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The Transnational Social Spaces of Migration

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1 The Transnational Social Spaces of Migration

Discussions of globalization have amply and aptly described the increase in the intensity, velocity and scope of cross-border exchanges, such as financial transactions, the exchange of goods and services, and various efforts to deal with these challenges and to cooperate internationally for the advancement of global governance. Much less attention has been devoted to conceptualizing cross-border social and symbolic ties and hence social integration, such as the life-worlds of persons and groups who move around and maintain ties in a de-borderized world. Terms such as transnational social spaces, transnational social fields or transnational social formations usually refer to sustained ties of geographically mobile persons, networks and organizations across the borders across multiple nation-states.¹ To list but a few examples, Chinese entrepreneurs have long been known to rely on *guanxi* – friendship-communal – networks dating back to hometown ties in China in order to integrate economically in a great variety of countries all over the globe. Kurdish political activists in various European countries have organized in various associations to address both governments of immigration states and rulers in Turkey to advance their cause of an autonomous ‘Kurdistan’. And in the UK, Muslim organizations made up of migrants from South Asia have sought to gain recognition as a religious association while forming part of a global *umma*.

The reality of transnational social spaces made up of migrants indicates, first, that migration and re-migration may not be definite, irrevocable and irreversible decisions - transnational lives in themselves may become a strategy of survival and betterment. Also, transnational webs include relatively immobile persons and collectives. Second, even those migrants and refugees who have settled for a considerable time outside the original country of origin, frequently entertain strong transnational links. Third, these links can be of a more informal nature, such as intra-household or family ties, or they can be institutionalized, such as political parties entertaining branches in various countries of immigration and emigration.

Under propitious conditions transnational social spaces find a fertile breeding ground. Favourable conditions for the reproduction of transnational ties include (1) modern technologies

¹ Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina Szanton Blanc, 1994: *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States*. Langhorne, PA: Gordon and Breach; Thomas Faist, 2000: *The Volume and Dynamics of International Migration and Transnational Social Spaces*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Alejandro Portes, Luis E. Guarnizo, Patricia Landolt, 1999: *The study of Transnationalism: Pitfalls and Promises of an Emergent Research Field*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22, 2: 217-237

such as satellite or cable TV, instant mass communication, personal communication bridging long distances via telephone and fax, mass affordable short-term long-distance travel, (2) liberal state policies, such as polyethnic rights and anti-discrimination policies, or the opposite (3) cultural discrimination and socio-economic exclusion of migrants in immigration states, and (4) changing emigration state policies which reach out to migrants living abroad for remittances, investment, and political support. There are four types of transnational spaces: small groups, particularly kinship systems; issue networks; transnational communities and transnational organisations.

(1) Formalised transboundary relations within *small groups* like households and wider kinship systems, are representative for many migrants. Families may live apart because one or more members work abroad as contract workers (like the former ‘guestworkers’ in Germany) or as posted employees within multinational companies. Small household and family groups have a strong sense of belonging to a common home. A classic example for such relations are transnational families, who conceive themselves as both an economic unit and a unit of solidarity and who keep, besides the main house, a kind of shadow household in another country. Economic assets are mostly transferred from abroad to those who continue to run the household ‘back home’.

(2) *Transnational issue networks* are sets of ties between persons and organisations in which information and services are exchanged for the purpose of achieving a common goal. Linkage patterns may concatenate into advocacy networks², business networks, or scientists’ networks. These issue-specific networks engage in areas such as human rights and environmental protection. While issue networks look back upon a long tradition in the realm of human rights, and are making steady progress in ecology, they are also emerging among migrants who have moved from the so-called third countries to the European Union (EU). Among the immigrant and citizenship associations are, for example, the European Citizenship Action Service (ECAS), the Migration Policy Group (MPG) – the latter network including the British NGO Justice, the Immigration Lawyers Practitioners’ Association and the Dutch Standing Group of Experts on Immigration and Asylum. Some of these networks – usually headed by non-migrant EU citizens – have succeeded in bringing issues such as discrimination onto the agendas of Intergovernmental Conferences (IGC), and, ultimately, into the Treaty of Maastricht (1997).

² Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (eds.), 1998: *Activists Beyond Borders: Transnational Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

(3) *Transnational communities* comprise dense and continuous sets of social and symbolic ties, characterised by a high degree of intimacy, emotional depth, moral obligation and sometimes even social cohesion. Geographical proximity is no longer a necessary criterion for the existence of a community, there are ‘communities without propinquity’. Transnational communities can evolve at different levels of aggregation. The simplest type consists of village communities in interstate migration systems, whose relations are marked by solidarity extended over long periods of time. The quintessential form of transnational communities consists of larger transboundary religious groups and churches. World religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism existed long before modern states came into existence. Diasporas also belong to the category of transnational communities. Diasporas are groups that experienced the territorial dispersion of their members some time in the past, either due to a traumatic experience, or specialisation in long-distance trade. Jews, Palestinians, Armenians and Greeks can be named as examples here. Generally, members of diasporas have a common memory of their lost homeland, or a vision of an imagined one to be created, while at the same time the immigration country often refuses the respective minority full acknowledgement of their cultural distinctiveness.

(4) *Transnational organizations* from small groups like transnational families by virtue of an even higher degree of formal control and co-ordination of social and symbolic ties. An early type of transnational organisation – interstate non-governmental organisations (INGOS) – developed out of issue networks like the Red Cross, Amnesty International and Greenpeace. At the other extreme there are organisations which are based in one specific country but whose sphere of influence extends abroad, as with the ethno-nationalist PKK (*Partiya Karkarên Kurdistan*). The PKK is not a non-governmental organisation but a para-state association because it seeks political autonomy for a territory named ‘Kurdistan’. Their goal is mass mobilisation, without which they cannot succeed. Transnational enterprises constitute a further type of transboundary organisation. These businesses are differentiated transboundary organisations with an extremely detailed internal division of labour.

Transnational social formations have cultural, political and economic aspects. Syncretist cultural practices – for example, music styles, language diffusion and mixing – and hybrid identities – such as German-Turkish or French-Algerian – are phenomena that tend to accompany processes of transnational migration. Although such phenomena may range from evanescent and temporary to more enduring and stable patterns over time, their observable existence has implications for the self-conception of individuals and groups, and for the definition of these same actors by others. How intensive this trend really is remains a matter of dispute. In principle, the idea of transnational cultural diffusion and syncretism implies the transboundary movement of people, symbols, practices, texts - all of which help to establish

a pattern of common cultural belief across borders and patterns of reciprocal transactions between separate places, whereby cultural ideas in one place influence those in another. Various responses are possible to cultural diffusion and exchange in transnational spaces. Possible outcomes include:

1. *assimilation*: the merging of minorities into the 'core majority', i.e. acculturation;
2. *cultural pluralism*: minorities, by and large, maintain their own culture; often transplanted from country of emigration to immigration country, or indigenous minorities maintain a core repertoire of cultural and identity;
3. *syncretism* allows a dominant culture to co-exist side-by-side with various sub-cultures, while the latter are influenced by transboundary ties upon the formation of identities.

Transnational migrant culture cannot be seen as baggage or a template, not as something to be figuratively packed and unpacked, uprooted (assimilationists) and transplanted (cultural pluralists). Syncretist identities and practices do not imply a diaspora consciousness, such as a collective identity carrying elements of both Turkish or Kurdish and German but with a strong dominance of the former element due to an imagined homeland or collective religious community. Nor do these mixing identities necessarily denote a successful stage in the transition from one collective identity to another, such as the prototypical development: Sicilian → Italian → Italian-American → US-American. Rather, it is an outcome of transnational ties and often segmented cultural communities that do refer to a successful synthesis in some cases – such as hip-hop musicians among the cultural elite – but also to an un-integrated existence of both German and Turkish elements next to each other, for example, among some young Islamists. However, quite important, syncretism and assimilation are not necessarily opposite processes. For example, while many Chinese migrants in Canada may assimilate socio-economically, they may engage in syncretist cultural practices related to both Canada and the region of origin.

In the political realm, over the last few decades more than half of all sovereign states have come to tolerate dual or multiple citizenship for various reasons. This is astonishing when one considers that a few decades ago citizenship and political loyalty to a state were still considered inseparable. Multiple citizenship could be conceived of as the political foundation of the transnational experience, enabling transnational migrants and their children to lead multiple lives across borders. There has been a push towards tolerating dual nationality from both ends, from immigration and emigration countries, albeit for somewhat

different reasons. In immigration countries it has been the spread of an equal rights perspective, advanced by considerations of gender equity and equal political freedom for all residents, which has provided the momentum towards increasing tolerance. Categories of persons to which tolerance has been shown have continued to grow, starting from stateless persons, those not allowed to renounce their nationality that is, not released from their original nationality, and, finally, spouses and children in bi-national marriages. In emigration countries, the reasons for increasing tolerance often have been pronounced in more instrumental ways. For instance, representatives of political regimes have attempted to forge continuous links to expatriates living abroad. A transnational perspective helps to elucidate how migrants maintain ties across the borders of nation-states and why emigration country governments are interested in their support.³ As the case of multiple citizenship already indicates, transnationally active persons may be firmly rooted in at least one 'place' while reaching out into a broader 'space'. It is plausible to argue that transnational political activists, for example, are not merely internationally oriented cosmopolitans, but rather need a firm grounding in local contexts. In other words, transnationalization is situated between a 'space of flows' and a 'space of places'.

Transnational migrant networks and associations have lately been at the center of the optimistic visions of national and international economic development policy establishments such as the World Bank and the UK government. First, the surge in financial remittances over the past three decades transferred by transnational migrants has given rise to a kind of euphoria. Annual remittances from economically developed to developing and transformation countries more than doubled during the 1990s and have been approximately 20 percent higher than official development assistance (ODA) to these countries.⁴ Second, there are social remittances, such as knowledge transferred through networks of scientists and experts from the USA to China, or the practice of participation in the formal labor market by women migrants from Bangla Desh who stayed in Malaysia and returned to the country of origin.⁵ Third, there is the transfer of political remittances, namely ideas regarding the rule of law, good governance, democracy, and human rights, has achieved a growing prominence in the aftermath of interventions into armed conflicts and efforts at reconstructing countries ravaged by civil war – evidenced lately in Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Occasionally diasporas

³ Thomas Faist (ed.), 2006: *Dual Citizenship in Europe: From Nationhood to Societal Integration*. Avebury, UK: Ashgate.

⁴ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2004: *World Economic and Social Survey. Part II: International Migration*. New York: UN.

⁵ Petra Dannecker, 2004: Transnational Migration and the Transformation of Gender Relations: The Case of Bangladeshi Labour Migrants, *Current Sociology* 53, 4: 655-674.

made up of exiles, refugees, and labor migrants are hailed as mediators in conflict resolution, for example in the cases of South Africa or Nigeria. However, all these mechanisms of transfer also have their dark sides. For example, refugee and exile communities that have fuelled conflicts in the countries of origin from abroad, such as Kosovo Albanians or Chechen freedom fighters.

To conclude, while transnationalization bears many positive prospects for the integration of migrants and North-South relations, it also bears dangers. What seems like a comparative advantage at one point – for example Turkish entrepreneurs in Germany having access to cheap labor in their garment factories in Turkey or Iranian exiles having a secure political basis to struggle for more autonomy in France – can be a springboard to something entirely else for some, while it becomes a kind of trap for others, preventing them from making more successful moves within the regions that has (partly) become their new home. It is only when transnational migrants and their children also find a basis for their economic, political and cultural activities other than sending country or homeland affairs that elements of transnationalization can remain beneficial to them in the long run.