EPILOGUE

CHAOS AND GESTALT

Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Yitzhak Sternberg

To conclude our multifaceted treatment of transnationalism, we may now point out to the basic convergence evinced by the very definition of this notion. This notion focuses on a condition where, in some ways and at varying degrees, people are involved in activities and allegiances which run across state boundaries. This condition impacts on both individuals who see themselves affiliated to a transnational diaspora and others who do not but live among many others who do. This condition does alter the essence of social endeavors, nay even of “society” at large. For diasporans, their actual society is one home among at least two—even though, it may well be the primary one; for non-diasporans who are members of the same setting, their society is now to entertain special relations with original (and varied) homelands of fellow-citizens but which are a priori foreign to them. These traits are but a few among many more concrete and precise: we think here especially of the significance of this condition for people’s—diasporans’ and non-diasporans’ alike—commitment to, and identification with, the national society and the commands of civility that it requests. These issues still require comprehensive elaboration but their reminding explicits what we mean here by alteration of the social endeavor in the following of the multiplication of transnational diasporas and the spreading of transnationalism as a societal condition.

On the other hand, we may also speak of basic divergences. We have seen that a transnational diaspora can be generated by migration of people sharing cultural and religious particularisms, or by changes of state borders. Some diasporas are united by a reference to a center or a central institution, a homeland from which they emigrated or a virtual homeland that came into being after immigration. Such groups respond to the notion of transnational diaspora as far as their members are interconnected through transnational networks. Such groups, however, represent the widest sociocultural diversity. Diaspora solidarity, indeed, emerges from most varied patterns intermingling
primordial—national, pan-national, cultural, linguistic, religious or other—bonds and contingent—political, economic, internal or international—factors. These forms of diaspora solidarity combine with a not less wide spectrum of attitudes toward the new homeland, and may mean very different things accordingly both among groups within the same individual societies and among communities throughout the different worldwide diasporas.

All in all, the chapters of this volume concur with the growing tendency among analysts of the contemporary social scene to describe our world as fragile, disorganized, fluid, unstable, unpredictable, and lacking directionality. Transnationalism, we have seen, is certainly of an important contribution of its own to the growing and uncoordinated pace of change that characterizes contemporary societies. Change, it is true, has always been understood by scholars as endemic to modernity and as a feature that distinguishes this era from previous times. However, present-day observers assess that the pace of change has been unprecedented since the last decades. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) goes as far as to use the term “liquid modernity” to characterize our time. A notion that Antony Bryant (2007) clarifies as follows:

The idea of liquid modernity as defined by Bauman is that it sets itself no objective, draws no finishing line, assigns the quality of permanence solely to the state of transience. Time flows; but it no longer marches on to any destination…in our current phase of modernity the key characteristic is not simply of sweeping things away, but doing so continuously and obsessively; change is constant and iterative…The word ‘liquidity’ evokes the idea of flow, constant movement, of change…The movement is itself the objective, there is no other (Bryant 2007: 127–128).

Our social world is becoming increasingly complex under the simultaneous effect of accelerated technological transformations and the amplification of globalization and its escalating interconnectedness across the globe and budding global flows of ideas and material resources, and above all, wide-scope immigration and the multiplication of diasporas (see Urry 2005). The resulting incoherence of the images one may perceive of the world scene as well as of individual settings accounts for growing scholarly trends asking for novel theoretical and conceptual outlooks. We think here of the emergence of a school of thought labeled “chaos and complexity theory” (McLennan 2003) which was gratified a special issue of Theory, Culture & Society (vol. 22; October 2005). One of the major contributions to the volume is an article entitled “The complexity turn,” by John Urry where he contends: