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► **To cite this version:**

Philippe Rygiel. Hearing from Home -When the State Talks to Emigrants. INTER_CULTURAL STUDIES, 2007, 7, pp.4-7. halshs-03957160

HAL Id: halshs-03957160

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03957160v1>

Submitted on 26 Jan 2023

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1 Hearing from Home – When the State Talks to Emigrants

Philippe Rygiel

The papers presented here first came together in Amsterdam about two years ago when four young historians presented their work together during the same session at a European conference on social history. They were dealing with very different topics, studying different populations, had not read each other's papers and probably had not even heard of one another. They were, however, dealing with nearly identical questions – wondering how states and nations reached out to their emigrants – and doing so using very similar analytical tools mostly coming from cultural studies and recent works in social science. Looking for diasporas or transnational phenomena, they were referring to terms and ideas coined to describe phenomenon usually associated with the post-colonial era or the latest transformations of a globalised world. For a long time historians have been borrowing concepts from sociology, geography, and more recently anthropology, so what was puzzling was not so much the fact that they were gathering thoughts and ideas from social sciences, but rather that they were using parts of a theoretical framework specially designed to identify and name what is new and unprecedented in our world, or at least what was considered so only a few decades ago. Moreover, it actually worked. This retrospective use of some present-day cultural studies concepts enabled them to shed light on the lives of the people they studied, in a way previous researchers that had not considered and even to question some commonly held assumptions about community building and nation formation in emigration.

Each of these papers was in its own right an interesting contribution to the history of a specific group or nation. What made them, together with Adlai Murdoch's text on French Caribbean identity, stimulating for a wider audience, was the reflexive effect of transporting concepts like diaspora or transnationalism into the past. As has been argued by others before, it creates a rich uncertainty (Antebi-Yemini, Berthomière, Sheffer, 2005). To put it in very general terms, we were led to wonder what was exactly new about such things as transnationalism and the multiplication of diasporas. Is it the world we live in, or the tools we use to describe it, or a bit of both?

Four of the five papers are based on doctoral dissertations and, as one would expect, their focus is narrow so they do not allow for a thorough exploration of such a broad issue. However, they provide food for thought, especially regarding the specific issues they address: what happens when the nation-state, or the embryonic nation-state, tries to reach out to migrants it aims to include. The two main questions the texts deal with are: How do Nations talk to emigrants, and how do they respond. The contributors allow us to form some hypothesis regarding these questions, and maybe even some answers, even if not all the questions that come to mind receive one.

The first conclusion we can draw is that, in late modern times, and for a historian that means from the first half of the nineteenth century, nations states, and zealots of a

national cause, do seem to take a strong interest in the emigrants they consider theirs, and try to contact them and influence at least some of them. This does not come as a surprise. After decades of looking at migrants through the eyes of the receiving societies and states, scholars – social scientists and historians alike – have discovered that migrants still take part in the national experience of their home-country, and are connected, willing or not, to their state of origin. Nancy Green and François Weil in their studies of the politics of emigration have shown this to be the rule, rather than the exception, during the nineteenth and twentieth century (Green, Weil, 2007). When citizenship and nationhood are intertwined and defined partly by descent, the state cannot abandon its migrants to their fate. Furthermore, they can become precious assets, providing information, remittances and political support abroad.

Even so, the means used to reach them and the messages sent to them differ widely. The government of communist Poland spent significant resources trying to establish personal communications with some of the Polish migrants working in Belgium just after the Second World War. On the other hand, post-war Dutch authorities did not ignore Dutch Americans but were more interested in presenting the Netherlands in a favorable light to an all American audience and seemed quite satisfied if only some of the material produced to serve that purpose found its way to Dutch Americans.

It is difficult to find unity in the diversity of situations presented here or offer a typology or a common timeline. An obvious reason for this is we would need a larger range of cases, especially since studies dealing with this issue are rare, to draw any firm conclusion. Also the very dense explanatory systems used here show us that a number of interconnected factors need to be considered in order to understand any of the communication methods under consideration. The most obvious, and most crucial one is the nature of the political body reaching out to the migrants. A nation-state has resources that an embryonic state has not, as in the case of the nineteenth century Greeks, or the promoters of a cultural/national identity. That given, differences are more striking than similarities when comparing the Polish experience and the Dutch experience, or even the Polish experience over time. The political context, both at home and in the recipient country, the diplomatic context too, play a strong role, as does the technical and financial means available to the state apparatus abroad and the changing nature of relations between the state and other national institutions, specially religious ones. Each nation-state has its own history of dealing with emigrants, and previous experiences, the acquired know-how and memories of specialized staff will partly shape the decisions made.

The Polish case does suggest, however, that state communication went from broadcasting messages through notabilities or religious institutions to trying to create personal connections to at least some of the migrants, and in the process being able to target groups of migrants of special interest considering the political agenda of the time. Given the transformation of western states during the last two centuries, we can safely surmise that we would find similar changes when considering other emigration countries experiences. But what we suggest here is more a hypothesis than a definite conclusion.

Conclusions seem easier to draw, when we turn our attention to the reception given by migrant populations to what the home state says or writes. Firstly, and contrary to some national legends, within each population responses are diverse and range from enthusiasm to a total lack of interest. The latter reaction seems frequent, Dutch American and Polish migrants in Belgium seem to often turn a deaf ear to what the home state has to say, when

they do not they turn selective deafness into an art form. We can attribute part of that to the fact that any given migrant population is diverse, and divided along political, ethnical, religious, and sometimes racial lines, and that we ought to expect diversity of responses and opinions rather than homogeneity when we study migrants with similar geographical origins or defined by the possession of the same citizenship. We do understand that when the home state or the nation is identified with ideological, ethnical or religious adversaries or enemies by some of the migrants, any message coming from it is regarded with caution if not with distrust. And we probably would find an even wider range of responses if we had systematically, as Adlai Murdoch suggests here, taken gender into account, since national images and narratives are deeply gendered (Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Sometimes the state was in the unusual situation of only being able to use persuasion to convince some of its citizens to connect with its institutions and this perhaps explains why there was a lack of interest in the opportunities and representations provided. While both true and obvious, neither of these explanations is quite sufficient here. The study of Dutch-America relations shows that the national narratives promoted by a western and democratic country can have even less success than the covert propaganda of communist Poland, and leads us to a broader understanding of what is at stake when State and Nations talk to emigrants. Migrants, as a group or as individuals, have their own agenda, derived partly from their situation in the immigration society and partly from links kept with the home country. Connecting or associating with institutions of the home country can run counter to strategies allowing them to negotiate a place within the recipient society without providing obvious benefits on the home front, especially since home is sometimes no longer for them, and even less for their children, a social setting in which they are actors. They also frequently have other sources of information and communication connecting them to the home state than the one sponsored or controlled by the state. Private and political information leaks through personal, business and kinship relationships. This also holds true even as early on as the first half of the nineteenth century as shown by the history of the Greeks in Marseille. Furthermore, they very often have built their own representations of the home country and of themselves as emigrants, as did the people of Holland, Michigan. Images of the Netherlands they constructed functioned as a common narrative assuring the continuity and cohesiveness of the Dutch American community. As is quite often the case with migrants, their vision is both nostalgic and outdated. This could not easily accommodate the picture of Holland as a modern, industrial and imperial power that the Dutch authorities promoted for reasons that had little to do with preserving the Dutch-American heritage and a lot to do with the way national interests were defined at the time. For this reason the surprising thing is not so much that they do not connect with the Dutch communication agency, but that some of them actually feel concerned enough to contribute to its activity.

Looking back for diaposas and transnationalism *avant la lettre*, studying communication strategies born long before the expression was coined, our little group of historians reveal then the complexity of past migratory experiences and remind us of the political dimension of community building and cultural identities in emigration. Doing so they show us that the production of transnational areas and institutions, or the building of cultural identities in emigration, are not an absolute novelty and that states and nations can

be very much involved in their birth, and migrants reluctant to take the spot assigned to them in these constructions. The reminder, however modest, might these days be useful.

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