The Study of Transnationalism: Pitfalls and Promise of An Emergent Research Field

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The study of transnationalism: pitfalls and promise of an emergent research field

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Abstract

This introductory article defines the concept of transnationalism, provides a typology of this heterogeneous set of activities, and reviews some of the pitfalls in establishing and validating the topic as a novel research field. A set of guidelines to orient research in this field is presented and justified. Instances of immigrant political and economic transnationalism have existed in the past. We review some of the most prominent examples, but point to the distinct features that make the contemporary emergence of these activities across multiple national borders worthy of attention. The contents of this Special Issue and their bearing on the present understanding of this phenomenon and its practical implications are summarized.

Keywords: Transnationalism (economic, political, and socio-cultural); immigrant adaptation; national development; social networks; technological development; social capital.

This issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* was conceived as a vehicle to bring to the attention of scholars and policy-makers a phenomenon that has only recently caught the eye of researchers in the field of immigration. Through this collection, we seek to provide evidence of the existence of this phenomenon and to advance theoretical notions to facilitate its interpretation. The events in question pertain to the creation of a transnational community linking immigrant groups in the advanced countries with their respective sending nations and hometowns. While back-and-forth movements by immigrants have always existed, they have not acquired until recently the critical mass and complexity necessary to speak of an emergent social field. This field is composed of a growing number of persons who live dual lives: speaking two languages, having homes in two countries, and making a living through continuous regular contact across national borders. Activities within the transnational field comprise a whole gamut of economic, political and social initiatives –

ranging from informal import-export businesses, to the rise of a class of binational professionals, to the campaigns of home country politicians among their expatriates.

The growing number of ties linking persons across countries and the fluidity and diversity of these exchanges has given rise to many contradicting claims. In some writings, the phenomenon of transnationalism is portrayed as novel and emergent, whereas in others it is said to be as old as labour immigration itself. In some cases, transnational entrepreneurs are depicted as a new and still exceptional breed, whereas in others all immigrants are said to be participants in the transnational community. Finally, these activities are sometimes described as a reflection and natural accompaniment of the globalization of capital, whereas in others they are seen as a grass-roots reaction to this very process (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992; Basch 1994; Guarnizo 1994; Smith 1995.)

Transnational migration studies form a highly fragmented, emergent field which still lacks both a well-defined theoretical framework and analytical rigour. Narratives presented in existing studies, for example, often use disparate units of analysis (that is, individuals, groups, organizations, local states) and mix diverse levels of abstraction. This tendency threatens to frustrate the viability of an otherwise promising topic of research. In this issue, we present several diverse points of view, not all of which agree with our own, in the spirit of providing a representative overview of knowledge in this area. However, we also advance a set of conceptual guidelines, adhered to in our own empirical study of the topic, that seeks to turn the concept of transnationalism into a clearly defined and measurable object of research. We summarize these guidelines next as a way of fleshing out our present understanding of this concept and of facilitating its investigation. As will be evident shortly, these rules are of general applicability, but they are particularly important in a new and still fragile area of research.

Studying transnationalism: some pitfalls

1. Establish the phenomenon

As Robert Merton (1987) admonished us, it is of no use attempting to explain a phenomenon whose existence has not been proved. Surprising, as it may seem, it is not so uncommon in the social sciences that elaborate explanations are advanced for processes whose reality remains problematic.[1] In the case of transnationalism, it is not enough to invoke anecdotes of some immigrants investing in businesses back home or some governments giving their expatriates the right to vote in national elections to justify a new field of study. To establish the phenomenon, at least three conditions are necessary:

a) the process involves a significant proportion of persons in the relevant universe (in this case, immigrants and their home country counterparts);
b) the activities of interest are not fleeting or exceptional, but possess certain stability and resilience over time;
c) the content of these activities is not captured by some pre-existing concept, making the invention of a new term redundant.

2. Delimit the phenomenon

The last condition above already suggests the following one. Once the reality of an event or process is established, it is important to delimit its scope to avoid redundancy with objects already studied under other concepts. Nothing is gained, for example, by calling immigrants 'transmigrants', when the earlier and more familiar term is perfectly adequate to describe the subjects in question. Delimiting the scope of predication of a term is also necessary to avoid its spurious extension to every aspect of reality, a common experience when a particular concept becomes popular.[2] For the case in hand, if all or most things that immigrants do are defined as 'transnationalism', then none is because the term becomes synonymous with the total set of experiences of this population. To be useful, a new term should designate a distinct class of activities or people different from those signified by more familiar concepts.

For purposes of establishing a novel area of investigation, it is preferable to delimit the concept of transnationalism to occupations and activities that require regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders for their implementation. Thus defined, the concept encompasses, for example, the travels of a Salvadoran *viajero* delivering mail and supplies to immigrant kin on a monthly basis or those of a Dominican garment shop owner going to New York several times a year to sell her wares and acquire new fabrics and designs for her business. By the same token, it excludes the occasional gifts of money and kind sent by immigrants to their kin and friends (not an occupation) or the one-time purchase of a house or lot by an immigrant in his home country (not a regular activity).

Clearly, as Itzigsohn *et al.* (1998) point out, the occasional contacts, trips and activities across national borders of members of an expatriate community also contribute to strengthening the transnational field but, by themselves, these contacts are neither novel enough, nor sufficiently distinct, to justify a new area of investigation. What constitutes truly original phenomena and, hence, a justifiable new topic of investigation, are the high intensity of exchanges, the new modes of transacting, and the multiplication of activities that require cross-border travel and contacts on a sustained basis.

3. Define the unit of analysis

As in other areas of human activity, transnationalism involves individuals, their networks of social relations, their communities, and broader institutionalized structures such as local and national governments. The existing literature on the subject tends to mix these various levels, referring at times to the efforts and achievements of individual migrants, others to the transformation of local communities in receiving and sending countries, and still others to the initiatives of home governments seeking to co-opt the loyalty and resources of their expatriates. This mix contributes to growing confusion as to what the concept refers to and what its proper scope of predication is.

For methodological reasons, we deem it appropriate to define the individual and his/her support networks as the proper unit of analysis in this area. Other units, such as communities, economic enterprises, political parties, etc also come into play at subsequent and more complex stages of inquiry. Yet, the individual and his/her networks comprise the most viable point of departure in the investigation of this topic. This choice is not based on any *a priori* philosophical position, nor is it intended to deny the reality and importance of broader structures. On the contrary, we believe that a study that begins with the history and activities of individuals is the most efficient way of learning about the institutional underpinnings of transnationalism and its structural effects. From data collection based on individual interviews, it then becomes possible to delineate the networks that make transnational enterprises possible, identify the transnational entrepreneurs' counterparts in the home country, and garner information to establish the aggregate structural effects of these activities.

The choice of individuals as a point of departure for inquiry into this field is also motivated by its own origins. Grass-roots transnational activities were not initiated by actions or policies of governments, national or local. Nor were they the brainchild of large corporate managers. Instead, these activities commonly developed *in reaction* to governmental policies and to the condition of dependent capitalism fostered on weaker countries, as immigrants and their families sought to circumvent the permanent subordination to which these conditions condemned them (Portes and Guarnizo 1991; Roberts *et al*. 1998). State-sponsored transnationalism emerged, for the most part, subsequently as governments realized the importance of their expatriate communities and sought to circumvent or co-opt their initiatives (Smith 1996).

4. Distinguish types

The heterogeneity of these activities suggests the logical next step. Not everything that falls within the scope of a given concept needs to be the

same, either in terms of the form or purpose of the activities involved. A common mistake in the research literature inspired by certain theoretical ideas is to exclude a range of events or activities just because they are not identical to those that prompted the idea in the first place, even when they share many of the same characteristics.

Within the definition of transnationalism given previously, it is possible to accommodate a number of diverse activities. An initial working typology grounded on this concept would distinguish between the economic initiatives of transnational entrepreneurs who mobilize their contacts across borders in search of suppliers, capital and markets *versus* the political activities of party officials, government functionaries, or community leaders whose main goals are the achievement of political power and influence in the sending or receiving countries. A third and more diverse category comprises the manifold socio-cultural enterprises oriented towards the reinforcement of a national identity abroad or the collective enjoyment of cultural events and goods. This type of transnationalism includes the travels of musical folk groups to perform before immigrant audiences, the organization of games in the national sport between immigrant teams and those from the home country, the election of expatriate beauty queens to represent the immigrant community in national pageants, and the celebration of holidays abroad with participation of prominent political or artistic figures who travel to immigrant centres for that purpose.

This working typology of economic, political and socio-cultural transnationalism has undergirded our empirical study of the topic and has proved useful in organizing what otherwise would be a chaotic set of activities. Several of the ensuing articles make use of this typology to present and interpret their respective empirical material. A second useful distinction is between transnational activities initiated and conducted by powerful institutional actors, such as multinational corporations and states, and those that are the result of grass-roots initiatives by immigrants and their home country counterparts. These various enterprises have been respectively dubbed transnationalism 'from above' and 'from below' (Guarnizo 1997a).

From an individual standpoint, both types fall appropriately within the definition of the concept. Thus, a diplomatic official or representative of a political party abroad is a transnational actor, as is the executive of a large corporation sent to work in a foreign country. These activities differ in organization, resources and scope from those of 'grass-roots' economic and political entrepreneurs. By bringing both types under the same conceptual umbrella, it becomes possible to highlight their similarities as well as to study systematically their distinct features. Table 1 presents a cross-tabulation of the two sets of types — by nature of activities and level of institutionalization — and illustrates them with examples from the existing literature.

Table 1. *Transnationalism and its types*

Level of institutionalization		Sector		
		Economic	Political	Socio-cultural
	Low	– Informal cross-country traders – Small businesses created by returned immigrants in home country – Long-distance circular labour migration	– Home town civic committees created by immigrants – Alliances of immigrant committee with home country political associations – Fund raisers for home country electoral candidates	– Amateur cross-country sport matches – Folk music groups making presentations in immigrant centres – Priests from home town visit and organize their parishioners abroad
	High	– Multinational investments in Third World countries – Development for tourist market of locations abroad – Agencies of home country banks in immigrant centres	– Consular officials and representatives of national political parties abroad – Dual nationality granted by home country governments – Immigrants elected to home country legislatures	– International expositions of national arts – Home country major artists perform abroad – Regular cultural events organized by foreign embassies

At least some of the activities that fall within the label of trans-
nationalism from above are well known and have been examined from
alternative conceptual focuses, including economic globalization, inter-
national relations, or cultural diffusion (Sassen 1991; Meyer *et al.* 1997).
For this reason, the emergent literature on transnationalism has focused,
albeit not exclusively, on the less institutionalized initiatives of ordinary
immigrants and their home country counterparts. They represent the
more novel and distinct development in this area and, hence, the one that
deserves greatest attention. Consular officials have been a common sight
for centuries and multinational corporation managers have been well
researched during the last decades; immigrant civic committees that liter-
ally take over public policy or public works in their hometowns have not.
For this reason, most of the case-studies included in this issue concen-
trate on this grass-roots level.

5. Identify necessary conditions

Theorizing about the determinants and practical implications of present-
day transnationalism must await the presentation and analysis of
additional evidence. It is, however, possible at this point to take a first
step in this direction by identifying the preconditions that make the
phenomenon possible. This is because identification of these necessary
conditions does not depend so much on new empirical evidence as on the
logical contrast with earlier periods of immigration, when the same
activities were not in evidence.

Transnational enterprises did not proliferate among earlier immi-
grants because the technological conditions of the time did not make
communications across national borders rapid or easy. It was not poss-
ible for would-be transnational entrepreneurs to travel to Poland or Italy
over the weekend and be back at their jobs in New York by Monday. Nor
would it have been possible for leaders of an immigrant civic committee
to keep in daily contact with the mayor of a Russian or Austrian town in
order to learn how a public works project, financed with immigrant
money, was progressing. Communications were slow and, thus, many of
the transnational enterprises described in today's literature could not
have developed.

The ready availability of air transport, long-distance telephone, fac-
simile communication, and electronic mail provides the technological
basis for the emergence of transnationalism on a mass scale. While these
technical innovations have enabled governments and major corporations
to accelerate the process of transnationalism from above, their potential
has not been lost on ordinary people who have availed themselves of the
same facilities to implement their own brand of long-distance enter-
prises. The image of the immigrant businessman on his way to the airport
to pick up a consignment of foreign goods shipped the previous day,

while talking on his mobile telephone to a home country partner and sending a fax to another could not have materialized as early as two decades ago.

Identification of necessary conditions for the rise of a phenomenon is helpful as a guide for empirical research and also as a source of new hypotheses. With the case in hand, if technological innovations represent a necessary condition for the rise of grass-roots transnationalism, it follows that the greater the access of an immigrant group to space- and time-compressing technology, the greater the frequency and scope of this sort of activity. Immigrant communities with greater average economic resources and human capital (education and professional skills) should register higher levels of transnationalism because of their superior access to the infrastructure that makes these activities possible.

By the same token, if a second necessary condition for this phenom-enon is the establishment of networks across space, it follows that the more distant the nation of origin is the less dense the set of transnational enterprises, other things being equal. This hypothesis is grounded on the higher cost and generally greater difficulty of regular contact imposed by longer distances, thus reducing the relative proportion of immigrants able to engage in transnational activities. On the contrary, those whose home countries are a short hop away and who are linked to them by a dense network of communications are in a generally better position to initiate cross-border ventures. Obviously, the space-compressing power of modern electronics allows persons who have command of these resources to engage in transnational activities without the need for face-to-face contact. Hence, the barrier of distance gradually diminishes as communities become able to substitute traditional personal contact with new electronic means of communication.

Variants and exceptions to these hypotheses exist and to identify them, as well as the forces giving rise to each, there is no substitute for field research in sending and receiving areas. This is the methodology on which case-studies and analyses reported in the articles included in this issue of *ERS* are based.

Transnationalism in historical perspective

Though lacking the contemporary technologies of communications and transportation, precursors of present immigrant transnationalism have existed for centuries. As noted previously, return migration and periodic visits to home communities have always taken place, at least among free labour migrants. Similarly, regular contacts have always existed among participants in political diasporas forced to resettle in a number of differ-ent countries (Cohen 1997). Russian Jews escaping the tsarist Pale of Settlement at the turn of the twentieth century represent a prominent example (Rischin 1962; Howe 1976). So do Armenians fleeing from

Turkish oppression (Noiriel 1995), or the vast Spanish diaspora follow-
ing the fascist victory in that country (Weil 1991; Sole 1995).

While these activities of immigrants and refugees across national
borders reinforced bonds between the respective communities, they
lacked the elements of regularity, routine involvement, and critical mass
characterizing contemporary examples of transnationalism. Few immi-
grants actually lived in two countries in terms of their routine daily activi-
ties. While most dreamed of going back one day, this long-term goal was
countermanded by the concerns and needs of their new lives and, for
many, eventually faded away (Handlin 1973; Thomas and Znaniecki
1984).

There have, however, been some examples of economic and political
transnationalism in history. They include what Curtin (1984) has labelled
'trade diasporas'; that is, communities composed of itinerant merchants
who settled in foreign jurisdictions in order to engage in commerce.
Those who simply settled abroad and became progressively integrated
into local ways fit more appropriately the definition of immigrant entre-
preneurs. Yet those who self-consciously preserved their distinct identi-
ties as members of a trading diaspora, cultivating their networks across
space, and travelling back and forth in pursuit of their commercial ven-
tures can legitimately be dubbed transnational entrepreneurs.

Thus, the foreign enclaves established by Venetian, Genoese and
Hanse merchants throughout medieval Europe and identified by Pirenne
(1970) with the revival of European trade symbolize an early example of
economic transnationalism under difficult political conditions. The inter-
national activities of Genoese bankers under the protection of their
Spanish Habsburg allies were so considerable as to have been identified,
by at least one author, as initiators of the 'first wave' of modern capital-
ist accumulation (Arrighi 1994). Enclaves of commercial representatives
engaged in various forms of transnational trade were established by the
Portuguese, Dutch and English in successive stages of the European
colonization of Africa and the Americas (Dobb 1963; Hardoy 1969;
Arrighi 1994). In more recent times the overseas Chinese represent a
typical example of a community of transnational traders (Freedman
1959; Lim 1983; Granovetter 1995).

Note the difference between these exceptional cases and the vast
movement of European settlers into the newly-opened lands of Africa,
the Americas and Oceania. Like subsequent labour immigrants, immi-
grant colonizers harboured dreams of riches and eventual return, but
their daily activities confronted them with the realities of a new country
and, in the process, many became permanently settled in the colonies
(Wittke 1952; Tilly 1978; Portes and Walton 1981; Tinker 1995). By and
large, early examples of economic transnationalism were of an élite type,
involving merchants and commercial representatives of some means who
maintained a firm affiliation with their home offices and communities,

and who relied on long-distance networks for their own economic survival.

For examples of a more popular type of precursors to contemporary transnational activities, one must wait for the onset of induced circular labour migrations in the nineteenth century. The organization of circular movements of formally free foreign labourers across state borders does not materialize on a massive scale until that time. It corresponds to a period of relatively advanced industrial capitalism, where the expansion of industry and commercial agriculture ran up against the barrier of dwindling domestic labour supplies (Lebergott 1964). There is no question that the agents who engaged in organizing this traffic were transnational entrepreneurs. What made the venture transnational for the labourers themselves was their short tenure abroad, their dependence on home country networks for initiating the trip and investing its eventual profits, and the regularity with which subsequent trips were made (Galarza 1977; Cohen 1988; Noiriel 1995).

The mass US-bound European labour migration at the turn of the twentieth century seldom took the form of a deliberately organized circular labour flow. However, other movements were. They include the mass recruitment of Poles for work in the heavy industries and mines of the Ruhr in Bismarck Germany (Weber 1906 [1958]), the engagement of Algerians and other North Africans by pre-World War II French industry (Weil 1991), and the mass labour migration of Mexicans to the American Southwest (Santibá ez 1930; Barrera 1980). Indeed, the popularity of Mexican labour for American ranchers and railroad builders hinged on its temporary orientation and willingness to return when no longer needed. This feature became permanently institutionalized with the onset of the *Bracero* accord between Mexico and the United States (Samora 1971; Portes and Bach 1985).

Instances of early political transnationalism were even less common, but those that existed frequently had momentous consequences. They include the dedicated efforts of certain leaders and activists abroad to liberate their native lands from foreign control or to support a nascent national state. Examples were commonly found among immigrants coming from stateless nations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Glazer (1954, p. 161), the first paper in the Lithuanian language was published in the United States and the nation of Czechoslovakia was, in a sense, 'made in America', under the leadership of the sociologist Tomas Masaryk.

Labour immigrants seldom engaged in this kind of transnational politics full time, but they provided the money and moral support to keep the cause alive at home. Under the leadership of its honorary president, Paderewski, the Polish Relief Central Committee in the United States contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to the cause of Polish national liberation in the early twentieth century (Glazer 1954;

Rosenblum 1973). The Republic of Cuba was also, in a sense, founded in New York, first under the leadership of Jose Marti and his Cuban Revolutionary Party, and then through the agitation of exiles that helped to bring about US intervention against Spain (Thomas 1971, pp. 291–309; Portell-Vila 1986, pp. 29–33).

These examples make clear that contemporary transnationalism had plenty of precedents in early migration history. Yet these examples were, for the most part, exceptional and lacked the novel features that have captured the attention of researchers and that justify the coining of a new concept. For all their significance, early transnational economic and political enterprises were not normative or even common among the vast majority of immigrants, nor were they undergirded by the thick web of regular instantaneous communication and easy personal travel that we encounter today. Contemporary transnationalism corresponds to a different period in the evolution of the world economy and to a different set of responses and strategies by people in a condition of disadvantage to its dominant logic. Herein lies the import of its emergence.

Significance of the transnational field

The rise of different forms of grass-roots transnationalism has both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, because it represents a distinct form of immigrant adaptation to those described in the past literature. Practically, because it offers an option to ordinary people not present in the past, either in their own countries or in those to which they migrate. As the process acquires momentum, grass-roots transnationalism has the potential of subverting one of the fundamental premises of capitalist globalization, namely that labour stays local, whereas capital ranges global. By availing themselves of the same technologies that make corporate strategies possible, transnational entrepreneurs not only deny their own labour to would-be employers at home and abroad but become conduits of information for others. In this manner, they help to reduce the informational gap between those engaged in the expansion of 'transnationalism from above' and subordinate groups formerly at the mercy of these strategies.

This line of reasoning, based on the empirical material available so far, can be summarized in three substantive propositions. They do not address the basic preconditions of transnationalism, as above, nor its specific determinants in given countries but the broad dynamics of the phenomenon and its potential implications: 1) the emergence of these activities is tied to the logic of capitalist expansion itself; 2) while following well-established principles of social network development, transnational communities represent a phenomenon at variance with conventional expectations of immigrant assimilation; 3) because transnational enterprise is fuelled by the dynamics of capitalism, it has greater

potential as a form of individual and group resistance to dominant structures than alternative strategies. These substantive propositions rely for empirical justification on descriptive studies of several immigrant communities, but a brief clarification of their rationale is in order.

1. Transnationalism and capitalist expansion

The real and growing demand for immigrant labour in the advanced countries furnishes the raw material for the rise of transnational enterprise. Different groups of employers in the First World have required and benefited from the presence of immigrant workers, but the latter also learn to adapt to their new conditions. Unlike the situation earlier in the century, when immigrants were mainly employed in industry, at present they cluster in low-paid agriculture and menial services with few possibilities for advancement (Sassen 1989, 1995; Roberts 1995). These conditions provide every incentive to seek other avenues for economic mobility, among which knowledge and access to goods and services across national borders represent an important one.

Technological advances in long-distance transport and communications facilitate exploiting these opportunities for reasons we have already examined. In this fashion, a class of transnational entrepreneurs emerges to bridge the distinct but complementary needs of migrant and home country populations. Demand for news and information, foods and cultural products from their home country is high in expatriate communities, while desire for appliances, advanced electronic products, and investments financed by immigrant capital is widespread among the population left behind. The presence of multinational corporations and the efficient marketing of their products in most sending countries fuels these desires by creating new consumption aspirations, difficult to fulfil by people within the limits of Third World economies (Alba 1978; Portes and Böröcz 1989; Grasmuck and Pessar 1991). Immigrants provide a ready solution by acquiring abroad and sending the desired goods to kin and friends and by making them accessible to others at cut-rate prices.

2. Immigrant adaptation

In keeping with the assumption that labour stays local, the immigration literature has generally assumed that, once newcomers arrive, they settle in the host society and undergo a gradual but inevitable process of assimilation (Gordon 1964; Alba 1985; Alba and Nee 1997). This literature makes allowance for a flow of returnees to their home countries, but not for sizeable back-and-forth movements and regular exchanges of tangible and intangible goods between places of origin and destination. These movements and the binational field that they gradually create amount to an alternative adaptation path for immigrants in the advanced

world. Whereas, previously, economic success and social status depended exclusively on rapid acculturation and entrance into mainstream circles of the host society, at present they depend (at least for some) on culti- vating strong social networks across national borders.

For immigrants involved in transnational activities and their home country counterparts, success does not so much depend on abandoning their culture and language to embrace those of another society as on pre- serving their original cultural endowment, while adapting instrumentally to a second (Goldring 1996; Guarnizo 1997b). In the United States it is thus possible for immigrants to engage in transnational activities without knowing English well and while remaining marginal to the American social mainstream. This alternative path to economic and status achieve- ment opens a host of new adaptation possibilities involving both immi- grants and their offspring.

Some of these still unexplored possibilities include: a) successful trans- national entrepreneurs eventually returning home, taking their children with them; b) transnationals giving up these activities to seek full assimi- lation into the receiving society; c) their remaining indefinitely in the transnational field, but their children becoming fully assimilated to the host society; d) parents passing on to their offspring both their trans- national skills and outlooks, perpetuating this social field across gener- ations. It is still too early to tell which of these (or other) alternatives will become dominant, but it seems clear that they can transform the nor- mative assimilation story, with major consequences for both sending and receiving countries.

3. *Effective resistance*

The international expansion of capitalism in search of broader markets and cheaper labour has led to various attempts to resist its depredations. A prominent example is the 'labour standards' movement which has sought to halt the wholesale transfer of low-tech industry to less devel- oped countries by imposing First World labour standards on these nations (Piore 1990). The idea, supported by trade unionists and some institutional economists, is to condition access of Third World imports to markets in the advanced countries to the observance of protective labour covenants. Goods produced under conditions of high labour exploitation would be barred and, in this manner, workers' rights in both advanced and poorer nations could be protected (Fields 1990).

The difficulty with these lofty ideals is that it is difficult to put them into practice. Enforcement of labour standards falls mainly into the hands of Third World governments that are either not up to the task or are unwilling to carry it out. There is good reason for this unwillingness, since too strict an enforcement of labour codes would simply stimulate foreign industries to move to the next low-wage country (Portes 1994).

For this reason, manufactured imports from numerous Third World countries continue to flow into the United States and Western Europe with not a question asked about the labour conditions under which they were produced.

Under the conditions set by global capitalism at present, mobilization of social networks for engagement in transnational ventures offers to Third World workers and immigrants abroad a superior alternative. This is because the viability of these activities does not depend on cumbersome legal covenants or the goodwill of government officials, but on the skills of individuals and the activation of their social capital. For this reason, a number of ordinary people have ceased awaiting redress from distant governments and ponderous international bureaucracies to confront the challenges of the new capitalist world economy on their own. The process can become cumulative and in time, embrace a sizeable proportion of the relevant populations (Sassen 1988; Guarnizo 1992; Portes and Dore 1994).

Just as in the past, migration abroad became 'the thing to do' in certain Third World countries and localities (Cornelius 1982, 1987; Massey 1987; Massey and Goldring 1994); in time transnational activities may evolve into *the* normative adaptation path among those groups seeking to escape the fate of cheap labour at home or abroad. It should be noted, however, that the parallels between economic transnationalism from above, as sponsored by multinational corporations, and its grass-roots counterpart, are only partial. Though both make extensive use of new technologies and depend on price and information differentials across borders, large corporate actors rely primarily on their financial muscle to make such ventures possible, whereas immigrants depend on their social capital. The long-distance networks that underlie the viability of such small enterprises are constructed through a protracted and frequently painful process of adaptation to a foreign society (Mahler 1995; Smith 1995; Goldring 1996). In turn, the onset of this strategy leads to the expansion of cross-border ties. In this manner, transnational enterprise expands and thickens cumulatively the original web of social relations that made it possible.

Summary of contents

Four contributions to this special issue of *ERS* present findings from our ongoing comparative research project of transnational ties among immigrants and their home country counterparts in three Latin American nations. Research on Colombian, Dominican and Salvadoran transnationalism was undertaken on the basis of informant surveys in two large immigrant communities for each nationality in the United States and two cities in the country of origin. Findings suggest broad structural similarities between the three cases, but also confirm the great heterogeneity

across transnational social fields. The study also establishes, with cer-
tainty, that for Colombia, the Dominican Republic and El Salvador the
transnational practices and processes implemented by their migrants have
become an important feature of local societies and economies.

In their article, Guarnizo and his collabourators provide what they
refer to as a general inventory of the economic, political and socio-
cultural ties that bind Colombians in New York City and Los Angeles
with their country of origin. Exploring the Colombian presence in New
York City, the authors confirm the continued importance of Jackson
Heights as an epicentre of Colombian entrepreneurship and trans-
nationalism. Colombian transnationalism in Los Angeles pales in com-
parison to its East Coast counterpart. In the light of the differences across
the two urban settings, these authors hypothesize that local contexts play
a critical role in mediating the scope and depth of migrants' transnational
practices.

The findings of the US-based research team are complemented by
those of their Colombia-based collaborators. Guarnizo and Luz Díaz
provide a brief but critical history of Colombian political economy and
of the urban centres in which fieldwork was undertaken. They examine
the transformatory impact that the international drug cartels have had
on the local economy, labour market and society of these two cities.
Fieldwork in both Colombia and the United States indicates that the
Colombian transnational social field is characterized by fragmentation
and distrust. Race, class and regional divisions fuse with the suspicion
and fear unleashed by the spectre of the international drug cartels to
erode sources of community social capital.

Dominican migration patterns have been the subject of much scholarly
research over the years. Itzigsohn and his collaborators provide a
thorough review of this literature, focusing on the development of a con-
ceptual map for understanding the Dominican transnational social field.
A panoply of Dominican transnational practices are categorized as
'narrow' or 'broad' based on their level of institutionalization and the
extent to which they require peoples' active participation and geographic
mobility. The authors' discussion of political transnationalism is particu-
larly illuminating. On the narrow end of the continuum, they estimate
that 10 to 15 per cent of Dominican political campaign funds are raised
in New York City, while broad transnational political influence is exer-
cised by migrants who, often quite unwittingly, determine the voting pat-
terns of their non-migrant kin.

The final country in the comparative study is the war-torn nation of El
Salvador. Landolt and her collaborators argue that Salvadorans' dra-
matic exit from their country of origin and their hostile reception in the
United States largely explains the initial propensity among Salvadorans
to forge and sustain transnational relations. They propose a dialectical
framework for analysing the interactions between Salvadoran migrants

in Los Angeles and Washington, DC, with different élite and popular sectors of their country of origin. The transnational engagement of Salvadoran economic and political élites with the immigrant grass roots results in the consolidation of migrants as critical agents of social, political and economic change in El Salvador.

Popkin's article on the Kanjobal Maya of Guatemala explores the relationship between settlement, ethnic identity and transnationalism. As the author recounts, migration to and settlement in Los Angeles, a predominantly Spanish-speaking milieu, presents new challenges and obstacles to the preservation of Mayan identity. Racism and exclusion prompt a 'reactive ethnic' formation through which the Kanjobal do not simply appropriate symbols of the homeland, but actually forge transnational relations that serve to reaffirm their Mayan identity. Transnational organizations, including home town associations and parish church groups, become a critical instrument in this collective effort. But as Mayan organizations in Los Angeles accumulate resources, they become, in turn, targets for co-optation by institutions created by the Guatemalan élite.

Glick Schiller and Fouron examine political discourses in the Haitian diaspora to investigate the ideologies underlying the formation of transnationalized nation-states. The authors suggest that their construction rests on a racialized notion of national identity as based on descent and bloodlines. Across class and generational differences, Haitians consistently make references to Haitianness as blood-ties but the latent functions of this discourse vary across social strata. For Haitians who depend on family remittances, the use of a racialized Haitian identity serves to legitimize their survival strategies. In the diaspora, the sanguinity of Haitianness preserves self-esteem in the face of discrimination while, for Haiti's political élite, its popular discourse and the transactions it guarantees become the basis for the formation of a transnational nation-state.

David Kyle presents a fascinating historical account of the development of an entrepreneurial transnational migration, namely the indigenous Quichua-speaking Otavalans of Northern Ecuador. The author describes how present-day Otavalans scout South America for marketable handicrafts and then travel to Europe, North America and Asia, stopping in large cities to recreate 'authentic' Indian markets for local seekers of exotica. In effect, the Otavalans have emerged as the principal brokers of native crafts from Latin America in the global economy. In the process, their identity as an entrepreneurial transnational group has been greatly strengthened.

In their article, Bryan Roberts and his collaborators investigate the causes and consequences of what they identify as a major reorganization of Mexican migration patterns. They argue that changes in social and economic conditions in Mexico and in urban economies and legislation

in the United States are restructuring the established Mexico-US migration system. The most significant shift is from a pattern of tempo- rary migration towards a transnational migration system in which migrants settle abroad but sustain significant ties with their places of origin. In the light of this hybrid migration system, the authors introduce Hirschman's concepts of Exit, Voice and Loyalty to explore the dilem- mas faced by migrants and by the sending states. They hypothesize that a transnational migration pattern results when both the return pull of sending communities and retaining power of receiving economies are high. These ideas are then applied to an analysis of rural and urban migrants living in Austin, Texas.

Jointly, the empirical case-studies examined in these articles attest to the reality of the transnational field as well as to its internal heterogene- ity. While these studies generally confirm our earlier assertion concern- ing the technological prerequisites for the rise of transnational activities on a large scale, they also point to the unique forces in different coun- tries and immigrant communities that have triggered their start. Reasons of a political order figure high in the onset of Salvadoran transnational- ism, whereas those underpinning the Otavalans' world-ranging enter- prises are grounded in the centuries-old history and internal bonds of solidarity in this Andean community. Colombian migration is heavily marked by the ramifications of the international drug trade, while a century-old Mexican labour migration becomes increasingly entrepre- neurial and transnational in response to changing relations between sending and receiving countries. As a whole, the research reported in the following pages offers a solid basis for advancing theory in this emergent field as well as guidelines for future policy in sending and receiving coun- tries. We take up each of these issues in the Conclusion.

Notes

1.   Examples are unfortunately numerous and range from treatises on hypothetical psychoanalytic concepts to more recent disquisitions on 'post-modernity', to name but a few. Extensive analyses have been devoted to such topics without a firm basis for estab- lishing their existence or the range of empirical phenomena that they are supposed to encompass.

2.   Once again, examples are not difficult to find. They include such terms as 'significant other', 'charisma', and, more recently, 'globalization', each of which has been applied in many disparate contexts. That proliferation of uses has led to contradictory interpretations and to the loss of the terms' heuristic value. As they devolved into journalistic clichés, they gradually ceased to be objects of serious scientific investigation. For the case of another imperilled concept, social capital, see Portes and Landolt (1996).

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