Transnationalism and identity

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Abstract  Transnationalism and identity are concepts that inherently call for juxtaposition. This is so because many peoples’ transnational networks of exchange and participation are grounded upon some perception of common identity; conversely, the identities of numerous individuals and groups of people are negotiated within social worlds that span more than one place. In this introductory article, the transnational perspective on migration studies is first discussed, followed by some critiques and outstanding questions. The final section summarises points raised by the contributing authors of the main articles in this themed issue of JEMS, especially with regard to various ways transnational settings and dynamics affect the construction, negotiation and reproduction of identities.

KEYWORDS: TRANSGLOBALISM; IDENTITY; MIGRATION

The increasingly invoked notion of ‘transnationalism’, referring to various kinds of global or cross-border connections, currently frames the view of numerous researchers concerned with migrants and dispersed ethnic groups. ‘Identity’, although it has long been one of the slipperiest concepts in the social scientist’s lexicon, can suggest ways in which people conceive of themselves and are characterised by others. Transnationalism and identity are concepts that inherently call for juxtaposition. This is so because, on the one hand, many peoples’ transnational networks are grounded upon the perception that they share some form of common identity, often based upon a place of origin and the cultural and linguistic traits associated with it. Such networks are marked by patterns of communication or exchange of resources and information along with participation in socio-cultural and political activities. On the other hand, among certain sets of contemporary migrants, the identities of specific individuals and groups of people are negotiated within social worlds that span more than one place. This special issue of JEMS is devoted to articles that provide detailed case studies and theoretical assessments of transnational spaces, groups and practices and the identities that both precede and arise from them.

In the first section of this introductory article, some key features of the transnational perspective in migration studies are discussed. Despite its current popularity and uptake by numerous scholars of migration and ethnicity, there remain many critiques and outstanding questions surrounding the notion of transnationalism. These are outlined in the second section. The final section includes a run-down of the contributing articles, pointing out ways in which the authors regard transnational settings and dynamics along with their effects on the construction, negotiation and reproduction of individual and group identities.
Migration and transnationalism

Researchers on migration have almost always recognised that migrants maintain various forms of contact with people and institutions in their places of origin. This has been observed, for instance, through the scale of migrants’ correspondence and remittances at the end of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries. Since the early sociology of migration in the 1920s–1930s, however, most migration research has generally tended to focus upon the ways in which migrants adapt themselves to, or are socially excluded from, their place of immigration.

The past decade has witnessed the ascendancy of an approach to migration that accents the attachments migrants maintain to families, communities, traditions and causes outside the boundaries of the nation-state to which they have moved. In the early 1990s the shift in perspective arose through a set of key texts in anthropology (Basch et al. 1994; Glick Schiller et al. 1992a; Rouse 1991); the transnational approach has been subsequently embellished throughout the 1990s (see for instance, Kearney 1995; Portes et al. 1999a; Smith and Guarnizo 1998; Vertovec and Cohen 1999). Observing this substantial change of approach, in 1995 Roger Rouse wrote:

While, a decade ago, disagreements about the frames for understanding (im)migrant experience were largely contained within the dominant models of bipolar landscapes and localized identities, they now focus much more widely on the relationship between these models and the alternative images of transnational social spaces and multi-local affiliations. (1995: 355)

While noting the similarities to long-standing forms of migrant connection to homelands, the current transnational approach underscores numerous ways in which, and the reasons why, today’s linkages are different from, or more intense than, earlier forms (see Foner 1997; Morawska 1999; Portes et al. 1999b). This obviously includes the rapid development of travel and communication technologies. The nature of contemporary transnationalism among migrants has also evolved in recent years in light of shifting political and economic circumstances in both sending and receiving countries. These have affected a range of developments such as migrants’ capacity for political organisation in relation to both sending and receiving contexts, sending countries’ more positive views of their emigrants, and the impact of migrant remittances on local economies and labour markets. Heightened attention to these kinds of phenomena and processes has marked, for many scholars, a significant shift in the ways contemporary international migration is understood. As described by Ayse Caglar in her article in this special issue, transnationalism represents ‘a new analytic optic which makes visible the increasing intensity and scope of circular flows of persons, goods, information and symbols triggered by international labour migration’.

The emergent approaches in migration theory describe ways in which contemporary migrants live in ‘transnational communities’. Such types of migrant community, according to Alejandro Portes, comprise

... dense networks across political borders created by immigrants in their quest for economic advancement and social recognition. Through these networks, an increasing number of people are able to live dual lives. Participants are often bilingual, move easily between different cultures, frequently maintain homes in two countries, and pursue economic, political and cultural interests that require their presence in both. (1997: 812)

Newer, cheaper, and more efficient modes of communication and transportation
allow migrants to maintain transnationally – effectively both ‘here’ and ‘there’ – their originally home-based relationships and interests.

Transnational connections have considerable economic, socio-cultural and political impacts on migrants, their families and collective groups, and the dual (or more!) localities in which they variably dwell. The economic impacts of transnational migrant communities are extensive. The most significant form of this is to be found in the massive flow of remittances that migrants send to the families and communities in the sending countries (see for instance Conway and Cohen 1998; Massey et al. 1998; Waller Meyers 1998). Substantial flows of remittances – currently far exceeding US$60 billion globally each year – may have positive and negative effects on specific places and groups (Vertovec 2000). The economies of numerous developing countries are increasingly highly reliant upon them as remittances reach amounts comparable to exports, development aid or tourism. The money migrants send not only critically supports families, but may progressively rework gender relations, support education and the acquisition of professional skills and facilitate local community development through new health clinics, water systems, places of worship and sports facilities. Remittances may also undermine local labour markets, fuel price increases, create new status hierarchies and generate patterns of economic dependence.

The social and cultural impacts are considerable and varied, too. Many migrant communities maintain intense linkages and exchanges between sending and receiving contexts including marriage alliances, religious activity, media and commodity consumption. As described throughout this special issue of JEMS, transnational connections affect migrants as never before with regard to practices of constructing, maintaining and negotiating collective identities (see also Hannerz 1996; Portes et al. 1999a; Smith and Guarnizo 1998). This has significant bearing on the culture and identity of the so-called second generation, or children born to migrants.

The political impacts of transnational phenomena surrounding contemporary migration are also of far-reaching consequence. This takes many forms, especially with regard to questions of citizenship (e.g. Bauböck 2002; Fitzgerald 2000; Labelle and Midy 1999) and homeland politics (e.g. Itzigsohn 2000; Østergaard-Nielsen 2001). The global flows and cross-border networks represented by transnational migrant communities critically test prior assumptions that the nation-state functions as a kind of container of social, economic and political processes. For Ulrich Beck, in fact, the most interesting features surrounding globalisation involve processes through which ‘sovereign national states are criss-crossed and undermined by transnational actors with varying prospects of power, orientations, identities and networks’ (2000: 11).

The ‘portability of national identity’ (Sassen 1998) among migrants has combined with a tendency towards claiming membership in more than one place. ‘Multiple citizenship is the most visible illustration of overlapping membership in political communities’, notes Rainer Bauböck (2002). In many countries, heated public debates concerning dual citizenship and dual nationality have been matched by considerable academic rethinking of rights and obligations surrounding migration, transnationalism and national identity (see Castles 2000a; Castles and Davidson 2000; Faist 1999, 2000). Among other issues currently raised in this field, one view holds that transnational ties weaken immigrants’ integration in the receiving country. Another view suggests that democracy is actually enhanced by public recognition and representation of
migrants’ transnational, multiple identities (Castles 2000b; Vertovec 1999b, c). In order to recognise the reality and prevalence of the phenomenon, some theorists have described issues surrounding ‘flexible’ (Ong 1999), ‘post-national’ (Soysal 1994), ‘diasporic’ (Laguerre 1998) or ‘transnational’ (Bauböck 1994) frameworks of citizenship. Questions concerning transnational migrants and citizenship – and the sometimes fierce political debates they have stimulated – underscore the need for more research and empirical data on the intersection of existing state policies, actual patterns of multiple membership, and long-term strategies of belonging among migrants and their families.

For all these reasons, within the field of migration studies (through several of its constituent disciplines including Sociology, Anthropology, Geography and Politics) an increasing number of researchers have developed keen interests in the transnational aspects of migrant phenomena (while recognising, of course, that not all migrants engage in such activity). Still, there is a need for much more empirical research in this area, while methodologies must be realigned and key areas of social and political theory must be rethought. Yet as Alejandro Portes, Luis Guarnizo and Patricia Landolt (1999b) stress, in order for the notion of transnationalism to be a truly useful analytical device for social scientists, it must be delimited and rigorously appraised as to whether it is really adding anything new to the field. With such a goal in mind, the following section includes some outstanding areas of criticism that currently remain around transnationalism.

**Some critical appraisals**

The following brief points represent some of the main critiques that should be born in mind concerning the current shift to a transnational approach toward migration processes and migrant communities.

- Transnationalism does not represent an altogether new theoretical approach, but one that inherently builds upon a number of preceding ones (including those of the Chicago School of Sociology and the Manchester School of Anthropology). Differences and similarities with prior theories of migration and immigrant experience should be elucidated so that we can realise whether theoretical advances are really being achieved, or whether we are merely pouring old wine into new bottles.

- Transnationalism is a notion that has become over-used to describe too wide a range of phenomena (from specific migrant communities to all migrants, to every ethnic diaspora, to all travellers and tourists; cf. Vertovec 1999a). It is clear that transnational patterns among migrants take many forms in socio-cultural, economic and political arenas. Further, each form may be ‘broad’ or ‘narrow’ (Itzigsohn et al. 1999), and may vary over time, depending on intensity of exchanges and communication. Rather than a single theory of transnationalism and migration, we may do better to theorise a typology of transnationalisms and the conditions that affect them.

- In much of the currently burgeoning literature on the subject, it is often unclear or undemonstrated just ‘how new’ transnational networks are among migrants. An historical perspective is often largely lost. Research needs to detail the current extent, structural and technical capacities, and migrants’ own desires, strategies and practices of remaining connected around the
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world, and exactly how these are continuous with, or distinct from, earlier patterns of linkage.

- Is contemporary transnationalism among migrants wholly attributable to shifts in technology? That is, are advances in transport and, particularly, telecommunications (from telephones and faxes through the Internet and satellite TV) – not least their relative inexpensiveness – largely responsible for the creation of today’s transnational migrant communities? Technological determinism is not a very strong argument. We need to understand the ways in which technology has combined with and perhaps facilitated or enhanced, rather than caused, transnational networks (cf. Castells 1996).

- It is open to debate whether migrants’ maintenance of transnational ties does or does not represent a distinct alternative to other social forms, processes and programmes of immigrant incorporation (cf. Castles 2000b). The field of transnational migration is not yet very well theorised in relation to preceding concepts and policies surrounding assimilation, acculturation, cultural pluralism, integration, political inclusion and multiculturalism.

- It has been variously suggested that transnationalism among migrants can be understood as either a mode of resistance to, or in contrast as a pattern of incorporation into, shifts in global capitalism. Much further detailed research remains to be done here in case-by-case fashion, and it is unlikely that a single overall theory will emerge to demonstrate one argument or the other.

- While social scientists working in the field commonly agree that contemporary patterns and processes of transnationalism among migrants are both new to the last 10 years or so and a development of earlier forms of connection among migrants, the question remains: how exclusive is transnationalism to the first generation of migrants? Will the so-called ‘second generation’ (children of immigrants born and raised in host countries) also maintain socio-cultural, economic and political ties of some kind (if so, what kind?) with homelands and with co-ethnic members around the world? Processes and patterns conditioning the intergenerational succession and reproduction of transnational ties remain largely under-researched and under-theorised.

Despite these shortcomings surrounding the notion of transnationalism, there has nevertheless emerged a considerable and growing body of empirical studies that contribute to expanding our understanding of relevant concepts and processes. Turning to the topic of this JEMS special issue: how has the concept of transnationalism contributed to the study of social and ethnic identities?

Transnationalism and identity: nine case studies

A massive body of social and social psychological theory addresses the ways in which people conduct their everyday lives in terms of their identities. According to most prevailing theories (neatly summarised by Richard Jenkins (1996), who draws especially upon George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman and Fredrik Barth), identities are seen to be generated in, and constructed through, a kind of internal (self-attributed) and external (other-ascribed) dialectic conditioned within specific social worlds. This holds for both personal and collective identities, which should be understood as always closely entangled with each other (while recognising the serious theoretical problems debated around notions of self, personhood and collectivity; see for example Rouse 1995).
The literature on transnationalism generally underscores the fact that large numbers of people now live in social worlds that are stretched between, or
dually located in, physical places and communities in two or more nation-states. Ulf Hannerz (1996), for instance, discusses people who live in diverse ‘habitats of
meaning’ that are not territorially restricted. The experiences gathered in these
multiple habitats accumulate to comprise people’s cultural repertoires, which in
turn influence the construction of identity – or indeed multiple identities. Each
habitat or locality represents a range of identity-conditioning factors: these
include histories and stereotypes of local belonging and exclusion, geographies
of cultural difference and class/ethnic segregation, racialised socio-economic
hierarchies, degree and type of collective mobilisation, access to and nature of
resources, and perceptions and regulations surrounding rights and duties.

Together the multiple contexts create what some have called a ‘transnational
social field’ (Glick Schiller et al. 1992b), ‘transnational social space’ (Pries 1999),
‘transnational village’ (Levitt 2001) or ‘translocality’ (Appadurai 1995). However
termed, the multi-local life-world presents a wider, even more complex set of
conditions that affect the construction, negotiation and reproduction of social
identities. These identities play out and position individuals in the course of
their everyday lives within and across each of their places of attachment or
perceived belonging. Transnational(ised) identities may also, indeed, form the
basis of homeland or receiving country-focused political engagement.

The contributions to this special issue of JEMS present case studies exemplifying
diverse approaches to transnational influences on identity construction and
expression. Differing migration processes, group and individual experiences,
policy contexts, institutional settings, organisational developments and cultural
flows are recounted by way of suggesting ways in which local identities are
shaped by transnational factors.

In the first piece, Bruno Riccio describes the complex experiences and multiple
self-representations evident among Senegalese Mourides in and between Italy
and Senegal. These coincide with, and help account for, the very differing
trajectories and strategies among the transnational Senegalese. One key strategy
identified by Riccio is the ‘dynamic process of constant networking within
transnational spaces’, a process both based on and reinforcing Mouride identity
and practice.

Ayse Çağlar follows with an article suggesting ways in which certain forms of
transnationalism significantly challenge German official discourses concerning
Ausländer (foreigners). Turkish-German transnational practices, images and cues –
observed in places like the new café-bars in Berlin – challenge the implicit
membership models and narratives of incorporation pervasive in German public
debates and policy. This is mainly because the conventional ‘scripts of belong-
ing’ in the public sphere are based on ethnic/national exclusivism, whereas the
transnational experiences lead to more cosmopolitan senses of participation and
belonging.

Because migrants and migrant-origin communities have tended to be the focus
of most studies of transnationalism, Nadje Al-Ali, Richard Black and Khalid
Koser emphasise the need to incorporate refugees into the emergent transna-
tional perspective. Such an exercise will usefully serve, among other things, to
undermine the long-standing conceptual distinction between migrants and
refugees (cf. Crisp 1999). In a comparative study of Bosniaks and Eritreans, the
authors demonstrate how refugee/asylum regimes condition and limit the
nature and extent of people’s transnational activities. The authors innovatively employ a comparative model surrounding refugees’ capacity (or ability) to participate in transnational affairs versus their desire (or willingness) to do so. The study underscores ways in which policy interventions can productively increase refugees’ capacity to participate in both home and host contexts simultaneously.

The state’s role in shaping transnationalism, and particularly transnational identities, is rather differently addressed by Pál Nyíri. Nyíri examines how the People’s Republic of China continues to play a central role not only in the management of migration, but also in the reproduction of Chinese identity outside of the country. This is achieved particularly through the regulation or conditioning of migrant flows and the construction of everyday discourses. Nyíri demonstrates ways in which overseas Chinese are considered as part of Chinese culture and society, as well as how their depiction remains wholly in line with dominant official discourses of Chineseness, cultural heritage and virtues. The process is shown to lead to an increasing standardisation of state and self-depiction among overseas Chinese.

The gendered nature of the nation-state, and especially of citizenship, has been subject to considerable scrutiny (e.g. Yuval-Davis 1997). Nation-states similarly shape and direct transnational practices in particularly gendered ways. In her article, Ruba Salih shows how various material and normative constraints impinge upon Moroccan women’s transnational practices between Morocco and Italy. Their ability to move and to build their own life-worlds is highly limited or framed by culturally gendered rules that permeate their transnational social fields.

In the article that follows, it is specifically gendered experiences, along with a common legal status and shared experiences of exploitation, that provide for a common identity and mode of organisation among female migrant domestic workers in London. Described by Bridget Anderson, the United Workers Association (UWA) is comprised of women from no less than 29 ethnic and national origins. While the women simultaneously participate in distinct migrant transnational communities of the sort described in most of the recent literature, Anderson describes how the UWA cross-cuttingly unites them by way of a transnational movement ‘from below’. Women in the UWA find common cause by way of ensuring their rights, protecting themselves from exploitation and improving their social and legal positions within both the sending and receiving contexts.

Official and popular discourses of identity are considered by Kevin Robins and Asu Aksoy. They describe how, in much public and institutional understanding, ‘identity’ in Britain functions as ‘an ordering device’ or ‘device of cultural engineering’ which entails ‘fixing cultures in place’. Such a view of ‘identity’ presumes the presence of a singular and homogeneous ‘community’ (cf. Baumann 1996). Within such a backdrop, Robins and Aksoy suggest that Turkish Cypriots in Britain have never asserted themselves as such an ‘identity’ or ‘community’. Instead, for more than 25 years, Turkish Cypriots in Britain have been subject to a constant, often very difficult negotiation between different cultural reference points: pre- and post-divided Cyprus, the British colony of Cyprus, contemporary Britain and Turkey, as well as the presence of Greek Cypriots in Britain. Following Robert Young, the authors propose the concept of ‘mental space’ as an avenue into understanding the Turkish Cypriot experience
in Britain. According to Robins and Aksoy (and in agreement with Çağlar), transnationalism presents possibilities of unfixing identities – particularly nation-derived ones – and arriving at new, cosmopolitan perspectives on culture and belonging (cf. Cheah and Robbins 1998; Vertovec and Cohen 2002).

The final two contributions represent novel and important takes on what we might call the transnationalisation of identities. The authors point to ways in which the transnational flow of images, practices, discourses and perspectives can have profound effect on people’s identities vis-à-vis both local and global settings. Rebecca Golbert presents the case of young Ukrainian Jews who have developed ‘transnational orientations from home’ towards the Ukraine, Israel and other Jewish communities in America, Germany and elsewhere. Such orientations are embedded in interpersonal networks and conceptual links with people, places, and histories outside the Ukraine. Drawing upon such an acquired transnational perspective from home, Golbert notes, young Ukrainian Jews undertake the evaluation of ‘everyday experiences, the past, and the future, with a double consciousness garnered from transnational links and a transnational conception of self’. Through narratives and the sharing of experiences – particularly regarding Israel – returnees have had a powerful impact even on those who never left the Ukraine.

Finally, Katrin Hansing addresses the transnational flow of meanings, images and practices and their effects on locally conditioned identity (cf. Hannerz 1996). Her focus, Rastafarianism, is a cultural complex of aesthetics, values and practices that has been globalised predominantly through music and consumer capitalism. In Cuba, the site of Hansing’s research, Rastafari has (despite government restrictions affecting global cultural flows) been adopted increasingly by black Cubans. In recent years Rastafari has stimulated an alternative view of cubanidad (Cubanness) while remaining pro-African, anti-racist and pan-human. Expressed and adopted locally in multiform ways, transnational Rastafarianism importantly offers black Cubans a source of personal resistance to growing racism within a context of ever-worsening economic conditions.

People who embody transnationalism, Çağlar points out in this issue, ‘weave their collective identities out of multiple affiliations and positionings and link their cross-cutting belongingness with complex attachments and multiple allegiances to issues, peoples, places, and traditions beyond the boundaries of their resident nation-states’. These kinds of connections – exemplified in all of the articles contributing to this special issue of JEMS – demonstrate how the juxtaposition of the concepts transnationalism and identity raises numerous theoretical issues which, in turn, help social scientists deepen their understanding of each concept itself.

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