

KEYNOTE ADDRESS



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Global Migration

The Dialectic of Nation and Trans-nation in Diasporic Geopolitics

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Introduction

I wish to delineate the geopolitical context of skills, knowledge and cultural transfers and exchanges in global migration. The salience of global migration and the diffusion as well as the organization of the exchange and transference of skills, knowledge and culture is evident in the range of contributions—themes and perspectives—to be presented in this conference. The papers deal with migration and development; multi-cultural locations; literary exegeses; interfaces, integration and conflicts; regional configurations; questions of identity; and diplomatic as well as policy issues.

The dialectic between transnational and the nation-state settings is at the heart of the geopolitical frame in which our analyses and deliberations can be framed. Specifically, the debate is between the proponents of those who see global diasporic processes crossing nation-state boundaries in a sui generis manner and those—political scientists and nationalists in the main—who advocate, for reasons that they are able to enunciate logically, the return to the nation-state boundaries in a more or less 'United Nations' universe of discourse. I discern that historians and literary scholars—proponents of the humanities in the main—belong to the transnational camp and hard-nosed social scientists, especially those with a vision of political economy, subscribe to the nation-state persuasion. What are the rela-

tive merits and demerits of the two visions? And is there a justifiable complementarity between them as a compass for our deliberations? This is the only issue that I will broach in my address.

The nation-state

To undertake the task at hand, I analyze, in the words of Wimmer and Glick-Schiller (2002: 30), "how the concept of the nation-state has and still does influence past and current thinking in the social sciences, including our thinking about transnational migration". Our authors discuss this topic critically in a universe of discourse designated as "methodological- nationalism" in the social sciences. Before coming to methodological nationalism, however, I would pin-point certain empirical instances where the nation-state framework looms large in our thinking about transnationalism and globalization.

Let me look at some of the topics that would be discussed in this conference. On a rough count, some seventy to eighty per cent of the papers are centrally located in the context of a nation-state (e.g., India, Uganda, Iran, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and the USA etc.) or in the international relations between these nations. Thus the papers discuss, for example, Bangladeshi immigrants in India, Gujarati migrants in the USA, Keralite and Punjabi migrants transnationally, the Rajasthanis in USA etc. In other words, either roots migration from geographical-cum-linguistic regions of a

nation-state or emigrants, including refugees, between nation-states constitute the context of global migration and diaspora. Unless one examines the analytical framework of these contributions it would be difficult to say what proportion of these presentations is biased in the direction of what Wimmer and Glick-Schiller designate as “methodological nationalism”. This bias refers to those analyses which fall into the trap of a “container model” of the nation-state, hence reducing transnationalist phenomena to a literal relationship between and amongst nation-states. In the extant literature on Indian diaspora there are salutary examples where an awareness of such a trap and the side-stepping of literal internationalism are in evidence. Axel’s (2001) multi-sited ethnography of the Sikh diaspora, Eisenlohr’s (2007) analysis of Indian “ancestral culture” in a sui generis localized socio-economic dynamics in Mauritius, Hanson’s (2012) observations on in situ mediations, away from any necessary nexus with developments in contemporary India, among Indian diasporics in Durban, South Africa, and Willford’s (2006) interpretation of Tamil religiosity in Malaysia are instances where a reference of diasporic “Indian” culture back to India in “real time” has been transcended in a transnationalist (rather than an internationalist) analytical frame. The latest academic contribution in this direction is Amrith’s (2013) environmentalist-cum-transnationalist interpretation of historical migrations across the Bay of Bengal, to which I will come again in detail a little later.

Transnationalist analysis

What is this “transnationalist” analytical frame? How has it evolved? What are some of its insights in contemporary works? Is there a danger of certain transnationalist analyses covertly falling into a biased “methodological internationalism” trap? How may one reformulate the discourse of global migration, diaspora and transnationalism from an anthropological vantage point? (In posing this last question, I have in mind analogically, the Wittgensteinian perspective (an anthropological way of doing Economics where you do not only “look” but “see”) on global migration.

The beginnings of a transnationalist perspective may be traced to a relatively politically aseptic cultural ecological viewpoint in human geography. An early example of its use is found in the

concept of plantation as a “settlement institution”. To quote its founding father (Thompson 1986:2; see also Thompson 1957, 1959), “plantation becomes migration and the planting of people, and the place planted becomes a plantation”. The term “plantation” in the original sense had reference not to a landed estate but to the “whole process of migration and settlement... The early use of the term corresponded to the Dutch term Volk-Planting.” The earliest human component on a typical plantation, for example in Malaya, consisted of immigrants—planters, supervisors and labourers. The only indigenous factor was the tract of land they jointly worked and inhabited. It was the way in which these people incorporated their statuses and purposes into the land that gave rise to characteristic social relationships among them, The estate (plantation) became a stratified social grouping (see Jain 1970: xix).

In anthropology “the cultural ecological hypothesis” (Steward 1936) was formulated in the study of hunting bands that later germinated in the study of plantation and peasant communities in Puerto Rico (Steward et.al., 1956). It also formed the theoretical basis of Thompson’s idea of plantation as a settlement institution. The concept of cultural ecology proved seminal in that both the terms “culture” and ecology” subsequently found an inter-relationship in the integrated and interpretative studies of evolutionary human behaviour (see Geertz 1973; Fox 1975; Bateson 1987). In contemporary social science theorizing as well as in popular usage the term “ecosystem” designates the culture and environment of any organization, ranging from the civic and the local (e.g., a municipality) to the cosmopolitan and the trans-local (e.g., a multinational corporation: see Garsten 2003).

The methodological infusion of the conceptual vocabulary of the “nation” (nationality, nationalism, internationalism, etc.) into the cultural ecological hypothesis is of relatively recent vintage. One may legitimately claim its original usage to be transnational in the sense that its locational parameters then were unbounded by what has been discussed as the “container model” of the nation-state. This is precisely its methodological nexus where environmental history approaches (Amrith 2013) and of “continuous histories” (Subrahmaniyam 1997) converge with anthropological analyses of transnationalism (e.g., Ap-

padurai 1997). There is a difference, however, between the historians' usages of the concept of culture and that of contemporary anthropologists. And a similar difference in usage pertains to the infusion of the nation-state context in anthropological texts and in certain political science writings.

Cultural ecology and transnationalism—a case study

Rather than review the whole gamut of transnationalist studies of global migration to bring out their focus on cultural ecology, let me take up Amrith's study, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants*, (Harvard University Press, 2013). The environmentalist persuasion and, hence, ecological history is pronounced in this approach. In ecology, the sea (waters) assumes an important role. The ecological interplay between the sea-shores and the hinterlands (the littoral) is characterized by repeated human crossings of the ocean and the progressive reclaiming of lands beyond the sea-shores through cultivation and building construction. Nature and human endeavour are thus seen as global factors in migration and its consequences. The story of famines and fluctuations of natural factors in sea-routes (wind directions and storms) are built into the historical narrative. Ecological regions are thus conceptualized and reinvented in a novel way recalling Braudel's studies of the Mediterranean, Subrahmaniyam's of the Indian Ocean and earlier studies of the Bay of Bengal itself by historians like Chris Baker and others. In thus reconstructing the eco-history of the terrain, particularly of south and southeast Asia, Amrith subsumes, in a sense, the currents of colonialism and imperialism within cultural ecology. Based on such a perspective, the countries of south and southeast Asia in Amrith's book—India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos and the Philippines—constitute a continuous region for a circulatory flow of ideas, goods, and people. Finally, up until the installation of the nation-state idea and its jural-political constraints following the period of the World Wars, the Bay of Bengal remained a cultural ecological region in the above sense. The aftermath of the wars saw the "loss", through its partial eclipse into newly constituted nation-states, of the Bay of Bengal eco-region as an "imagined community."

The ecological frame in the above redaction of cultural ecology may not be disputed (though there are sceptics who would want detailed scientific proofs for assertions like the "rising" of ocean waters (Amrith, Chapter 8) similar to doubts concerning climate change and global warming, but here I shall let it pass). But the anthropologist is within his disciplinary rights to interrogate its usage of the concept of culture. I begin with a clarification. Michael Herzfeld (2013: 110), writing about political-science culturalists, such as Samuel Huntington (1996), says, "The culturalists' view is that you cannot understand a political process, especially in international relations, without taking culture into account. But what they actually take into account is 'cultures'—finitely bounded entities that look far more like the creations of 19th century nationalist ideologues or early anthropologists than the fluid processes that today's anthropologists usually study." In a similar vein, the anthropologist Frederick Barth (1994) has written that his concept of culture is characterised as continuous rather than discontinuous; it is wrought by variation and flux; it is contested rather than being assumed to be homogenous; and, finally, though culture was seen mainly as a boundary-making mechanism (in relation to ethnic groups), its content was not altogether unimportant. With particular reference to the cartography of diaspora, Avatar Brah (1996: 234) defines culture comprehensively as "the play of signifying practices; the idiom in which social meaning is constituted, appropriated, contested and transformed; the space where the entanglement of subjectivity, identity and politics is performed. Culture is essentially process... (The) emphasis on process draws attention to the reiterative performance constitutive of that which is constructed as custom, tradition, or value." (Author's italics)

While speaking of cultural syncretism among Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Buddhists in the Bay of Bengal eco-region of south and southeast Asia, Amrith basically glosses over many aspects of the continuous and processual nature of culture, of contestations within the cultural flow (culture with a capital "C") and veers close to a somewhat simplistic view of "live and let live" paradigm of coexistence among cultures especially in the pre World War era but continuing to this day. As to the content of multiple cultures in the region, Amrith confines his entire discourse of accommodation to religion and spirituality (sample the examples of local Christianity p. 179; local Hinduism p.280; local Islam and Buddhism

also p. 280).

Cultural ecology and levels of politics

It is true that besides religion and spirituality Amrith is able to configure financial and trading exchanges among the diverse ethnic groups in the eco-region, but where is the political power equation in his cultural configuration? He does tackle this question also at the end of the book but, as we shall see, in a global context of environmentally defined geo-political scenario. There is, nevertheless, a more proximate context: that of the nation-state building process in diasporic situations of diverse locations where the power equations are played out. To return to the Bay of Bengal eco-region currently in the throes of country-wise nation-building processes, ethnic groups are mutually engaged in power games that can be analysed in Gramsci's terms as "transformist hegemony" (Gramsci 1971; Williams 1989). To take the Malaysian example, each ethnic minority (e.g., the Chinese and the Indians) to speak nothing of the ethnic majority (the Malays as bumiputeras) are proud possessors of their cultural heritage. But the ethnic minorities in relation to the politically dominant ruling ethnic majority face a dilemma. If they adhere exclusively to their cultural moorings and behaviour, they are looked down upon by the dominant ethnic majority as a potential fifth column in the polity. Yet they are expected to make a contribution to the common patrimony of the nation-state controlled by the ruling majority. If, then, they proceed to homogenize with the culture of the majority, they suffer ridicule by others and in their own eyes as lackeys hanging on to the coat-tails of their alien superiors/oppressors. This, then, is the predicament of diasporic ethnic minorities in the nation-state building process and it lays behind many an inter-ethnic conflict. There is no allusion to this dilemma or similar contestations in Amrith's account.

Here there is a double whammy, however. The nation-states of the Bay of Bengal eco-region with all their patterns of dominance and inter-ethnic conflicts are subordinate to yet bigger power-games in the Indian Ocean/South China Sea/the Pacific Ocean arena—those between the U.S., China and India. Amrith is sensitive to this environmentally defined context while by-passing, as we have seen, the cultural politics of nation building processes in the eco-region. That our author's sights are all focussed on the

grand global vision of the U.S. administration is evidenced when he cites with approval and approbation the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's statement made in Chennai in July 2011 (Amrith 2013: 251). Hillary Clinton extolled the port city of Chennai to discuss India's leadership in the region to its east not only in the historic past but even today. "Today the stretch of sea from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific contains the world's most vibrant trade and energy routes, linking economies and driving growth", she said. Amrith adds, "The Bay's position as a stretch of sea from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific puts it once again at the heart of global history". . Ironically, several parts of that very city of Chennai faced a grave threat of ecological disaster in August 2016!

Conclusion

The message loud and clear to the students of diaspora and transnationalism is that whether we stress ecology or political economy or both, we must ground global theories in empirical instances while avoiding the pitfalls not only of methodological nationalism but of an insidious methodological internationalism as well. (See for a timely warning in relation to freewheeling globalization analyses, Favell 2001) For transnationalist analysis to trump both methodological nationalism and internationalism, the human ecosystems—peoples and their environments, natural and man-made—as also the observers of these systems, would have to be conceived as moving targets subject to the vagaries of geopolitics.

To end on an anthropological note for research methodology to be adopted in the scenario sketched above, it would seem that sustained and long-term fieldwork in specific localities that are part of national and international arenas may provide an answer. What one anthropologist (Herzfeld 2013) describes as cultural and social intimacy of and with the informants may hold a clue to discommoding the obvious or self-evident truths publicised by the powers-that-be and echoed by the media. In so doing the social responsibility of the anthropologist-ethnographer would be "not so much to speak truth to power, as to speak doubt to truth". He/she would then be raising questions about what increasingly powerful media present as self-evident truths.

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