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**SÉRIE ANTROPOLOGIA**

**173**

**THE CONDITION OF TRANSNATIONALITY**

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# THE CONDITION OF TRANSNATIONALITY

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Anthropologists have always striven to understand the relationships between local and supra-local realities, the integration of smaller socio-political economic and cultural units into larger wholes, the creation of political and economic systems. In this paper, transnationalism is interpreted within the realm of debates on levels of integration, shrinking of the world and the creation of new realities that challenge existing forms of coping with life and inherited understandings within the social sciences.

The discussion on transnationalism has frontiers and similarities with subjects such as globalization, world system and the international division of labor. But I argue that its own distinction lies in the fact that transnationality points to a central issue: the state/citizenship relationship, or to put it in a more abstract fashion, the relationship between territories and the different forms of socio-cultural and political arrangements that orient the way people represent their membership to a certain level of integration. The emergence of transnationalism is recent and it endangers the logics and effectiveness of the other pre-existing collective representations on socio-cultural and political membership. Although we may clearly speak of transnationalism, transnationality as such keeps in many regards potential and virtual characteristics. This is why I'd rather consider the condition(s) of transnationality and not its existence in itself. I will explore this subject by briefly presenting six clusters of conditions that are separable only for analytical and exposition purposes.

## **(1) Historical Conditions.**

Transnationality needs to be understood in relation to a historical process that has evolved notably since the XVth century when Europe started a political, economic, social, cultural and biological expansion that gradually creates the so-called world system with different historical and geographical degrees of integration. Since this is a process we are always experiencing its most advanced point. European expansion coincides thoroughly with capitalist expansion and the different interconnected realities it creates around the planet. Modernity is a label frequently used to refer to this process in which the growth of the productive forces, especially those of the communication, information and transportation industries, provoke a "shrinking of the world" (Harvey 1989). Heterogeneity is thus increasingly produced under the umbrella of processes of homogeneity.

There is a wide consensus that this process leads to a globalization of economic, cultural, political and social realities. But the nature of the present state of the integration of the world system is a motif of debate given the fast changes in the capitalist political economy in the last ten or twenty years. However, if there is a phenomenon with new

intensity in the contemporary world this is transnationalism. Historically, territories have resulted in forms of collective representations associated with social, cultural and political identities whereby people would recognize membership to some unit and would accept, by violent or peaceful means, the authority of individuals or of political bodies that said to represent their territory, inhabitants, nature, cultural heritage, etc.

"Social organization" is a traditional theme within anthropology since it has to do with the ways people organize themselves to cope with life. The collective subjects -be they families, clans, lineages, segments, moities, tribes, cacicazgos, kingdoms, empires, nation-states, etc. - are always an imagined "we", an imagined collectivity with varied degrees of efficacy. The relationships between local and supra local realities can be understood in terms of the different levels of integration with their related representations and socio-political units. The analysis of local, regional, national and international levels of integrations need now to consider the transnational dimension. Transnationalism puts in risk the logics of the categories associated with the other levels of integration since it cross-cuts them. How other forms of organizing socio-political units, such as the nation-state, will co-exist with transnationalism is still an open question.

## **(2) Economic Conditions.**

The global scope of capitalism is now obvious. It has extended its networks in such a manner that it is now common to consider that no real or imaginary space has been left out of the reach of capitalism or modernity. Much of the effectiveness of this expansion lies in forms of production, veritable bridgeheads, responsible during colonial or imperial times for the occupation of new areas as well as for the flow of people, capital, commodities and information. Plantations, mines, large scale projects, export processing zones, are few examples of powerful undertakings that transformed localities into fragments of the world system. Economic frontiers in expansion, especially those driven by agriculture and cattle-ranching, have also played powerful roles in the incorporation of new territories and people.

But, once again, the powerful advent of transnational capitalism is the new (f)actor in this scene with the agencies it empowers or creates. Transnational capitalism must be distinguished from international and multinational capitalism because it involves a different logic of structuration of political and economic agents, leading to the emergence of a new hegemony.

International capitalism supposes the full operation of the international division of labor as it exists in the interplay of different sovereign nation-states, a most powerful political and economic agent. Multinational capitalism supposes the association of capital with different origins in the same enterprise. It is still possible to identify, in a lesser or greater degree, the composition of capital, and its political implications, in terms of nationality. However, transnational capitalism makes it impossible to trace the origins of capital, given the present volatility and flexibility of financial and industrial capital. We know, for instance, that the largest stock markets are integrated via satellite in a planetary race for profits; and that the segments of a same productive process may be scattered around the world. The operation that the transnational corporation has the power to

perpetuate is the scrambling of the logics of the relationships between the different levels of integration. Origin - the relationship between territory and political accountability - is now capable of being hidden without a pre-established plan or without recurring to illusions or intermediaries. Capital is now fully deterritorialized in its planetary flow.

The transnational corporation operates in an environment cohabited with other agencies interested in multi as well as in transnationalism. They play a major role in today's political economy. New and not so new economic entities such as the G7; the Club of Paris; multilateral and regional banks (World Bank; Interamerican Development Bank; and others); multilateral agencies (United Nations; International Monetary Fund -IMF; Organization of the American States; and others); political and economic blocks such as the European Economic Commission, the North-Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Mercosur (the integration initiative in South-America involving Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay). All of these seem to be intermediary forms. Existing in a moment of transition, they anticipate or maintain the new and the old orders engaging in different political struggles in several scenarios such as wars, the promotion of new ideologies, legislations and technologies.

### **(3) Technological Conditions.**

The shrinking of the world is accomplished through a process that David Harvey (1989) called "time-space compression". Two kinds of technological development are important here. Those related to the growth of speed and simultaneity. The apparatuses of time-space compression have their own genealogies and contribute to the annihilation of space through time creating the possibility of experiencing the world as a smaller, more fragmented but integrated entity. They are the hardware that enables the unfolding of the global network.

Since the industrial revolution speed has greatly increased and become so pervasive in daily life that it is naturalized in the present. In fact, it is common to consider "the fast pace of life" as one of the characteristics of our time. The apparatuses of speed are part of a genealogy that includes locomotives, steamboats, cars, motorcycles, airplanes, all of them, in lesser or greater degree, symbols of modernity in their own right. The naturalization of simultaneity is equally true. Since the telegraph, the apparatuses of simultaneity include radios, telephones, television, fax and computer networks. If speed turns space into an obviously relative entity, simultaneity virtually annihilates space and time. In the era of satellites, communicating from Brasilia to Tokyo dissolves several time zones. It is the end of the absolute space, the empire of the relative space inserted in a global web that facilitates and energizes the complex intermingling of people, capital and information.

This situation needs to be understood in relationship to the shifting positions held by different sectors of the industrial system. The new industrial hegemony under flexible capitalism means the hegemony of the electronic and computer industries. The centrality of communication and information matches or provokes new needs related to the division of labor, the organization of production with its managerial ideologies, the military, leisure, the consumption of images and other cultural goods. Planned obsolescence in electronics and computers occurs in a grandeur tantamount to the volatility of capital and to the rates of

returns associated with this new round of melting everything that is solid.

Global networks of communication become the whirlpool that redefines political-economic functions, attributions, and the collective representations of people around the planet dissolving the lines between the different levels of integration. Global TV networks and global computer networks give life to the main symbolical and ideological support for the emergence of transnational culture.

#### **(4) Ideological and Symbolical Conditions.**

Of the many ideologies central to the envisaging of the world and of humankind as a single entity, I will briefly mention two interrelated ones, development and environmentalism. They play a major role in the creation of modernity and of the contemporary world as well as in the structuring of prevailing utopian discourses on man's destiny.

Development as ideology and utopia works as a veritable matrix galvanizing non-western societies and cultures around western political and economic goals and rationales (Ribeiro 1992a). It provides apparently neutral grounds for people to work together towards a better future, explains the differences between countries and offers recipes of how to achieve collective material power and happiness. Its efficacy may be the reason why it has survived many different junctures by the strategic addition of adjectives that supposedly qualifies a trend. The latest adjective is sustainable. I argued elsewhere (op. cit.) that sustainable development represents a compromise, symptomatic of the present historical transition, between agents interested solely in economic growth and environmentalists, a compromise that, in an era of political and ideological crisis, allows for the creation of new utopian discourses as well as of new political alliances. One of the many compatibilities these new or reformed elites share is the notion that a main characteristic of the present is the global nature of the planet and its interconnections. The conception of the planet as a unique entity that may suffer from impacts that are transnational is a clear one amongst environmentalists. Ross (1991) has shown how climatology and the discussions on global warming play an important role in the construction of a culture of globalization.

In this sense, it is not a coincidence that environmentalism became a fashionable and efficient political discourse in the present. The interplay between multilateral agencies - such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the G7 -with environmentalists is conspicuous. It is not a coincidence either that environmentalism is highly interested in transnationalism, in the use of transnational symbolic means and in the enhancement of the mega global rituals that reinforce the emergence of a transnational citizenship. Indeed, environmentalist NGOs around the world have been responsible for the largest transnational ritual to date, the UN Rio-92 Conference, as well as for the diffusion of the main symbolic matrix enabling the emergence of the transnation: computer networks.

Before commenting on the latter, a brief consideration of another important planetary communication system, global television networks, is necessary. Global tv is now popularized through the services of different cable tvs. The Cable News Network (CNN) is archetypical. We may now literally witness selected homogeneous worldviews. It is perhaps too early to say what the impact of this homogeneization will be, since studies on

the different receptions of CNN around the world are yet to be done. But it is possible to suppose that it at least creates topics of conversations that are common to many spectators around the globe. Here is fertile ground for the work of anthropologists and linguists who may assess how global images and subjects are part of the imaginary and of the pragmatics of everyday life. TV global networks most often suppose another important linguistic characteristic - the clear hegemony of English as the *lingua franca* of the world system. Now, more than ever, the predominance of English as the international and transnational linguistic means of exchange is clear. Sociolinguistic studies on the relationships between power and language also find new scenarios to explore. This is also valid for the major computer networks linking the world in global scale.

First developed as part of an American defense project, Internet, the network of the networks, is presently interconnecting some 30 million people all over the globe and has become the most powerful symbolic means of interactive communication. Since the electronic universe or frontier is always expanding, the possibilities, once more in human history, seem endless. Virtual reality now exists in a cyberspace where faceless people communicate in a "on-line", "parallel" world where time, space, geography and culture are non-existent or non-important (Escobar 1994, Laquey & Ryer 1994, Feenberg 1990). This virtual and imagined community forms the basis upon which the first transnation will arise.

The imagined transnational community has particular characteristics, a type of cyberculture (Escobar 1994), that leads its members to have hyperbolic opinions about their role in the real world. Children both of globalism and the computer age they see themselves as creating a new situation, one where access to the network is at the same time a sort of post-modern liberation (in the sense that once in the network they are free from territoriality and from cultural and political constraints) and a new democratic means that empowers people to flood the world system with information thereby checking the abuses of the powerful. Non-governmental organizations everywhere praise this potential of liberation.

However, what NGOs and other members of this virtual and imagined community do not see is that every technological innovation is ambiguous, containing in itself both the potential for utopia and dystopia (Feenberg 1990). Underneath the prototype of a first transnation may lie the prototype of the first transtate. The Internet is not the image of a liberal free market, uncontrolled, or responsive only to individual manipulation. It is controlled, in the last instance, by the American state, via the National Science Foundation or security agencies, that in case of necessity may always exercise their electronic power. More prosaic factors limit access to this democracy: the costs of computers and related equipments; access and knowledge to the codes of the network; education; knowledge of the English language; the control of the functioning of the system by many different computers centers.

However, what is important to bear in mind is that amongst the different processes that contribute to cultural globalization (Appadurai 1991), especially those related to global computer networks form the basis upon which transnationality may become a reality. Benedict Anderson (1991) could, in retrospect, show how important literary capitalism was to create an imagined community that would develop into a nation-state. We can now suggest that electronic capitalism is the necessary environment for the development of a transnation-state. But, no form of political organization fully comes into being without social actors that incarnate its goals.

## **(5) Social Conditions.**

Social actors and agencies interested in the transnationalization of the world become bearers of this kind of worldview. They are most often immediately geared to the logics of the contemporary political-economy and constitute a world elite. Executives of powerful trans, multi or inter-national corporations; stock-brokers; officers of multilateral agencies; diplomats; scholars; and global political activists are members of this group.

But an important phenomenon is vivid in the present: the acceleration and intensification of the movement of people in a global scale creating a world where a greater number of alterities can be really experienced by different social actors in a same situation. International tourists, international or transnational migrants are the most visible actors of these movements.

Tourism is widely cited as a fast-growing industry, the largest or the second largest in world trade. It is supposed to become the most dynamic segment of the world economy in the next decade. As the communication and transportation systems developed and the related costs decreased, tourism thrived. With new denominations such as adventure and eco-tourism, there aren't places out of the reach of outsiders who keep temporary contacts with foreign native or urban populations creating unequal encounters where local people become objects of a consumption drive guided by exoticism and a search for authenticity. Tourism plays the ambiguous role of fostering a certainty about one's place (tourists always go back home) at the same time that it creates a sense of relativity about it. This ambiguity facilitates the future experiencing of other social and ethnic identities either at home or abroad, promoting more international and transnational exchanges. Tourism may also play a role in furnishing vital information about a future receiving area, being thus a first step before the establishment of regular migratory flows. In fact, it may be said that international tourism stimulates the growth of international migration and vice-versa.

However, for the purposes of this paper, the most important migratory movement underway is that of the transnational migrants, a new and still minority segment. These "transmigrants" are defined as "immigrants who develop and maintain multiple relationships - familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political - that span borders" (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994: 7). In this situation, "transnationalism" is defined "as the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (idem). Interested in at least two countries these transmigrants can use their split identities to foster cultural, social, political and economic changes in both their "home" and "host" countries. Basch, Glick-Schiller and Szanton Blanc (1994) quote as typical the situation of Haitians, Grenadians and Filipinos. The economic impact of transnational migration is evident in many different scenarios, such as the Brazilian one where the flow of migrants from the state of Minas Gerais to the northeast of the US (Margolis 1994) and the return migration of Japanese-Brazilians changed the local economies of the sending areas.

I described elsewhere the characteristics of a truly transnationalized migrant: the work-site animal (Ribeiro 1992b, 1994a). These are skilled workers or professionals of large-scale projects that migrate in a world-scale, from project to project, following the



investments and jobs of transnational corporations. Their identity is permanently ambiguous since they identify themselves as citizens of the world, gypsies, uprooted expatriates. A technical elite that is being reproduced within the small villages of the world system, the working-site animals is another group that have clearly developed a deterritorialized vision of the world.

In sum, the acceleration of the movement of people in a global scale has created different social segments and agencies that foster transnational visions that are typically culturally ambiguous and deterritorialized.

## **(6) Ritual Conditions.**

But, numerically and sociologically, the most important population of transnational or potentially transnational citizens is that linked to the existence of the virtual transnational community. And this population needs to perform mega-rituals to transform its virtuality into reality.

There are at least two kinds of mega-rituals organic to the fostering of globalization and transnationalism. The first ones, though not as important as the other I will explore, are the mega rock concerts, where rock fans can show their public face and adherence to an international pop music style, to global pop culture. Superstars' world tours are now routine. Here Michael Jackson is as important as Coca-Cola and Kodak for the standardization of global culture. These mega concerts are often global media events that pretend to pass a sense of planetary unity, a sense that "we are the world". The ritual power of music in the unification of different socio-political segments, of creating *communitas*, is certainly at play in these circumstances.

But in no other scenario can the mega rituals of transnationality be better performed than in the conferences of the United Nations, an agency immediately linked to the promotion of inter and transnationalism. Amongst conferences such as those on human rights (1993) and on population (1994), in Viena and Cairo, respectively, the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED, the Earth Summit, Eco-92 or Rio-92) is archetypical. It was the first opportunity to praise the new world order, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, under the aegis of the emerging new pacts and alliances of transnational post-Fordist capitalism as well as of a transnational ideology, environmentalism. The largest transnational power display ever reunited the most powerful actors of global political economy - representatives of multi-lateral agencies (UN, World Bank, Regional Banks, G7, etc.); representatives of nation-states (some one hundred and twenty head of states went to Rio); corporations; managers and entrepreneurs; the scientific community and the global civil society.

I understand the Rio-92 conference as a mega ritual of passage of the world system, one where both institutions and individuals, in a moment of political, economic and ideological transition, celebrate in anticipation of what they expect to be the future of the world. A world without frontiers would mean the closure of the world system, the capilarity of modernity made true. Such capilarity and closure would not be able without the development of the time-space compression apparatuses of the present. This is one of the reasons why in Rio more of those apparatuses than ever before were seen together. From

Rio International Airport, a major world system knot that received the largest number of airplanes in its history, to the conference center, a time-space compression corridor was opened up, a veritable speed tube that cordoned off the official participants of the conference from the natives and where motorcades with many cars, motorcycles and helicopters could develop high speeds to transport the powerful of the world in security. The world media was a show in itself. Microphones, cameras, cables and spotlights engaged in several skirmishes with the UN security in their search for communicating to the world every aspect of the conference. From Jane Fonda to Jacques Cousteau everybody wanted to be seen in this media whirlpool. Cellular phones showed better than any apparatus the connection between time-space compression and power. Computer networks equally informed those members of the transnational imagined community that could not be present in Rio. However, the ritual need for co-presence impeded the Japanese Prime-Minister to electronically participate at the Assembly, a sheer confirmation that what was at stake was the shift from virtuality to reality.

The projection of the future that is implied by ritual also implies utopias and dystopias that are disputed in politically ritualized grounds. In this connection, Rio-92 can only be properly understood if interpreted as a happening composed by two and counterposed events that regulated each other: the official UN conference and the Global Forum. They are representative of political forces that are complementary to each other. The official conference, UNCED, was the scenario where the transnational establishment negotiated their own visions of the future of the world. The Global Forum was the first world assembly of transnational citizens. Located several kilometers apart, they stand to each other in a relationship analogous to structure/anti-structure.

At UNCED institutional power was the focus of an encounter dominated by formal structures, hierarchy and rank. Only qualified people could have access to qualified space. Access to certain areas, specially to the most powerful ritual centers, were restricted to a minority of powerful people identifiable by different badges. In contrast, the Global Forum was marked by a party atmosphere, one where top officials, diplomats, celebrities, and common people formed a community that not only discussed the problems of the planet but also celebrated the vision of its uniqueness. The sharing of many common principles in spite of their differences of national and ethnic origins gave the temporary community of the Global Forum the certainty they were participating in the creation of a new world, in the construction of "our common future".

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