

## **SOC585 MIGRATION AND TRANSNATIONALISM – MIGRATING PEOPLE, MIGRATING CULTURE: OPTICS, METHODS, AND IMPACTS (Fall 2013)**

### Final exam

#### Q.1

*Sanjeev Khagram and Peggy Levitt (2007) identify five intellectual foundations of contemporary transnational scholarship. Please identify them and discuss briefly selected text(s) from the syllabus as examples of each of these intellectual foundations.*

The first intellectual foundation of transnational studies is represented by *empirical transnationalism*. To empirically study transnational activities and identities means to describe, map, and classify them, using also ethnographic and comparative-historical strategies of research in order to look at social spaces in which transnational phenomena emerge, what flows within them and the mechanism of transmission. This sort of study of transnationalism ranges from the analysis of discourses, to the material flows, cultural interaction and circulation of artistic genres that cross borders. Anything that is produced and exchanged across borders, how it moves, why some take roots and others don't, is of interest. This type of analysis points to the ways in which actors are embedded in transnational social fields, for example to identify people that are the transmitters of new ideas and practices while others are translators or transformers. Moreover the structural features of transnational organizations has been researched within this field. Levitt and Nieves (2011) contribute to this discussion with their research on social remittances. Even though this paper encompasses more than one of the intellectual foundations of transnationalism, one of its most salient points is the empirical research underpinning it. The authors revisit the concept of social remittances through a historico-biographical research about how people's experiences prior to migration influences what they remit back. The structural characteristic of transnational organization emerges from the research together with a clear analysis of the patterns of social remittances. In fact the research uncovers how social remittances can scale up from local level impacting regional and national change, through the relationship that members of transnational organization active in their homeland communities built with their government (Levitt et al, 2011). The comparative perspective adopted by studying various organizations based in the two villages in the Dominican Republic enriches the research (Levitt et al, 2011). It is very

interesting to see how the different group face similar problems and struggle to find solutions. Adding to the paper is the underlying theme of contributing to the debate about the relationship between migration and development. This discussion is part of an ongoing debate about various theories of migration, globalization and transnationalism, that are part of the third intellectual foundation of the transnational field.

The reformulation of existing data and accounts, the invention of new methods of investigation and of evidence collections, and the application of existing investigative approaches in a novel way are the characteristics of *methodological transnationalism*. Its aim is to explain and interpret transnational phenomena and dynamics. The analysis is often life-cycle, long duration in order to challenge or identify changes in the relationship between geography and history. This is a type of research grounded in postmodern thinking of time/space compression that challenges normative expectation about the relationship between geography and history as well. Vortvec (2007) work on super-diversity and its implications is an example of methodological transnationalism. In his work the author reassess how diversity is traditionally conceived through the juxtaposition and assemblage of existing data. Vortvec (2007) uses data from the Census, from governmental statistics agencies identifying the changing patterns of diversity shaping the cultural and social composition of the city. His work shows a global city, that attracts an increasingly number of migrants. Within the city he searches for the complexity that he defines as a condition “distinguished by the dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants who have arrived over the last decades” (Vortvec, 2007: 1024). He starts by drawing a brief 'biography' of the city of London to delineate the origin of one of the most diverse cities on the planet today with more than 300 languages spoken and as much as 179 different nationalities (Vortvec, 2007). Vortvec takes into account a variety of factors, such as language spoken by London's migrant population, their religion and belief system. Furthermore other structural factors are taken into account such as changes in immigration policies and laws, becoming generally more restrictive especially in the past decade. The challenge posed by this work is both toward research and policy, and how these understand and react to changes in migration patterns.

The third pillar is represented by the *thoretical* challenge that *transnationalism* poses to the more or less traditional theories of migration and globalization. Transnational theories aim to identify and explain transnational phenomena and dynamics theorized in local, national,

international, global terms. These explanations can take three forms, they can be a parallel exercise because they interpret and explain phenomena and dynamics that have not yet been looked at under a transnational lens; some studies can be complementary to classical migration research because they explain better some aspects of migration phenomena; or they can compete with some accounts and models that are deeply engrained in the study of the local, national, international or global scale; and lastly they can generate hybrid theoretical accounts, using a combination of various conceptual frameworks. Snel et al (2006) study '*Transnational involvement and social integration*' aims at discovering the relationship between transnational activities and identities, and assimilation patterns in the host society. This study is a parallel exercise since it explores empirically an area that the authors felt was not enough developed (Snel et al, 2006). It also challenges assimilation theories that suggest that the more the migrant is involved in transnational activities the less he/she identifies with the host country (Snel et al, 2006). The study in fact shows that other factors, such as the position in the labour market, have more influence on the extent of migrants' integration. Moreover the study has implication over the assumption migrants identify with their diaspora communities. In fact it emerged that migrants identify more with compatriots living in their host country (in this case the Netherlands) than with compatriots living abroad or in other countries (Snel et al, 2006).

*Philosophical transnationalism* is the most radical of the five foundation pillars. In fact it represent a philosophical current that start from the metaphysical assumption that social worlds and lives are inherently transnational. National and global should not be taken from granted but rather identified as constructed and contested social facts. One of the central focus is to excavate them. This is the most difficult perspective to find. As Levitt and Glick Shiller (2004) explain in their paper, they contributed to: "larger intellectual project, taken up by scholars of transnational processes in many fields, to *rethink and reformulate the concept of society such that it is no longer automatically equated with the boundaries of a single nation state.*" (2004: 1002) This is a move away from ideas of methodological nationalism, substituting it with the opposite perspective that does not sees society as a closed box but actually as open to fluxes of people and cultures.

Lastly, there is *public transnationalism* that aim at creating alternative space and legitimate options for social change, abandoning the assumption that most social processes are bounded and bordered. Particular attention is given to the power dynamics underlying social relations, and towards the adoption of a particular consciousness that uncovers the implicit ideological

and methodological assumptions that skew research. The normative assumption is usually that everything originates and flows from the West and North, the direction intensity and effects of global cultural flows are usually not taken into account. For this reason public transnationalism tries to identify the various kinds of carriers of a transnational spread of norms and practices that enhance transformation and contribute to cross-cultural understanding. An interesting example of this approach is L. Pratt book '*Imperial Eyes*' (1992). In the book Pratt unpacks the ideology underlying Northern European books about travels and far away civilization and she also reveals the skewed attitude of researchers when looking at such material. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Europeans declared themselves as the centre of civilization while native people of the conquered territories lived in conditions of material and ideological subordination. In some way Western scientific community still suffers from this ideology holding on the Northern European privileged perspective. Pratt (1992) borrows from anthropology the term 'transculturation' that describes how subordinated or marginal groups selected and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant culture and determined to varying extent what was absorbed into their own culture, how to use it and what they make it mean. Sometimes this cultural production flow from the margins of the European Empires to its centre. The author analyses a manuscript that was found in a library in Denmark, written to address the King of Spain, identifying it as an example of 'autoethnographic expression', or 'strategies of innocence constructed in relation to imperial rhetoric' (Pratt, 1992: 9). The book proposes a view of the world from the perspective of an Andean, reformulating also the story of Christ mixing it with Andean mythology. This way the subjected group or person participates in the process of hybridization. Another example of public transnationalism is Tsing article '*Global situations*' (2000) in which the author states: "Imagine ethnic groups, corporations, refugees, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), nation-states, consumers, social movements, media moguls, trade organizations, social scientists, international lawyers, and bankers, all swarming alongside creeks and earthworms to compose the landscape, to define its elements, carve its channels of flow, and establish its units of historical agency." [Tsing, 2000: 287] Moreover she points out how globalization of scholarship put Western genealogies into discussion with South American or South Asian theories of dependency or subordination. This goes into a global discussion that is shaping contemporary debates.

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## Q.2

***“Migration is an inherently cultural act.” Please, take a position on this statement and elaborate on it using at least 2 readings from the syllabus.***

I think migration is a cultural act because every time people are in a situation where they encounter other people that comes from a different culture, there is an encounter with a different point of view, a different perspective on the world, and a different understanding of values and norms. Sometimes it is surprisingly similar and sometimes is incredibly different. But every time we move, such encounters are inevitable. Migration produces social fields that encompass both sending and receiving countries therefore includes and influence their cultural practices and norms. Migration is inherently cultural because migrants carry with them ideas, practices and forms of belonging that are culturally shaped by their background (Levitt et al, 2011). This background will also influence their behavior and their performance in the host society. Moreover the possibility that migrant will get involved in transnational practice creates a social field where both host and sending countries meet, form or strengthen existing ties. Culture influence the behavior of the migrants greatly especially when they take part in transnational activities and when they adopt transnational identities. For example, cultural norms will affect the way people decide to send remittances back home: some will choose more formal ways such as going through banks or international money exchange services, others will chose informal ways, such as giving money to some compatriots to deliver to the family back home. Cultural norms will determine the way migrant communities

organize, how often they will participate to community events, if they are religious and whether they will lobby local governments about particular community issues. On the one hand migrants travels with their cultural luggage to their new destination but once they establish their community there, they have to engage with local institutions. This practice influence the way they relate to their home country, their expectation and their demands. Especially when migrants engage transnationally they become the recipients of both host and sending countries' cultures, actively bringing back and forth way of socializing, organizing and belonging.

Migrants identities, practices and ideas are culturally rich and socially meaningful (Levitt and Nieves, 2011) therefore all their activities and practices will reflect this diverse richness. Both material and non-material resources will travel from one place to another through various kind of “[...] brokers, gatekeepers, travelers, bridgers and diffusers contributing to the transnational spread and transformation of norms and practices as well as promotion of greater cross cultural understanding.” (Levitt and Khagram, 2007)

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## Q. 3

***“Methodological nationalism is a tendency to accept the nation-state and its boundaries as a given.” What are the consequences of this tendency in migration research? Provide examples.***

Methodological nationalism is the tendency to identify the nation-state as the main unit of analysis. To adopt this perspective also mean to take national identity as the main characteristic shaping normative and cultural values of individuals. This way everything that does not respond to system that is made up of closed box tend to be ignored or seen as deviant from the norm. Methodological nationalism is a perspective that stands opposite to methodological transnationalism which instead tries to determine those dynamics, phenomena and identities that cross borders and defy boundaries.

In their analysis of methodological nationalism Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2003) define its inception in post second world war theories of migration. Since then, and especially in the last decades, scholars of migration have been moving forward from this idea and they have tried to reformulate some questions by challenging methodological nationalism. Some of the ideological consequences of this perspective are the ignorance of cross-cultural expressions, the lack of understanding of complex experiences of people moving across borders and the deficiency in recognizing that migration is an activity that influence multiple societies at the same time.

In their paper, Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2003) identify three variants of methodological nationalism that influence how social sciences interpreted the world and migration. The first variant is represented by the attempt to ignore the fundamental importance of nationalism for modern societies and also by not questioning the universalism of the nation-state. In transnational studies the nation-state system is seen as challenged by a number of factors such as migration and globalization. Most of the classical theories regarded nationalism as a transitional stage towards a fully rationalized, individualized class society based on merits. The second variant is enacted through naturalization. In fact the nation state is presented as the norm while social identities and practices that are enacted across state boundaries are presented as exceptional. Everything that is exceptional tend to challenge the *status quo* therefore often migrants are seen as a threat to the stability of the society in question. Moreover since the state usually directs and organize the social sciences project, the collection of information and data for analysis is produced within the nation-state maintaining the assumption of the nation-state as being the natural unit of interest. This way anything that goes beyond or put at risk the integrity of the nation is ignored or seen as dangerous. Here it is possible to connect to the third variant. In fact territorial limitation confine the study of social processes to the political and geographic boundaries of a particular nation state. Transnationalism has shown that social processes indeed go beyond the political and geographical boundaries to create networks and relationship that mutually influence multiple actors and nations.

These three variants of methodological nationalism form a coherent epistemic structure, reinforcing and reinvigorating each other. It is clear that in this way migration studies are limited to the confines of the nation-state while the social processes and the networks created across boundaries remains unexplored. The consequences in research can be seen in the first post-WWII studies on migration which focused on theories of assimilation of migrants in the new country, on multiculturalism as experience of the hosting society and gave particular



importance to the economic motivations of migrants. All these researches takes the sending and receiving countries as two separated elements, with people moving between them in a sort of ethereal space, without carrying anything from home or bringing anything back to their community of origin. Moreover a lot of effort has been put into studying the consequences of immigration in host countries on the welfare system, on unemployment patterns, on the formation of ghettos and ethnic communities. In empirical research immigrants have been compared to the 'national mean' rather than to other groups with similar characteristics. This has the consequence of implementing a politics of exclusion, and seeing migrants as failing elements of society. The limits posed by methodological nationalism in the study of people on the move are significant. Even though economic pull and push factors, networks of migrants, economic and social capital are taken into account other phenomena cannot be seen. For example emigration, return migration and internal migration and tend to be left out from migration studies that adopt methodological nationalism. Transnationalism instead provides tools to study the multi-layered and multi-sited social fields that embrace both migrants and non-migrants, sending and hosting societies. By not being fixed on something, transnationalism is “building toward a new paradigm that rejects the long-held notion that society and the nation-state are one and the same.” (Levitt and Glick Shiller, 2004: 1003)

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