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*Pages on the Crisis of Representation:  
Nostalgia for Being Otherwise*

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### DIVIDED ATTITUDES TO GYPSIES IN GREECE

The status of Gypsies<sup>1</sup> in Greece – as in all other European countries where they reside – illustrates the remarkable durability of ethnic stereotypes. Throughout Europe, Gypsies have for centuries been generally despised and disliked, for reasons which are everywhere similar and seem to be of early origin: their popular association with sly thieving and vexatious begging, and their often squalid living conditions, combined with their distinctive appearance and strange customs. Perhaps their only mitigating features in the eyes of the majority population – and then only in some countries – are their colourful dancing and music.

Gypsies have lived in the area of present-day Greece since their arrival in the fourteenth century from Asia Minor, after they had come originally from India several centuries earlier. Soon after arrival in what would become Greece, they dispersed all over the mainland and the major islands, and throughout their history have usually been regarded with the same distaste and suspicion as in the other sixteen European countries where they form 0.1% or more of the population (European Roma Rights Centre/Greek Helsinki Monitor, ERRC/GHM, 2003: 28-40; Kasimati in Kasimati, ed., 31; *The Economist*, internet edition, 9 September 1999, 'A Gypsy Awakening'). One argument of this paper is that this prejudice remains a formidable and perhaps insuperable barrier to their attainment of respected status. A second argument will be that Gypsies, like other minorities seen as alien, provoke – as in all western countries – growing divergence in the majority population. Those favouring tolerance tend to be highly educated and urban, and a large proportion are in general outlook, left-wing. Those leaning towards intolerance tend to be uneducated, rural and in general outlook conservative.

#### NUMBERS AND STATUS

We should begin by outlining what is known about the Gypsy population of Greece. This is surprisingly limited, because their diversity and low status make them difficult

to identify and survey. A census question on ethnic identity (such as has been asked in Australia and Canada, and is advocated by human rights groups) would probably have little success as a means of assessing their numbers because many Gypsies might not admit their identity, however tactfully the question was phrased. What is known is that they are very diverse in occupation, ethnicity and religion. As a result, most generalisations about them must be tentative.

Published estimates of Gypsies' total numbers are impressionistic and vary greatly, from about 150,000 to 500,000 (the latter certainly too high). The numbers seem to have approximately doubled since the mass influx into Greece of people from eastern Europe which began in 1991 after the collapse of the communist regimes (Exarchos in Kasimatis, ed, 1998: 194; *Kathimerini*, 9 November 1997: 27, Apostolou Lakasa, 'Apokleismenoi kai stin Ellada'; *Kathimerini*, 31 January, 2003). The pre-1991 population in Greece was divided linguistically between those who spoke, as their mother tongue, either Greek, or Turkish, or Romanian, or else a form of Romany. They were divided in faith between two main groups, Orthodox Christians and Muslims; but a majority spoke Greek and belonged to the Orthodox Church. Those who arrived after 1991 came from the former communist regimes of eastern Europe: Albania, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Bulgaria and Romania, and the former Soviet Union. Only a minority of the new arrivals (those from Albania) were Muslim; but all were stigmatised not only as Gypsies but also as poverty-stricken, alien and uninvited. Thus the present-day population of Gypsies differs from the other traditional ethnic minorities which have for long been settled in Greece – those who speak Albanian, Slav Macedonian, Turkish, Romanian or Bulgarian – in that they are very fragmented and are not associated with any state or national territory. Most belong to close-knit families and clans, which view each other with rivalry and suspicion. They live in all parts of the mainland and in the larger islands, many of them in miserable camps and shanty-towns around cities and country towns. Some remain nomadic, a feature which in itself invites prejudice. They pursue diverse occupations, which include farming, horse-trading, scavenging from rubbish dumps, selling carpets, manufacturing household goods such as baskets and metal ware and selling them in open-air markets. Many of these occupations have declined because of the inability of craft-work to compete with manufactured goods, especially those imported from China. Even now, only a small minority of Gypsies has continued at school to the legal minimum age of 15, and their life-expectancy is shorter by many years than that of the majority population (Lakasa,

1997: 27). Only in the 1950s did Greek Gypsies begin to obtain official recognition in the form of identity cards – the prerequisite for all other official documents. Many even of those long-established in Greece still lack them, and so are ineligible to vote or receive welfare benefits, and are vulnerable to prosecution for not having driving licences or retailers' permits (Lakasa, 1997: 27).

Various opinion surveys show that Gypsies rank with Albanians at the bottom of the ethnic status hierarchy prevalent among the Greek population, and even below African and Asian immigrants (To Vima, 12 April 1998, A48: Panayioti Bitsika). Unfortunately – and in this respect quite unlike many Albanian immigrants in 2008 – Gypsies show little sign of escaping from their despised position by acquiring education, decent housing and respectable occupations. It is not that they lack the will to escape. Their social structure seems quite resilient; although some Gypsy communities are accused of drug-trafficking (*Kathimerini*, 11 May 2001, English internet edition, Miron Virouhakis). It has been found that most Gypsy parents appreciate the importance of education for their children (ERRC/GHM: 161). The strength of family and clan loyalty must make it difficult for individuals to rise on the social ladder.

But the main barrier to upward mobility, as in most European countries, is the hostility of the majority population. This is self-reinforcing. Because of it, the majority will not let Gypsies escape from their despised status, which in turn gives rise to hostility. The Gypsies' lack of education, and disunity, prevent them from acquiring cohesion or leadership. There do not seem to be any Gypsies with political influence, such as municipal councillors, as in some other European countries. As in some other countries, musical performers have done well. In particular the singer Kostas Hatzis, born of a musical family, has in his fifty-year career attained a great national and international reputation, as well as influence on other musicians.<sup>2</sup> But as in the case of African Americans in the twentieth century, eminence in popular music has proved compatible with abject status in other spheres. In general it is true in Greece as almost everywhere else in Europe that Gypsies 'are at the bottom of every socio-economic indicator: the poorest, the most unemployed, the least educated, the shortest-lived, the most welfare-dependent, and, yes, the most segregated' (*The Economist*, 10 May 2001, 'Europe's spectral nation,' internet edition):

Antagonism to Gypsies in Greece was strengthened by the massive and uncontrolled influx of people, including many Gypsies, across the northern frontiers from several countries of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union from 1991 onwards,

following the collapse of communist regimes. It seems that most of the refugees were motivated by economic need; and the influx has for several years been diminishing as economic conditions improve in most countries of origin. Meanwhile, however, there has been a growing influx by sea of economic and political refugees who do not include Gypsies from Asia and Africa, many of whom move on to western Europe.

Successive surveys of public opinion in European Union (EU) countries by the European Commission since 1988 reveal a dramatic change in public attitudes to aliens in Greece. In 1988, resentment of foreign residents in Greece was weak by EU standards, simply because there were relatively few of them to resent. But from at least as early as 1994, and up to 2006, resentment of foreigners has been found to be exceptionally strong in Greece (Special Eurobarometer, 'Racism and Xenophobia,' November 1989: 3-5, 44; Standard Eurobarometer 42, Spring 1995: 69; *Kathimerini*, 7 February 1998, p. 6, referring to Eurobarometer findings; Standard Eurobarometer, 53, Spring 2000: 88; Special Eurobarometer, 'European Social Reality,' February 2007: 68).

This shift of opinion has been attributed by some social scientists to traditional intolerance of alien minorities (e.g. Nikos Mouzelis, *To Vima*, 16 February 1997: 63). This explanation is lent some plausibility by repeated survey findings (*Athens News*, 14 November 2003, Kathy Tzilivakis). It may be true that Greeks have always tended to be more intolerant of aliens in their midst than other European nations. But it is suggested here that the recent strengthening of hostility to aliens should really be explained by the aliens' vast numbers and by the facts that the mass immigration was novel and almost uncontrollable. Greece is in a uniquely disadvantaged position among European countries in that it possesses both land and sea borders which are exceptionally long and exceptionally difficult to guard against immigrants. There has for a long time been a general view that the country is overrun with foreigners, and that many of whom are compelled by destitution to live by crime. Presumably Gypsies have suffered from the new hostility levelled at aliens of all kinds by the majority population.

Various factors are at work however, which reduce this hostility to aliens. One is habituation to the presence of aliens and foreigners in schools, workplaces and neighbourhoods. Opinion surveys have shown that younger people are more tolerant than their parents, evidently because of their acquaintance with aliens at school. Thus a massive survey by the National Centre of Social Research (EKKE) in 2006 found

that three-quarters of children at all levels of school said that they had friends of another nationality (*Kathimerini*, 8 October 2006). Schoolteachers reported in 2006 that habituation to the presence of foreigners in schools was also making parents more tolerant (*Kathimerini*, 24 March 2006, English internet edition). Educated and professional people have been making increasing efforts to learn about alien minority groups, and to help them in various ways, especially legal and medical (*To Vima*, 24 November 2002, B7: B. Kremmydas). Another factor making for tolerance is the vital contribution which immigrants make to economic growth, which is increasingly appreciated – or at least was, so long as the good times lasted (*Kathimerini*, 15 December 2007, English internet edition, citing VPRC poll). A Eurobarometer survey entitled ‘Intercultural dialogue in Europe’ conducted in November 2007 found that Greeks and Cypriots reporting to a greater degree than any other national group that they had benefited from such dialogue. It was found in 2004 if not earlier that immigrant women were marrying Greek farmers and so doing something to remedy the shortage of marriageable women in rural areas (*Kathimerini*, 17 October 2004, Linas Giannarou & Giorgou Lialiou).

But Gypsies, because of their extreme marginalisation (illustrated below), may benefit relatively little from these two factors: they participate less than other ethnic groups either in the educational system or the economy. Gypsies are likely to benefit however from another force for tolerance: the growing educational level of the Greek population. Recent opinion surveys (Special Eurobarometer, ‘Racism and Xenophobia,’ November 1989,;5; Special Eurobarometer, ‘European Social Reality,’ February 2007: 68), show how in Greece as everywhere else, tolerant attitudes are correlated with educational level: the more educated, the more tolerant. Educational level is correlated with urban living and with high income, because the better-educated are more likely to earn high incomes and live in large conurbations. Those of left-wing or progressive opinion are especially likely to show tolerance. However, there is a very different source of tolerance: the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church, which has been active in helping refugees on compassionate grounds. Professional people are prominent in non-government organisations (NGOs) of which there have been many in recent years have helped refugees legally, medically and materially, and called in public for better treatment of them. Meanwhile politicians in government are exposed to pressure emanating from the European Union and from the Council of Europe for the improvement in their status of minority groups. The EU is the source of funds earmarked for Gypsies, and the Council of Europe is the parent



body of the European Court of Human Rights, which is open to appeal from citizens of any European country. A combination of factors – educational level, pressure from European institutions, sense of responsibility – would explain why leaders of all political parties (except the extreme nationalists who are relatively few) and journalists in the quality press have repeatedly appealed for tolerance of alien minorities in recent years (*Kathimerini*, 27 October 2003, English internet edition).

What seems to have been the first attempt to improve Gypsies' material conditions on a national scale was made in 1996 by the government led by the new prime minister, Kostas Simitis, with a programme to improve their housing conditions and education. It is not known whether he was acting on his own initiative, or in response to the EU and to Greek NGOs; but on this subject he displayed a sense of mission, which seems unusual among Greek ministers. His government cooperated with NGOs and utilised extensive EU funds. By the government's admission, implementation of the programme was slow in the first few years. But in June 2000 Simitis reaffirmed his commitment to raise Gypsies' status, covering housing, education and health care (*Athens News*, 12 November 2000). In the same month he was scheduled to visit a self-managed settlement in Salonika of 251 pre-fabricated houses, accommodating as many Gypsy families, with a health clinic, child-minding centre and school bus service. The settlement was designed by several NGOs and established, apparently with government funding, as a result of pressure by them from 1996 onwards (*Athens News*, 11 November 2000). In March 2002, the government announced that it was in the middle of a spending programme of over 500 million euros (much of it supplied by the EU) on these goals as well as job creation (*Kathimerini*, 5 March 2002, English internet edition). In September 2002, the Minister of Education claimed that whereas in 1997, three-quarters of gypsy children were not completing primary school, now (as a result of a scheme to provide each child with a card entitling it to education anywhere), three-quarters were (*Ta Nea*, 1 October 2002). The ERRC/GHM study cited earlier shows that such claims were exaggerated, but fails to acknowledge the progress that had been made in raising school attendance (170-171). In January 2003, the government announced that it had established 32 settlements for gypsies; which implies that many thousands of people had been successfully re-housed. A further important step was the establishment in 1998 of the Citizens' Advocate (or Ombudsman's Office) which has since been active in upholding Gypsies' legal rights. Before coming to power in March 2004, the opposition party New Democracy criticised the government for

the slow pace of implementing its policy of raising Gypsies' status, so showing that it agreed with the government on principle. In view of the obstacles to implementation described below it seems unlikely that New Democracy has itself done any better in government.

Careful investigations in 1997-2003 by the European Roma Rights Centre and Greek Helsinki Monitor (ERRC/GHM) show however that the progress in education was somewhat limited, and the progress in housing patchy. Much of the fault lies with municipal authorities, which in many places (perhaps almost everywhere) have with strong popular support done much to subvert the national government's policies, and defied efforts by the national government, the Citizens' Advocate and the courts to protect Gypsies' legal rights. The ERRC/GHM investigations showed for example that many municipalities neglected Gypsies' education in various ways: by failing to provide school buses, or failing to enforce school attendance, or giving Gypsy children second-rate education in segregated classes or even in segregated schools. The driving force in all these cases of discriminatory treatment was the aversion of most of the majority population to contact between Gypsy children and their own. (ERRC/GHM: 153-73). Many municipalities worsened Gypsies' housing problems by demolishing their settlements or directing Gypsies to insalubrious sites such as the vicinity of rubbish dumps. The ERRC/GHM claimed in 2003 to have recorded 'dozens' of cases of forced eviction of Gypsy settlements by municipal authorities since 1997, with a 'sharp rise' in recent years (42, 50). The impression left by this evidence is that much of the Gypsy population in 2003 depended on intervention by the national government for housing and education. In this respect, we see a parallel with the situation of Indigenous Australians in 2008.

One especially acrimonious confrontation, in Nea Chios in the north-eastern Peloponnese, achieved national notoriety, and illustrates the division of public opinion which was referred to earlier. Over 500 Gypsies had for some time lived just outside this village of 3000 people, using land which they had bought; but they became unpopular with the other inhabitants, who accused them of various offences: theft, trespass, and drug dealing. According to a local police officer, these accusations were greatly exaggerated; and the crime rate among Gypsies was not serious. In May 2001 the municipal council voted to force the Gypsies to move away, and a neighbouring municipality, Nea Tiryntha, then did the same. The inhabitants of Nea Chios erected road blocks to restrict access by Gypsies to shops in the village, and

made it clear that Gypsy children were no longer welcome at school. Representatives of the youth organisations of the two national left-wing parties, the Communists and the Coalition, and of various human rights organizations, visited the municipal authorities in order to plead the Gypsies' case. But this visit seems to have inflamed the situation: the visitors from Athens were abused and threatened with violence by a gathering of villagers, who shortly afterwards attacked Gypsies' property and at least one of the Gypsies themselves. The Minister of Justice ordered the public prosecutor based in Navplion to investigate the conflict. The organisations defending the Gypsies lodged a complaint with the prosecutor, and held a press conference in which they condemned the way the Gypsies had been treated. In the last respect they were backed by the Citizens' Advocate. The outcome of this conflict seems to have been inconclusive, in that the Gypsies stayed in Nea Chios, but without legal action being taken against the local residents (*Athens News*, 1 June 2000, 13 June 2000, 21 June 2000; ERRC/GHM: 74-76).

In 2008, the Gypsies' low status among minority groups was as obvious as ever.<sup>3</sup> Most immigrants into Greece from eastern Europe, including the Albanians, have improved their status since the early 1990s. They are finding respected employment which enables them to send home substantial remittances. Many have found decent housing, and obtained a reasonable education for their children (*To Vima*, 7 July 2002, Antonis Liakos: A46). The Greek majority population are becoming readier to accept their presence. Some Gypsies meanwhile have made a certain amount of progress in material welfare, with much help from the national government. But the great majority of them appear to be locked into a position of abject deprivation and racist contempt by their unique combination of traditional disadvantages.

Has this brief study thrown any new light on the reasons for the Gypsies' low status in Greece? One cannot say that public prejudice is noticeably greater than in other comparable countries, especially after the wave of hatred against Gypsies in Italy in May 2008. The fragmentation of Greek Gypsies – by divisions of language, religion, national origin, and mutual animosity between clans and families – may be particularly marked. It has grown as a result of the influx of people from former communist countries, and must make concerted action by Gypsies almost impossible. Finally, the extraordinary weakness and inefficiency of the Greek state have undermined its attempts to raise Gypsies' educational level. In Greece as elsewhere, education is increasingly expensive, and increasingly important for upward social mobility. The education provided in government schools is of low quality; while the

national government lacks the authority to compel schools and municipalities to carry out its educational policies. For reasons which in part are peculiar to Greece, the outlook for Gypsies remains bleak.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 In accordance with normal practice, this word is treated as synonymous with Roma or Romany.
- 2 I am grateful to Dr Stathis Gauntlett for information about this figure.
- 3 This paper was completed too early to allow an assessment of the effect of the economic downturn in 2009.