

The Europe of the Gypsies: Toward a comparative semiotics of space.

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Space is the way in which humans experience, perceive, conceive, and represent their physical environment. Although the experience of the environment depends in part on universal biological constraints, cultural factors introduce diversity not only in the interpretation of the forms of space but also in the ways in which space itself is perceived and conceived. This paper endeavors to probe the difference between the way space is experienced and interpreted by nomadic cultures and the way that is typical of sedentary populations. The divergence hark back to prehistoric times when Neolithic settlers developed a new practical relationship to their environment that was at odds with the way of life of the hunters-gatherers. Although the latter became increasingly under pressure and were pushed back, they did not totally vanish. Nomadic cultures persist with the presence of hunters-gatherers and pastoralists in several parts of the world, including within Europe itself where the Gypsies (under various tribal names such as Roms, Sinti, Zigeuners, Kalandars, Kalderash, Romanychals, Ursaris, Gitans, Travellers, etc.) still roam the Eurasian peninsula. The presence of these mobile (and often elusive) ethnic minorities have been documented since the 15th century. Their ethnography provides revealing, albeit sometimes indirect information on their cosmology that appears to be strikingly different from the mainstream sedentary population's world view and thus can help develop a comparative semiotics endemic to the contemporary European space. This paper draws its data

from the works of George Borrow, H.M.G. Grellman, Pop Serboianu, Jan Yoors, Angus Fraser, Jean-Pierre Liegeois, Patrick Williams, Damian Le Bas, Sharon Gmelch, and Susan Tebbutt among others, as well as from my direct experience of years spent with a Gypsy circus.

Introduction

“Gypsies” is a generic term to designate the nomads who have roamed Europe since the 15th century. This term tends now to be considered “politically incorrect” by some people as it indiscriminately lumps together a great variety of distinctive groups under a single racial category that has been stigmatized and persecuted all over Europe for centuries. The current accepted term is “Roms” and their ancestral language is the Romany. They remain a socially problematic population in most European countries in as much as they are not fully integrated into the bureaucratic mold of the sedentary citizenship of the nations they inhabit, often temporarily. They have survived centuries of discrimination and persecution, including slavery and policies of extermination. However, they have also fascinated their host countries to the point of being romanticized in the literature and the arts. These people and their culture constitute indeed an exoticism embedded within the European countries rather than located in the geographical and cultural outside. Their elusive presence pervades European history as centuries of chronicle bear witness to both the fascination they caused and the fear that prompted their relentless persecution. They constantly embodied dangerous otherness with more salience than the population of the other continents.

The purpose of this paper is to call attention to the Gypsies semiotic experience of European space and to contrast it with the way in which settled Europeans conceive their geo-political environment and endow it with meaning. Ultimately, the opposition of these two perspectives that generate misunderstanding and conflicts goes back to the fundamental difference between hunter-gatherer and sedentary cultures of time and space.

The semiotics of space generally takes the Euclidean geometrical constants for granted and relies on topology to define the relevant oppositions through which meaning is produced, such as center and periphery, openness or closeness, connectedness, compactness, continuity, and morphological transformations that preserve topological relations. The comparative study of cultures show that these topological oppositions are used to signify semiotic values such as public vs private, sacred vs profane, permitted vs prohibited, male vs female, etc. These values are irrespective of their actual dimensions since it is the topological relationships that make the difference. As a consequence, this semiotic structuring of space is not absolutely linked to any particular location but transferable across space with necessary adaptations to local geomorphic characteristics. Nomad as well as sedentary people implement this topological distinctions. In a village's built environment, for instance, waste and refuses are usually deposited in the periphery and the seat of authority is located in the center. This establishes a permanent system of reference and generates countless metaphors. Gypsies traditionally camp on what they consider to be appropriate "stopping places" close to a source of water, preferably running water the use of which is strictly governed by the upstream and downstream

distinction. People and horses drink upstream, then, going downstream, water is taken for cooking, then for cleaning male, then female bodies, and, further downstream clothes can be washed. Breaking these rules is taboo.

These behavioral differences with respect to the practical and semiotic structuration of space are relatively contingent and may appear trivial. However, the nomadic and sedentary deep meaning of space that generates these differences arise from a much deeper fracture between two diametrically opposed mode of experience of the common spatial environment. By staking out the well-defined settlements we have inherited in a form or another, Neolithic populations and their descendants have founded a mode of spatial understanding that can be defined as “bounded space”. One of the main consequences of this is that it considerably reduces the uncertainty that open space entails. This, in turn, generates what can be called “bounded information”, that is, information that provides answers to known alternatives referring to local variations. By contrast, hunter-gatherers and nomads in general experience space as open or, let us say, “unbounded”, a space that increases uncertainty and generates what can be called “unbounded information” that is, information that offers a low degree of predictability, even the possibility of total unpredictability. These two opposite types of relationship to space lead to maximally diverging ideology and practices. The two are incommensurable and it is difficult to conceive a progressive transformation of one into the other. The best metaphor that comes to mind to account for this unbridgeable difference is the Necker cube.

Those who have gained an intimate knowledge of the Gypsies' semiotic of space through observing their practice, engaging them in conversations, or listening to their songs and tales come to the conclusion that they cannot accept the idea that a piece of land can be owned by an individual who asserts total and exclusive control, and thus introduces an artificial geographical discontinuity upon the earth continuum through fences, warning signs, or legislations. For hunters-gatherers the earth is the undivided common good that is shared with many other species. The network of borders either as individual properties or national delimitations is for them superficial and abusive. The earth is an affordance for transience and its continuum is meant to allow humans to roam it as they see fit in search of vital resources that must be consumed on the spot and cannot be hoarded beyond a modicum that does not prevent swift mobility. The borders that are prized by sedentary people since the advent of the Neolithic appear irrelevant, even ludicrous for people who only occupy the limited place they need for resting, cooking, and sleeping for a little while before being on the move again. For sedentary populations, this mode of life is unthinkable and conceived as a fundamental lack that generates unmanageable spatial anxiety.

Sedentary space: enforced boundaries through time; asserted ownership of the land and its products; reduction of uncertainties and cultivation of predictability; shaping space to meet vital needs; permanent creation and defense of territory-bounded social space; grounded permanent transformation of space.

Nomadic space: fluid, ephemeral boundaries; temporary holding of places and opportunistic exploitation of the environment's affordances; confrontation of uncertainties and adaptation to novelty; shaping behavior to meet vital needs; transitory improvisation and defense of stopping places; moveable and adaptable structures through unbounded space.

How does this contrasted relationship to space impact the semiotic make-up of both types of populations?

1. identities are not bounded to particular location.
2. memory is differently supported oral vs written
3. anticipation is governed by different Bayesian statistics because the priors have different weight
4. absolutist permanent semiotic system (stable cultures) vs relativistic semiotic systems (precarious and minimal structures)
5. Stability vs free energy (Karl Friston)
6. the center vs periphery opposition is irrelevant for nomadic populations for which space is structured as fluid affordances irrespective of cultural discontinuities arbitrarily imposed upon absolute contiguity.

References

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