tutankhamun’ (21 Oct. 1997); while the *Daily Telegraph* (22 Oct. 1997) carried a detailed story of ‘intimidation from gypsies, who despite being penniless, are filling their shopping trolleys’. Other reports were more explicitly damning

and widened readers' insights into asylum-seekers' activities and general behaviour. For example, the *Daily Telegraph* reported mass shoplifting by groups of up to 15 to 20 Slovaks, a Slovakian child who had broken into the meter of a children's ride, and of sophisticated shoplifting at Etams (4) where demands for refunds were made. In addition to this, the *Daily Star* (22 Oct. 1997) reported that 'penniless gipsy asylum-seekers . . . were yesterday discovered begging—in LONDON' [upper case in original]; *The Independent* (21 Oct. 1997) brought attention to 'one case [where] would-be asylum seekers signed on in two areas to gain double benefits'; while *The Sun* (23 Oct. 1997) carried a story of an asylum-seeker who spent 'up to £67' on one National Lottery draw (5). The attribution of this kind of behaviour to the Romani asylum-seekers not only boosts readers' beliefs in them as 'loose-fingered marauders' (*Independent on Sunday* 26 Oct. 1997), and as 'having a weak sense of property' (*The Express on Sunday* 26 Oct. 1997), but it further positions them outside the 'rule of law' which is the basis upon which a free and democratic society—such as the UK—is founded (Bentham, 1948).

These narratives, however, fail to buttress the more sinister notion of a 'criminal conspiracy'. Indeed, the *embodiment* of this particular thesis centred on the singular character of Antonin Lukac. That is, the *Daily Mail* (20 Oct. 1997) featured an investigative article which pre-empted (and encouraged) a particular kind of response from its readership. At the outset, readers are warned that the narrative to follow will 'alarm . . . deeply perturb . . . seriously concern . . . (and) . . . petrify' them; it will confirm their worst fears of a 'Romani conspiracy'. Committed to searching out those features of the story which substantiate these claims, readers confront the figure of Antonin Lukac, the 'King of the Gypsies', reputed to 'brief asylum-seekers' about to leave for Britain. Left at that, there is little to convince the reader that Lukac is at the apex an organised, criminal syndicate. It is the descriptive detail of the journalist's encounter with Lukac which positions him within a sinister underworld of which novelists have grown fond. The article states:

Roman Bac led us to the smoke-filled Bar Bajkal, a cheap beer house in a high-rise suburb on the outskirts of Kladno. After a few minutes, a well-dressed, evidently educated and highly respected man of middle-age appeared. We had been told that his name was Antonin Lukac, although he claimed to be called Gejza Fakras. . . . A sociology graduate with a senior government post (he declined to reveal what it was), Lukac eloquently discussed the difficulties facing the Czech and Slovakian

Romanies. He was less expansive about the 'surgeries' where he metes out practical advice about immigration laws and the Geneva Convention.

In this commentary, readers meet a character who is outwardly respectable, yet frequents seedy bars in a run down part of town; he is guarded in the dual senses of the word; he is both part of the establishment and resistant to it; he is as well-known to the Romanies as he is unknown to the Czech and Slovak authorities; he may not even be Antonin Lukac; and though he is knowledgeable and articulate, he knows nothing of organised emigration and cannot comment on it. In short, he is an enigma who perfectly symbolises the secrecy and stealth required to organise an international criminal racket.

On this overview, even those readers desperately seeking the 'genuine Romani asylum-seeker' would be hard pressed to encounter a character who symbolized anything other than the 'bogus', 'thieving', 'begging', 'cheating', 'gambling', 'secretive', and 'conspiratorial' variety.

Conclusion

It is evident from this detailed analysis that the way in which the British press reacted to the events in Dover during October 1997 was a clear and very specific example of anti-Romani racism. Alongside blatant ignorance and ideologically loaded commentaries, was the fact that the Roma were seen as 'soft targets' by staff writers and editors of the major newspapers. They were, in the words of one features writer whom Colin Clark spoke to in early 1998, 'fair game' and a group that could help 'sell copy'; their perceived 'exotic otherness' combined with their 'scrounging refugee' label gave newspaper columnists and editors a license to wax lyrical as we have seen in previous sections of this paper.

It is, of course, easy to set out the content of the newspaper reporting. It is much harder to actually try and *explain* why this reporting took the many forms that it did. We must though speculate on this question; was it simply a case of newspaper staff and editors pandering to the anti-Gypsyism (and racism) of their readers in order to sell newspapers or was it an anti-Gypsyism amongst the writers and editors themselves that was 'allowed' to run riot during this period? Was it a calculated anti-Gypsy 'attack' or something more general or subtle than this, akin to what Kaye (1999: 40) has called 'a fairly predictable reflex reaction' of the tabloids? Was the fact that they were Romanies a factor here? We hope to have given enough evidence in this paper, through examining the styles and terminology of reporting, to

suggest that the fact the asylum-seekers were Roma was a significant factor.

All of this is not merely rhetorical concern on our part; one of the most worrying aspects to this whole discussion is the fact that whether direct or indirect, the press reaction to the Romani asylum-seekers pressurised the Labour government into proposing far-reaching policy changes to the British immigration and asylum system. To be sure; the consequences of the reporting have been real and will be felt. The provisions in the new Immigration and Asylum Bill, if they go through as expected on 1 April 2000, are aimed at making sure this kind of ‘invasion’—whether by Romanies or not—never happens again (6). The reaction of the government to what the newspapers said on the matter was telling; the recent Refugee Council report on the ‘invasion’ put it this way:

The Roma did not want to leave their homes and come to the UK. They left countries which have spent centuries making it painfully clear that they are not wanted there. And here in the UK, when the Roma asked us for shelter, we too have told them they are unwanted. The least we could have offered them was a fair hearing. (Young 1999: 91)

We would argue that one thing from our analysis seems clear; the Romanies who made it to Dover in 1997 did not get a ‘fair hearing’ from Britain; they were judged and convicted as ‘bogus’ as soon as they became ‘known’ as ‘Gypsies’. An interesting question to ask at this point might be; what would a ‘fair-hearing’ have looked like? How could the stories, messages and reporting been different to what they were? What challenges could have been made to the dominant discourses? Could the Romani asylum-seekers and their supporters have made such a challenge and communicated it effectively? For the future, one answer to this speculative question might be via a set of alternative communication strategies; the transmission of Romani media stories from within the community itself and getting these messages out to those who need to hear them. As Orhan Galjus (1997) has recently argued the Romani media must be led by Roma themselves if they are to develop and communicate their ethnicity, language, culture and needs—both within the Romani community itself and to the wider non-Romani society in which they find themselves. By establishing effective alternative communication strategies it may well be that two sides are reported should such a ‘Gypsy Invasion’ occur again, and not just one *gadzhe* side which more often than not seeks to demonise and dehumanise those trying to escape persecution from a place they once called ‘home’.

Notes

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1. Kenrick (1997) offers a concise summary of those 'foreign Gypsies' who have arrived in Britain during 1945–1996.
2. The attention given to the perceived behaviour/lifestyle of the Romani asylum-seekers in these discussions is very reminiscent of the way in which Charles Murray (1984) used perceived individual (African-American) behaviour to direct attention away from the structural factors that gave rise to them allegedly occupying so-called 'underclass' status; in other words, it is not the mechanics of advanced post-industrial capitalism that keeps 'them' where 'they' are in terms of social class, life chances, income and the like, but rather the ways in which *they* behave *themselves*.
3. The Dublin Convention was originally negotiated in 1990, ratified in July 1992 and implemented in September 1997. The press made much of the timing, and used it to support their supposition of a causal relationship between the treaty and the arrival of the asylum-seekers at Dover.
4. Etam is a UK high-street, chain store specialising in women's and 'girl's' fashion.
5. For a full discussion of the media, welfare benefits and asylum-seekers see Kaye (1999).
6. Although containing more than 130 clauses, the two main dimensions to the Immigration and Asylum Bill focus on changes in social security benefits which asylum-seekers can claim whilst their cases are being processed (e.g., vouchers and nominal daily cash allowances replace the normal giro-cheque cash payment) and the policy of 'dispersal' which will see asylum-seekers sent to various 'cluster areas' around the UK and being given 'no choice' in where they are housed.

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