

HAGE, GHASSAN. *Diasporic Condition: Ethnographic Explorations of the Lebanese in the World*. University of Chicago Press. 2021. 219 pp. ISBN: 9780226546902 (cloth), ISBN: 9780226547060 (softcover), ISBN: 9780226547237 (ebook)

In his new monograph, *Diasporic Condition: Ethnographic Explorations of the Lebanese in the World*, Ghassan Hage argues that diasporic culture is the culture of capitalist modernity in Lebanon. As in his previous work, Hage works through his ethnographic material by drawing upon the critical tradition of Western philosophy and social science, most significantly, ideas from Spinoza and Bourdieu. Through this, he composes for the reader an intellectually stimulating description of the diasporic lifeworlds of his interlocutors. This monograph is based on fieldwork carried out amongst Lebanese hailing from the pseudonymous Christian villages of Jalleh and Mehj, one situated in the north of the country and another closer to Beirut. The book's ethnography ventures from these locations along transnational village and kinship connections to diasporic locations in Australia and North and South America. Beyond familiarising the reader with diasporic Lebanese networks and locations through lucid and lively ethnographic prose, the book produces a compelling flurry of conceptual tools with broad relevance for rethinking issues related to the diaspora and migration. This is the sort of work that has benefited from tenure and a long career: although most of the fieldwork for the book was carried out in the early 2000s, it draws upon material from the 1990s through the 2010s, and illustrates the productivity of letting ethnographic material simmer and mature for a good decade of critical anthropological thinking before being brought together in a book.

The Diasporic Condition positions itself as a champion of the critical anthropological tradition that does not shy away from strategic exoticisation and the search for radical alterity, following Hage's *Alter-Politics* (2015), inspired by the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. Hage (2021: 3) summarises this perspective through the question, 'In what way does the study of a particular sociocultural phenomenon expand our knowledge of the plurality of modes of existing in the world?' This perspective stands slightly apart from the sociological and explanatory orientation often dominating studies of migration and diaspora. The latter has certainly been the case in studies of Lebanese migration and diaspora, a prolific topic for research amongst historians, but rather surprisingly not the subject of much anthropological attention as of late. More significantly, for those readers with a personal or professional interest in Lebanon, Hage frames his subject as the study of *the culture of Lebanese capitalist modernity*, and thus it has just as much to do with the comings and goings in Beirut or Mount Lebanon as with Lebanese communities in, say, New Bedford, USA. The book is certainly productive in working against banal methodological nationalism by consistently showing that the crossing of national boundaries (or the separations created by them) is not always the most significant transition or separation in the lifeworlds of our interlocutors, even when dealing with transnational themes.

The monograph is structured in nine chapters in addition to an introduction and a conclusion, all of which incorporate material from Hage's fieldwork across decades and some conceptual labour. The book reads as if composed of two parts, where the first five chapters focus on crafting conceptual tools for understanding the diasporic condition and the latter four chapters illustrate how these can provide us a more nuanced understanding of specific themes. Chapter one provides a historical overview of the emergence of Lebanese migration since the late nineteenth century through an examination of the penetration of global capitalism in the mountains of Lebanon. It argues that this process created an expanded, even global, *space of viability* in which a villager in rural Lebanon could just as well imagine continuing their life in Venezuela or West Africa, moving to the capital Beirut or remaining in a village. Chapter two complicates the standard thinking of push-and-pull factors in migration by taking up Bourdieu's concept of *illusio* to understand *existential mobility*, the way moving across space is always tied to the desire to advance through one's life. Existential mobility, Hage suggests, is akin to Spinoza's notion of joy: movement to a greater state of perfection, that is, towards a higher agency. Remaining in a village can make a person feel stuck, especially if options for migrating or otherwise advancing through life are not readily available. Chapter three generates another key concept by borrowing Lévi-Strauss's notion of *anisogamic marriage* (marriage between hierarchically unequal parties) and stretching it for use as part of the *comparative mode of existence*. Here, he argues that Lebanese migratory lifeworlds are saturated with comparative valorisations of the home country and the destinations of migration. These comparisons are tinged with a sense of inferiority, not (only) due to the wider

post-colonial conditions, but also due to the specific feeling of hailing from a country that could not keep hold of yourself.

Chapter four argues that, rather than torn between here and there (the country of origin and the country of migration), it would be better to understand migratory subjects as fragmented—as partly and sometimes here, partly and sometimes there. Based on this, chapter five provides the book's main theoretical contribution, proposing to understand diasporic realities as *lenticular* as in the photographic technique. Fragmented migratory subjects, according to Hage, are indeed not torn between but inhabit multiple spaces of the home country and the diasporic country. Hage bases this lenticularity on the distinction between metaphor and metonym, and suggests, through ample ethnographic examples, that objects (posters, foodstuffs, accents, and gestures) from elsewhere do not necessarily simply remind one of their origin, but could be understood as metonymic of it. A Lebanese cucumber in Australia is a piece of Lebanon in Australia in a very real way. Likewise, a villa in Mount Lebanon paid for using remittances is an extension of the countries of diaspora in Lebanon. The remaining four chapters further explain, develop, and nuance this picture, whilst using rich ethnographic material to discuss agency and community (Ch. 6), kinship and family (Ch. 7), sexuality (Ch. 8), and urban space in Beirut (Ch. 9).

The image of diasporic lifeworlds emerging from Hage's ethnographic theorisation stresses two issues: comparative valorisations as a mode of making sense of relations between locations, and the relationality of always multiple lenticular space. Thus, it seems to me that Hage's diasporic subject is always both well aware of the relative value of here and there, whilst simultaneously fragmented in an

ontological sense between that here and there. Hage explicitly suggests this in relation to recent decades' debates on the ontological turn in anthropology (eg. Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). For me, Hage's argument seems very much in line with other recent attempts to make sense of the lifeworlds of our ethnographic interlocutors, such as Ilana Gershon's (2019) emphasis on porous social orders and boundary work. The image composed by Hage is persuasive, and his treatment of lenticularity and anisogamic comparisons are likely relevant to scholars well beyond the fields of migration and diasporic studies or Middle Eastern studies. For scholars working in these fields, and even more so for those working in Lebanon or amongst the Lebanese, I would recommend this book more than warmly. Hage readily admits that the image of the Lebanese diaspora emerging from his monograph emphasises commonalities instead of differences in experience. He also admits that he deals with power only insofar as it is internal to the diasporic culture his writing conjures (that is, mostly of the patriarchal kinship type) and ignores the 'whites' of border

regimes and (post)colonial global power. As for studies of Lebanese diaspora, these external issues of difference and power will thus have to be examined by other scholars. But I would agree that their bracketing has been a sound step towards emphasising the novel and unique effort of this fascinating work.

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