

DIASPORIC LANDSCAPES ON MAPS, MINDS AND THE WEB

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As the presence of diasporic groups from every corner of the planet has become an everyday reality of the Western metropolis, the Huntingtonian threat of the “clash of civilizations” seems to be replaced by the feeling of uneasiness caused by the discovery that our new neighbour is a stranger.

Diaspora (Greek: Dispersion), Hebrew *galut* (Exile), the dispersion of Jews among the Gentiles after the Babylonian Exile; or the aggregate of Jews or Jewish communities scattered “in exile” outside Palestine or present-day Israel (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

Although the term diaspora to a certain extent still keeps its Jewish connotation, it came to be widely used to describe the forcible or voluntary movement of people of any race, ethnicity or religion from their homelands into new regions as well as the communities of those people in the new environment. In the 1950s and 1960s it was appropriated by black intellectuals to denote the black dispersal into the Western hemisphere. Here the use of the term was still justified by some striking similarities between the historical experiences of both groups during particular periods of time. Slave Christianity in America was to a great degree shaped by the Old Testament. It focused on the Old Testament stories of God’s liberating acts in history. From there the slaves derived their conviction that the God of Israel was involved in their history and would liberate them from oppression (Cone 1980, 108). What God did for the people of the Old Testament, the black people were sure God would do for them. Identifying particularly with the Israelite slaves in Egypt, they firmly believed that God would deliver them as He delivered the chosen people, the Israelites (Douglas 1994, 26). For Christian slaves the story of Exodus and the figure of Moses were the basis for interpreting the freedom offered by Jesus.¹

¹ “The appropriation of the Exodus story was for the slaves a way of articulating their sense of historical identity as a people... The Christian slaves applied the Exodus story, whose end they knew, to their own experience of slavery, which had not ended... Exodus functioned as an archetypal event for slaves” (A. Raboteau, 1980, 311).

It was Edward Wilmot Blyden, one of the most important black leaders of the nineteenth century, whose Pan-African concept, modelled on Jewish Zionism, legitimized the importation of the term "diaspora" for the black communities in the Western hemisphere. Blyden developed a deep feeling of affinity between Jews and blacks based on the history of suffering and servitude.²

In today's black diaspora the identification of black history with that of the chosen people is, however, waning. Afro-Americans are willing to identify more readily with Egyptian pharaohs than with the distressed people the rulers of Egypt held in bondage. This shift clearly reflects a decisive transformation in the moral basis of black Atlantic political culture (Gilroy 1994, 207). Politically there is strong support for the fight of the Palestinian people. Antisemitism is not rare among the black population.

Lately the term *diaspora* has become one of the key concepts in Post-Colonial Studies. Here diaspora is seen as a central historical fact of colonization. Colonialism itself is characterized as a diasporic movement, requiring dispersion of millions of Europeans and their settlement all over the world. These migrations have profound and permanent effects on the global scale, producing lasting environmental changes. Originally many of the settled regions were developed as plantations or agricultural colonies to grow foodstuffs for the metropolis. These projects created large-scale demand for labour that could not be covered by the local population. The result was the development of an economy based on slavery.

The need for slaves became even more pressing when, by the mid seventeenth century, the tropical colonies of Britain and France had begun to produce sugar, which required a substantial amount of labour. A shortage of labour was the complaint of every colony from Canada to Barbados, but especially of areas rich in fertile land and dependent on the exportation of tobacco, rice, or sugar. In some areas the slave population by far outnumbered the white settlers. In Jamaica by the end of the eighteenth century there were ten times more blacks than whites (Davis 1966, 138).³ Virtually all slaves shipped to the Americas were taken from West Africa through European coastal trading posts.

² The Negro is found in all parts of the world...He has crossed the Atlantic to the western hemisphere, and here he has laboured in the new and in the old settlements of America... He is everywhere a familiar object, and he is, everywhere out of Africa the servant of others... Africa is distinguished as having served and suffered. In this, her lot is not unlike that of God's ancient people, the Hebrews, who were known among the Egyptians as the servants of all; and among the Romans, in later times, they were numbered by Cicero with the nations "born to servitudes", and were protected, in the midst of the haughty population only "by the contempt which they inspired" (E.W. Blyden, 1967, 120).

³ This situation endangered the security of the colonies. The incentives to attract more white work force were mostly ineffective. The founders of the new colony of Georgia even envisaged it as slave-free, but as free white farmers were unable to compete with slaveholders, the project had to be dropped (D.B. Davis, 1966, 149).

When slavery was outlawed by the European powers at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the demand for the cheap agricultural labour in the colonial plantation economies was filled by a new system, that of indentured labour. Under indenture agreements large populations of poor agricultural labourers from such countries as India and China were transported to places where they were needed. These practices resulted in world-wide diasporas. Substantial Indian minorities or majorities are now found in the West Indies. The British black intellectual Stuart Hall remarks with irony: ...“when you visit Guyana or Trinidad, you see, symbolically inscribed in the faces of their peoples, the paradoxical “truth” of Christopher Columbus’s mistake: you *can* find “Asia” by sailing west, if you know where to look” (Hall 1994, 395). Besides West Indies large Indian diasporas are found in Malaya, Fiji, Mauritius and in Eastern and Southern Africa. Large numbers of Chinese people were brought to the same destinations besides settling in areas across most of South-East Asia and the Philippines.

The most recent and significant diasporic movements have been the movements of colonized peoples back to the metropolitan centres. Britain, France, the Netherlands now have vast minorities of diasporic ex-colonial populations of various countries of origin and various religions. Some observers do not hesitate to say Britain is now being colonized and London is a colonial city. In some European countries that were not colonial metropolises in the past large diasporas were created by labourers attracted by opportunities in fast developing economies (guestworkers in Germany and elsewhere). Many diasporic communities have their origins in streams of refugees fleeing the areas of war, climatic disasters and other conditions of distress.

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The post-colonial world, however, is slowly being transformed into a more and more interactive system as never known before. With the technological explosion, especially in the sphere of transportation and information, we have entered into a condition of neighbourliness even with the individuals and communities in the most distant parts of the planet.

One of the most influential thinkers of the second part of the twentieth century characterizes what, in his view, the imminent future will look like:

“...The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of network that connects points and intersects with its own skein” (Foucault 1986, 22).

Theorizing about the emerging world Marshall McLuhan coined the term “global village”. This term, however, does not take into account the fact the new media do not provide affinities to place. “How can stable meanings be secured and how

can individuals be motivated or committed to global conditions? In simplistic terms, one can understand the commitment of a peasant to the village in which he and all his ancestors were born, but can we imagine commitment to a global village?" (Turner 1994, 111). Just as electronic globalization seems to unite people geographically, it also seems to separate them relationally. Media enable people to live in "cultural enclaves" built around sameness rather than diversity (Griswold 1994, 147).

Arjun Appadurai (1994, 328) believes the complexity of the current global economy has to be seen as an outcome of fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture and politics. He discerns five dimensions of global cultural flow, whose relationship, in his view, can form an elementary framework for exploring the global situation. He uses rather unusual terms of his own coinage: *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *finanscapes* and *ideoscapes*. The suffix *-scape* points to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes and at the same time indicates that these are not objectively given relations which look the same from every angle, but rather perspectival constructs.

In Appadurai's view even an elementary model of global political economy must take into account the fact that relations between *ethnoscape*, defined as the shifting world of various moving groups, *technoscape* as a global configuration of technology, and *finanscape*, the network of financial institutions, moving mega-money round the globe with astonishing speed, are disjunctive and highly unpredictable, each of these landscapes being subject to its own limits and pulls. *Mediascapes*, understood as the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information as well as the images of the world they produce, and *ideoscapes*, mostly directly political concatenations of images connected with state or group ideologies, produce the world, in which the world of commodities and the world of entertainment and politics are unextricably mixed.

Appadurai's flows of *scapes* replace the established oppositions such as global/local, metropolis/colony, centre/periphery, North/South, East/West. His perspective may be provocative and utopian, but undoubtedly offers new points of departure and deserves to be taken seriously. Probably the most illuminating of the author's insights is his vision of *ideoscapes* as being composed of the elements of the Enlightenment worldview (ideas like "rights", "representation", "sovereignty", and above all "democracy"), products of Western political development, that have been launched into global orbit. Appadurai speaks of "diaspora of keywords" (Appadurai 1994, 331) which, outside their original environment, require careful translation from context to context and whose resonance may depend on variety of cultural conventions and ways of communication.⁴

⁴ "...while an Indian audience may be attentive to the resonance of a political speech in terms of some keywords and phrases reminiscent of Hindi cinema, a Korean audience may respond to the subtle coding of Buddhist or neo-Confucian rhetorical strategy encoded in a political document" (Appadurai 1994, 331).

It is, of course, the first term, *ethnoscape*, that is of greatest interest here. Says Appadurai (1994, 329): "By *ethnoscape* I mean the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers and other moving groups and persons constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree. This is not to say that there are no relatively stable communities and networks, of kinship, of friendship, of work and leisure, as well as of birth, residence and other filiative forms. But it is to say that the warp of these stabilities is everywhere shot through with the woof of human motion, as more persons and groups deal with the realities of having to move or the fantasies of wanting to move. What is more, both these realities as well as these fantasies now function on large scales, as men and women from villages think not just of moving to Poona or Madras, but of moving to Dubai or Houston, and refugees from Sri Lanka find themselves in South India as well as in Switzerland, just as the Hmong are driven to London as well as to Philadelphia. And as international capital shifts its needs, as production and technology generate different needs, as nation-states shift their policies on refugee populations, these moving groups can never afford to let their imagination rest too long, even if they wish to."

The dispersed groups can extend to develop transnational communities, various kinds of long-distance social networks affecting both local and large-scale economic patterns, international migration, political movements and cultural inter-penetration. Today's information technologies connect such networks with unprecedented efficiency and speed. Despite great distances and international borders and all the regulations these borders represent, many kinds of relationships have been intensified. Many transnational communities are gaining in power and their significance is growing. The overseas Chinese, for example, are believed to have a national Gross Domestic Product larger than China. Countries such as Egypt, Pakistan, El Salvador and the Philippines are greatly dependent on the remittances of their emigrants. Contemporary transnational communities are at once the products of, and catalysts of globalization (Vertovec, 1999).⁵

These processes show that the borders of nation states are breached in innumerable ways, creating, on one hand, all kinds of opportunities for cultural cosmopolitanism, on the other hand generating anxieties experienced by the locals and expressed by a range of strategies employed by groups, parties or movements, including racist and xenophobic ones. With unemployment becoming a more or less permanent problem in most Western societies, xenophobic and racist slogans attract growing crowds to the banners of unscrupulous populist leaders (France, Austria).

⁵ Transnationalism is a characteristic feature of a number of religious movements, such as some sufi orders, the *tariqas*, or as Tablighi Jama'at, Muslim missionary movement of Indian origin, operating in more than 80 countries. Its annual conferences have become the second largest congregation of Muslims after the Hajj.

On the other side of the barrier recent analysis of the behaviour of young Asian population in Britain have shown that sections of "Asian" youth dissipate their energies in inner-group hatreds and prejudices, blacks fighting Asians, Sikh youth fighting Muslims or radical Hindu groups, one Muslim sect fighting another. In most Muslim communities in Europe there is competition between ethnic and Islamic ties. Zygmunt Bauman has recently coined a useful term "glocalization" that points to the fact that globalization can often reinforce particular and local as well as transnational identities.

The problem of identity in diasporas has recently become a widely discussed issue. In *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* Stuart Hall (1994, 393) mentions two different ways of thinking about "cultural identity" under the diaspora condition, in his case the Caribbean identity. Within the terms of the first, "our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as "one people", with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history... Such a conception of cultural identity played a critical role in all post-colonial struggles which have so profoundly reshaped our world". The other way of thinking about "cultural identity", in Hall's view, is to see it defined not by essence or purity, but by recognition of its heterogeneity and diversity. Diasporic identity is hybrid identity. In the case of the black diaspora, the slaves, forcefully separated from Africa, were from different tribal communities, languages and gods. These gods continue to live on underground, in the hybridized religious world of the Caribbean. Forcible transportation to the Americas cut the black people off from their past and at the same time produced a kind of unity in difference. Quoting Hall (1994, 402), "Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference".

The problem of identity becomes complicated with diasporic religious groups. Jews hold widely divergent views about the desirability and significance of maintaining a national identity. According to the theory of *shelilat ha-galut* ("denial of the exile"), Jewish life and culture are endangered in the diaspora because of assimilation and acculturation. On the other hand many Reform Jews believe Jews are Jews in the religious sense only and should be loyal to their country of residence.

Worried about Muslim loss of identity in the West, Zain el-Abedin, the founder of the Institute for Muslim Minority Affairs in Jedda, Saudi Arabia, prescribed developing Islam as an ethnicity. In his view this is the most effective way to protect the community from desintegration. He sees the West as a laboratory where a new modern identity should be created, one that promotes a common language and distinctive traditions such as style of dress and food among others (Haddad 1998). Ethnicity, however, can be very divisive given the diversity of diasporic groups of Muslims. Besides, ethnicity itself is un-Islamic and can be harmful to one of the most valued features of Islam, its all-embracing universalism.⁶

The growing pressure of cultural homogenization results in permanent contest between sameness and difference. This situation is especially grave for the dispersed groups and families that try to reproduce themselves. The process of enculturation, the transmission of culture, becomes more complicated by the fact that both the culture of origin and that of arrival have lost their stability and do not provide a reliable point of reference in the time of crisis. Trans-generational continuity of knowledge rarely exists in diaspora. Family relationships can become very unstable as parents move to new locations or grown-up children return from prolonged stays abroad. Global labour diasporas represent great strains on marriages and on women in particular. Relations between generations suffer as ideas about property, mutual obligations and proper behaviour change with distance and time. "As group pasts become increasingly parts of museums, exhibits and collections, both in national and transnational spectacles, culture becomes more and more an arena for conscious choice, justification and representation, the latter often to multiple, and spacially dislocated audiences" (Appadurai 1994, 335). Even so deeply coherent communities such as those of Muslims show signs of individualization, sharpening of self-consciousness, privileging personal choice over the constraints of religious tradition. Like "consumers" people are increasingly choosing which tenets and rules of their religion to recognize and which to ignore. Among the members of the second generation of immigrants religion is pushed more and more to the private sphere (Cesari 1999). Personal choice, however, need not always mean some kind of secularization. It can bring about fundamentalist attitudes as a form of resistance to Western political and cultural imperialism. The choice of strict Islamic observance can sometimes signify nothing more than an expression of self-confidence among young Muslims, an attempt to affirm their identity (*ibid*).

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An analysis of the current situation should take into account not only processes going on within diasporic groups, but also changes resulting from the presence of these groups in the host countries as well as relations between diaspora and its country of origin.

In the last mentioned case diaspora can strengthen the attachment to the home country and its political situation and thus can contribute to the development of global fundamentalisms including Islamic and Hindu fundamentalism. On the other hand the problems of the home countries can be discussed in a much freer atmosphere in the West. This, in the long run, will probably have its effect on the society

⁶ "Islam deals with man as a man... those who accept the principles of Islam are not divided by any distinction of nationality or race or class or country. The ultimate goal of Islam is a world-state in which the chains of racial and national prejudices would be dismantled... Islam would appeal to mankind in general" (Maududi, 1982, 94).

at home. In this context the impact of the diaspora of intellectuals on the way global situation came to be reflected deserves attention.

Owing to the presence of deterritorialized communities within democratic societies of the West multiculturalism has become a real issue, redefining public space as it means accommodating different world views. Multicultural politics represents a challenge to Western liberalism. The egalitarian universalism of modern Western culture has its roots in an opposition to status and caste hierarchies, against situations where different groups had different rights and different obligations. The liberal concept sees justice as equally applicable to all groups, differences being reduced to a "private matter".⁷ Historically, privileged equality over difference was a way of achieving liberation. The other side of the process was the adoption of assimilation, that of the melting pot, where mainstream groups defined the rules and standards of the process (Dallmayr 1996, 209). In this way the marginal groups were disadvantaged having to measure up to the norm set by the majority. They were discouraged from developing their own identity and often interiorized feelings of inferiority.

Some religious traditions in their radical fundamentalist garb represent a challenge to the very foundations of Western political system. One need only remember the impact of the Rushdie affair in Britain. "Modern democracy cannot readily accommodate radical cultural diversity, just as little as modern science can integrate alchemy (or Christianity accept the pagan pantheon) (Dallmayr 1996, 203). Nevertheless, the cultural diversity cannot be ignored, claims of different groups to be part of the social and political order have to be acknowledged. In B.Turner's words "otherness has been domesticated". The existence of a variety of traditions within a community poses questions inquiring not only about the authenticity of cultures, but about integration of different traditions within the Western political systems as well. Answering the challenge multiculturalism has become a prominent dimension of most political systems in the West.

The issue of multiculturalism has been discussed mostly in connection with curricular structure and curricular reforms, which is only natural as education is a decisive factor in the production of future society. In general, non-Christian religious groups, their system of values and their ways of life are no longer discriminated against, but the general framework reflecting the Christian background usually remains in place. The timing of the school year proceeds mostly according to the established tradition, irrespective of the practices of diasporic groups (e.g. fasting during the month of Ramadan in Islam). In the case of schoolgirls wearing veils in

⁷ It is under the impact of the modern unified legal systems as applied to all citizens of a state within the borders of its territory the efforts of Islamists to replace the state law by Islamic shari'a is to be understood. Historically, under Muslim domination, each religious group had its own legal system (L. Kropáček, 1999, 165).

France the courts, unable to reach a final decision, ruled the matter was within the authority of the headmasters.

In general, existing Western structures and procedures are viewed as irreplaceable, an assertion that neglects the variety among Western regimes and the long period of experimentation preceding the prevailing arrangements. Democratic multiculturalism asks for political imagination and flexibility, for re-examining even such basic concepts as democracy. John Esposito quotes the words of W.B. Gallic: "Democracy is an essentially contested concept." The Western democratic heritage is a broad and rich one and this resource for polity creators around the globe is weakened if only a small part of it is presented (Esposito 1996, 21). In a considerable amount of the literature concerning institutionalizing cultural diversity, attention is given to such possibilities as multiple public spheres... "the idea of an egalitarian, multicultural society only makes sense if we suppose a plurality of public arenas in which groups with diverse values and rhetoric participate. By definition, such a society must contain a multiplicity of publics" (Nancy Frazer 1999, 529). Some authors suggest for example the establishment of "ethnic federalism", bicameralism or multicameralism. Nevertheless, no solution seems to be free of serious problems (Dallmayr 1996, 219).

It seems, however, that we are witnessing the rapid shift from the old model of relations between state and society to an all-pervasive information society, to cyber society, where the state will be less powerful in its regulatory functions on one hand and less protective on the other. According to some (sociologist Manuel Castells, Saskia Sassen, an American feminist theorist), information technologies will reinforce global asymmetries. Sassen speaks of "cyber-segmentations" causing unfair distribution of economic wealth. What we are likely to see is the further marginalization of the already marginal.

Although electronic mediation has impacted diasporic groups unevenly, the influence of the Internet is overwhelming. Anthropologist Shahram Khosrawi (ISIM 00) even proclaims: "Diaspora is a deterritorialized World Wide Web." The Internet offers more effective and cheaper ways of communication than any other medium. It provides a unique opportunity for the creation of a transnational public space/sphere. Analysing the Iranian situation Khosrawi stresses the fact this virtual public sphere enables Iranians to talk about political issues or taboos without the risk of persecution. It makes contacts between different oppositional factions possible. Besides, since the chief language of the Internet is English, the gap between generations becomes less divisive. In the conventional media in diaspora the second generation is usually absent, not so on the Net. The first generation can use the Internet as a means to connect with their children and to transfer their cultural heritage to the next generation.

Cyber-space is used to preserve the collective identity by producing the past and objectifying collective culture in a sort of cyber-museum. Pictures of works of art, of monuments and landscapes are available online. "This cyber-museum, like the

conventional national museums, "objectifies" the Iranian culture and history, making them "immortal". Thereby it creates an "eternal authenticity", which in turn affirms the durability of the diaspora" (ibid.). While return home is unrealizable for most Iranians, "virtual return" is practiced by many.

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