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Rethinking transnational studies: Transnational ties and the transnationalism of everyday life

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Abstract

Once an alternative approach to the mainstream, transnationalism has gained increasing currency and salience in migration studies. What is left of its theoretical import, however, after establishing that proper transnational activities, aside from remittances, are relatively infrequent; and that such practices are not incompatible with – and are even facilitated by – successful integration overseas? This article contends that the theoretical toolkit of transnationalism can still be helpful in studying migrant life trajectories, with particular respect to their everyday life sphere. Theoretical progress should be made, however, in three regards: (1) a stronger connection with globalization studies; (2) further elaboration on the reference points of transnational ties; and (3) a deeper reflection on the relevance of identifications and senses of belonging to migrant connectedness with their homeland. Along these lines, an understanding of transnational ties and relationships is outlined, in terms of potential and selective attributes of day-to-day interactions between migrants and their non-migrant counterparts.

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Discourses on 'transnational migrants', in the early 1990s, sounded like a challenge to the established status quo in migration studies. To be sure, the adjective itself is hardly new (Saunier, 2009). Relevant use of it can be traced to almost a century ago in migration literature (Bourne, 1916), and more recently – among other disciplines – in International Relations (Keohane and Nye, 1971). Still, its novel currency in the past two decades seemed bound to introduce a turning point in approaching migration – and possibly in the whole of social sciences, under the rubric of transnational studies (Levitt and Khagram, 2007; Faist, 2010). It is in fact increasingly difficult, nowadays, to find any piece of migration research which does not have a 'transnational' dimension. What the dimension ultimately amounts to, and the real extent of its novelty, however, are still controversial.

While transnationalism did mark a turning point in the discursive terrain, its actual distinct import as a social science perspective, recognized by many, is not without contention (Waldinger, 2011). Even its research agenda does not seem to have made much progress in the past few years, apart from its increasing connections with the study of diasporas (e.g. Bauböck and Faist, 2010) and cosmopolitanism (e.g. Nowicka and Rovisco, 2009), and without denying the potential to apply the 'methodological nationalism' argument to a range of cognate topics (ethnicity, nationality, and the like).

Once an alternative approach to the mainstream, migrant transnationalism has gained increasing currency and salience. However, what is left of its theoretical import, once established that transnational activities *stricto sensu* (Portes et al., 1999), aside from remittances, are relatively infrequent (Guarnizo et al., 2003; Itzigsohn and Saucedo, 2002; Waldinger, 2008); and that such practices are not incompatible with – and are even facilitated by – successful integration overseas (e.g. Portes, 2003; Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004; Foner, 2007)?

In the face of the risk of reducing transnationalism to a passe-partout, this article contends that it has more in its potential scope for research than what has been tapped so far. The theoretical toolkit of the transnational perspective can shed further light on migrants' daily life trajectories, along with the expectations and strategies of non-migrants, and home societies more broadly, towards them. In order to make the transnational optic useful in this respect, however, progress should arguably be made in three regards – provided the transnational is understood as a continuous (if selective) variable, rather than in stark 'either/or' terms:

1   In the first place, a stronger link would be necessary with globalization studies. When it comes to the impact of global processes on everyday social reproduction, notions such as Giddens' social action at a distance, Harvey's time–space compression or Urry's mobilities are helpful in two major respects: (a) analyzing migrant transnationalism against the broader patterns of transnational participation which may apply, under different conditions, to non-migrants as well; and (b) shedding light on the accessibility, reach and impact of interactions at a distance, against the 'traditional' background of social action underpinned by physical and sensorial proximity.

2   Greater attention is also needed when defining the reference points of transnational ties. What actually lies 'at the other end' of immigrants' lasting links with the motherland is far from obvious or univocal. Distinct homeland references are often

conflated with one another under the common rubric of transnationalism. The emphasis can be placed on: (a) migrants' interpersonal ties with non-migrants (specially family members left behind); or (b) migrants' interactions with their motherland's institutions, insofar as one's homeland is still a source of rights, opportunities or obligations; or even (c) migrants' symbolic and emotional ties with their past life experience back home – hence their attempts to reproduce some fragment of it in terms of sociability, consumption, or through economic or political activities fuelling significant contacts with 'home' even after settling overseas for good.

3 Another potential way forward involves migrants' identities and senses of belonging, as their identification processes may for a long time be homeward addressed, becoming bifocal or even 'hybridized'. Is migrants' persistent identification with the motherland – if relevant – a matter of symbolic ethnicity only? Or does it deserve further analysis, either as a pre-condition for transnational social practices, or as a significant issue in its own right?

Before entering into discussion of these issues I will touch on some persistent ambivalences of the transnational perspective, then present my own view – an actor-centred view that is focused on everyday life, developed through my empirical fieldwork (Boccagni, 2009; 2010). I will argue finally that using a transnational lens – in a proper narrow sense, entailing the transnational as a potential attribute of social relationships, rather than a substantive entity – can still help make sense of migrant life trajectories, and of the reactions (and the broader social changes) these elicit in their home societies.

Saving transnationalism from its overuse: some major sources of ambivalence

Major reviews exist, by now, on the strengths and persistent limitations of a transnational approach in migration studies, depending also on the disciplinary realm, on the relevant life sphere, on the scale of social action.[1] Rather than insisting on the well-known debate between 'believers' and 'sceptics', or on the typical criticisms addressed by this perspective (cf., among others, Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 2004; Glick-Schiller and Levitt, 2006), it is worth highlighting some inherent ambivalences encountered by the researchers who use it.

First of all, transnationalism continues to be, in one and the same expression, both a theoretical lens (or a research programme) and a set of empirical phenomena (Morawska, 2003). This conflation is a source of misunderstanding in itself, as a theoretical stance may easily slide into a normative and prescriptive definition, or even into a one-sided celebration of the social processes it should be critically analyzing. A case can be made, besides, for an excess of vagueness in the use of the notion of transnational, which is sometimes applied to nearly all migrant social practices. Hence the need for a specific and rigorous definition, possibly following Portes et al. (1999) [2] – though, in fact, broad definitions still have wide currency.

In the second place, the traditional objection of 'what is new', if anything, in migrant transnationalism reflects a deeper concern: whether the ensuing social practices mark a qualitative change with the past migration patterns,[3] or a 'merely' quantitative one.

While the acceleration of transnational communication via ICTs is self-evident, the substantive difference this would make with the past is contentious. To further complicate matters, still unclear are the prospects for operationalizing transnational processes – or even to measure them in terms of intensity, extent, frequency or degree (Mazzucato, 2010; Soehl and Waldinger, 2010; Boccagni, 2012). A significant challenge ahead, in other words, lies in 'the need to measure the *real empirical extent* of transnational social phenomena and especially of durable and dense *transnational societal units*' (Pries, 2007: 4).

One more ambivalence is related to the socio-spatial dimension of the transnational processes that migrants are engaged in (Glick-Schiller, 2010). The critique of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller, 2003), and more broadly of any 'mutual and exclusive embeddedness of social space and geographic space' (Pries, 2009: 595), may not be enough to cover the tension between two quite distinct ways of 'theorizing socio-spatial relations' (Jessop et al., 2008) from a distance. On the one hand, the transnationalism debate often emphasizes so-called 'spaces of flows' (which, some argue, would even 'replace' spaces of places), and the scope for deterritorialization inherent in cross-border activities. On the other hand, increasing awareness exists of the actual embeddedness of migrants' transnational practices – as a result of their agency – within limited, specific and situated contexts and networks (e.g. Gielis, 2009).

Whatever the case, greater attention should be given to the diverse socio-spatial configurations of migrant transnational practices. The latter could tentatively be ordered according to three analytical levels: (1) one consistent with the conventional geographical hierarchies of scale (which applies, for instance, to 'physical' transnationalism, resulting in a variable scope for mobility from a local context to another, without ultimately questioning the boundaries between them); (2) one resulting in an in-betweenness of social practices linking different local contexts, but not strictly reducible to any of them (e.g. transnational communication); and (3) one mixing distinct local scales of references or social-spatial units – somehow displaying the need to deconstruct the common view of the local as 'nested within larger encompassing units, which often have political boundaries' (Glick-Schiller, 2010; see also Sassen, 2007). Remittances, and any other form of effective 'social action at a distance' (see below), would fall into the latter category – whereby different local contexts correspond to 'mutually constitutive levels of social interaction' (Brenner, 1999: 62), as far as the life experience of migrants and of their significant others is concerned.

Having said this, it may be worth starting from my own construction of migrant transnational ties. Drawing both on migrant agency-oriented research on the topic (e.g. Levitt, 2001; Smith, 2006) and on my fieldwork, I have outlined a working definition which emphasizes the relational, reciprocal and everyday-related bases of migrant transnationalism. This can be helpfully understood, as an empirical phenomenon, as

> 'The diverse complex of the social relationships and practices developing at a distance (and of the identifications underpinning them), through which migrants exert a significant, provable and reciprocal influence on non-migrants in the countries of origin' (Boccagni, 2009: 20).

With a view to utilizing the transnational as a specific and discriminating category, this perspective calls for a twofold appreciation of cross-border social phenomena. Their

perceived importance (in the eyes of the subjects involved) should be taken into account, together with the social consequences they exert, here and there, insofar as a researcher can empirically trace them. This framing of transnationalism – as an attempt to move beyond its use as a 'trendy catch-all' (Pries, 2007) – calls for greater attention to three relatively disregarded prospects for elaboration:

1 The relevance of globalization-related theoretical constructs to a keener understanding of the scope and contents of migrant transnational engagement (and, circularly, the insights emerging from transnational migration studies as to the empirical 'hold' of such constructs).
2 The need to better clarify what lies 'on the other side' of migrant transnational ties, as the presence of distinct referents may reflect the existence of quite different social phenomena and engagements, even within a communal theoretical rubric.
3 The need to plunge into the role and the relevance of migrant identifications, whether transnational or not, in the overall framework of transnational processes.

The next sections will address each of these points, while the Conclusion will discuss the prospects for further elaboration and research on migrant cross-border participation.

From globalization studies to migrant transnationalism: theoretical constructs in question

The first way forward is, in a sense, a return to the beginnings of the debate on migrant transnationalism.[4] Since its very inception this perspective has been associated with some traits of the emerging debate on 'globalization', such as the erosion of national boundaries and of state sovereignties, or the acceleration and the global reach of cross-border flows, whether of capital, information, goods and services or even of people. To be sure, the current pace and extent of migration processes have often been taken as a 'systemic factor' (Castles, 2002: 1144) of globalization itself – the latter to be basically understood as 'the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all [sic] aspects of contemporary social life' (Held et al., 1999: 2).

What is more interesting, however, is not the abstract relevance of migration processes as a vague 'indicator' of wider globalizing trends. While this, in empirical terms, is contentious to say the least, the same may actually apply to the bulk of potential empirical evidence of globalization processes.[5] More promising, instead, is a transposition of some conceptual tools of globalization theories with a view to better grounding migrant transnationalism, and to exploring the scope for a comparison between the transnational attitudes and behaviours of migrants and non-migrants.

Three interconnected notions, from as many relevant authors, will be outlined here: action at a distance, time–space compression, and mobilities. While emerging from distinct disciplinary traditions, these notions ultimately share a view of globalization as a differentiated and incremental development of worldwide-extending, intensifying and accelerating social processes. Each of them can helpfully cast light on the reach of migrant cross-border ties, and on the conditions accounting for it.

The notion of (social) action at a distance, following Giddens (1990), reflects an agency-centred viewpoint on globalization processes, which highlights

> the way [and the extent] to which, under conditions of contemporary globalization, the actions of social agents (individuals, collectivities, corporations, etc.) in one locale can come to have significant intended or unintended consequences for the behaviour of 'distant others'. (Held et al., 1999: 15)

In my perspective, such a view is helpful in drawing the boundaries of migrant transnationalism in their everyday lives. On the one hand, a case can be made for migrants' increasing potential to intentionally produce relevant consequences – though not necessarily the expected ones – on the life sphere of those left behind (and, to a lesser extent, vice versa). This applies, for instance, to the migrant networks-mediated circulation of money, affections, information or even objects, as well as to migrants' involvement in collective and/or institutional initiatives which directly address their motherland – be it a matter of cultural activities, of collective remittances, political support, or whatever else. Of relevance, here, is the evocative if fuzzy notion of 'social remittances'. This broadly refers to the grassroots cultural circulation of 'norms, practices, identities and social capital' towards home societies, enabled by migration (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011: 3).[6]

On the other hand, migrants' ability to exert intended consequences back home (let alone the unintended ones, which would raise an even wider and more complex issue) is highly variable. It should not be taken for granted, either as a real possibility or even as a desirable one (on migrants' own terms).

In fact, the 'current conditions of globalization' – basically amounting to easier transport and accelerated communication – are a necessary condition, but by no means a sufficient one, for an increase in migrant transnationalism (Faist, 2010). The latter is contingent on myriad further structural factors, and is highly variable and mutable even within the same immigrant population. That said, when it comes to understanding social action at a distance (at least on a *purposeful* basis), migrant cross-border ties and activities helpfully display the selective, situated and highly differentiated scope for this pattern of current globalization.

A related and oft-quoted construct is that of time–space compression (Harvey, 1989), standing for 'The manner in which globalization appears to shrink geographical distance and time: in a world of instantaneous communication, distance and time no longer seem to be a major constraint on patterns of human social organization or interaction' (Held et al., 1999: 15). Even in this area, migrant transnationalism can provide a useful litmus test in terms of empirical soundness. As research on transnational migration suggests, migrant everyday experience reveals Harvey's construct to be deeply ambivalent. On the surface, a bird's-eye view of contemporary migration (e.g. Massey and Taylor, 2004) could be enough to dismiss any 'death of geography' pretensions. Migrant flows, however increasing, remain a highly selective fact (compared to the potential migrant supply), contingent, among other factors, on geo-political distances and on the prevalence of state-based immigration controls.

On a deeper level of analysis, however, a case could be (and often has been) made for migrants to be able, no less than anybody else, to gain instantaneous access to distant sites (with special respect to their homelands) via ICT-mediated communication. In a

way, when it comes to the virtual circulation of information and even of money across remote localities, the potential does exist for migrant action to result in a real time–space compression. This, some argue, would even call for a 'paradigmatic shift' in our ways of understanding migrants (Diminescu, 2008).

However, on a still deeper level, the 'compression' is likely to prove temporary and even ephemeral. As suggested by several ethnographies on transnational communication between migrants and those left behind, virtual contacts are typically shaped by the structural asymmetries between the former and the latter (Mahler, 2001; Carling, 2008). Moreover, they may well prove effective and self-sufficient insofar as they entail exchanging material resources alone. To the extent that personal emotions and affections enter into play, however, communication at a distance is more likely to be perceived as makeshift. While being a valuable resource to maintain personal ties and negotiate reciprocal obligations, it hardly eliminates – in fact, it fuels – the need to re-found them on a physical proximity basis (Baldassar, 2008; Skrbis, 2008; Boccagni, 2010).

Once again, the risk of a technological determinism should be avoided. Even in the (implausible) case that ICTs were widespread and easily accessible for migrants and their significant non-migrants, this would hardly make a difference, as to the relevance of – indeed, the need for – face-to-face contacts and interactions, on a periodical basis at least (Urry, 2002). The same seems likely to apply, as a precondition for generating trust and maintaining co-operative practices across time, to completely different 'transnational communities', whether of academics, of professionals, etc. (Faist, 2010; Elliot and Urry, 2010). As transnational migration studies suggest, therefore, the construct of 'distance shrinking' should be internally deconstructed and stratified, both in the light of the different *kinds of distance* involved, and of the differential capabilities to shape and negotiate them. An analytic distinction between physical, social, cultural and emotional distance should be obviously maintained, while their distinct combinations should be empirically appreciated. At the same time, attention should be given to the social stratifications, based on different potentials to compress distance indeed, contingent on the accessibility and usability of ICTs, as well as on the capability to complement this with physical mobility (hence, of course, on the selective relevance of migration controls).

One more prospect for further elaboration on transnational migration is suggested by the mobilities approach, most notably formulated by John Urry (e.g. Urry, 2007). This perspective can be understood as, among other things, an analytical attempt to cope with an issue of major relevance to transnational migration processes: 'What happens if presence and absence – or proximity and distance – are *not* opposed to one another?' (Callon and Law, 2004: 3). In fact, at the very core of migrant transnationalism lies the simultaneity of physical absence *and* social presence, to any scope or effect. This, however, calls for a selective reconfiguration of proximity and distance (and, of course, of the attendant boundaries) as still significant, if malleable categories, rather than for a simple conflation between them.

In broader terms, Urry contends that, while social science has traditionally been informed by a 'sedentarism' that 'treats as normal stability, meaning and place, and treats as abnormal distance, change and placelessness', a *mobility turn* – related to the systematic circulation of people, images and information – is 'connecting different forms of transport with complex patterns of social experience conducted through communication at-a-distance' (Sheller and Urry, 2006: 208).

Once the analytical focus is on mobility (in a broad sense) rather than on a relatively static and stable social order, greater emphasis can be put on the cross-border circulation of material and non-material resources, exerting influence both 'here' and 'there', which is also highlighted by the transnational approach. Approaching mobility as an issue in its own right, however, should not mean neglecting the different scales in which various forms of mobility take place, nor the variable structure of opportunities that accounts for the differential ways and degrees in which physical, or even symbolic mobility occurs, for migrants or, for that matter, for anybody else. Against the risks inherent in a 'sociology without frontiers' perspective, which may ignore the global hierarchies being created by the differential 'freedom to be mobile, as a resource', Turner (2007) outlines the picture of a far less fluid and more differentiated social arrangement: an emerging 'immobility regime' whereby barriers and restrictions to human mobility have far from disappeared. Against this background, appreciating the differential scope for the cross-border circulation of migrants, and of any migration-related resource, is a major theoretical challenge ahead for the transnational perspective.

What is the reference point of transnational practices?

Another theoretical refinement of the transnational approach calls for a better understanding of transnational ties as reciprocal, two-way relationships. While migrants obviously stand on one side, it is not so obvious what should stand on the other, for an interaction at a distance to qualify as transnational. More often than not, empirical studies on transnational migration have simply ignored the relevance of migrants' counterparts (and more broadly, of 'relatively immobile people') in the countries of origin (Faist, 2010). The reference points of immigrant transnational ties can, however, be grouped into three analytically distinct categories, critically depending on their variable sociospatial dimensions, as suggested above. A typology of the objects of migrants' transnational participation can thus be built, to be combined with those concerning the relevant domains, contents, frequency/reach/intensity and channels of their transnational interactions (e.g. Portes et al., 1999; Vertovec, 2004; Snel et al., 2006).

The first category, arguably applying to the bulk of transnational phenomena, involves migrants' interpersonal relationships with their significant others left behind, at a micro level. This especially, though not exclusively, applies to family members. In a regime of family-related 'transnational moralities' (Carling, 2008), systematic interactions between emigrants and their significant others at home can result in a spontaneous grassroots circulation of remittances, cross-border communication and transnational caregiving practices. Such activities may persist for a long time, regardless of the physical distance, although with the fundamental mediation of communication technologies and, when possible, of visits back home (Mason, 2004). While being a prerogative of migrants' private lives, which may even result in a poor concern with their homelands overall (Boccagni, 2010; Waldinger, 2011), such practices obviously exert a significant influence, taken together, on the public life in the sending country.

Yet, regardless of their macro-level impact in economic development terms (and judged not only by that currency), these transnational interactions are 'significant others-dependent'. They have an appreciable incidence only insofar as they are addressed

to a few selected individuals – possibly the only ones that warrant, in emigrants' eyes, their efforts to maintain systematic homewards connections. To be sure, their expectation to return also has a relevant stake, though it is not necessarily fulfilled in the short to medium term. As this form of migrant transnationalism is contingent on interpersonal relationships, it primarily requires a bottom-up understanding of the everyday interactions between migrants and non-migrants, i.e. of the affections, expectations and interests driving them (e.g. Toyota et al., 2007). The role of their homelands as such is, in this respect, a relatively secondary variable.

Second, a distinct category involves the aggregate and cumulative impact of the interactions maintained by some emigrants with a variety of institutions in the motherland – whether related to the state, the market, or civil society. Interpersonal mediations are necessary, certainly, any time they wish to transnationally interact with the political system back home (via, for instance, external voting or political mobilization); to make investments, or start businesses, linking them to the mother country; to contribute to socio-cultural events, development initiatives, etc. (Itzigsohn and Saucedo, 2002; Goldring, 2004). However, in each of these instances the issue at stake has less to do with interpersonal relationships, than with the persistent relevance of the motherland (or of an institution thereof) as a perceived source of rights, opportunities or obligations.

Once reframed in this perspective, transnationalism typically results in a more selective and mutable involvement (Portes, 2003) – one arguably correlated with migrants' patterns of social inclusion overseas (and even with their human and social capital), which does not necessarily apply to the first category. Structural factors such as the physical and geopolitical distance from the motherland, along with migrant individual and collective orientations, are also likely to be relevant in this respect. On the other hand, the variety of interests and agendas driving migrants' institutional counterparts in home societies, as they facilitate expatriate connectedness, deserves further elaboration (cf. Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003, among others).

That said, a third and less obvious category of 'recipients' of migrant transnationalism can be formulated as follows. As much ethnographical research has shown, immigrants' references to their homeland may have significant social consequences, if they are shared and practised together among co-nationals overseas. In fact, many public manifestations of migrants' homebound attachment – such as those displayed in their patterns of consumption, in their ways of dressing, in the symbols they use, etc. – involve not so much a reference to their 'actually existing' country of origin, in its current everyday life. The object of migrants' projections is rather a deep-rooted reminiscence – possibly a selective one – of their earlier ways of life before leaving, which drives a variety of attempts to reproduce them overseas. Sociability, ethnic consumption, ritual events (including those related to nationhood and patriotism claims) are typical channels trying to reproduce social life 'as it was before', even from afar (Guarnizo, 2003).

Although these migrant practices do fuel a sense of connection with the motherland, and even significant relationships at a distance, they amount to a form of cross-border connectedness well different from those above. The issue at stake is not only keeping in touch with those left behind or with homeland institutions, but somehow recovering their previous condition of being full citizens in their own country – or at least, of full members of their home society. As a result of these efforts for communal evocation,

which may well be contentious and conflictive, homeland itself is turned into an object of collective consumption, celebration and, of course, identification (Ghorashi, 2004). I will return to this point in the next section.

While the three categories, in practice, significantly overlap, greater analytical clarity between them would enable a better understanding of the scope and sustainability of migrant transnationalism. Certainly, this is variable according to the kind of transnational practice and the characters of a migration flow (and even of single migrants), not to mention factors such as distance from home, policies of sending and receiving countries, and migrant life course (Eve, 2009). That said, and less obviously, I have found migrant transnational ties to be critically dependent – as to their social relevance, composition and prevalence – on the category into which their 'recipients' fall.

Migrant transnational identifications: a matter of ethnicity (only)?

Migrants' transnationalism, as Levitt et al. (2003) contend, is relatively easier to be appreciated as far as cross-border social practices and ties are concerned. Another level of analysis has, however, to do with their personal and social self-identifications. At least as far as first-generation immigrants are concerned (Haller and Landolt, 2005), their sense of belonging, along with their key groups of reference, may be still embedded for a long time in the motherland, no less – or even more – than in the host society (see, *inter alia,* Viruell-Fuentes, 2006).

The case for their 'bifocal' identity orientations (Vertovec, 2004) raises a theoretical dilemma: are migrant homeward bound identities, provided they keep relevant, a proper topic of concern for the transnational perspective? To put it differently: do they amount to a channel of transnational influence between migrants and their motherland, hence are they an issue falling within the remit of this lens of analysis? Are migrants' home-addressed identifications, in themselves, a transnational 'way of being', or 'only' a transnational 'way of belonging' (Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004)?

The answer, in my opinion, is once again ambivalent. To be sure, a focus on migrant self-identifications is necessary to make sense of the motivations, the value orientations and the expectations driving their transnational participation (Levitt et al., 2003; Snel et al., 2006). At the same time, qualifying any form of identification with the country of origin as transnational would make little sense, since the adjective would be deprived of any discriminating power.

Ironically, as I have found out in my fieldwork (Boccagni, 2010), the persistent identification with 'home' may affect less the conditions of those left behind, than migrants' own lives in the receiving countries. To begin with, a strong homeward attachment – whether in nostalgic or patriotic terms – is a source of personal and group consistency against the typical hardships of everyday life overseas, including external categorizations 'by defect' as immigrants, rather than full-blown citizens. In the second place, home can be legitimately constructed by immigrants as a future life destination, however indeterminate, which acts as a moral resource providing a meaning for and a sense of direction to the sacrifices they make overseas. However, one's predominant identification with the mother country, even as it persists in the medium run, may result only in

a 'myth of return' (e.g. Anwar, 1979), which does not necessarily impinge on their transnational interactions (if any).

The construct of symbolic ethnicity (Gans, 1979) is clearly relevant here. This applies to any collective identification along cultural or national lines that 'can survive without significant social or cultural participation' – even less so when it comes to homewards engagement.[7] A counter-argument, of course, could also be made: such identification may still result in the country of origin being framed as a major term of reference for the socialization of immigrant second generations (or later) who have never lived in it. This, however, may say little, or nothing at all, about the home society itself. In my opinion, for a personal or social identification to qualify as transnational in a strict sense (rather than oriented to any ethnicity other than the mainstream), it should match the development of activities or connections involving the context of origin and/or the family members left there.

Having said this, a focus on migrants' self-identification is necessary to make sense of the potential disjunctures between the physical spaces they inhabit, the social and cultural spaces they interact with, and the emotional and affective spaces they strive to negotiate (Pries, 2007). That the latter may be homeward bound is not enough, however, for any transnational transaction to be empirically substantiated. Indeed, the possibility of migrants developing actually hybridized, or even cosmopolitan identifications should be tested in the field, rather than aprioristically posited. Once this is done, more space generally emerges for (trans)locally based, parochial identifications and loyalties (Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 2004), than for any de-territorialized, cosmopolitan-style, or even post-national identifications.

Conclusion

Along the lines for further elaboration suggested above, a communal assumption was that the persistent potential for theoretical innovation of transnational migration studies need not be taken for granted. It never has, however, in some of the most sophisticated overviews provided thus far. Witness to this, and worth revisiting now, is the landmark article by Portes et al. (1999), which makes an oft-quoted case for properly 'delimiting the scope of predication' of transnationalism as a theoretical category. Finding out sufficiently distinctive empirical bases was, in the authors' persuasive argument, a necessary condition to warrant the adoption of a new term in social sciences. Not surprisingly, however, the reduction of that very term to a passe-partout with little or no added value has been a recurrent development thereafter. While this lexical inflation has arguably been the price to pay for the popularization of the concept itself, it is my contention that the appeal of Portes and colleagues for conceptual delimitation could now be reframed in quite different terms.

Both the possible coexistence of transnational engagements and integration patterns in migrants' lives, and the relatively limited currency of their transnational practices *stricto sensu,* are well-recognized points by now. While, in the original terms of Portes et al. (1999), these findings may question the merit of transnationalism as a distinctive framework, I have argued in this article that its significance as at least a theoretical lens is still there – and not just because of its very real, if contentious, success story in the

academia. To put it differently, while the transnational can really be misused as a fashionable byword, the theoretical potential of this way of understanding migrant everyday lives is still partially untapped.

For one thing, the biographic interdependence between migrants and their non-migrant counterparts (and more broadly between home and host societies) deserves further discussion. At the minimum, transnationalism – as an optic moving beyond methodological nationalism, rather than a full-blown theory – has accelerated theory building, methodological elaboration and field research with a view to achieving a simultaneous understanding of immigration and emigration processes.

A major challenge lies ahead, however, to begin with, in a deeper understanding of migrants' (indeed, anybody's) cross-border participation on a social theory terrain (Glick-Schiller, 2010); second, in moving from the mainstream concern with any sort of 'transnational social units' – whereby the transnational turns into a sort of actually existing object – to a less obvious focus on the transnational as a situated and stratified potentiality, to which 'time–space compressing' technologies are a necessary, but by no means sufficient condition. Rather than as something out there, the transnational should be understood as a matter of situated attributes that may emerge, to different degrees and under distinct circumstances, in migrants' lives and in migration-related social formations.

Paraphrasing the contentions of Brubaker (2009) on ethnicity and several related categories, a cognitive turn could equally be developed in transnational migration studies. Rather than transnationalism as a noun, which suggests an indeterminate but overwhelmingly expanding entity, the transnational should indeed be understood as an adjective – that is, as a social attribute (or even an asset) which may apply and be enacted to different degrees, depending on other variables which turn into the real focus of analysis.

The ultimate point is not even a *transnational vs. non-transnational* contraposition, which would reduce the whole matter to the modest percentage of migrants who seem to qualify as transnational in a strict sense. A more promising way ahead lies in exploring specific aspects of migrants' daily lives, on which a transnational lens enables a better understanding. This nevertheless requires, among other conditions, a more critically self-reflective disposition within the transnational perspective – possibly along lines such as those sketched out in this article.

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Notes

1. See, among others, Kivisto (2001); Levitt and Jaworsky (2007); Vertovec (2009); and Østergaard-Nielsen (2012).
2. The same argument has recently been developed, from a social theory perspective, by Faist (2010), who refers to 'sustained and continuous pluri-local transactions crossing state borders'.
3. Among the advocates of a substantively qualitative change, Mazzucato (2008) highlights the potential simultaneity of migrant engagements – and the need to develop relevant methodologies – as a key marker of change. In broader terms, Pries (2007: 16), building on Alfred

Schutz's construct of 'everyday life', argues that current conditions make 'conscious experiences of others … possible even across long geo-spatial distances. Thus, social environments can span across several spaces pluri-locally and transitionally more easily than, for example, a century ago.' By the way, this point resonates with the 'global consciousness' notion of Robertson (1992), as a sociological hallmark of current globalization processes.

4. To be sure, an even wider (and far pre-existent) body of relevant theories involves world society and world system approaches, which are somewhat outside the migrant agency focus of this article. See, however, for an exploration of the links with such perspectives, Faist (2010). See also, for a more critical stance, Glick-Schiller (2010).

5. In the most celebrated review of globalization studies, Held et al. (1999) speculate on a set of categories which would allow for a broad empirical mapping of globalization processes, namely four 'spatio-temporal dimensions' – extent of networks, intensity of flows, velocity of interchanges and impact on particular communities – and as many 'organizational dimensions' – facilitating infrastructures, institutionalization (of flows, networks and relations), patterns stratification, and predominant modes of interaction. Only a few of these dimensions (such as the acceleration in transactions at a distance), however, suggest some relevant differences in the current developments of migration processes, compared with the past.

6. In more cautious terms, Waldinger too (2011: 1) has pointed to the 'spillover of ideas, goods and civil and political engagements across national boundaries' that migration almost invariably generates. The issue at stake, according this author, lies less in developing new labels for such 'spillover', than in devising new research strategies to better account for it.

7. The quote is from Gans (2009: 123). As the author has recently summarized his well-known formulation, symbolic ethnicity is 'a passive ethnicity, involving the temporary and periodic expression of feelings about or toward the ethnic group or culture through material and non-material symbols'.

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