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To the Editor:

The Myth of Gypsy Nationalism*

I am writing to dispute certain assertions made by Ian Hancock in this journal.¹ I do so in the hope of shedding light on two more fundamental

questions:

- 1) Are Gypsies best understood as just another modern “ethnic” group, with “nationalist” aspirations as befits such a group, or are they, rather, best understood as essentially *sui generis*, with a genius all of their own; and
- 2) What are the ways in which fact can be distinguished from error among the competing claims made in the vast literature about Gypsies?

I

Ian Hancock asserts a central role for a “nationalist movement” in Gypsy life. He severely criticizes other scholars, including me, for denying the very possibility of such a movement among Gypsies in any meaningful sense. Where Hancock claims an authentic Gypsy constituency for Gypsy nationalism, I maintain that this movement is confined—totally so in America, and overwhelmingly so in Europe—to a few individuals who have no meaningful contact with actual Gypsies. Who is right?

In pursuing his claims, Hancock refers to the nationalist movements of other ethnic groups. If others have such movements, why not the Gypsies? Other peoples have languages of their own, movements of national self-assertion, and they have national flags and other such symbols. Why not the Gypsies? This argument is simply by analogy, but there are also empirical claims: twenty-three international(!) organizations in twenty-two countries in 1972 (p. 261), sixty delegates and observers from 26 countries in 1978 (p. 262), three hundred delegates in 1981 (p. 263), and nearly five hundred participants in 1990 (p. 264), etc. Yet, there is no convincing ethnographic detail behind these numbers. We are not told anything very helpful about these “hundreds” who are said to have attended, which languages they may have spoken, what their occupations were, nor, most important of all, how they were elected or appointed to be delegates. Similarly, we are not told whether people who actually practice the Gypsy style of life, all over the world, support or even know about any of this “nationalist” activity.

A further argument consists of preposterous allegations against a number of scholars who have written about Gypsies: “Those who willfully deny Romani self-determination perhaps have their own motives for doing so,” according to Hancock (p. 265). His culprits, listed together with Heinrich Himmler of the Nazi S.S., are the late Dora Yates of the Gypsy Lore Society, Werner Cohn of the University of British Columbia, and Jiri Lipa and Joszef Vekerdi, well-known European scholars of Gypsy culture (pp. 255-56). On the other hand, “it is not merely coincidence that those who have paved the way [to a recognition of Gypsy nationalism] have been those most directly descended from the freed slaves in Romania” (pp. 265-6). In other words, there are dark forces—Nazis and non-Gypsy scholars—who deny the truth, and real Gypsies who set the record straight.

Unfortunately for this argument, almost all those cited by Hancock in

support of his thesis of Gypsy nationalism—Thomas Acton, Donald Kenrick, Grattan Puxon, and others—make no pretense of being Gypsies. The argument that those who claim Gypsy ancestry are more to be trusted than others is contradicted by Hancock's reliance on these self-professed non-Gypsies.

II

The word “Gypsy” is commonly used to describe a number of groups in various parts of the world who are thought to be related. First and foremost, there are groups of more-or-less nomadic peoples who describe themselves as *Rom*, speak related dialects of a language they call *Romanes*, lead a more-or-less common lifestyle, and can be found in most countries of Europe and the Americas. It is these Rom with whom I am acquainted and with whom I am mostly concerned in this communication.²

But there are also other groups often known as “Gypsies.” They all speak languages that are different from *Romanes* and cannot be understood by the Rom. (We are now fortunate in having a complete catalog and description of all such groups found in North America.)³ Hancock seems to include all under his umbrella of “Gypsy nationalism.” Such groups include, but are not limited to, the Cale of Spain, the Romanies of Britain, the Sinti and Manush of central Europe. In the Balkans and in Turkey there are further groups which, for one reason or another, are called “Gypsy.” Sometimes the Tinkers and other Travelers of Britain are also included in this list.

I have briefly observed many such groups in my travels but know little about them beyond the fact that in language and culture they are all distinct from the Rom with whom I have worked.

The Rom themselves are only vaguely aware of such groups. When they think of them at all they consider them, at best, as varieties of half-breeds, more non-Gypsy than Gypsy; they certainly do not include them in the world of real Rom, *i.e.*, “real men.”

III

The essentials of the Rom lifestyle are four: *Romanes* language, bride price, ritual feasts, and, specifically, Rom business occupations. From the Rom point of view, those who do not practice these four are not Rom, not Gypsy. It is, therefore, particularly presumptuous and misleading when people who stand outside the Gypsy lifestyle pretend to speak on behalf of the Gypsy people.

The bride price and the ritual feasts delineate the internal life of the Rom group; the Rom business occupations define the ethos of Rom life. The occupations consist of fortune-telling for women and one or more of the following for men: trade in used automobiles, body work on automobiles; some Rom are involved in real estate work, others in marginal police work. Without going into detail, it can be said of all these occupations that they are

variants of one single Gypsy business and that this business is one which unsympathetic outsiders would characterize as the confidence racket.

What can be said about the affiliations and loyalties of the Rom? In brief, there are no meaningful loyalties beyond the extended family. As I have already suggested, the Rom are concerned over bride price and ritual on the one hand, business—*i.e.*, relations with non-Gypsy customers and Gypsy competitors—on the other. Talk “Gypsy nationalism” to them and you can count on merriment or scorn and, in any case, lack of comprehension.

IV

The myth of “Gypsy nationalism” is only the latest of the fictions that are spread about Gypsies. Since it takes substantial effort, patience, and long-term commitment—including a conscientious study of the Gypsy language—to discover the realities of Gypsy life, there is a vast ignorance on the subject. This ignorance has been exploited, chiefly, by three classes of tellers of tall tales: the “Boasters,” the “Scribblers,” and the “Promoters.” Hancock, in his citations, shows that he has gathered his story from all three of these.

1) Related to Gypsy life but not properly of it, there occasionally arise certain marginal grandiloquent individuals who claim to be leaders, presidents, or kings of the Gypsies. These are the Boasters; sometimes they are humored by the Gypsies, sometimes used by them to fool the non-Gypsy authorities; but their status as actual authority figures lies only in the gullible eye of an ignorant non-Gypsy public.⁴

2) There is a tradition of bad books about Gypsies. These are works that are quickly written by unscrupulous journalists and other such Scribblers. Typically there are scraps of information from here and there, from *obiter dicta* in the popular press, from amateur travelers’ reports, and so on, weaving a persuasive tale about which the best one can say is that there sometimes are bits of half-truth embedded in it. A significant majority of books about Gypsies that are to be found in the libraries of the world are of this type.⁵

3) Finally, there are the Promoters. There have always been non-Gypsy enthusiasts of various sorts swarming around the Gypsy people, trying to win converts or, failing that, the appearance of converts. In the past, such Promoters have often been missionaries for the Protestant sects, some of which have had a modicum of success among the Manush Gypsies of France. But there have also been political Promoters: Communists in Eastern Europe, when Communism was in power, *etc.* The most amusing of the Promoters, to both Gypsies and knowledgeable observers, have been the non-Gypsy advocates of “Gypsy rights,” mostly in Britain but also on the European continent.⁶

By way of curiosity, I should also mention the occasional Promoter who claims to be of Gypsy descent. There are such individual cases; those I know concern people who neither practice the Gypsy lifestyle nor are part of the Gypsy network of familial obligations.

Before we leave this gray area, we should also take note of the fact that certain enterprising Gypsies, seeing the opportunity for revenue, have been known to make use of Promoters for business purposes. Occasionally one finds a collusion of a few Promoters, Boasters, with a mercenary Gypsy or two, together with a retinue of curious bystanders, who fabricate paper organizations and thereby create the impression of a "Gypsy nationalism." I do not believe that there is any more substance than this to the phenomenon in Europe; certainly neither Hancock nor any of the other writers of his school have provided us with evidence that would indicate more. As for North America, the reader can be quite certain that "Gypsy nationalism" simply does not exist.

V

Hancock has made one set of claims that include the Rom of North America, and I am making another. But the reader need not, indeed should not choose between us on the basis of mere words. Fortunately for the skeptical reader, and in defiance of all those who would wish to assimilate them with their non-Gypsy surroundings, the Rom are alive and can be directly observed.

In any of the cities in which the reader of this journal is likely to find himself, Gypsies are engaged in the fortune-telling business and, therefore, available for consultation in return for suitable remuneration. In New York, for instance, it is difficult to walk more than two or three blocks without encountering the red neon palm, sign of the Rom. Here are some questions you can put to the fortune teller:

1) "What is *Jekhipé*?" Hancock (p. 266) tells us that it is a word used by Gypsies to denote the "oneness" espoused by a Gypsy nationalist movement. It is true that *iek* (or *kek*, in a different method of transcription) is the word for "one" in Romanes. But, from what I can tell, there is no noun known to the Rom that expresses the abstract notion claimed by Hancock. As far as I can tell, *Jekhipé* is an artificially constructed form, invented by a clever outsider, alien to the Rom.

2) "What do you know about the Fourth, or for that matter, any World Romani Congress?" Hancock (pp. 264 and *passim*) tells us of these events as important to what he calls Gypsy nationalism. Can any of your Rom consultants, even under offer of reward, give reasonable details of these alleged happenings? Can any of them produce the names of even a single one of the alleged Gypsy leaders that are listed by Hancock?

3) The existence of a Gypsy flag is alleged by Hancock on page 262. Can any of your Rom informants, with or without reward, give a description of such a flag that would match Hancock's?

In view of the competing claims made in the pages of this journal, I call on the reader to verify the facts for himself.

NOTES

*I am most grateful for helpful comments from Matt T. Salo, Sheila Salo, and Jirí Lípa. I alone am responsible for this communication.

1. Ian Hancock, "The East European Roots of Romani Nationalism," *Nationalities Papers*, XIX (3), Fall 1991, pp. 251-268.
2. There are two outstanding books about the Rom: Jan Yoors, *The Gypsies* (New York, 1967), a memoir of the author's years with European Rom that constitutes a most satisfactory, brilliant ethnography; and Olof Gjerdman and Erik Ljungberg, *The Language of the Swedish Coppersmith Gipsy Johan Dimitri Taikon* (Uppsala, 1963), a thorough, scholarly account of Romanes. Any ethnographic work with the Rom would be unthinkable without the aid of these books. While those who cite these works, of course, do not by that act alone become scholarly observers of the Gypsies, those who fail to refer to these books can hardly be taken seriously. My own booklet on the subject is Werner Cohn, *The Gypsies* (Reading, Mass., 1973). I mention it here only because it documents many of the assertions I make in this communication.
3. Matt. T. Salo, "Gypsy Ethnicity: Implications of Native Categories and Interaction for Ethnic Classification," *Ethnicity*, vol. 6 (1979), pp. 73-96.
4. Among the more famous Boasters are the Kwieks of pre-war Poland. Hancock takes them at face value (pp. 259-30). Yoors, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-16, tells us what the Rom thought of them.
5. I will mention only one which is among the most notorious and also, unfortunately, among the most influential: Jean-Paul Clébert, *The Gypsies* (London, 1963), first published in French in 1961.
6. For an insight into the Promoters, I refer the reader to the works by Acton, Kenrick and Puxon, all of which are cited by Hancock.

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To the Editor:

Nationalities Papers is to be congratulated on publishing Ian Hancock's paper on Romani nationalism and the reactions of Werner Cohn and Jiri Lipa. Each of these three in its own way is a prime example of various aspects of Gypsy studies. Together, they constitute a set of valuable historical documents for the edification of future scholars in the field.

Hancock is a Gypsy and an academician; Hancock is a Gypsy and an activist. Some academics think one cannot be both a scholar and an activist, so Hancock is not well received by them on that basis alone. Recent developments in social science adopting a perspective that acknowledges the artificiality of treating scientific research as objective and advocates a perspective that views the researcher and the data in a perpetual, dynamic dialogue would encourage reading Hancock's presentation, remembering constantly *who* Hancock is (a Gypsy by birth, a scholar by training, an official