

# The migrant's time

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To belong to a diaspora ... I wrote down those words and stopped. For I was not sure one could belong to a diaspora. Belonging is predicated on something that is already constituted. Would the first migrant then remain excluded for ever from a diaspora? Who constitutes a diaspora anyhow? And what is it after all? Is it a place or simply a region of the mind—a mnemonic condensation used to form figures of nostalgia out of a vast dispersal? Or is it nothing but the ruse of a beleaguered nationalism to summon to its aid the resources of long-forgotten expatriates in the name of patriotism? Well, I don't know—not yet in any case.

So, to start with let me stay close to the essential connotation of the term as a parting and scattering and say that to be in a diaspora is already to be branded by the mark of distance. Somewhat like being an immigrant, but with a difference. The latter is distantiated from the community—the people or the nation or the country or whatever the name of the community—where he finds himself more often than not as an unwelcome guest. From the moment he knocks on his host's door, he is one who has come in from the outside. The diasporan as a migrant is, on the contrary, someone who has gone away from what once was home—from a motherland or a fatherland. In this case, unlike the other, the function of distance is not to make an alien of him but an apostate. An apostate, because, by leaving the homeland, he has been unfaithful to it. Since there is no culture, certainly not in South Asia, which does not regard the home as the guardian and propagator of values associated with parenthood to the extent of investing the latter with a sanctity akin to religiosity, desertion amounts to transgression. The migrant, even the involuntary one washed offshore by circumstances beyond his control, has therefore broken faith and is subjected to judgements normally reserved for apostasy.

I speak of apostasy in order to highlight the intensity of the moral strictures heaped by their compatriots on those who have gone away. The disapproval could be nationalistic or familial in rhetoric and the defector condemned for weakening in that fidelity which makes for good citizenship and kinship. Whichever the idiom in which it is expressed, its object is nothing less than the violation of some sacrosanct codes. These are codes of solidarity and exchange, alliance and hostility, love of neighbours and fear of strangers, respect for tradition and resistance to change—all of which help a population to form a community through mutual understanding. Presupposed in every transaction between its members, these are in effect codes of belonging by which they identify themselves and recognise each other. To violate these by going away, by breaking loose from the bonds of a native world is to be disowned and bring

down on oneself the harsh sentence: 'You no longer belong here; you are no longer one of us'.

The voice in which such a sentence is pronounced is that of the first-person plural speaking for an entire community from a position entrenched within it. What is within is *here*—a place the migrant will not be entitled to call his own. The displacement is made all the more poignant by the paradox that it corresponds to no distantiating in time. For it is stapled firmly to an accentuated and immediate present cut off from a shared past by the adverbial force of 'no longer'. A sharp and clean cut, the dismissal leaves its victim with nothing to fall back on, no background where to take umbrage, no actual communitarian links to refer to. For it is in their everyday dealings with one another that people in any society form such links in a present which continually assimilates the past to itself as experience and looks forward at the same time to a future secure for all. The loss of that present amounts, therefore, to a loss of the world in which the migrant has had his own identity forged. Ousted temporally no less than spatially, he will, henceforth, be adrift until he lands in a second world where his place will seek and hopefully find matching co-ordinates again in a time he, like others, should be able to claim as '*our* time'.

A diaspora's past is, therefore, not merely or even primarily a historiological question. It is, in the first place, the question of an individual's loss of his communal identity and his struggle to find another. The conditions in which that first identity was formed are no longer available to him. Birth and kinship which gave his place in the first community the semblance of so complete a naturalness as to hide its man-made character, are now of little help to him as an alien set apart by ethnicity and culture. Birthmarks of an originary affiliation, these are precisely what make it hard for him to find a toehold in that living present where a communal identity renews itself as incessantly in the day-to-day transactions between people as it is promptly reinforced by a common code of belonging.

For everything that appertains to such a code is framed in time. Indeed belonging in this communitarian sense is nothing other than temporality acted upon and thought—and generally speaking, lived—as being with others in shared time, with sharing meant, in this context, as what is disclosed by the community to its constituents as temporal. One has simply to listen to the discourse of belonging to realise how pervasive such temporalisation is in all that people say or otherwise indicate to each other about good and bad times, about work and leisure, about how it was and how it might turn out to be, about being young and growing old, and more than anything else about the finitude of life in being born and dying. This is not only a matter of some linguistic compulsion requiring the grammar of a language to insist on the aspectual category of verb phrases in an utterance. More fundamentally, this is an existential question of being in time. There is no way for those who live in a community to make themselves intelligible to each other except by temporalizing their experience of being together.

Temporalization such as this has, of course, all the strands of past, present and future inextricably woven into it. However, the migrant who has just arrived stands before the host community only in the immediacy of the present. This is so because, from the latter's point of view, whatever (if anything) is known

about his past and presumed about his future, is so completely absorbed in the sheer fact of his arrival that, as an occurrence in time, it is grasped as a pure externality, mediated neither by what he was nor by what he will be. Yet there is nothing abstract about this. Quite the opposite seems to be the case. For, it has the concreteness of a sudden break with continuity, or more appropriately, if figuratively speaking, that of a clinamen which disturbs the laminar flow of time to create a whirlpool for the strangeness of the arrival to turn round and round as a moment of absolute uncertainty, a present without a before or an after, hence beyond understanding. Of course it will not be long before the latter recovers from the shock of suddenness and takes hold of the occurrence by interpretation—that is, by such codes as may assign it a meaning in terms of one or any number of alterities ranging from race to religion. All of which, again, will be phrased, much as was the very last sentence of rejection addressed to the migrant on the point of departure from his native land, thus: ‘You don’t belong here’. Wanting as it is in the adverbial phrase ‘no longer’, this interdicts rather than rejects. However, like that other sentence, this too will be uttered unmistakably within a nowness.

How come that the now sits on guard at the gate of the host community as well? It does so because, as Heidegger says, ‘Belonging-somewhere (*Hingehörigkeit*) has an essential relationship to involvement’.<sup>1</sup> Belonging to a community is no exception, for it involves being with others in the everyday life of an ordinary world. Since the now is the mode in which everydayness articulates mostly and primarily, it serves as the knot that ties together the other strands of a community’s temporal bonding. The past is gathered into this knot and the future projected from there as well. The now is, therefore, the base from which all the distantiating strategies are deployed against the alien as the one who stands outside the community’s time—its past of glory and misery, its future pregnant with possibilities and risks, but above all its present charged with the concerns of an authentic belonging.

Nothing could be more acute as a predicament for the migrant who personifies the first generation of any diaspora. Participation in the host community’s now, that is, a moment of temporality made present as today, is an indispensable condition of his admission to it. Yet, as one who has just arrived from the outside, he is, by definition, not admissible at all. For he has nothing to show for his present except that moment of absolute discontinuity—the foreshortened time of an arrival—which is conspicuous precisely by its exclusion from the today of the community at whose threshold he has landed. Not a little of the complexity and pathos of the diasporic condition relates to this very impasse.

At this point it would be convenient for us perhaps simply to go round this difficult and embarrassing moment and allow our narrative a small, almost imperceptible jump in order to move on to that firm ground where the migrant, washed and fed and admitted already to his new community, awaits assimilation as either a mimic or a misfit, depending on the degree of his resistance to that always painful and often humiliating process. But let us not be tempted by this option. Let us continue a little longer with our concern for the impasse in which, literally, he finds himself: stranded between a world left behind and another whose doors are barred, he has nowhere to go. Homeless and with little hope left

for anything but one last chance, he has all his orientation and comportment taken over by anxiety.

That is a mood notorious for its unsettling effect. It shakes him out of the groove of an immediate and unbearable present and makes him ready to summon the experience of what he has been for an encounter with the indefiniteness of what lies ahead. In other words, it is anxiety which enables him to look forward to his own possibilities, helps him to mobilise the past as a fund of energies and resources available for use in his project to clear for himself a path which has the future with all its potentiality on its horizon. A difficult path opened up by the tragic disjunction of his past and present, it lies across that now from which he has been excluded so far and posits him there by the logic of that very crossing.

Thus, the migrant has situated himself at last. But he is far from assimilated yet. For the everydayness of his new situation and that of the host community's intersect, but do not coincide. There is a mismatch which will serve for a field of alienation from now on with differences read along ethnic, political, cultural and other axes. This non-coincidence puts a new spin on the problem of the migrant's time. Why does he now resist absorption in that of his adopted community? Because it is constituted differently from the latter. For the now of any time whatsoever arises from the connectedness of the present with the past and the future. It inherits and projects, and in that dual function, integrates to itself all that is specific to a culture as it has formed so far and all that will determine its quality and character in time to come. A community's now is, therefore, not just one of a series of identical moments arranged in a steady succession. Aligned by its connectedness and coloured by the specificities of its overdeterminations, the moment of its time a community experiences as now is necessarily different from that of any other.

This is why switching communities is in every instance the occasion of a temporal maladjustment which, however, is grasped by common sense, not for what it is, but as the failure of one culture to slot smoothly into another. There is nothing particularly wrong with this interpretation except that it makes a part stand in for the whole. For what is cultural about this phenomenon is already entailed in the temporal and follows directly from it. Thus, to cite an all too familiar example, the difference in attitudes to clock time ascribed often so readily to religious distinctions is perhaps much better explained in terms of the differing temporalities which connect a community's understanding of its own past, present and future in a manner unlike another's.

The migrant, too, is subjected to such misinterpretation in the host community once he has been admitted to it. For the connectedness of time which makes up the fabric of its life is not and cannot be the same as in the one he has left behind. As an immigrant—with the prefix *im* to register the change in his status as one kept no longer waiting outside—the sense of time he brings with him is the child of another temporality. The myriad relationships it has for its referent—relations to his own people, its traditions and customs, its language, even the environment of his native land—set it clearly apart from those that inform such relationships in the community where he finds himself. His attempt to get in touch with the latter and involve himself in the everydayness of being with

others is, therefore, fraught inevitably with all the difficulties of translation between accents, inflexions, syntaxes and lexicons—between paradigms, for short. All that is creole about a culture is indeed nothing other than evidence of its creative overcoming of such difficulty.

It is not uncommon for the necessary inadequacy of such translation to be diagnosed wrongly as nostalgia. The error lies not only in the pathological suggestion it carries, but primarily in its failure to understand or even consider how the migrant relates to his own time at this point. Driven on by anxiety, he has only the future in his horizon. 'What is going to happen to me? What should I do now? How am I to be with the others in this unfamiliar world?' These are all cogitations oriented towards what is to come rather than ruminations about what has been so far.

Lacking as he does the kind of support and understanding one finds in one's native community, he is entirely on his own with no hinterland for retreat but only a prospect which faces him with its daunting openness and an indefiniteness which is as promising as it is disconcerting. All that is in him, and makes him what he is, is caught now—at this moment—in an inexorably forward drift. What he has been so far is also caught in that drift, but not as dead baggage towed along by a force not its own. On the contrary, it is itself constitutive of that headlong movement carrying him forward. In that movement the past does not float passively as a chunk of frozen time, but functions as experience both activated by and invested in the force of a precipitation. There is nothing in it of any desperate effort at finding what has been lost, but only an ongoing current in which the past is integral to the present.

The alignment of the migrant's past with his predicament in the flow of his being towards a future occurs, therefore, not as a process of recovery but of repetition. Far from being dead that past has remained embedded in its time fully alive like a seed in the soil, awaiting the season of warmth and growth to bring it to germination. As such, what has been is nothing other than a potentiality ready to be fertilised and redeployed. It anticipates the future and offers itself for use, and through such use, renewal as the very stuff of what is to come.

That is why the migrant's present, the moment of that tide in which his future-oriented past is being carried along, draws attention to itself invariably as the figure of an ambiguity. For at any such moment, he still appears to speak in the voice of the community where he was born to his first language, even as he is so obviously picking up the language of the other community where he is about to find a second home. In all other respects of his comportment as well—the way he dresses, works, eats, speaks and generally conducts himself in his everyday relationship with others—he mixes idioms and accents and is typecast as one who defies translation, hence understanding.

Our first migrant is, therefore, in a temporal dilemma. He must win recognition from his fellows in the host community by participating in the now of their everyday life. But such participation is made difficult by the fact that whatever is anticipatory and futural about it is liable to make him appear as an alien, and whatever is past will perhaps be mistaken for nostalgia. He must learn to live with this doublebind until the next generation arrives on the scene

with its own time, overdetermining and thereby re-evaluating his temporality in a new round of conflicts and convergences.<sup>2</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987, p. 420.

<sup>2</sup> Text of a presentation at a Humanities Research Centre workshop of the Australian National University on 7 August 1995.