

Commission on Nomadic Peoples

“The ‘Monde du Voyage’: French Carnival Nomads’ View of Peripatetic Society”

Oliver Lerch

Nomadic Peoples, Number 21/22, December 1986

The Commission on Nomadic Peoples of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) is collaborating with the Ford Foundation to digitize, preserve and extend access to the journal of *Nomadic Peoples*. For more information regarding the journal *Nomadic Peoples* visit the Commission on Nomadic Peoples website at www.nomadicpeoples.info and the Berghahn Books website at www.berghahnbooks.com

THE "MONDE DU VOYAGE"

FRENCH CARNIVAL NOMADS' VIEW OF PERIPATETIC SOCIETY

by Oliver Lerch

Based on ten months of participant-observation in Brittany in 1967-1968 this paper describes how a unique group of itinerants, the industriels forains of France, perceive the social universe in which they live. Since, however, who and what industriels forains may be seems not well known outside of Western Europe and even there only slightly and imperfectly understood, it seems at the outset important to provide some basic background information about them.

There is no direct English equivalent to the French industriels forains.¹ In English "carnival nomads" may serve as a close, but not totally satisfactory translation. American "carnies" and industriels forains sell and operate similar sorts of amusements (games of skill or chance, rides, foodstands, shows, etc.) in contexts (in North America, the fair or carnival; in France, the fête foraine) which appear to resemble one another. Both groups live in mobile habitations. They relocate regularly since, for the services and goods which they have to offer, there is transient demand. Both groups, too, may see themselves as special people, ones more knowing and more clever than the customers with whom they deal.

But it is at this point that resemblances between American "carnies" and French forains end. The forains together create the fête foraine, a congeries of stands and rides formed by the coming together of a number of forain households each of which holds one or more amusement enterprises in severalty. The American carnival with its own centralized ownership and loosely-attached concessionaires as a unit "leaves town". In contrast, the fête foraine dissolves. Each family-based entrepreneurial unit goes off on its own path to another site of local celebration and forain assemblage where it holds a customary right to vend amusement at an appointed time of year.

Tersely, then, the industriels forains can be described as peripatetic, family-based owner-operators of amusement enterprises. They hold more or less substantial amounts of tangible property--stands, rides, trucks, trailers and other paraphernalia--which they use to make less or more of a living. As that property is possessed, used, and may be passed on to successors by inheritance, so, too, is that other most vital sort of intangible asset, the tournée. It consists of a household's emplacement rights at a sequence of fêtes distributed throughout the course of a year. Acquiring, keeping, cleverly gaining from, expanding and passing on to subsequent generations both sorts of property, in my judgement, simultaneously defines who the industriels forains are and constitutes their principal occupation and preoccupation.

To see and describe the industriels forains in this way, to stress their commitment to and dependence on entrepreneurship and property ownership, may be to suggest that the forains are nomadic affiliates of the usually sedentary middle classes. In their enacted and expressed attitudes toward the value of work, the necessity of cleanliness, the sanctity of property, and the importance of children, the family, sexual propriety and patriotism the forains are very much like the sedentary middle class. But while occasionally acknowledging these resemblances in

attitudes and values, to the forains it is how they are different from townsmen or country-folk that is also of great importance and concern.

First and foremost forains see themselves as travellers (voyageurs) who inhabit a separate and unique social universe, the "world of travellers" (monde du voyage). As monde in one sense means "crowd", the forains acknowledge that others besides themselves live in the world of travelling. In their view, however, and in that of other voyageurs, too, the monde du voyage stands in complementary opposition to the nationally normative way of living, that of staying in one place. That life style the forains call "la vie sédentaire".

While recognizing that there are material comforts and some sorts of security in the sedentary lifestyle which they do not enjoy most forains that I knew in Brittany preferred and positively valued the peripatetic lifestyle. To them houses were prisons, mobile trailers were "home". They found special freedoms in the world of travelling which derived from regular change of place. For them change of place meant change of personnel. Other forains, often one's relatives, were met with constantly. The sedentary strangers consistently were left behind. The forains saw, too, that movement meant relative economic autonomy. Unlike the sedentary farmer or merchant with fixed real property forains are not inextricably tied into the particular economy of the particular place. And, not tied tightly to the local economy, neither are they enmeshed in local rivalries and power struggles.

In thinking about the sedentaries, forains are of mixed minds. Collectively sedentaries are seen as "other", but differing "others" are differently valued. Standing acquaintances among sedentaries (regular customers who come each year to the fête, the barkeeps, postmen, and specialized tradespersons with whom the forains consistently deal), if liked as individuals may be exempted from the onus usually applied by forains to non-travellers. Generally, however, forains see themselves as persons superior to the ordinary run of sédentaire. Travellers such as they, the forains believe, are more generous, open, clever and worldly-wise. Borrowing the Romany term they speak of non-travellers as "gadje" (noun, plural). This pejorative denotes persons who are parochial, stupid and greedy and whose only real reason for existing is to be gulled.

So forains see being fixed in space to be a norm in French national society to which they do not conform. It is that non-conformity, the forains believe, which differentiates travellers like themselves from the sedentary majority in France and which gives a special salutary character to the "monde du voyage". To stretch a common anthropological concept overly thin the "rule" maintained among the forains and the other travellers that they recognise is that of "anti-local" residence. The norm is to be of a condition in which regular change of place prevails. To participate in that condition shapes individual identity as, simultaneously, it forges and maintains social boundaries.

Within the "world of travelling" industriels forains distinguish themselves from others who, they say, "may be travellers, but are not forains." At a later point in this paper the forains' view of travellers of kinds other than their own shall be examined. Now we shall see from several perspectives how forains look at themselves.

Thinking collectively about themselves, forains at times characterize all the forains of France as members of "La Grande Famille Foraine" (The Great Forain Family). This somewhat idealistic view of their social circumstances--it is often

found in forain trade publications--accurately describes some aspects of the forains' social reality, but obfuscates others. Like the members of an extended family forains do have a shared sense of identity and of common history. The analogy to family, too, may derive from four other commonplace circumstances in the forains' way of life: 1) among the forains enterprise is organized on a familistic base, 2) forains usually marry forains, 3) most of the kinsmen that forains recognize also are forains, 4) as adults the children of forains usually continue in "la vie foraine". Thus there is a certain measure of truth to the construct of "The Great Family".

But the notion of the "Great Forain Family" also is a prescriptive moral statement. Forains, it asserts, should act toward one another as do members of the ideal family. Among forains, it proclaims, there should be trust, mutual aid and concern, harmony, tranquility and order. What the notion conceals, of course, is the extent to which as in real families anywhere, "La Grande Famille" is riven by hatreds, jealousies, and conflicts which stem from competition for clients and for good places at profitable fêtes.

A second sort of assertion about themselves which sometimes is encountered among forains is a distinction between "real forains" (les vrais) and "not real forains" (les pas vrais). Not made universally, this distinction most often comes up in conversations with forains who descend from four or five generations of travellers. In contrast to the "Jeans-come-lately" to the fête these forains made "real" by family tradition see themselves as having the same sort of special right and value which sedentary "long term, established residents of..." often confer upon themselves. The unproven newcomer to "la vie foraine"--he may also be a well-capitalized and dangerous competitor--thus is recognized, rationalized, and dismissed by the assertion of his "non-reality".

Another way in which forains sub-divide their social universe is the differentiation of families as standing either on "La Grande" or "La Petite Banque".² This is a distinction both as to wealth and to reputation. Proprietors on the "Grande Banque" hold substantial properties and personally may be recognized public figures in areas where they regularly appear. He who stands on "La Petite Banque" is the forain "ordinary man". With his family he travels inconspicuously with a simple stand or ride.

It is incorrect to think, however, that economically or politically "La Petite Banque" is subordinated to "La Grande". The Great Families may control the large fêtes and have most to say when the forains' Syndicat meets at the local or national level.³ But both Great and Small are independent proprietors. The difference between them is of scale, not kind. And at large fêtes especially they are linked by a special sort of interdependence. The Small need the Great to attract large crowds. The Great need the Small with their little lotteries, shooting-galleries or rides for children to establish the total ambience which the public expects at the fête.

In looking at themselves and one another forains also make distinctions deriving from the spatial dimensions of a household's annual round. Because their circuit takes them seasonally to many major fêtes at important cities in most regions of France some forains are known (and know themselves) as "Nationaux". Many of these stand on the "Grande Banque", but some stand on the "Small".

Next to the "Nationaux" come those forains who mostly travel in one geographic or traditionally distinct region of the nation. Logically enough, they are

called "regionaux". Most "regionaux", as I knew them in Brittany, descend from families which over several generations have accumulated emplacement rights at a series of relatively desirable fêtes in towns and cities not at great remove from one another. They see their particular region of travel as their "pays". They resent intrusion into it by forains from outside.

Finally come "les Locaux", those whose circuit of travel centers on one or two settlements. In predominantly rural Brittany almost all "locaux" stand on the smaller end of the "Petite Banque". Some so limit their range of travel and work at fêtes that they seem almost sedentarized. In contrast the "locals" of Paris and its suburbs are among France's most affluent and committed forains. They move neither far nor often, but put up expensive and profitable enterprises in France's most lucrative entertainment market.⁴

To conclude this discussion of social differentiation within "la vie foraine" it should be noted that forains identify personally and are identified by others according to the sort of attraction which they operate at the fête foraine. Shifting the word's meaning to suit their view of themselves in economy and society, forains call the stands or rides that they mount at the fête their "métiers". It is the métier which establishes the individual's particular occupational role within "la vie foraine". One may be known as a "tirist" (proprietor of a shooting gallery), a "loterist" (lottery operator), or a "Skooterist" (proprietor of a "Dodge-em" ride). All, however, are industriels forains. That term then, as the forains use it, is descriptive not of an occupational role, but of an all-encompassing status and condition of life in society. "Métiers" are acquired, but to be forain is a birthright.

All forains are voyageurs, but not all travellers are forains. True in fact, this statement also accurately describes the forains' perception of the world of travelling as a social universe. In classifying and characterizing other groups of travellers the forains make two major sort of distinctions--ethnic and occupational.

Most forains that I knew in Brittany ethnically were French (not Breton!). For them French was their first and--usually--only language. They ate French foods, observed French national holidays and saw themselves as citizens of France. Some, however, acknowledged that in their families over several generations a shift in cultural practice and personal identification had occurred. Between 1870 and 1920 forains' genealogies, supported by life history data, show that some families ethnically Gypsy (sub-type Sinti or Manus) abandoned essential features of their traditional identity and lifestyle. As with Eugen Weber's parochial peasants some gypsies, too, in France in the last third of the 19th century were transformed into Frenchman.⁵

To explore the causal factors which brought about this ethnic transformation is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say here that to forains the Gypsy/French distinction is of major significance.

While forains recognize various sorts of Gypsies as "habitants" of the world of travelling, they are anxious not to be associated with them in the public mind. There is a deep-seeded, long-standing prejudice against Gypsies in France, a sentiment which many of Brittany's forains share. In their own slang forains refer to their Gypsy fellow-travellers as "Rabouins", a pejorative deriving from a medieval French term meaning "the devil himself".⁶ The forains I knew of course did not believe Rabouins to possess Satanic powers, but they were certainly not viewed as a God-sent blessing, either. As the forains saw things, given their generally casual

approach to matters taken seriously by forains (work, sanctity of property, punctuality, word as bond, etc.) the Rabouins were more inspired by (and thus, deserving of) Hell than by Heaven.

If, in general, the forains do not much like the Gypsies and have relatively little to do with them when they camp at the fairgrounds, the forains know that there are several different sorts of Gypsies who live in the travelling world. They recognize that there are important differences between the Gypsies who call themselves Sinti or Manus and those others about whom they know little, but whom they refer to collectively as "Hongroise".

The Sinti/Manus descend from groups of Gypsies that over many generations travelled mostly in France, the Rhineland, and northern Italy.⁷ Their Romany has incorporated many French and German loan words and is less heavily inflected than that of Romany speakers of a recent eastern European provenance. They often come to the fêtes foraine to set up minimally capitalized amusements. They combine work at the fête with scrap-collecting, vending in the markets, and door-to-door sales of carpets, linens and housewares. Some are musicians, some are circus performers. As above noted it is from Sinti ancestors that forain family lines that shifted to French ethnicity derive.

The term "Hongroise" as the forains use it refers to any Gypsies that they recognize that are not Sinti. Usually it is applied to nomads seen at a distance who look to the forains like Gypsies of the classic stereotype: long-skirted, low-bodiced women, telling fortunes and flashing gold; dark and powerful men, clever metal-smiths or shrewd horse-dealers. These, the "Hongroise", seem to the forains to be more savage, difficult and distant than their merely disreputable cousins, the Sinti/Manus.

Finally there are two occupational subgroups in the travelling world that are recognized by forains. One is the circus-folk (circassiens). In years gone by, when the circus and the fête foraine took place simultaneously on the same ground, forains and circus people of whatever ethnicity (there were several) met and married. Today since fête and circus seldom coincide in space and time, contact between the two groups is rare. Yet among the forains a sense of kinship to the circus folk remains. It is based not only on known genealogical connections, but on the recognition of a shared commitment to showmanship and moving on.

The other occupational subgroup seen by the forains to be French and travellers but otherwise little known are those called "Camelots".⁸ They are merchant travellers who follow a regular round of markets. There they sell clothing, tools, and textiles, notions, housewares, and shoes. Like the forains they live continuously in mobile habitations which they pull with cars or trucks. As my genealogies which show few marriages between forains and camelots reflect, the opportunities for contact and communication between these two groups of travellers are slight. Thus the forains have little sense of kinship with camelots. To forains, camelots are travellers, but that is all.

In the foregoing I have attempted to describe the industriels forains' understanding of nomadic group differentiations in France. To do so is to look out at peripatetic society from the perspective of a particular group of travellers within it. Obviously the forains' view of the world of travelling is neither the only nor the finally authoritative version. Each of the other travelling groups differentiates the major constellations of the peripatetic social universe in its own way.

One thing, however, seems to be absolutely certain in all of this. It is that the travellers' varied views--many in France yet to be studied--all are significantly different from those of the dominant sedentary classes. To the latter forains and other travellers indeed are strangers. In the public mind and media the several groups of travellers are often lumped together carelessly and characterized collectively according to the stereotypes "vagabond" or "Gypsy". Perhaps, then, there is something to learn about the heterogeneity and complexity of the world of travelling when regarding it emicly, through the forains' eyes.

Notes

1. Forain derives from the Latin root foras as does the English word foreign. According to Littré forain applies to someone "who is from the outside" ("qui est de dehors"). E. Littré, DICTIONNAIRE DE LA LANGUE FRANÇAISE, (Paris: Hachette, 1882), t. 2, "D-H," pp. 1722-1723.
2. This term derives from banc, bench. As in the word saltimbanque (an acrobat, literally to jump or tumble on a bench) banc refers to the travelling performer's portable stand. See Jacques Garnier, FORAINS D'HIER ET D'AUJOURD'HUI, (Pithiviers: Imprimerie "Les Presses", 1968), p. 386.
3. Headquartered in Paris the Syndicat National des Industriels Forains in 1968 counted a membership of about 8000 forain households. It acts as a pressure group for forains at the local and national levels. Membership is open to all who pay dues. Dues are assessed according to the size and the estimated profitability of the owner's enterprise. Only those individuals who have the required government certificates of registration as forain are eligible for membership in the S.N.I.F.
4. One of the most enterprising of the Parisian forain families several years ago established an amusement park on a "Wild West" theme at Senlis, 53 km. northeast of Paris. Picking up on American practice they named the attraction after themselves. Its called "Hoffmann land, the Redskin Canyon".
5. Eugen Weber, PEASANTS INTO FRENCHMEN, THE MODERNIZATION OF RURAL FRANCE, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1976).
6. Jean-Paul Clebert, THE GYPSIES, translated by Charles Duff, (London: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 74.
7. Forains in Brittany mostly know that the Sinti/Manus distinguish between those who once mostly travelled in Alcase/Lorraine (gaskano manus) and those who once travelled in northwestern Italy, the Sinti piedmontesi.
8. Guiraud, defining a "Camelot" as a travelling merchant, sees this word as deriving from an earlier form coesme which, he says, simultaneously meant travelling beggar and travelling dealer in textiles. Pierre Guiraud, L'ARGOT

(Paris: Presse Universitaire de France, 1966), pp. 35-36. According to the NEW CASSELL'S FRENCH DICTIONARY (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1968, p. 123), camelot refers to peddlers or to "cheap jack stuff". The verb cameloter means "to make trash" or "to sell trash". The English camlet, derived from the French camelot, refers to "a costly smooth-surfaced fabric made in Asia of camel's hair or Angora wool". WEBSTER'S NEW COLLEGIATE DICTIONARY (Springfield, MA: G. C. Merriam, Co., 1956), p. 119. Such are the vagaries of language.

Oliver Lerch
Dowling College