

Centre for Research in International  
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# Living Next to an Airport

*Narratives on the Return to Chile*

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CEIFO Working paper

2010: 3

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## *Diaspora Narratives on the Return to Chile*

by

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### **Abstract**

This article looks at the realisation of ‘projects’ to return to the country of origin of Chilean migrants who lived in Sweden. The discussion focuses on the relation between these return-projects and the diaspora after return. Drawing on ethnographic research, it is argued that the returnees’ narratives display that return migration is not solely an individual undertaking but is rather something embedded in the social context of migrants; that the returning migrants in general seem to cope with their situation with a pragmatic and open-ended strategy and that they tend to position themselves as part of the diasporic network even after their return. The interpretation is that return migration does not ‘end the refugee-cycle’ but represents a dimension in a transnational way of living.

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## Introduction

The dream or 'myth of return' among migrants is a well covered theme in the literature. This myth is expressed in terms of individual migrants' assumed or real desire to return to their country of origin and when migrants realise this dream this is often considered as something to be expected and conceived of as a recouping of social identity (Hassanen, 2007). The appeal of the idea of return is nurtured in modern society by a strong universal feeling that human beings have 'roots' and that these conflate with culture and territory (Malkki, 1995). This 'root-discourse' mediates notions among both sedentary majority-populations and migrants concerning the normality of return to a place thought of as something like a home. One expression of this discourse is provided by the case of exiled refugees who are perceived likely to return in order to be 'rehabilitated' or to get 'revenge' (Lundberg, 1989). Re-migration after a long stay in exile back to the country of origin is from this perspective often perceived in terms of a closing/ending of the migratory circle (Black and Koser, 1999), despite the well-known fact that returning migrants often suffer from problems of estrangement and 're-integration' (King, et.al., 1985; Schütz , 1964).

Return-migration is, however, obviously not only a myth since many refugees (and their descendants) *do* in fact re-migrate. The Chilean migrants in Sweden, which is the case being focused on here, is no exception to this since there has been considerable re-migration to Chile, particularly on the part of refugees living as exiles in Sweden (Klinthäll, 2007; Olsson 1997, 2007; Tollefsen Altamirano, 2000). Many also express a desire to do so in the sense that they have a plan for re-migrating back to what they consider to be their 'home' in their country of origin (for now I leave aside whether this actually leads to a definitive 'return' or not). The Chileans provide, in my opinion, an interesting case for discussing return-issues. From the Chilean migrants' point of view the act of return to the 'homeland' has been

regarded as a crucial symbol of a passion for the Chilean ‘homeland’ and during the heydays of exile to the extent of being perceived as a ‘duty’ (Lundberg, 1989; Tollefsen Altamirano, 2000). After the ‘end of exile’ the Chilean diaspora in Sweden developed somewhat of a return-movement to Chile (Klinthäll, 2007; Olsson, 2009; Tollefsen Altamirano, 2000) while, nevertheless, managing to keep their community-forming projects in diaspora alive over time (Olsson, 2009). This makes it worthwhile inquiring into the ‘diasporic ties’ of the Chilean returning migrants and, furthermore, how the existence of such relations affect the social life of those who have set in motion their return-projects.

The purpose of this article is to re-evaluate our understanding of how migrants living in diasporic conditions arrange their lives in a transnational world particularly in relation to the myth of returning to the country of origin while simultaneously being part of the formation of a community in exile and diaspora. In doing this I will focus on how Chilean migrants returning from Sweden themselves account for their situation when realising their return-projects<sup>1</sup> taking into consideration that the issue of return within this diaspora has been coded differently in different historical contexts (Olsson, 2009). First, I will examine how the narratives of return-projects of the individuals have references to and will correspond with the discourses and practices expressed about return within the social networks of the Chilean diaspora. Secondly, it will be examined how the narratives of the returnees represent their return-projects. Which obstacles and hardships are they referring to in their narratives of a return and what strategies do they employ when dealing with these? What significance, if any, is ascribed to the social networks in diaspora? Thirdly, in order also to understand the significance of ‘diasporic ties’ for these returning migrants I also examine how this social network of Chilean and other migrants living in Sweden and other parts of the world is represented in these narrative. In doing this identity and the feeling of belonging becomes

crucial. Hence I will also examine the way these narratives represent the Chilean society and what social contacts and communication that becomes important in this.

### **Some Points of Departure**

The social engagement invested in the idea of return within migrant populations demonstrates the need to move the understanding of return-migration a step away from the view that perceives this in terms of individual decisions and plans relating to whether they should stay or whether they should leave (cf. Hassanen, 2007; Jansen and Löfving, 2008). If there is a decision to take on whether one should stay or return to the country of origin, this choice ‘depends to a certain degree on what happens during exile’ (Kaminsky, 1999: 38). Any proper understanding of return-migration needs to take into consideration that individual projects of return are related to a complex nexus of decisions and potential future prospects embedded in the social context of the migrants.

The return-projects are, as a consequence, not the exclusive private property of the individual that reflects on his or her experiences. Rather different expressions of return-projects are reflected in significant practices and discourses operative in the migrants’ social context and the narratives and actions of individuals appear in some sense to display correspondences with these. This type of correspondence can be observed, for instance, in the way a narrative places the subject in terms of social categories located in time and space (cf. Anthias, 2002), the narrative telling the listener both who and what he or she is at the same time as also making meaning out of the significant discourses of return. Hence will narratives ‘say’ something that goes beyond the individual motives on return which makes it important to shift the analytical unit from the individual to the collective or social level.

An important premise that follows with the bringing of social relations into the picture, is related to processes of diasporic formations and the in-built tension between the ‘living here’ and the ‘desiring of another place’ (Clifford, 1994: 311). This tension could be usefully reformulated in relation to the idea of return since diaspora, particularly for exiles, is more and more tending to become a space of identity for refugees with return frequently becoming a crucial collective symbol, one infused with strong symbolism about the homeland, in the mobilisation of a community (Cohen, 1997; Safran, 1991; Tölölyan, 2000). Refugees become agents as well as subjects in diasporic movements (Sökefeld 2006) where it is mobilised for a community of ‘expatriates’ while simultaneously pleading for their return. This juxtaposing of community and return in diasporic discourse and practices seemingly represents two flips of the ‘diasporic coin’ which migrants have to cope with (cf. Ramji, 2006).

The way returning migrants will cope with their double-edged diasporic orientation is an interesting question that their experiences and positioning after return are likely to cast light on. This question alludes to a discussion of the significance of diasporic ties after ‘leaving’. In what way are these ties active or operative when it comes to establishing a life back in the country of origin? Since the context for diasporic formation changes over the years (Olsson, 2009; Tölölyan, 2000) diasporic discourses are, for obvious reasons, not static – for instance when political exile comes to an ‘end’ – and hence also alter their representation of return. It is likely, then, that the act of return will sooner or later be reconsidered and possibly also devalued by those who do not share the commitments of the exiles.

With these premises in mind, this article will examine the construction of return-projects through the migrants’ accounts of their life-situations as returning and diasporic migrants from the ‘homeland-position’. How is their return-project accounted for from the position of

‘returnee’ in the ‘homeland’ and what does it mean to have experiences of exile and diaspora when confronted with the everyday problems inevitably encountered back in the country of origin? What do exile and diaspora signify for the ‘returnees’ from the position of living in the country of origin? An important question here is how the actual returnees relate to the social networks of the diaspora. Through an examination of these questions we should not only be able to arrive at a better understanding of the complexity of migrants’ return-projects but also be able to illuminate the broader questions that concern the function and power involved in the social ties of diasporic networks.

The narratives used in the following analysis are generated within various ethnographic fieldworks carried out in Sweden, Spain and Chile in the period since 1990. Most relevant for this article is the fieldworks carried out in Chile (1994, 1999, 2004, 2005 and 2006) during the course of which I interviewed more than 75 individuals and (in more informal ways and in different settings) followed the progress of an even greater number of informants who were trying to return to Chile. A limited number of these have been ‘key-informants’ which I have been following for a longer period of time. My understanding of these return-projects is based on the informants own accounts of their experiences, plans and future prospects as well as on field-observations related to these.

## **Reviewing Chilean return migration from Sweden**

The Chilean migration to Sweden has its origins in the events of 11 September 1973 when General Augusto Pinochet took hold of power in Chile by means of a bloody military-coup. During the cruel Pinochet dictatorship in Chile 1973-90, hundreds of thousands of people left the country. More than 30,000 refugees arrived in Sweden which became the largest destination country outside of Latin America. The Chilean exile in Sweden was contemporary

with the exile of people from other Latin American countries such as Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil and the refugees from all these countries together often expressed the sense of sharing something like a Latin American community in Sweden (Leiva, 1997; Lundberg, 1989). The political quality of their networks became a part of many Latin American people's self-image in Sweden as well as part of the stereotypes held by the surrounding host society (Lundberg, 1989; Olsson, 2009). One major cornerstone of this life in exile was the dream of a return to Chile (and Latin America more generally).

The Chilean refugees did not voluntarily choose to become exiles and hence their stay in Sweden became an 'undesired parenthesis' in their lives (Leiva, 1997: 211). As a rule their expectations (and their attitude to their prospects) in exile were based on the foreseeing of the fast removal of the Pinochet-regime and a short stay in exile. Exile was unthinkable without thoughts and actions anticipating their return as political subjects. The idea of a return became in itself the meaning of exile (Lundberg, 1989) and together with the value of expressing solidarity with the Chilean people this became one of the most solid elements in exile discourse. This also left traces in the cultural life of exile in Sweden by, for instance, generating a strong exile literature expressing 'diasporic otherness' and predicting the moment of return (Kaminsky, 1999; Leiva, 1997). A politically committed discourse was also a very strong magnet pulling the networks of Chilean and other Latin American refugees together.

Many of the Chilean refugees left Chile with the 'programmed' intention of returning as soon as this was a political possibility (Tollefsen Altamirano, 2000: 140). Within the formation-process of a Latin American and Chilean diaspora in exile this idea was institutionalised in the political and cultural life, something which had consequences for the everyday lives of the



migrants. The idea of return took the form of an imperative in the social life of the refugees (Tollefsen Altamirano, 2000: 136) which Enrique Perez (1996) describes as something like a fixation on return. As long as Pinochet kept his grip on power and the struggle for justice in Chile was of international concern, the political exile mobilisation was a winning concept making the plea for a return more a slogan than a reality. With the changes that came the validity of this slogan was for the first time seriously tested.

When political change in Chile finally arrived in the late 1980s and return was made possible, then, all that had to be done was to press the button to launch the return-programme. During my early fieldwork (1990-94) I noticed how this happened for many of the Chilean refugees which strongly emphasised their political heritage and explicitly talking about their plans for going back. By then the Chilean society was on the path towards democracy. The removal of the Pinochet regime could be mapped in three steps. In 5 October 1988 a referendum voted for democratic elections, providing for the first hope of a return. After the democratic elections of 1989 a second step in this direction was taken and when the new president was installed in March 1990 the third step was completed. For the diaspora these events became a turning point (Olsson, 2009). The end of obliged exile meant that the Chilean exile-diaspora was transformed into a diaspora which contained the exiles but which left them with the choice of return (Kaminsky, 1999). The implication of the transformation is also that the exile community fragmented and became supplemented by practices that were not strictly politico-cultural in their overt 'exile' meaning. Political activities that constituted the web of social relations of exiles were gradually replaced with new projects that responded to the demands of the post-exile situation (Olsson, 2009).

The context for a diasporic existence was altered and it seemed logical to expect the return of many exiles after the situation changed. During the Chilean exile the ironic saying that refugees constantly live *con las maletas listas* (i.e. with bags at the ready) has been much repeated. The estimates of the number of returnees suggest that this sense of readiness is more than just a joke, though. When looking at the actual return-movement the picture of an ideological force behind many Chilean return-projects is somewhat confirmed. The first returnees to Chile from Sweden had arrived as migrants in Sweden in the years roughly corresponding to the years when the political dimension of this refugee-motivated immigration was at its peak (Klinthäll, 2003, 2007).<sup>2</sup> However, economic factors should not be neglected with regard to this, either, since return to Chile was also positively correlated with income performance (ibid.). The statistics also show how the heyday of return migration in terms of the number of emigrating individuals occurred during the first years after the democratic election of 1989.<sup>3</sup>

It soon became evident to the Chilean migrants that a return-project was a much more complicated affair than just packing your suitcases and booking a flight. The number of ‘emigrants’ to Chile from Sweden have decreased after 1994 and have since gone down more to a relatively stable few hundred people per year. In some sense return became an act for those exiles searching for restitution while diaspora remained as the ‘second exile’ for those who did not get it (Kaminsky, 1999). When the informants in my studies expressed their plans for moving back to Chile, at least with the hope of living there temporarily, they could however easily find ways of justifying their seemingly hazardous project for many years after 1990. So, even if the return was not immediately realised the dream was maintained which the informants express as for example a belief of having natural bonds with Chilean soil, with the home of the ancestors and with the Chilean people. A typical answer to questions about

motives was: “It’s quite a natural thing, you know, I belong to that country – I have my roots there”. Return was, thus, no longer primarily a political act but inspired by sentimental metaphors to do with ‘natural belonging’, ‘family-life’ and ‘home’. The return to Chile was in the diaspora’s post-exile rephrased to change it from being a political act to something that ended the circle: the return took the migrants back home to their ‘roots’ and to the family. Indeed, even very young people born in Sweden argued for the need to regroup the family in the Chilean *patria*.

Over the years I noticed that Chile has more and more become a destination for leisure and ‘the good life’. Chile is an attractive proposition for the retired people in Sweden who long for their old country and who also want to be able to enjoy the spending power of their Swedish pension there. Many spend months or even years in Chile while not excluding the possibility of once again living in Sweden, however (Olsson, 1997). In addition a significant number of people from among the ‘second generation’ have an interest in at least living temporarily in Chile as students or as long-term travellers. Chile is not only the country of their family roots but also a country where one could travel and discover new lands. This search for ‘the good life’ creates a market for investments in real estate and for travel agencies, services and products that facilitate these. It was the extensive infrastructure offering various kinds of services related to these interests combined with the availability of cheap tickets that led to a significant portion (perhaps the majority) of the Chilean migrants in Sweden at least visiting Chile after its democratisation. This type of marketing and consumption represent a transnationalising incentive in the network relations connecting the Swedish diaspora with Chilean society (Olsson, 1999).

## **Narratives of return**

The overall picture that comes from my field studies is that many returnees faced difficulties finding a regular and secure everyday living in Chile. Only a few of my informants were able to stay there permanently without needing to supplement their incomes with temporary periods in Sweden. These exceptional cases seem to be the result of being from a wealthy family or of being supported by kin or friends. Economic means are, of course, crucial for a return-project as one couldn't and cannot count on support from social security in Chile. Social networks are for this reason crucial for solving material needs. A frequent solution to the material problems experienced by most returnees is to spend an additional period in Sweden while the individual or family in question searching for new opportunities.

The information about how returnees are accomplishing their return is, however, only accessible through informants' own accounts of their experiences and plans. These narratives were in reality conversations and interviews I had with a number of people who had been living in Sweden. In my analysis of these narratives I noticed that the bulk of the material was distributed between a few leading themes which referred to the reasoning concerning why the informants had left Sweden for Chile, how they conceived of Chilean society and how they managed or did not manage to get by living there. In addition to these themes I also noted plenty of references to life and social networks in Sweden interposed in these narratives. These themes provided common ground not only in my company but also in social interactions involving other returnees. It should be remembered, then, that these narratives are individual accounts referring to something beyond the individual project and it is this 'beyond' which is in focus in the continued discussion.

### **Motives: political programming and the family**

A woman who came to Sweden in her fifties bore witness to how many Swedish Chileans perceived of their situation as exiles:

“The first years we always had our suitcases packed by the door. All our furniture was bought for practical reasons but not because we liked it. It all felt borrowed. The first seven, eight years we just waited for Pinochet to fall and for us to return. We later realised that this was impossible as the dictatorship continued but ...”

Others told me how they had immediately started to take action after the election of 1989 – they hadn’t needed any time for reflection. This was a general response by many of the exiles which confirms the picture given about return as a ‘programmed’ act (Tollefsen Altamirano, 2000: 140). For some families, though, it was clear that the ‘self-evident’ decision to return was not actually so unanimously agreed upon, the issue sometimes not being discussed in the family. In an interview 1994 Ricardo, who had tried to return several times already, was able to very clearly express his view of the matter:

“For me it was not something to be discussed ... not even with my wife was this discussed. I simply took for granted that we would leave! My wife was hesitating, which was of course not a surprise since we had a life over there [in Sweden] and my son was to begin school. Moreover she had a traumatic experience in Chile behind her. But as for me, there was nothing to be discussed!”

Another example is Jaime who was a celebrated writer and cultural personality while he was living in Sweden. Jaime was one of the early returnees to Chile and has since stayed in the country:

“when the bastard backed off [referring to the dictator Pinochet] there was no question about it, I had to go ... if not it would be like confessing that they had won and that was impossible for me to accept!”

For Jaime and many other exiles the expectations that the democratisation of a Chilean society brought with it were just the trigger that launched the already programmed return. As long as Pinochet did not intervene it was simply a matter of time; when the circumstances allowed they would buy the ticket, prepare their already packed suitcases and take off. A vast majority of the ‘early’ returnees confirmed this picture. These narratives were delivered from the position of the ‘pure’ refugees, the true exiles, and I had the impression that this was important for them to make explicit. The ‘programme’ was built from the experiences and repercussions from the period of the Pinochet regime and from the sentiments of living in the parenthesis that characterised the life of exile.

In the narratives of the ‘late’ returnees return was more often motivated by the desire to unite the family and to have a more intense family life than by political motives. These people often expressed a desire to be part of Chilean society with its lively but friendly and welcoming atmosphere. Not all these statements were ‘rational’ in the sense that a move to Chile did not necessarily make any difference in terms of uniting the (extended) dispersed family or returning to something that was genuinely ‘theirs’. In Chile it was simply easier to live a more relaxed family life since Chile was their own country. Even young people who had come to

Sweden as small children or who were born there referred to similar qualities when talking about Chile, these attitudes stemming from what they had learnt from occasional visits and the positive memories they had of family reunions there.

When going deeper into the 'motives' for return I also noted that both early and late returnees in some cases referred to their status as foreigners in Sweden. Sweden was not their country, they said. Sweden was often said to be a very nice and decent country while simultaneously making it clear that they did not belong there. They had difficulties with the language and culture and some experienced discrimination.

One of my key-informants, Felipe, repeatedly and explicitly told me about his determination to return as soon as it was possible. People in Sweden were in general kind but something was lacking in their attitude and this made him feel unwelcome. He was constantly urged to struggle to get recognition but he noticed how refugees had to take the jobs rejected by the Swedes. He mostly accompanied 'other *latinos*' for the purposes of different politically related activities or for pleasure. Felipe married with Alejandra and their first son was born in 1989. They soon decided to move to Chile and stayed for a year mostly living with their respective families. Various disappointments and struggle to make ends meet made the family again move to Sweden. After a year back there Felipe and Alejandra had a second child and immediately after this the family finally (or so it seems) returned to Chile. When I asked him why they were taking the risk of being poor in Chile instead of staying secure in Sweden he replied:

“We didn't want our children to grow up in Sweden as immigrants. Secondly they would also inherit our exile and everything. We didn't want that! We wanted them to live normal

lives with cousins and family and their own environment. One loves the children so much! Just imagine if they came home from school some day and told me ‘Dad, today they called me a Black-skull’, I think I would start crying. ... I also remembered when Alejandra started to cry because of my son calling her mama in Swedish! She was afraid that he was going to speak Swedish and that she wouldn’t understand! ... We were determined. We also knew the risks, not only the political but also the economical ones, we had no house in Chile ... But one is empty, I think being an immigrant or a political refugee is basically the same; one is not in ones’ own home, it is the same feeling of longing all the time! It was an emptiness I didn’t want to carry all my life.”

Other informants were seldom so explicit about their experiences of discrimination. Felipe’s narrative was an exception attributable to the fact that we were becoming close friends – it was because of this friendship that he was more honest about his ambivalent feelings towards Sweden. His experiences and feelings were certainly shared by others, though, (cf. Tollefsen Altamirano, 2000) but most chose not to mention them. Instead most returnees expressed their gratitude towards Swedish society in general, talking about the support they had received.

The narratives in general employ categories that are significant in the diaspora’s representation of return. What Felipe adds to the picture of a programmed return is the explicit reference to the ‘roots’ but also to discrimination and feelings of non-belonging, something which is more typically found in the conversations and interviews with people who returned later in post-exile. The changes of emphasis in these return narratives are also equivalent to the changes in the diasporic discourses when exile transformed to post-exile. This does clearly demonstrate the need to contextualise the return-projects in the social networks of diaspora instead of simply treating them as decisions taken by individuals.



### **Back in Chile as the eternal immigrant**

From the narratives of the Swedish Chilean returnees' emerges a mixed picture of the Chilean society they went back to. Clearly several informants seemed happy about their decision to return and the closeness of family, the friendly people, the nice climate and the relaxed lifestyle were often cited as evidence of the advantages of being in Chile again. Several of them gave positive judgements of how the society had progressed in both economic and political terms. Such advantages provided reasons for returnees to express gratitude for finally being 'home'.

A majority of the informants were, however, ambivalent in their opinions on the Chile they found. I met several people who explicitly expressed their disappointment and who even claimed that they had become depressed over the fact that Chile had changed and become different. For instance did Jaime talk about the expectations he had on his return from exile and how these were soon transformed into pessimism:

“Even if I live here in Chile, in my own country, it is not my own country any longer!  
Because it is a country I left, which has changed so much!”

The early returnees of the 1990s, in particular, frequently complained about a 'changed' Chile, often portraying the new version as a society with marked class divisions, widespread cynicism and the tendency to exploit, for instance, the workforce and indigenous people. The critical remarks about the local population are salient. One informant told me in detail about his, by then, seven years of experience of neighbours which failed to greet him and in other ways showed disrespect. In narratives like these the locals were frequently portrayed as people who were sometimes mean and egoistic as well as obsessed by status. These negative

remarks about the local population were somewhat mitigated in later narratives but even so these accounts were given in relation to a society extremely sensitive to personal contacts, these representing potential ways of opening the doors to friendship as well as creating opportunities of other types.

A significant topic in the narratives is complaints about locals' hostility towards foreigners and their patronizing attitudes towards *retornados* (i.e. a 'returnee'). Being a *retornado* is a central point of reference in many of the narratives. The *retornado* refers to a particularly interesting social category in Chilean society, carrying, as it does, deep associations with a return from exile and with political and social tensions within Chilean society itself. There have certainly been ambivalent responses on the part of the local population about the dictatorship and forced exile and as a result of this returnees have sometimes been accused of having had a 'golden' exile and even of economic fraud (Tollefsen Altamirano, 2000: 200-215). This would explain the suspicious attitude of the locals and the risk that comes with being labelled a *retornado*. In addition to this the narratives paint a situation in which overt discrimination makes it safer to keep a low profile concerning one's exile background (Olsson, 1997).

The narratives give a picture of a 'changed' or 'different' and sometimes 'strange' and hostile Chile. This is not a surprising reaction if we bear in mind that returnees have had to confront everyday life in a country they left several years before. Similar observations have been made by other researchers (Tollefsen Altamirano, 2000; Jansen, 2008) who suggest that this reaction could be an effect of the 'homeland' being viewed through the lens of the past (Schütz, 1964). This interpretation does not mean that returnees were unaware of the changes, however. They expressed an understanding of the changes their society had gone through due

to, for instance, the dictatorship and also of the changes to themselves resulting from years spent in a foreign society. The life in exile had created these expectations, not Chilean society, and one has to face this as a reality.

Still the confronting of this cleavage and the fact of having to face up to the difficulties of being accepted led to many returnees reacting with something like shock. The narratives they recount tell of what appears to be the inevitable ‘fate of being an immigrant’, this, ironically, being one of their main reasons for leaving Sweden, however. Often they contrasted the lack of public support they received in Chilean society with the Swedish welfare state. This does not mean that the returnees explicitly considered themselves as immigrants in Chile, though – this country still represented, without doubt, their ‘roots’. The problem was simply that they found themselves alienated.

### **The long summer**

When evaluating their own return-project informants also talked about how they were tired of being forced to cope with the situation of being the homecoming ‘immigrant’. This theme usually came up spontaneously before I even asked about it. The narratives demonstrate a rather similar range of strategies and techniques for how to cope with the situation.

With regard to attempts to cope with the practicalities of the return-projects, the narratives in general refer to an initial period of hardship. A typical return as a rule involved spending longer periods of time in unemployment. A minority of the informants told of quite a successful return with their basic plans of finding a living becoming realised. At least they after some months but more often after more than a year seemed to have accepted the situation and its promise of a reasonable future. Those who claimed to have found what they

really were hoping for were, however, exceptional cases. According to the success stories the circle was closed at the moment they returned 'home' whether this meant resettling in the same town or province as they had resided in before leaving for exile or going to live in another Chilean town. From my observations I was able to note that all of these return-projects were launched with the assistance of friends and kin from the social network.

According to a majority of informants, though, the return-project ended up being less than expected, this resulting in interrupted resettlement attempts and re-migration. Some projects seemed to never come to a definitive end. One example that looks like an odyssey into a migration labyrinth is provided by the case of Fernando and Maria, my 'key-informants' from the time of my first trip to Chile in 1993.

Fernando returned to Chile from his Swedish exile in 1989 on a reconnaissance trip although he had, in fact, already decided that it was time to go back. He found enough opportunities for securing a living, he thought, and so the family bought a small house in a village outside of Viña del Mar, the whole family moving out from Sweden in 1991. They survived on savings and temporary employment and even managed to purchase a small bakery. They also occasionally went to Sweden one at a time to temporarily be taken on by their old employers. The bakery was a promising prospect and Maria very decisively declared after a time that she would stay, whatever happened. I was therefore surprised when Fernando, in February 1994, suddenly told me how they had sold the bakery and how they were all planning to go back to Sweden again. Maria should leave first together with their son while Fernando stayed on alone until she could manage to send him a ticket from Sweden. When I expressed my surprise at their decision, Fernando replied that it just didn't work out and that he was not a businessman anyway! With a smile he added:

“This time it will be different ... [as] we will live in Märsta [a suburb of Stockholm not far from Arlanda airport] which makes it easier since it is next to the airport ...”

In fact Fernando had spelled out a prophecy which almost turned out to be true. After gaining an additional member in 1995, the family tried a move back to Chile again; Maria and the children stayed for a year while Fernando stayed in Sweden. For more than fifteen years I have followed this family's projects and 'definitive' moves back to the same house in Chile. I have also met up with them several times when they have come back to Stockholm, living in different second-hand rented apartments in the suburbs. Their attempts to live in Chile were dependent on finding an income and after several months or a year of failures in this regard a new move always appeared as the solution. However, one could live decently even from a modest Swedish income by owning a house in Chile and taking advantage of the comparably favourable subsistence costs in Chile. After unfortunately being diagnosed with a chronic disease, Maria received a partial early retirement pension in Sweden. This provided the family with a new opportunity which the family has, so far, taken by having Fernando circulating between the two countries and Maria and their daughter Laura making a more permanent living in Chile. Later the grown up son seemed to be following in the footsteps of his father, spending periods in Chile and Sweden respectively as well as some time in Spain.

The seemingly extraordinary experiences of this family are not particularly unusual, however. If listening to the narrative's people are very practical-minded. For people who are determined to return it is common to adopt a pragmatic and open-ended strategy in relation to the different opportunities available in order to not 'stop the project' entirely. Repeated moves in both directions to solve material problems could also turn this behaviour into the 'normal' way of living (Olsson, 1997). Fernando illuminated something of this tendency to normalise

backwards and forwards movement when, in answer to my question, he said that he did not foresee any end to the circulation. Indeed, perhaps he didn't want it to end since his everyday life was in *both* countries, his social life was in *both* and "when one of the two countries has winter, the other has a summer".

One conclusion of this is that the seemingly ambiguous standpoints with regard to the return-projects (whether to stay or whether to go back to Sweden again) mirrors a rationale which takes the somewhat unpredictable and demanding situation of being in a 'foreign' country without welfare support into consideration. The decision to live as a resident in either of the two countries is not definitively closed but is rather kept open, which seem to be a pragmatic accommodation to the reality that most returnees experience. Even if people were strongly dedicated to the idea of return, as the exile-returnees in particular were, they still had to rely on the rationale of the *retornado* in an immigrant position in order to get by (cf. Tollefsen Altamirano, 2000). According to this rationale social networks become something like social capital, social capital that can potentially open the door for different opportunities in both countries.

### **Staying connected**

The peculiarities experienced during the re-encounter with Chilean society seemed to provoke a spontaneous and engaging comparison between Sweden and Chile. This represented a favourite pastime although this was undeniably an effect of them being contacted by a visitor from Sweden like me. Nevertheless the anecdotes from a life in exile and Sweden were salient in the company of returnees, too. In fact these narratives recalled a sort of reversed version of the stories that were told about Chile when having similar conversations in Sweden. Most

often Swedish society was praised as well-organised and decent although it happened that informants were also critical and angry about the treatment they had received.

Very few (or perhaps no-one) declared a complete severing of links with Sweden, however. The returnees typically made the effort to get cheap airline tickets and to make phone calls and to have access to computer communication, like one probably did when they were living in Sweden. In general the returnees gave the impression of having frequent contact with people in Sweden and of having up to date information about the society. Despite the economic sacrifices involved most of them managed to visit Sweden occasionally for a vacation as well as for the purposes of taking up temporary employment. This was possible because most of the returnees were Swedish citizens who had decided to keep their passports for reasons of security.

Of particular significance for their social lives was the rather intensive communication by means of internet, telephone and travel with their friends and relatives in Sweden. Now and then a conversation would be interrupted by a phone call from someone living in Sweden or from someone who had recently arrived back from a visit there. When the absent friends were people within their social networks who still lived in Sweden all the conversations evoked the feeling of being in a space that was not in Chile but that was somewhere between there and Sweden. Geographical distance was in some senses ignored in that things that were in reality taking place in Sweden were treated with a proximity making it appear as if they were happening in their everyday neighbourhood. This feeling was reinforced by the visibility of Swedish markers in the form of flags and banderols on cars, Swedish brands in shops, T-shirts with Swedish text, etc. The Swedish language was, and still is, surprisingly frequently spoken on the streets particularly during the Chilean summer when many of the families visit Chile

for a vacation. Particularly during the 1990s in the twin-city Valparaíso-Viña del Mar (from where many of the migrants in Sweden originate) this special type of space materialised.

The narratives of the returnees were in this way connecting people to the social networks in diaspora. The advantages of having a supporting network in migrant situations are obvious and well documented in much research (e.g. Björklund, 1981; Glick Schiller et al., 1992; Watson, 1977). Not least the social network becomes a channel for information on job and other opportunities of importance for migrants. This supports the analysis of return-projects made above; the returnees typically adopt pragmatic and open-ended strategies, the social network forming a crucial component of these.

However, these narratives also *position* the returnees in the diasporic context. By means of different expressions of the will to communicate and through the wearing of identity-markers, these demonstrate a common identification with the social networks in diaspora (mainly Sweden). One speculation is that this identification is not only the result of some kind of social inertia but that it is also a reaction to the situation in Chile. Being part of a diaspora when living in Sweden certainly fuelled the transnational positioning revealed in their narratives but so did the ‘tension between the desired and the lived’ (Ramji, 2006: 659) and the reactions to confrontations with Chilean society after return.

### **Narratives on the transnational**

It is not controversial to picture (former) migrants like the returning Chileans as ‘transmigrants’ (Glick Schiller et.al., 1995). The reason for this should in this case however not primarily be because these migrants maintained their ties to the Chilean territory and society during their life in diaspora. The transnational dimension is in this case rather an



effect of the migrants maintaining their ties to the diasporic networks even *after* returning to the assumed cultural and territorial 'roots'. The returnees simply continue engaging with people in their social networks in various forms of communication and practices. The argument for this is mainly found in three interrelated aspects of the Swedish Chilean's return-projects.

First, it is demonstrated how the narratives of return-projects are coherent with the dynamics in the discourses and practices of the diasporic networks where the idea of return is constantly expressed in different symbolism. The individual returnees in Chile is clearly influenced by the discourse(-s) in diaspora while using the same symbols and motives when representing their return. This underlines that the decision to return is not solely an individual undertaking but rather a response to discourses and practices embedded in the networks of diaspora. Another clue for this is the significant references made to the enabling assistance of kin and people within their network.

Secondly, the narratives of the returnees represent return-projects as genuinely open-ended, flexible and pragmatic. According to these narratives returning migrants need to employ strategies that are able to deal with the 'immigrant' position experienced in the return-context which in some sense resemble to the one's utilised in exile. The narratives also emphasise the need to have supporting social network when making attempts to return. This pragmatic and open attitude to opportunities in both countries seem to be a rationale guiding the migrants decisions and actions and in some sense favouring a transnational way of living.

Thirdly, the returnees are (in the narratives of their return-projects) in general presenting themselves as part of a social network of Chilean and other migrants living in Sweden and

other parts of the world. The way these narratives do represent the Chilean society and how to cope with the situation after return, what social contacts and communication that becomes important in this, indicates a conflating of social relations with the diaspora. The returnees seem to speak from a diasporic position rather than as an 'integrated' member of the Chilean society. This tendency is here interpreted as an expression of the transnational belonging that is underpinned by the diasporic formation of migrant networks but to some extent it is also a reaction to the returnees' alienation in the Chilean society.

A more general conclusion to be drawn from these three interrelated aspects of the return-projects is that return migration does not 'end the refugee-cycle'. To stretch the discussion out it makes it likely that migrants will continue circulating between the two countries (and in some cases also a third country) for longer periods of time. Not being a one-way journey to the 'roots', return migration instead represents a dimension in a transnational way of living. The way the return-projects are embedded into the life of diasporic social networks also fuels a transnational belonging as these formations are mobilised in a broad sense by an interest in and engagement with 'homeland-issues' (Cohen, 1997; Vertovec and Cohen, 1999). The transnational practices of the diasporic formation will, at least in post-exile, become a transnational refiguring of social space which maintains the social networks even after people have launched their return-projects and moved back to their country of origin. The Swedish Chilean return-projects then demonstrate how the idea of people's cultural and territorial roots are serving the diasporic networks' bridging of seemingly disparate social worlds.

## Notes:

1. I am aware that the word 'return' has connotations that associate the word with something definite and closed. This article, in fact, argues for an opposite view, however. I will mainly refer to re-migration attempts as *return-projects* but have unfortunately been unable to avoid at least occasionally using the word 'return' in its commonsense meaning.

2 Approximately 30 percent of the cohort for the 1975 immigration year had returned to Chile by 1998; this is in proportion about twice as much as within the cohort coming to Sweden ten years later (1985) (Klinthäll, 2007).

3 The Swedish official statistics (SCB) account for at least eight thousands of emigrants from Sweden to Chile from 1985 onwards. The top-year, 1994, 904 people were registered. The statistical information could not for many reasons, however, give comprehensive information about the exact number of returning diasporic migrants as these are the total number of people (all nationalities) and that the same people could be counted several times (as in cases with repeated moves). The circulation of migrants between Sweden and Chile is significant and well known (Olsson 1997, 2003, 2007; Tollefsen Altamirano, 2000) and many keep their resident status in Sweden while also living in Chile.

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