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The migration-development nexus and the changing role of transnational immigrant organizations

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ABSTRACT


The State and the Grassroots presents the results of studies of immigrant organizations engaged in transnational development initiatives from thirteen different immigrant nationalities in five countries of reception. The scale of this endeavour is unprecedented. The articles represent the fruit of a long-term project known as the Comparative Immigration Organizations Project (CIOP), which was launched by the Center for Migration and Development at Princeton University in the early 2000s. *The State and the Grassroots* makes significant analytical and methodological contributions to the migration studies field, particularly to the study of the migration-development nexus and of the relationship between assimilation/integration and transnationalism. This volume will be useful for upper-division undergraduates, as well as for graduate students and seasoned researchers interested in this field, particularly at this time of heightened anxiety about immigration and national security.

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Contemporary global migration has become one of the most powerful social forces inducing social and political transformations across the world. In migrant-sending societies, large-scale South–North migration is transforming, among many other things, the legal and practical meaning of national citizenship and dominant development models. Meanwhile, it is triggering unprecedented cultural and political crises in affluent, receiving societies. Indeed, xenophobic reactions against immigrants from the global South are fanning the flames of ultra-nationalism and extreme right-wing ideologies. These, in turn, are altering the political map of Europe and the United States.

These developments make it especially urgent for scholars to analyse the dynamics, determinants and effects of migrants' incorporation abroad, as well as their transnational engagement with their homelands. This volume is a timely and significant contribution to this effort.

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The State and the Grassroots presents the results of studies of immigrant organizations engaged in transnational development initiatives from thirteen different immigrant nationalities in five countries. The scale of this endeavour is unprecedented. The articles represent the fruit of a long-term project known as the Comparative Immigration Organizations Project (CIOP), which was launched by the Center for Migration and Development at Princeton University under Portes' direction in the early 2000s. CIOP originally sought to study the development effects of Latin American immigrant organizations in the United States. The project later expanded to include organizations created by immigrants from China, Vietnam, and India in the United States, as well as some Latin American and African immigrant organizations in four European countries (Spain, Belgium, France, and the Netherlands).

To appreciate the contributions of the volume, it is valuable to have some insight into CIOP's methodological approach. CIOP's data collection strategy consisted of four main phases. The first two phases took place in the country of reception, and the last two in the migrants' respective countries of origin. The first phase consisted in collecting exhaustive inventories of formal and informal organizations created by each national group. In the second phase, the leaders of the largest and smallest organizations were interviewed. This was followed by data gathering in the countries of origin. The third phase included interviewing government officials in charge of maintaining relations with migrants abroad. Finally, the fourth phase focused on interviewing counterpart organizations of those interviewed in the country of destination. Fieldwork in the country of origin also included direct observation of development projects sponsored by immigrant organizations seeking to determine their local impact.

CIOP's mixed-method approach is transnational and multi-sited, and has produced a wide range of valuable data. This strategy allows for the collection of comprehensive information about immigrants' organizational field in the countries of destination (including the size, orientation, and reach of these organizations), their developmental impact on the ground, as well as the composition and characteristics of the members of these organizations – that is, their level of assimilation and transnational engagement. This innovative approach has already produced new insights into the relationship between migration and development, as demonstrated in several earlier publications by Portes and his collaborators (Portes, Escobar, and Radford 2007; Portes, Escobar, and Arana 2008; and Portes and Zhou 2011).

The State and the Grassroots opens with a theoretical discussion by Portes, is followed by ten empirical chapters by scholars based in the United States and Europe, and closes with an analytical concluding reflection by Fernández-Kelly. Portes' introduction summarizes earlier debates on immigrant incorporation and on the migration-development nexus, emphasizing the importance of immigrant organizations as agents of development. In brief,

Portes concludes that migration has a positive effect on the development of sending countries, noting that “developmentally relevant activities tend to be conducted by organizations, rather than by individuals”. Furthermore, he argues that it is the better-off and more assimilated among migrants who are more likely to lead and participate in transnational organizations. In addition, he notes, long-term cyclical migratory flows, including monetary and information transfers and return migration, rather than definitive migration, “provide the more reliable pathways to migrant developmental contributions” (8).

The empirical chapters are divided into two sections. The first section includes six chapters on immigrant transnational organizations in the United States. The second section is made up of four chapters reporting results from four European countries. Min Zhou and Rennie Lee’s chapter opens the first section. They present an in-depth, historically informed analysis of how the Chinese government influences migrants’ United States-based organizations and their transnational activities. Zhou and Lee demonstrate how these organizations, in close relation with the Chinese state at the national and local levels, facilitate both immigrants’ incorporation into the United States, as well as the creation and maintenance of multiple relationships, ranging from economic to social to academic and cultural, that connect the two countries.

In chapter two, Christina Escobar reports her findings on Colombian and Dominican immigrant organizations in the United States. Escobar shows that although both sending states have created programmes and policies to encourage migrant transnationalism, Dominican and Colombian immigrant organizations have grown independently of state intervention. Moreover, these organizations sponsor projects with a national, rather than hometown focus. Interestingly, while Colombian organizations tend to work in partnership with civil society actors in Colombia, including large corporations and private foundations, Dominican organizations tend to work in close relation with powerful political parties. The practical effects of these organizations on development, however, tend to be very limited.

Rina Agarwala’s contribution presents the main findings of her study of Indian transnational organizations in the United States, including her examination of the active role of the Indian state in facilitating and encouraging migrants’ long-distance engagement. Indian organizations have indeed created important linkages between both countries. Professional and alumni organizations have been crucial in keeping first-generation immigrants involved in India, while organizations focused on religion are proving critical to keeping the second generation connected to their parents’ homeland and for affirming their Indian identities. Yet, Agarwala finds that the effect of these organizations on India’s economic and political development “has been decidedly mixed” (105).

In her chapter on Mexican hometown associations (HTAs) in the United States, Natasha Iskander convincingly debunks a widely held perception that these grassroots organizations are autonomous and that they operate independently of state influence. Indeed, Iskander demonstrates the various ways in which HTAs interact with and have their agendas shaped by both the United States and the Mexican governments. In brief, she argues, Mexican HTAs are embedded in, and are shaped by, official Mexican state structures, which tend to be openly political at the national, regional, and local levels. More significantly, Iskander finds that despite the official involvement of, as well as common narratives about, the significance of HTAs for local development, HTA-state cosponsored projects tend to be modest in scale and have a rather limited development impact.

In chapter five, Margarita Rodriguez demonstrates how Nicaraguan organizations' orientation and transnational actions are heterogeneous and have been shaped by global sociopolitical processes and dominant development discourses. She shows how these organizations serve as advocacy groups, and are significantly influenced by the political polarization of the Cold War, the class and racial composition of the migrant population, and their relationships with the private sector in Nicaragua and philanthropic institutions in the United States. While their transnational interventions target specific beneficiaries (i.e. women and children) in specific localities, Rodriguez concludes, these organizations have a minor ameliorative effect on Nicaragua's development.

Jennifer Huynh and Jessica Yiu's chapter focuses on Vietnamese organizations. The authors introduce the concept *blocked transnationalism* in reference to the sociopolitical factors that curtail Vietnamese refugees' involvement in transnational activism. Huynh and Yiu note that first- and second-generation Vietnamese tend to have different foci, and different degrees of transnational engagement. This difference is clearly expressed in their transnational organizations. While first-generation Vietnamese harbour a strong mistrust of the Vietnamese government and limit their actions to independently helping their conationals, their offspring are keener to engage in transnational development action in cooperation with the Vietnamese government.

The second section of *The State and the Grassroots* opens with Marie Godin, Barbara Herman, Andrea Rea and Rebecca Thys' chapter on the migration-development-integration nexus of Moroccan and Congolese immigrants in Belgium. These scholars discuss some of the topics covered in the previous chapters and confirm the importance of migrants' historical contexts, including their mode of incorporation and the policies of home and host states, in determining the formation and transformation of immigrant organizations. However, Godin et al. conclude that migrants' capacity to contribute to

international development remains a hollow promise and rarely materializes in effective actions.

In their case study of Moroccans in France and their transnational activities, Thomas Lacroix and Antoine Dumont report that contemporary Moroccan organizations are more the result of immigrants' search for social recognition in both countries, than an attempt at developing their homeland. Indeed, the authors found that Moroccan community leaders use such organizations as a way to engage in upward social mobility as they confront political contexts in France and their homeland, often using their successful integration in France to pursue crossborder engagement. As such, Moroccan transnationalism is the domain of members of the better-off, first generation. The authors thus conclude that "the future of the Moroccan transnational social space depends on the continuous inflows of new immigrants" (233).

In chapter nine, Gery Nijenhuis and Annelies Zoomers present results from their study of Ghanaian, Moroccan, and Surinamese transnational organizations in the Netherlands. The authors acknowledge that diasporas are formed by migrants coming from different sociopolitical backgrounds, moving for different reasons, under different circumstances, and at different times. The organizations they create reflect that heterogeneity and complexity, with all the concomitant strengths and limitations. Overall, the authors find that these organizations' crossborder engagement tends to be translocal, rather than transnational, and has a symbolic rather than a practical development effect.

The second section closes with Héctor Cebolla-Boado and Ana López-Sala's analysis of Colombian, Dominican, Peruvian, Ecuadoran, and Moroccan transnational organizations in Spain. The authors find that the expansion of these organizations' transnational development engagement resulted from the Spanish government's introduction of co-development policies. As such, these organizations are highly dependent on state funding and support. While this top-down model appears to be the most important factor in the development of transnational immigrant organizations, its stability is in doubt due to the severe economic and fiscal crisis currently affecting Spain. A lack of state support could mean a drastic erosion, if not the end, of collective immigrant transnational engagement in Spain for these groups.

In the concluding chapter, Fernández-Kelly synthesizes the main contributions presented in the ten empirical chapters, and introduces a theoretical model for the study of immigrant transnational organizations. This model is structured by the intersection of a temporal and a spatial analytical vector. The temporal vector refers to these organizations as means for the intergenerational transmission of economic advantages and identity formation, through transnational engagement with the homeland. The spatial vector conceives of immigrant organizations as a bridge connecting migrants

abroad to their homelands. In sum, Fernández-Kelly concludes, the activities of these organizations are much more than channels for development abroad. They facilitate immigrants' assimilation and the recasting of their own identity. At a higher analytical level, she posits insightfully, globalization and assimilation are mutually constitutive processes connected by transnationalism.

The wide array of cases included in *The State and the Grassroots* provide a variegated landscape of immigrant transnational organizational spaces. At the same time, several analytical dimensions emerge that can help us understand the morphology, dynamics, and orientation of immigrant transnational organizations, thus linking the experience of these diverse groups. Perhaps the most significant dimension is the historical-structural embeddedness of the immigrant organizational field. The origin, social composition, and direction of migration flows appear to be contingent on global geopolitical and economic processes – that is, international economic crises, the Cold War, historical relations between places of origin and destination, techno-economic changes, and, lately, the globalization of market fundamentalism. In turn, the size, morphology, and durability of organizational spaces are dialectically related to migrants' socioeconomic composition, mode of incorporation, and the historical-determined contexts in their homeland and abroad.

The empirical studies also convincingly show that the state constitutes a significant dimension of the formation and analysis of immigrant transnational organizing. As Portes indicates in his introduction, the national state has historically been a key actor shaping migrants' organizational spaces. This is a dimension that has not been fully appreciated in the literature until now. Practically all the case studies included in the volume identify the significant role played by the state in both countries of origin and destination. States provide the institutional and practical conditions, as well as the opportunities that in great part determine the composition, structure, and political orientation of migrants' organizational field. Host states help shape the organizational field either through direct migration policies (as European states have done) or indirectly, through their international relations with countries of origin (as the United States government does). This is a valuable insight that has so far been neglected in the emerging literature on immigrant organizations. The structural-historical embeddedness of immigrant transnational organizations may ultimately cast some doubt on the analytical usefulness of Fernández-Kelly's suggestion that there is a "typical evolution" of immigrant organizations (i.e. from defensive to advocacy, and so forth), for such evolution appears to be contingent on geographical and historical contextual conditions, and depend on the timing, composition and conditions of migration, as well as the role of the state in countries of origin and reception.

Meanwhile, states of origin like Mexico, Nicaragua, Vietnam, Morocco, India, and China, have also greatly shaped migrants' transnational organizations.

The cases in this book document the dynamics and implications of official intervention by the state of origin at different levels (national, regional, and local) to encourage migrants' engagement with development in their places of origin. This intervention ranges from granting dual citizenship and voting rights from abroad, to allocating official migrant representation in the national parliament, to schemes encouraging private investment and the funding of civic projects in the countries of origin (like Mexico's 3 × 1 programme).

State policies both at home and in destination countries, however, have generated concerns about the official cooptation of migrant organizations for states' own purposes, as states of origin seek to exert political and economic control over migrants and their organizations, and as destination states try to use them to regulate migrants' spatial mobility and maintain political control. One significant effect of state intervention has been the emergence of a transnational migrant bureaucratic elite that tends to present itself, and be officially perceived, as the legitimate representative of the migrant population. Another element of concern is the increasing role played by private corporations, religious organizations, and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in providing financial support and shaping the agenda of transnational immigrant organizations. This area in particular calls for further research, in part because it poses a set of questions that depart from existing debates on the migration-development nexus. Indeed, the question here is not whether migration affects development. Rather, echoing Portes' argument, it may be how grassroots immigrant organizations handle their increasing dependency on nation states and other large institutional actors, and the effect of this dependency on their own development priorities.

Another central dimension brought to the fore by this volume regards the role, if any, of immigrants' offspring in the transnational organizational field. These ten case studies show that second-generation immigrants tend to be engaged in transnational development endeavours at a lower level, and for quite different reasons, than their forbears. Overall, the second generation tends to engage in such activities mainly for identity-related reasons, rather than out of an interest in the development of their parents' homeland. In this sense, as Fernández-Kelly points out, transnational engagement, assimilation, and identity are closely intertwined and dynamic processes.

Immigrant transnational organizations play an important symbolical role in the sending country. However, these organizations' contribution to development is minimal, as practically all the case studies included in the volume conclude. Partly this is due to the very size and capabilities of these organizations; in part, it is due to migrant leaders' personal goals. Finally, it is partly determined by the size of their contributions. These organizations tend to be very small and include only a tiny fraction of the migrant population. As such, their development contributions tend to be hardly noticeable. This is

particularly clear if we compare their monetary contributions to those of individual migrants, sent via personal remittances. The latter are much more substantial. Take the case of Mexico, which is a country often used as a paradigmatic example of state-supported migration-based development. As Iskander points out in her chapter, collective remittances for development projects in Mexico are minuscule, reaching around US \$10 million in 2014, as compared to the US \$23,606.8 million sent by individual migrants that same year.

As with most edited volumes, *The State and the Grassroots* is an uneven collection, particularly in the methodological approach and dimensions covered by the articles. The first six chapters reporting United States-based studies fit together well and reflect the consistent application of a singular methodological approach, while allowing for a diversity of analytical perspectives. This is less true for the articles based on European cases: each one reads as an independent study using very different research methods. The only connection with the CIOP methodology in this section can be found in the authors' efforts to create an inventory of immigrant organizations in each country. Some of the chapters in the second section of the volume offer a more limited analytical approach and could have benefitted from more careful proofreading.

Despite these limitations, *The State and the Grassroots* makes significant analytical and methodological contributions to the migration studies field, particularly to the study of the migration-development nexus and of the relationship between assimilation/integration and transnationalism. This volume will be useful for upper-division undergraduates, as well as for graduate students and seasoned researchers interested in this field, particularly at this time of heightened anxiety about immigration and national security.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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