Migration, hope and the making of subjectivity in transnational capitalism

Ghassan Hage in conversation with Dimitris Papadopoulos

This conversation deals with Hage’s conception of society as a mechanism for the production and distribution of hope. The first part emphasises the importance of examining the kind of hope distributed within each different network of production of hope, the space of distribution and the degree of equality in distribution occurring within this space. The second part examines the nature of the logic of pure (spatial and symbolic) exclusion to which refugees are subjected to and how it differs from the logic of exploitation. This leads to examining the nature of citizenship today. Hage examines the rise of citizenship as a defensive form of conscription in opposition to citizenship as a form of enjoyment of the nation. Finally, the conversation examines the relationship between hope and social change. Hage defends the role of what he calls ‘minor utopias’ as a kind of hope ‘on the side of life’ aimed at fertilising the present and transforming potentialities into practical possibilities.

Keywords: hope, migration, subjectivity, citizenship, transnationalism

Papadopoulos Ghassan, in your recently published book Against Paranoid Nationalism (Merlin 2003) you start from the idea that societies are mechanisms for the distribution of hope and that we have to think of subjects as ‘hoping subjects.’ What is changing in contemporary transnational capitalism, are the conditions for the distribution of
hope in society. This is because when nation-states try to reorganise themselves in a way which makes a particular locale attractive to multinational companies and global capital, they pay less attention to the maintenance of the social bond between their members and they are less committed to the general welfare. Hope becomes then scarce in such a society. Transnational capitalism involves a systematic attack on hope. I think this idea is very powerful but at the same time it creates a sort of nostalgia for the social organisation, which is related to the nation-state. I think that what is both disturbing on the one hand and liberating on the other in the contemporary situation is that the social production of subjects isn’t limited to the workings of the nation-state. So, there are new forms of sociality emerging out of the ‘attack on hope’: some of them lead to paranoid nationalisms but some other lead to new forms of sociality beyond the logic of the state. It is a very ambivalent and controversial situation. How would you deal this ambivalence?

Hage I am not sure whether there is something nostalgic in my analysis of the nation-state and its relation to hope. I take it for granted that it is part of what it means to be a human being to desire to live communally. Now, for a long period of time, the capitalist nation-state has been the way this desire for communality has been organised. I probably adhere to the Marxist functionalist thesis that the nation-state became dominant (which is different from the question of why the nation-state became possible) because the dominant classes increasingly perceived it to be the best framework (centralised decision making about infrastructural conditions of capitalist expansion, the availability of markets, common language, etc) in which the industry-based accumulation of capital could be maximised. It so happened that this class aspiration for a secure market, etc also coincided with the human desire to live communally and thus ended up providing a long lasting framework for this desire. Now that this nexus is weakening, some will react nostalgically and some will think about new forms of sociality but we still need to understand the reason why the nation-state has for so long satisfied the desire for communality of the great majority of the people of the universe. That is, what the idea of the nation-state as a producer and distributor of hope is aiming to capture.

We can also use this framework, of course, to begin to analyse what the new forms of global sociality and communality entail. But to do so one has to distinguish between three key features that mark any network of production and distribution of social hope:

1. A network produces a specific type of social hope, not ‘social hope’ in general. Thus, in the case of the nation state, it is not enough to say that it is a network of production and distribution of social hope. We have to ask what kind of social hope did the capitalist nation-state encourage and distribute and whether the new global networks offer the same kind of social hope globally or a different kind of social hope.

2. A network of a particular kind of social hope will always cover a particular geographical and social space. Thus, there will always be a question of who is included in the distributional network: i.e., who perceive themselves as receiving some kind of hope from it: who is in and who is out?

3. To emphasise that networks of hope demarcate between those who are in and who are out does not mean that all of those who are in, who are part of the distributional network; receive the same ‘amount’ of hope. That is, hope, like just about everything else in life, is not equally distributed. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between those who are included in the distribution network but are receiving very little and those who are simply excluded from receiving anything.

In Against Paranoid Nationalism, I argue in relation to: (1) the issue of ‘what kind of social hope’ a social system produces, that capitalism has hegemonised the ideological content of social hope such as it became in a matter of fact way equated with dreams of upward social mobility, higher purchasing power of commodities and services, etc. In relation to (2), the issue of inclusion and exclusion, I note that the capitalist state was highly inclusive as far as the distribution of hope was concerned: it managed to include many people located within the boundaries of the nation-state within its distributive network through an increased equation between access to the network of hope and national inclusion. This is why Michelet could treat both the access to nationality and the access to what he termed ‘a share of hope’ as one and the same thing. Nevertheless, and despite this inclusive impulse, and this brings us to (3) distributional question: the capitalist nation-state was characterised by a relatively egalitarian distribution of social hope (as opposed to the unequal
at the level of (3), the distribution of social hope by an existing network invites a distributional struggle, which is probably the least far-reaching of all struggles. There has always been people who aim at a more equal distribution of that particular type of social hope encouraged by capitalism, but who couldn’t care less if others were excluded from the network (for example on the basis of race) or for the other forms of social hoping in life that could be a more viable alternative.

We need to examine the new global struggles from within this perspective. Thus, today’s global ecological struggles are similar to earlier struggles in their emphasis on radically new ways of hoping (for example, the hope for an ‘ecological balance’ is a critical hope that encompasses or demands a fundamental transformation of lifestyles and of the social structures of production and consumption). What differentiates early environmentalism from the form it takes today is that we have a consciousness that such new modes of hoping are impossible if not pursued globally. But, of course, global as they might be, these struggles will still obey the logic of all hope distribution networks. We still need to ask: who has access and who is excluded from the network of ecological hope, and can such ecological hope be distributed equally. This puts us, face to face with some of the global contradictions of the new networks, for example, the dominance of ‘First World concerns’ within the global movement.

Papadopoulos Camps (Lager) are part of the colonial legacy of Australia. The Indigenous population was interned in camps, missions, ‘boarding schools’. The extraordinary in these camps is that the Aboriginal population was included in the system of administration and regulation in order to become effaced and excluded. The exclusion of the Indigenous population took place through their inclusion in the system, which controls their whole existence and then systematically marginalises them. And today’s exclusion of the Indigenous population is in fact the continuation of this complex exclusion/inclusion system of the older camps. With the detention centres, camps returned back to Australian normality (and of course not only to Australia). And here we encounter the same phenomenon: interned people are included in the system of camps in order to facilitate their exclusion and often their forced deportation. With that I want to say, that the camp is much more than the place of exclusion par excellence. It is a very functional and necessary moment for the regulation of mobility and inclusion, but of
course a very particular form of inclusion, which targets the total control of migratory currents, and mobility.

Hage I think that this issue links up with the shrinking geography of capitalist hope we dealt with earlier. In my current research on migration I have developed what to me is an important differentiation between symbolic and physical mobility. I consider the desire for symbolic upward mobility an intrinsic feature of how we experience our humanity. Under capitalism, symbolic upward mobility is transformed into desire of social mobility and more commodities, but it does not have to be this way. What is intrinsic to our humanity is that we like to feel that we are ‘going places’ as we sometimes put it in everyday parlance. We don’t have to move physically to experience this symbolic mobility. I can be in the same job or the same village but feel I am ‘going places’.

Now to me, those we classify as migrants, people who engage in a specific mode of physical mobility, are often people who initially feel ‘symbolically stuck’ where they are or at least, they feel themselves moving ‘too slowly’. They are not ‘going places’. ‘Nothing is happening here’ migrants often say when describing the place they are leaving, or ‘I am going nowhere’ here. In this sense, migratory physical mobility is a substitute of symbolic mobility. It is only when we ‘feel stuck’ symbolically that we start dreaming of moving physically. Often the physical spaces we try to move to are places that, we hope, will allow us to experience symbolic mobility once again. That is, physical space is only a launching pad for this symbolic movement we yearn for. This again brings hope into the equation, for what is hope, if not a projection of our dreams of upward symbolic mobility.

It is often decried that working-class migration in the sixties and seventies was highly exploitative. But from the perspective of the migrant, the prospect of being exploited was far better than the prospect of being of no use to anyone. Exploitation meant the possibility of dreaming of better lives, etc.

But what happens today, as the nation-state is becoming highly selective in its choice of migrants, accepting mainly middle-class professionals and investors, is that the working-class migrant (who in the most desperate cases takes the form of the refugee) is facing precisely the nightmare scenario of no prospect of either symbolic or physical mobility.

This is why it is important to see in the camps a modality of pure exclusion. For this logic of pure exclusion is not part of the same logic of exclusion/inclusion you mention. It has its own specificity. Pure exclusion has not been the dominant logic of capitalism historically. This is because capitalism generally promotes the logic of exploitation, which is really a logic of inclusion – a distorted inclusion, but inclusion nevertheless. No capitalist would want to exclude workers if by exclusion we mean a spatial and physical keeping out. If you need to make use of someone you need them ‘in’. Now, the notion of pure exclusion is against this logic because it means society have absolutely no use for the excluded: it says to them ‘piss off... go away from here...’. No one interested in exploiting people would talk to them like this! This is why this phenomenon of ‘pure exclusion’ is very different from the exclusion that migrant labour used to suffer from in the sixties and seventies. Then, the Western states were not telling migrant labourers that society had no use for them. Indeed society needed them badly. We need to really deepen our understanding of the difference between these two kinds of exclusion.

I always recall the powerful effect that a particular passage in the work of the French naturalist Geoffroy de St Hilaire had on me. The work deals with the domestication of animals and the passage was concerned with the domestication of a specific kind of Llama, I think, somewhere in Latin America. The quality of the wool that this Llama produced was particularly good. So farmers were quite eager to domesticate it – read here, exploit it. So, spatially, they were keen to bringing it in from the wild. The problem was that no sooner was it brought in from the wild and domesticated than the quality of its wool deteriorated. Therefore the domesticators faced a rather complex question: how to maintain the Llama in the wild so that the quality of its wool is maintained, and yet, at the same time, you had to stop it from being in the wild in order to exploit it. This is the difficult dialectic: there was a need to bring in the Llama from the wild (ie, to include it within the domestic sphere) in order to exploit it, but at the same time it was only worthy of being exploited in so far as it remained in the wild (ie, excluded from the domestic sphere). It was only worth being included in so far as it was being excluded. This is what de St Hilaire called the ‘sauvegarde de l’état sauvage’: the safeguarding of the savage state. Note the paradoxical definition here, for what is ‘safeguarded’ is by definition no longer in a savage state. It is this dynamic that I have called the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion. To me, it captures completely the logic of exploitation. What makes slaves, migrant
labour, domestic servants, etc valuable for their employers is precisely that they are ‘wild’, that they are symbolically excluded form society, i.e. not included in such a way that they feel as if they are socially powerful. At the same time however, there is no point allowing this symbolic exclusion of the domestic servant or the migrant labour to be transformed in to spatial exclusion. You need them physically and spatially in... you need them included. Likewise, no slave owner is not going to hold a placard, which says: ‘blacks out’. The slave owner wants the blacks in not out, included not excluded. But of course he doesn’t want them so ‘in’ that they feel as powerful within the space of their inclusion as he is. He wants them to feel out, while they are spatially in. This is why this dialectic of inclusion and exclusion captures so well the logic of exploitation.

Now, the reason I am stressing this logic is to also stress how radically different it is when compared to the logic of pure exclusion that we have today vis-à-vis the refugee. For, pure exclusion has nothing to do with capitalist exploitation. As I began by arguing, it is precisely the logic whereby you are saying to the other: I don’t even want you in to exploit you, I simply have no use for you... This is I think a logic which is not governing only refugees coming from the outside, but also the people who are being left out of the networks of social hope within what use to be national societies: we are back with the refugees of the interior. In this sense, the joyful mobility becomes a rafied experience, increasingly specific to the educated classes that dominate the workplaces of transnational capitalism. There is no joyful mobility, physical or symbolic, for the refugees of the exterior and the interior who are the non-exploitable rejects of transnational capitalism.

**Papadopoulos** I would like to turn to the issue of subjectivity. What I think is particularly interesting in this respect is that the emergence of new forms of sociability, claiming citizenship not in the name of belonging but in the name of subjective mobility and ad hoc commonality with other subjectivities, drastically challenges the idea of representation. There is no stable and essential identity to represent any more. Of course you have your own starting points, references, connections, but you claim political rights not in their name but in the name of your actual, here and now participation in this society. Each one of us today follows different paths in his/her movement though different countries, cultures, and communities – there are routes of migration emerging here and there which become relatively stable for temporary periods, but before consolidating into legal social structures they start to shift and change again – so, each of us takes different subjective paths. It seems to me that there is a new form of subjectivity emerging here, which gives way to a new form of sociability and to a community of those who belong nowhere.

**Hage** I like to respond to this by emphasising my inability to share the view of those who celebrate in absolute terms mobility and non-belonging in opposition to immobility and belonging, etc. This is because I don’t see mobility and immobility, motion and rest, travel and homeliness, belonging somewhere and belonging nowhere as oppositions but as deeply interrelated. In anthropology this same logic has been popularised with the supposed opposition between routes and roots. Again I can’t see how such an opposition can be analytically or politically fruitful. One can, of course, see belonging and roots as ‘imprisoning’ and non-belonging and routes as implying the freedom to move. But I think that this is a very narrow conception of both. Even more importantly, to celebrate travel, movement and non-belonging in absolute terms simply misses the enormous variety of ways in which human beings can experience such states. One can move without belonging anywhere and feel confident and liberated doing so, and others move without a sense of belonging and feel brittle, shaken and exposed. We can even feel imprisoned by a state of constant mobility and belonging nowhere. This is why I find the concept of ‘secure base’ developed in attachment theory so useful. It offers us the way to think beyond this opposition.

The basis of the notion of secure base is best captured by the image of a young child playing in a park and who keeps coming back every now and then to ‘touch’ their carer, mother or father, sitting nearby on a bench. Very importantly, however, they don’t return to their carer to stop playing and moving. Once they feel secure that their carers are indeed around, available for them if they have to need him or her, they go back to being ‘on the move’ confidently playing in the park.

In going back to their carer for a little cuddle, the child can be said to be returning ‘home’. But importantly, they don’t want to return home to stop moving and playing. They just want to have a little rest and be energised by their homely return. Once, they’ve done so, they’re back on the move in the park confident that their carers, their secure base, is around. Of course, the cuddle the carer gives to their child can be imprisoning and suffocating, and it can stop the child from moving.
In this case, ‘home’ becomes too claustrophobic to be homely. But the carers’ cuddle can also be neglectful and it will lead the child to feel without any anchorage and feel insecure. In this case, not having a home is bad news. The ideal ‘secure base’ is that which embraces us enough to give us confidence to move: it neither too imprisoning to stop us from moving nor too neglectful to make us feel without any anchorage. When it is that good we internalise it, we don’t even need to ‘touch it’ to know it is there. This is also the definition of the good ‘home’. ‘Home’ here is not that which stops you from moving, rather it is what gives us a sense of security to move in the world. That’s why when we are talking about movement and travel we need to differentiate between good movement (people who move confidently, hopeful in the face of the uncertainties of the future) and bad movement (people who move hesitantly, scared of the uncertainties of the future).

This is also why the opposition between routes and roots is not as useful as it might appear to be. People who see roots negatively seem to mix between the human desire to ‘have roots’ and the desire to ‘be roots’. No one wants to ‘be roots’ when the metaphor of roots is used, except perhaps some types of fundamentalists. Most people who think of themselves as having roots, like to imagine themselves to be branches. And what are branches if not a type of routes. What’s more branches are routes that are never already traced but are constantly tracing and spreading themselves. However, branches as routes cannot be thought of as opposition to roots, for the more well-rooted they are, the better routes they are likely to be. There is no opposition here. Likewise, to see one’s ancestors, one’s nation, one’s community as only part of a route we are on rather than also part of our roots is a denial of their nurturing and propelling power.

To me this attempt at celebrating subjectivities without ontological anchorage, whether this anchorage is spatial (like a migrant’s home village) or genealogical (like one’s family) or both (like one’s nation), is to basically abstract people from the history of their production into particular human beings, their ‘mode of production’ as human beings as it were. For we do not turn into social human beings out of nowhere, a particular social milieu turns us into what we are. In this sense each milieu is a particular mode of production where what is produced is ourselves. I am using Marxist language on purpose here because to me the person with no roots is like the commodity on the market that Marx analysed so well with his concept of commodity fetishism: a commodity that appears on the market having lost its connection with the very process of its production and appearing as if it only exists in relation to other commodities on the market, as a form of pure synchrony without a diachronic genealogy. In much the same way, to celebrate people without roots is to celebrate them as people on the market abstracted from that which has infused life into them. Indeed the celebration of the rootless, non-belonging, person seems to me as a celebration of what global capitalism would very much like us to think of ourselves: fetishised, non-grounded people, existing only in relation to the market rather than in relation to the histories of our production as concrete social human beings. This is so, because the person who does not recognise themselves as rooted are, like commodities, much easier to get circulating around the globe, because they have no belonging, which also means no attachment, no spaces that one can come to care about in any deep sense.

Let me be clear here, that belonging and attachment do not have to be localised such as attachment to the village or to the family or the nation. Indeed, I can think of global, ecological forms of belonging, where one acknowledges one’s roots in the earth as a whole and, likewise, develops a form of attachment to it as a whole. If that is what is meant by belonging nowhere that is fine, but there is a difference between celebrating non-localised modes of having roots and attachment to celebrating rootless-ness and non-attachment.

Papadopoulos I wonder how this might relate to the concept of citizenship? There are many different social and political movements calling for the establishment of new forms of citizenship which go beyond the citizenship connected to the political formation of the nation-state: global citizenship, cultural citizenship, indigenous citizenship are some of them. Are there forms of citizenship that offer more hope than others?

Hage I think that the main question in terms of the relationship between hope and citizenship has more to do with how one lives one’s citizenship rather than with what kind of citizenship it is. I take citizenship to define a form of belonging and in this sense, all forms of belonging, whether national or non-national, have a dual character. When I say this is my group or community or nation or society, or even my planet, X. I am always claiming two things: I am saying I belong to X, and I am saying that X belongs to me. This is what I’ve called in White Nation, respectively, homely belonging and governmental
tortures...? How can a citizen, for example, sustain an image of himself or herself as democratic while engaging in highly undemocratic practices against the ‘Iraqi other’? We are seeing an interesting split happening in each and every citizen in the US and Australia, but also elsewhere in Europe, between one part of the self representing an essentially good ‘truly democratic’ citizen, and one part of the self which is a conjuncturally bad and undemocratic citizen. The part of us that is the bad undemocratic citizen who does not care about torture and unlawful imprisonment is conceived as the product of a ‘state of exception’. Every citizen convinces himself or herself of his or her own goodness by saying something like this: ‘We are not essentially torturers. We are essentially democratic, peace loving citizens. If we are torturing today it is because we have to. We are in a state of exception but this does not reflect who we really are.’

This kind of split way of living one’s citizenship has long been the dominant mode of experiencing Israeli citizenship, by the way. So, one can say that we are witnessing a globalisation of the colonial settler mode of living one’s democratic citizenship. Rather than looking at conspiracy theories for the rapprochement between Bush’s America and Sharon’s Israel, one should note the psychological affinity between the types of citizenship and national belonging advocated and propagated by the two parties. Both are generated by a colonial project in which constantly unsavoury acts are performed (against ‘the other’) in the name of a self that is perceived as eternally and unquestionably good.

I think that any kind of citizenship, including cultural and global forms of citizenship, can embody such paranoid impulses. This is why the question of how one lives one citizenship is paramount.

Papadopoulos I want return to the question of hope. I often tend to think that Heiner Müller’s idea of “hope as a lack of information” speaks to today’s situation. And yet there could be another way to understand hope. In contemporary societies – which are dominated by paranoid nationalism, control, and by the boring and repetitive aesthetics of globalised bureaucracies and elites – hope could be understood differently. Hope as a celebration of all these unspoken, uniformed ways to escape the present. Hope could be the re-appropriation of the right to move against repression and detention; the celebration of the possibility of relating to others on the basis of non-belonging; the move against the politics of representation; the celebration of a community of subjectivities as opposed to a mass of belonging. In this logic: there is no such thing as enjoying the good life (homely belonging) without a defense of the good life (governmental belonging). The question is the relationship between the two and most importantly: to what extent is one subordinated to the other. Do I live my life defensively or openly? One can note here that there is an immense tension within Western nations today between the citizen as the one with the rights to enjoy the goodness of the nation and the citizen as a kind of army conscript (Somewhere recently, I’ve read a nice analytical piece of this conscript mentality by Susan Sontag).

There is a little example, which relates to the ‘secure base’ story I mentioned above and which I find very helpful in making accessible this kind of difference. A young child who falls and hurts herself in the school playground might very stoically appear as totally together, showing no emotional weaknesses and not allowing anyone to see how hurt she is. No sooner does her parent arrive to pick her up and her hand is safely tucked into their hand that she would start sobbing uncontrollably. Now the question is when is this child at her toughest? When she was tough enough to control her emotions and show no signs of vulnerability, or when she was tough enough to expose her weaknesses. In the first instance, toughness is a defensive posture, which sees others as a threat before whom one should not expose one’s vulnerability in case they might exploit it and ‘get us’. In the second instance, toughness is a strong sense of security whereby we feel so threatened that we do not mind showing our vulnerable side. I think that what we have in the first instance is what we can call ‘masculine toughness’ and in the second instance ‘feminine toughness’. In general, paranoid forms of belonging promote a citizenship in which the masculine form of toughness prevails because the paranoid communalist (whether the community is defined globally, nationally or culturally does not matter here) believes that he or she lives in an environment where someone is always out to get them and/or get there ideal community. Thus no criticism of the community or any other attempt at exposing its vulnerability is allowed. This promotes an aggressive citizenship where anything is allowed to promote the fantasised ‘goodness’ of the communal self.

It is interesting in this regard to look at what is happening to national citizenship in the US today as this masculine toughness is becoming a must. How is an American citizen capable of maintaining a sense of their own goodness in the face of the continuing images of the ‘bad’ aggressive American, the one who lies and the one who
individuals etc. This also raises the question of the relationship between hope and justice.

**Hage** Your comments raise some important questions about the relationship between hope and the possibilities of social change. Inspired by the Nietzschean tradition one can always differentiate between hopes that are ‘against life’ and hopes that are ‘on the side of life’. The latter are those hopes that keep you engaged in reality aiming to change it while the former are those that make you retreat from it and promote passivity. But to understand this we need to understand how hope relates to various aspects of reality. Various philosophical traditions differentiate in reality between actuality and potentiality or virtuality. This differentiation is useful to understand hope, though I have to say that I don’t think that such philosophical differentiations are as complex as the popular classifications of reality. For instance, people in their daily lives distinguish between at least two different kinds of actuality and between two different kinds of potentiality. Thus, actuality is perceived as ‘what there is’ (the absolute present) and ‘what is about to be’ (the future that is practically unfolding from the present). Likewise, people differentiate between things that are pure potentiality (‘what can be’ or ‘what ought to be possible’) and practical potentiality (what is practically possible). I think it is in the latter domain that the question of hope and political change emerges.

All forms of hope contain some kind of conception of a better future. We live our lives thinking of better realities. We can think of these imagined better realities as ‘minor utopias’. I say minor in the sense that they are not the grand holistic utopic schemes that are produced by intellectuals. Such minor utopias, however, are only politically efficient to the extent that they are themselves based on the pure potentialities that reality has to offer. This because for such utopias to have an effect they have to be capable to ‘speak to’ and interact with these pure potentialities such that they can transform them into practical possibilities. I think of it as a kind of Terminator effect: in the film, a man from the future goes back into the present and inseminates the woman from the present with what will be a future leader that will uphold the struggle for a better life. We have to, of course, abstract from the gendered categorisations of the film. But, in general, this is how the politically efficient forms of hoping work: they are images of the future that inseminate the present transforming what exists in a state of pure potentiality, into a real practical possi-