

*Daniel Seabra Lopes, Deriva Cigana. Um Estudo Etnográfico Sobre os Ciganos de Lisboa*, Lisboa, Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, 2008, 166 páginas.

In *Gipsy Drifts, an Ethnographic Study About the Lisbon Gypsies*, Daniel Seabra Lopes describes a concrete study of a district in Lisbon inhabited by an overwhelming majority of gypsies: his field of observation covers about four hundred people. The main methodological choice of the author is the empirical and impressionist approach. Straightaway and all through his development, the author impugns all general theoretical schema which would influence the reader's interpretation. On the contrary, Seabra Lopes means to show his submission to reality and strictly to what he can attest through direct observation. This choice is both his weakness and his strength. It is his strength insofar as the author thus provides us with a document which is entirely original as it is first hand. On this account it will remain a document of knowledge. It is his weakness conversely, as it splits up the knowledge chosen by the author, bringing about the risk of not exceeding the limited context in which he chooses to put down his roots, the district of Assunção (a fictitious name).

Thus the first theoretical datum which he challenges in his introduction: “The gypsies are not a people. There are no gypsy people”: a major theoretical and intellectual risk when we know all the written works of the intellectual gypsies about the gypsy people and the definition they give to themselves. This exclusion of the Assunção gypsies from a wider whole, both European and world-wide, obviously is the great weakness of this approach, but it is both intentional and chosen. Seabra Lopes’s reference is not to the gypsy intellectuals and their political decisions. He fights a folksy view of the gypsies, strengthened by public powers which incorporate all the individuals in a homogeneous whole “as a bond of power” (p. 39). But there is quite a distance between the ancient folklore and the strategy of emancipation and assertion of the civil rights. Seabra Lopes chose an academic ground for his thesis.

We will come back to this aspect. In the same way, Seabra Lopes chose to write about the “surrounding social milieu” (p. 42) and not about a “dominant society” or “a mainstreaming society”. But with no explanation in this case: from the point of view of sociology, it is however difficult not to refer to a dominant society, when all the studies on all minorities whatever their statues, refer to a dominant society: on this plane, it is undoubtedly to drive the theoretical reserve too far, uselessly.

Once we have left these questions behind, we enter directly into a very strong empirical analysis which is powerfully built around concepts specific to the gypsy world. The author builds three basic segments: (i) what separates gypsies and “gadge” or payos (non-gypsies); (ii) what separates gypsy men and women; (iii) what separates families from one another. Among the strategies meant to distinguish from the other non-gypsies, the language of the gypsies, the *Romani* (even when it is very much adulterated in Portugal as slang), and the tendency is toward endogamy and craft (as an occupation). The second segment is articulated around a strict sexual division of space and around a tyrannical supervision of women by the whole group. The third segment is constituted of agnatic families separated from another, revenges and rites of assertion of separation.

The rite of wedding brings two families together and seals an alliance; the funeral rites bring agnatic families together and display a general feeling of belonging. Wedding rites and funeral rites share a strict control on women: the one through the central obligation of virginity at the time of the wedding in the name of which all supervision of young girls is allowed. The other burying the widow with the dead husband as happens in India, but only symbolically in this area: the cutting of hair and black clothes until the end of her life, showing a final withdrawal from the joys of life. This mourning is maintained by the gypsies, even though it is no longer in the habit of their fellow citizens (p. 63).

These obligations of virginity of the promises woman and of the faithfulness of the wife are qualified by the author of “sexual conservatism”.

In this, his conceptual boldness stands out clearly against the initial basic concepts of sociology, of anthropology and of history: Seabra Lopes accepts a category of gender in plain language. The conservatism of gypsies regarding the relationships between men and women, is explicitly accused of machismo, strengthened in his mind by the salazarism reactivation of an integrist catholicism whose ultimate manifestations would have found a shelter in the gypsies of Portugal (p. 78). This analysis is entirely satisfying. The sexual rules which organize the gypsy group are called gypsy law by those concerned. This law is non-written by definition — a sort of gypsy moral order. The part concerning the study of the sexual division of the gypsy group is strong and consistent.

The second important theme which Daniel Seabra Lopes offers for us to read is the one which deals with the oral basis for the gypsy population and the behavioral attitudes which derive from it, in his opinion. This basic aspect of the gypsy is seldom subject to analysis by our colleagues, and this is why we will pay a special attention to it in this chapter. It is that of an unwritten civilization (this word is never used) in which school enjoys no special prestige and where the written work is viewed with the utmost indifference, inclusive of the pressures of the surrounding social environment (to use the author's wording). Among the expressions of the gypsy oral basis, Seabra Lopes points to the use of nicknames, the tendency towards fabrication, the part played by rumor, the song, the partiality for photography (pp. 103). It is obvious that the mental structuring cannot but be strongly affected by a system of massive orality and in the absence of any correct scientific study on this point to date, Seabra Lopes's approach is a very noticeable contribution from this viewpoint.

Among the descriptions of this work, we notice the destruction of things (p. 246) which is equally, in fact, a facet of the relationships of gypsies to the material world, very obvious as soon as we get near this group; it is seldom analyzed as such. Once more it is only to be regretted that this clear-sighted observation should not be related to a more theoretical understanding of the gypsy whole as a consistent civilization, for the author might have offered proposals of interpretation and meaning for these gypsy material strategies.

To sum up, this unquestionably valuable study brings leading elements to the knowledge of the gypsies. But its main weakness resides in the refusal of the macro analytical tools of classical anthropology. This restriction in no way weakens the worth of this work, but invites us to seek on a further theoretical investigation.

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