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2006

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MPRA Paper No. 109148, posted 11 Aug 2021 23:47 UTC

Transnationalism for Migration Studies: A Critical Review and Analysis

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Abstract

This study sets out a case for the adoption of a transnationalism paradigm for the study of migration. The scripture of transnationalism research is reviewed, along with key discontents, and recent trends in the field. This paper are introduced four definitions of transnationalism such as activities, relations, social fields and subjectivity. In addition, there are five identifiable critiques of the transnationalism concept explored. These critiques involve some very sound definitional observations on how transnational activities and relations are not so novel. Transnationalism retains its greatest possibility as a new conceptual approach, which can trouble traditional understandings of unidirectional movement and the expectation of assimilation. As a paradigm, transnationalism facilitates a holistic examination of the forms of mobility and communication. It also facilitates stronger theoretical attention to the relation between movement and identity. Some of the gaps of the emergent field are identified, and ways forward suggested.

Keywords: transnationalism, migration, paradigm, activities, relations, social fields, subjectivity

INTRODUCTION

Transnational refers to processes or arrangements that span the boundaries of two or more countries. It's often used to refer to processes or arrangements generated by people or organizations other than the governments of countries e.g. transnational corporations orchestrating processes of production and distribution that span national boundaries or the transnational social fields created by cross-border migrants who remain actively involved with people and places in the countries from which they've moved. In our mind, the transnational is not just a socio-spatial term but what called a chronotope, as much about time as space, specifically suggesting processes that not only span boundaries but also do so in a manner involving simultaneity.

Some people distinguish transnational corporations from multinational ones that are understood to run largely distinct operations in a plurality of countries. People who highlight this distinction often argue that, since the mid-1960s, transnational corporations have increasingly displaced multinational ones as the dominant organizational vehicles for the pursuit of profit; think of the auto industry, where companies like Ford used to produce cars in the U.S. largely for the U.S. market, in Britain for the British market, and so on but now have different parts of a car produced for them in different parts of the world and then bring them together for final assembly in the country where the cars will be sold or in a country from which they will be exported to their final destination.

Global strictly speaking refers to processes, interactions, and arrangements that encompass the entire planet or, perhaps, affect the entire planet even if they don't operate in every part of it. However, the term is often used more loosely to refer to any processes and

arrangements that operate beyond the limits of a single polity, especially ones that operate over long distances and connect people in different world regions. Some people who recognize that these processes don't encompass or even affect the entire planet are still willing to use the term in part because words that include nation(al) are, strictly speaking, only appropriate once a division into formally sovereign territorial states has become widespread if not ubiquitous. They're not really appropriate to earlier periods characterized by the dominance of empires and other kinds of polity; indeed, one might argue that it was not until the 1970s, with the disappearance of most formal colonial systems, that most of the world was organized around a system of formally sovereign territorial states, which may seem paradoxical given that this is precisely when some people see global arrangements as displacing earlier national ones to produce what they claim is a post-national world.

Some people prefer transnational to global because they want to be attentive to the specific and often limited geographies of processes and arrangements that span national boundaries and/or because it suggests the coexistence of countries and the processes that span their boundaries rather than the disappearance of both state boundaries and the power of national governments that is sometimes implied in references to the global.

This paper advocate the utility of a transnationalism paradigm for population studies. This review of the field strongly affirms the intellectual basis, and strategic advantage, in thinking about a transnational paradigm for the study of population movement. But before progressing to the abovementioned literature, and my substantive argument, it should define and introduce the concept of transnationalism.

TRANSNATIONALISM CONCEPT

Transnationalism is often used to describe and categorize certain activities, some of which are familiar to us as the normal activities of immigrants. These include the sending of remittances, gifts, correspondence, telephone contact, immigrant property ownership in countries of origin, political activity, and various forms of care and emotional networking (Basch et al 1994). Transnationalism has been defined as the multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states (Vertovec 1999). Through transnational activities, immigrants become trans-migrants able to maintain, build, and reinforce multiple linkages with their countries of origin (Glick et al 1992). Glick et al 1992; Glick & Fournon 1999) and Pries (1999) referred to the transnational social fields that migrants now lived in. More radically, there has been reference to a de-territorialized world, in which the power of the nation-state to control population movement, and other forms of circulation, has been increasingly weakened. The cultural and political specificities of national societies are combined with emerging multilevel and multinational activities in a new space beyond territorially delimited nation-states, inevitably questioning the link between territory and nation-state (Kastoryano, 2000).

A de-territorialized world, and of empowered mobile citizens, was explored most fully in Ong's analysis of Chinese immigrants in the USA (Ong & Nonini 1997). There has also been discussion of transnational subjectivity. This refers to people who have dual or multiple national loyalties, all of which may be primary. Many people today do advance global views or perspectives, they see themselves as world citizens (Hannerz 1992). Interestingly, this is a value that we inculcate in high school geography. In broad then, transnationalism has

been used in four general senses: to refer to specific activities, a set of relations, to a new social field or context, and to a subjectivity or perspective.

The exploding scholarship on transnationalism (Waldinger & Fitzgerald 2004), attempts have been made by some of the canonical contributors to define and reign-in the field. This focusing of the field was also in response to a series of criticisms that transnationalism was not a new phenomenon. Portes et al (1999) identified a series of conditions which needed to be met for an activity, or a relation, to be considered transnational. The specific criteria for transnationalism were: new types of linkage or movement; a massness of the activity; frequency; continuity; which together make the activity routine and normative (Portes et al 1999).

Two necessary conditions for transnationalism to emerge. These were technological advances in transport and communications, and the presence of networks through which transnational movement of, and communication by, ordinary people could flow (Portes et al. 1999; Pries 1999). Even the transnational discontents, Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004), accepted that the former is correct, they observed that the latter have existed for some time, and that this has given rise to new relations between migrants and nation-states and civil society. Kastoryano (2000) usefully pointed to other important conditions that have aided transnationalism, namely neo-liberalism, multiculturalism, as well as international NGOs. She also pointed to the important role of emotional ties and political convictions in driving transnationalism. Indeed, Portes et al.'s two-part set of conditions says too little about the affective conditions necessary to sustain a transnational field or a network, including obligations, nostalgia, patriotism and the like.

TYOLOGY

The attempts to provide direction to the field of transnationalism research a number of authors have attempted to categorize forms of transnationalism (Mannan & Kozlov 2005; Portes et al 1999; Ip et al 1997; Vertovec 1999). Each of these is worthy of review. Portes et al. (1999) identified three main forms of transnationalism: economic, political and socio-cultural. They also mapped those forms across a binary: transnationalism from below, and from above. The matrix that they developed was a very useful categorical device. Economic transnationalism included both the actions of transnational corporations, and the globe-trotting of elites, but also the cross-border economic activity of smaller sized businesses, and remittances. Political transnationalism included the work of expatriates militating against political regimes at home, as well as bilateral agreements between nations and the emerging influence of international NGOs. Instructive examples came from Guarnizo's (Portes et al 1999) work on the actions and influence of Dominican activists in the USA. Thirdly, all other forms of transnationalism were deposited within the socio-cultural category. Naming this residual and catch-all category as socio-cultural betrayed the epistemological emphases of those authors, and also, the nature of the transnational links they had studied. It revealed a strong political-economy emphasis. Even political transnationalism was identified as dependant upon labour migration.

They were quite clear in foregrounding economic matters, such as the development of capitalism, as key to the emergence of transnationalism (Mannan & Kozlov 2003; Portes et al 1999). Moreover, the socio-cultural examples provided by Portes et al. spoke quite weakly to issues of identity, belonging, attachment, and to cultural change more

broadly. Ip et al (1997) also conceived of a three-way division: relational, experiential, and legal. This categorization suggested a much stronger interest in matters of identity and citizenship. Relational transnationalism involved individual movements between two or more countries, whether to visit relatives, holidaying or to conduct business. It also included communications. Experiential transnationalism referred to sense of identity and belonging. This had important implications for the manner in which immigrants are incorporated into national spaces, and the new fields and forms of social relations and experiences that are in turn produced (Soysal 2000). Another important component of experiential transnational is the way immigrants imagine home, the way they remember their homelands, and perceive their new home both nationally and locally (Mannan & Kozlov 2001; Westwood & Phizacklea 2001). Another question is how identity and belonging are affected by the experience of racism and intolerance (Dunn & McDonald 2001; Mannan & Kozlov 1999; Vasta & Castles 1996)? A number of researchers have begun to pose questions about the emerging complexity of citizenship, in an era where individuals live in a transnational field (Castles & Davidson 2000; Faist 2000; Ip et al 1997; Soysal 2000; Mannan & Kozlov 1997).

Third category of legal transnationalism referred overtly to the formal attachments that trans-migrants have in different countries, including issues such as dual citizenship. Ip et al. (1997) referred to the notion of instrumental citizenship to describe a process elsewhere referred to as the commodification of citizenship. Researchers have speculated on how migrants obtain passports and citizenship for strategic reasons. These reasons could include the construction of escape routes to a safe haven, perhaps to avoid sovereign shock in

a country of origin. The Vancouver school of researchers have examined this in regard to Hong Kong emigrants to Canada ahead of the hand-over of the territory to the People's Republic of China (Ley & Kobayashi 2003; Mannan & Kozlov 1995).

Strategic citizenship could also be driven by a desire to access better or different standards of education for children. This form of citizenship is seen as problematic insofar as the migrants do not develop a strong symbolic attachment or nationalist loyalty. Citizenship can thus become a commodity: a marketable item with price tags (Ip et al 1997), and Ley's (2003) critical examination of the Business Migration schemes in Canada provides compelling evidence for that. Other evolving terms used to describe the attachments of legal transnationals have included: strategic citizenship, strategic transnationalism, and flexible citizens, the latter drawing on Ong's foundational use of that term to describe Chinese migrants in the USA (Ong 1999): transnational Chinese subjects, those most able to benefit from their participation in global capitalism celebrate flexibility and mobility.

It has far reaching implications for the concept of citizenship itself, which historically was tied to a single national affiliation. However, other research has indicated that the notion of instrumentality has become somewhat exaggerated, and that trans-migrants continue to be involved in local participation, loyalty and attachments (Mannan & Krueger 2004; Foner 2001; Waters 2003). Nonetheless, Ip et al.'s (1997) three-part categorization facilitated a much more fulsome focus on matters of identity and culture than did that by Portes et al. (1999). Vertovec's categorization identified six research themes for transnational research. These included: global or cross-national networks; global subjectivities, consciousness and perspectives; hybrid styles and fashions

and global media; economic interactions; political transnationalism, and; the emergence of new spaces of migration transnational social fields. The latter picked up on the work of Pries (1999; 2001) and Glick Schiller et al (1992; 1999) who referred to new social fields, or social spaces, of trans-migrants that were cross-border and multi-national.

Broader encapsulation of the field reads like a response to those attempts to narrow the field of transnationalism. Crang et al (2003) were more overt in their judgment, worrying about Portes et al.'s attempt to discipline the field. There is an undercurrent, within the work of Portes et al. (1999), of cynicism towards the work of cultural studies, and poststructuralist theory. Crang et al. (2003) pointed to a contradictory tendency within the programmatic statements on transnationalism. On the one hand there is broad recognition that the work undertaken in the field has been extremely good, including rich ethnographic work, and investigative political economies of considerable depth. At the same time, there have been constant calls for grounding of research, and for the gathering of empirical data. These betray disciplinary prejudices for certain types of work. Nonetheless the field has developed some trajectories and absences that are briefly reviewed towards the end of this paper.

New forms of movement and communication, and to transnational fields, has certain appeal. Mitchell (1997) observed that the term possesses a transgressive quality associated with the illicit sense of border crossings. Others in the field have described it as a new imaginary, superior to the term migration studies (Crang et al 2003) or even globalization (Conradson & Latham 2005). Transnationalism and international migration have troubling effects on both sending and receiving societies (Mannan & Krueger 2002; Castles 2000).

However, Vertovec (1999:459) concluded that transnationalism had its greatest utility as an umbrella concept, not necessarily a narrow descriptor of certain activities, or even certain social fields, or perspectives. Indeed, this is closest to the argument that want to articulate: transnationalism as paradigm.

INTEGRATION

The paradigmatic strength of transnationalism is most obvious, and where it has been oft-mentioned, is its strong concordance with the dual and multiple attachments of migrants. Earlier thinking, and policy-making, on immigrant settlement and incorporation followed a long-established Chicago School tradition of assuming that immigrants would over time gradually adopt the dominant culture of the society where they had settled, and that the culture of the origin would dissipate. Mitchell summarized the assumption well: In this view, migrants bring their culture with them and, after their arrival, become relatively less or more assimilated to the prevailing cultural norms of the new national territory (Mannan & Krueger 2000; Mitchell 1997).

This was premised on a circumstance in which international emigrants rarely tended to return. In the context of Irish emigration to North America, Australia and New Zealand this was referred to in shorthand as gone for good (Handlin 1973). According to Pries (1999), the movements were overwhelmingly unidirectional. The scope for return migration was influenced by economic fortunes, proximity and geopolitics, and the stronger it is potential the more inhibited was assimilation (Cohen & Gold 1997). Early commentators on transnationalism noted how the Chicago School assimilation theory was increasingly hard to apply in contemporary times (Mannan & Krueger 1998; Glick et al 1992): theories of assimilation and ethnic pluralism are

insufficient because they espouse a container concept of space – adaptation of immigrants within nation-states (Faist 2000). The limits of Chicago School concepts included the inability to reconcile cultural maintenance by immigrants as anything other than a short-term evil or an enduring pathology (Dunn 1998).

Integration theory became even further complicated by the emergence and/or expansion of the transnational activities introduced earlier. Routine communication and return visitation to a country of origin are likely to retard assimilation. A series of researchers have commented on the multiple memberships and loyalties that transnationalism gives rise to (Kastoryano 2000). Even the transnational discontents recognised the problems with the assimilation model (Waldinger & Fitzgerald 2004; Mannan & Krueger 1996). As Portes et al (1999) referred to this as one of the key theoretical challenges posed by transnationalism. It would turn that around slightly, and argue that the notion of transnationals dispenses fundamentally with assimilation, defeating a problematic assumption that has currency in most settler societies. However, Friesen et al (2005) referred to the local New Zealand impacts of a New Delhi announcement by the Indian Government in 2003 that dual citizenship would become available. Interestingly, the statement revealed how the aim was to encourage a broad Indian identity and attachment, but the government also insisted that those in the diaspora must maintain their loyalties to the nations where they were resident. This transnational legal pronouncement cannot be adequately theorized within the traditional and unidirectional understanding of migration and assimilation. The idea of assimilation has been a long-time shadow upon population geography and migration studies. In most settler societies

assimilation remains a dominant philosophy (Kymlicka & Norman, 2000), and it is strongly manifest in public opinion (Dunn et al 2004). A transnationalism paradigm thus exorcises a ghost that continues to haunt immigration theory, policy and politics.

THEORIZING OF IDENTITY

Interesting aspect of transnationalism is the way that it fundamentally embraces movement and identity. Migration researchers have known for some time that movement and identity are fundamentally linked. Of course, place and identity are also linked. But movement, and especially migration, has a fundamentally important relation with cultural change (Baldassar 2001). O'Connor's (2005) work on Irish-Australians in Melbourne has revealed the fundamental cultural roles of migration, providing new senses of the Other and the primary recognition of the Self their own culture hitherto not seen before their own migrancy (Struver 2005). Shia Iranians in Sydney, Vancouver and London talked to McAuliffe (2005) about visiting Iran to discover their identity or roots.

Movement is important to culture. The Vancouver based geographer, Dan Hiebert stated that in a transnational age: Identities are formed by movements as much as they are by the long-term relationship between people and place that is usually celebrated by geographers (Hiebert 2000). The relation between movement and identity has been poorly conceptualized, with the exception perhaps being the Chicago School. A transnationalism paradigm opens up new opportunities to theorize more deeply on the relation between movement and identity. Of course, in all of this, a focus on communication must come to rival our interest in movement.

THEORIZING OF MOVEMENT

Transnationalism offers renewed holistic vistas for migration and population studies. One could advance an argument that within population studies there has been a creeping compartmentalization of the study of movement. Research on immigration has become detached from emigration, and certainly from internal migration and mobility. Return migration has become a separated field of inquiry. There was no sense of such separation within Zelinsky's (1971) mobility transition, which embraced seven key forms of movement. What is more, Zelinsky engaged with the prospects of communication, and how that would affect movement. Indeed, there is a sense that some migration theorists have embraced transnationalism in part to assuage the intellectual separation of international emigration and circular forms of movement (Vertovec & Cohen 1999). For example, Ley and Kobayashi's (2003) work on return migrants from Canada to Hong Kong overtly discussed these movements as occurring within a transnational field, as did Waters' (2003) work on the so-called astronaut movements. In other words, transnationalism has been seen as a paradigm in which different forms of mobility can again be addressed holistically.

The case that in settler societies like Australia the focus of migration research in the last few decades has been overwhelmingly upon immigration. This has come at the expense of interest in internal movement, and also return migration. Exceptions to this have been the work of Burnley, Hugo and Bell. In New Zealand, the work of Lidgard, Ho, and Bedford also bucks that master trend. Of course, the research emphasis upon permanent immigration in Australia and New Zealand and other countries was undertaken for entirely an understandable reason – the massive settler

immigration programs from the 1950s to the 1980s (Castles & Kozack 1973).

However, this research emphasis neglects increasingly important forms of movement, including temporary migration: there has been a massive increase in global population movement and an increase in the complexity of the types of movement, permanent and temporary, legal and undocumented, forced and voluntary, work and non-work related, etc. In Australia much thinking about international migration remains anchored in a paradigm of movement that applied in the four decades following the Second World War, which focused almost entirely on permanent settlement (Hugo 2004). A transnational paradigm would re-integrate the research trajectories of emigration, immigration, temporary movement and visitation. It could also, Zelinsky-like, reintegrate movement and communication.

CRITICISM OF THE TRANSNATIONALISM

The critics of the emergent field of transnationalism have already been mentioned (Foner 1997; Waldinger & Fitzgerald 2004; WaltonRoberts 2005). In broad, five identifiable arguments have been advanced. Firstly, it has been pointed out that many of the activities that have been cast as transnational have been in operation for a long time, many for centuries. Foner (1997; Smith 2001) outlined how the contemporary migration, settlement and communication of certain cultural groups was strongly similar to that of decades before, and even previous centuries: Transnationalism is not new, even though it often seems as if it were invented yesterday (Foner 1997).

Therefore, Portes et al. (1999:219) posed the question of whether there was any point in coining new terms for analyzing old movements, hence their aforementioned attempt to limit the definition of transnationalism. However, the above criticism pre-supposes that the extant theory and policy frameworks for analyzing immigrant movement, settlement and identity were satisfactory. As it outlined earlier, regarding the assumptions of unidirectional movement and assimilation, it is not convinced that the extant paradigm was satisfactory. A second critique of transnationalism concerns the nature of the movements that are usually studied, and whether they are more appropriately referred to as inter-national movements. Waldinger and Fitzgerald's (2004) argument is that most of the subject matter of transnational research concerns dual identities, and communication and movement between two countries. They have argued that the term transnationalism should be reserved for discussions of identity and movements that are above or beyond nations (Waldinger & Fitzgerald 2004).

Thirdly, it is the observation that much of the activities studied are actually trans-local, between a village in one place and a suburb in another, and not transnational (Waldinger & Fitzgerald 2004). For example, Velayutham and Wise (2005) refer to the strong ties between Tamil Indians in Singapore and the specific villages where they or their families originated. The attachment to Indian-ness, and even Tamil, was an inferior consideration to village and caste identity. However, these movements and attachments nonetheless involve movements across borders, and in conceptual terms it matters little whether the attachments and movements involve only two or multiple nation-states.

Fourthly, from Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004), was their observation that the current

level of transnationalism is highly dependant upon the tolerance of nation-states and civil societies. They point to the restrictions on movement and communications that can quickly be generated in times of international conflict and tension. Moreover international movements are highly influenced by geopolitical relations. Finally, Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004) expressed concern at the public consumption of transnationalism, and especially the political effects from normalizing multiple national loyalties. Dual or multiple loyalties are still received suspiciously in most countries and by most people: In a world of mutually exclusive nation-states persons with foreign attachments are open to question, and all the more so when the relevant nation-states coexist on less than friendly terms (Waldinger & Fitzgerald 2004).

However, transnationals can easily become the despised enemies within or the traitors abroad. A current example is the circumstance of Arab and Muslim-Australians, who perceive themselves the brunt of new terror laws and police actions, and are disparaged in media and in government rhetoric (Islamic Council of New South Wales 2004; Klocker & Dunn 2003). However, it is not at all clear that the myths of assimilation did much to confront this sort of nationalist-based political intolerance. Indeed, a transnational paradigm in which dual and multiple national loyalties are normalized – may be a long-term remedy.

Finally, the carefully considered critiques of transnationalism, by the abovementioned discontents, were important reminders of the similarities between immigrants and trans-migrants. The discontents justifiably took issue with the definitional distinctiveness, or lack thereof, between previous and contemporary movement and communication, and the state reactions to it. However, none of this definitional correctness assuages the extant

limitations in traditional migration theory, policy and politics. Transnationalism retains its greatest merit as a troubling concept, and as a paradigm.

OTHER STUDIES AND TRANSNATIONALISM

The mold of transnationalism has not been without faults and preoccupations. It is important to briefly recount these here, ahead of a final advocacy on the virtue of the concept as a paradigmatic device (Dunn 2005). Four sets of gaps and pre-occupations can be identified. Firstly, there is a concern that transnationalism research has exaggerated the degree of mobility and agency in contemporary population movement. There remain a series of costs on mobility, and this continues to make access to international movement highly uneven. Moving is expensive and troubling, and it is still difficult to get bodies across national borders. Again, the crossing of borders is easier for some bodies than others. Nation-states have clung on to their powers over borders, and they remain important to assisting with migrant settlement. And peoples' mobility continues to be embedded within places and networks.

Secondly, work on transnationalism has tended not to engage with the darker sides of contemporary movement. A pre-occupation with agency and mobility, as just reviewed, has been linked to a celebratory emphasis. Yet trans-migrants are still migrants, and most require settlement assistance of some sort, and many face radicalized barriers, discrimination, and cultural hierarchies of privilege, as many migrants before them have. These experiences are likely to be an important influence on belonging and on movement and communication. Thirdly, during the first ten years of this emergent field of transnationalism there was an understandable emphasis on the

technological developments that have enabled or facilitated new and more frequent international movement and communication. However, these technologies do not explain why transnationalism occurs. Most of the discussion of the drivers of transnationalism has focused on economic maximization. Yet, there are a host of affective drivers of transnationalism that also require examination. Nostalgia, patriotism and political conviction are important drivers of political transnationalism. Other important drivers of return migration, and of visitation and communication include obligation, guilt, love and other emotions. These drivers of transnationalism are deserving of further research.

Finally, a recognized emphasis within the field has been the grounded and everyday examination of transnationalism. However, while the work has been well grounded, including excellent ethnographies and political economies, there has been a tendency to study migrant groups, and those known to be transnational. This has meant that there has been a research emphasis on ethnic minorities within settler societies. There has been a corresponding lack of work on transnationalism among non-minorities and on ordinary spaces. One way forward is to include grounded analyses of transnationalism among longer resident migrant groups, the so-called invisible migrant groups, and also nonmigrants. Similarly, there has been scant work at all on the links between transnationalism, however defined, and indigenous people, their cultures and their specific claims to citizenship.

CONCLUSION

Presumption is that the geographical and population studies impulse is to accept much of what it has outlined above. Observations regarding the continued friction of distance, the potency of nation-states, and the need for grounded observations and empirical data, will be received with little opposition. More radical suggestion is that population and migration studies should adopt the transnationalism paradigm as their own. Other disciplines have passing interests in the matters discussed above, including sociology, cultural studies, anthropology as well as globalization studies. However, it is in population and migration studies that the paradigm has the most to offer, particularly in the holism it offers. Bearing in mind the limitations of the field to date, and thinking through the ways forward that assuage those, the transnational paradigm promises to enliven population studies.

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