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A RESPONSE TO JANINE DAHINDEN



## Commentary on the study of transnationalism: pitfalls and promise of an emergent research field

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Janine Dahinden has written a thoughtful and provocative commentary on our 1999 article on immigrant transnationalism. We agree with many of her points and even with some of the critiques levelled at the original article. Before commenting on this, it may be worth recalling where things were back in the 1990s and what our article attempted to accomplish then. The enthusiasm unleashed by *Nations Unbound* by social anthropologists Basch, Glick-Schiller, and Blanc-Szanton (1994) was followed by a veritable explosion of both qualitative studies and speculative writings leading to the impression that all immigrants were involved in transnational activities and that transnationalism represented a new “paradigm” for the understanding of global phenomena.

Our article was, first, a call for caution. We followed Robert K. Merton’s apparently simple methodological observation that before a phenomenon is studied, its existence has to be proven (Merton 1987). Historians and other social scientists had long known about such practices as remittances sent by migrants, periodic visits back home, and dense social networks linking migrants to their places of origin. By themselves, such activities hardly justified coining a new term.

What made “transnationalism” novel in the early 1990s was the assertion that such activities did not constitute tangential aspects in an overall march towards assimilation, but that they were part of an alternative to it. Immigrants were by-passing assimilation, constructing instead a new mode of social and economic adaptation by simultaneously living and participating in two or more communities in different nation-states. The social anthropologists who introduced the term buttressed this hypothesis with a series of ethnographic case studies. Still, at the time, there was no hard evidence to assert that such practices were generalizable or representative of what most immigrants were actually doing.

As Dahinden's comment appropriately notes, our article attempted to overcome this problem by specifying criteria that would justify the coining of a new term, identifying a clearly defined and measurable object of research. At a minimum, the phenomenon had to include a significant number of persons; it had to consist of activities that were not fleeting or occasional, but conducted on a regular basis as parts of the everyday life of participants; and finally, such activities were not already captured by pre-existing concepts. Creators of the term may have objected that such conditions unduly restricted it but, in fact, we attempted to save it from the fate befalling many other concepts in social science. Commonly, when a new term comes around that excites the imagination of scholars, it tends to be applied widely and in ways that exceeds its original scope. Hence, it ends up seeking to explain everything which is the same as explaining nothing. The original heuristic value of the concept is thereby dissipated.<sup>1</sup>

In our subsequent empirical surveys, we found that regular transnational activities – economic, political, and social – did exist, but they did not include the majority of immigrants in the communities studied. Most migrants went on with their regular lives in ways better described by existing theories of adaptation and incorporation, rather than by the transnational hypothesis. The hypothesis did identify a real phenomenon, but one that was by no means universal. The fact that not all immigrants were transnationals simultaneously strengthened the concept as a worthwhile object of research because it created *variance* in both the origins and the consequences of these practices.

Later studies by other scholars such as Levitt (2001), Itzigsohn (2009), Kyle (2000), Escobar (2007), as well as ourselves discovered another important point, namely that while regular transnational practices were exceptional in immigrant communities, they could still exercise a significant role both in these communities and in their places of origin. Such effects became particularly important when the focus shifted to the organizations that immigrants created to influence events in their home towns and regions (Goldring 2002; Iskander 2010; Portes, Escobar, and Radford 2007). These subsequent discoveries consolidated transnationalism as a "strategic research site" (Merton 1987), both in the study of immigration and in that of national development.

Our commentator is right in noting the absence of a systematic discussion of the role of national states in the original article. This was due to two reasons. First, we implicitly assumed the significance of states for, without them, "transnationalism" would lose its meaning. If there were not state-imposed barriers and regulations on flows of people, goods, and capital across national borders, such flows would be no different than those occurring within national borders. "Transnational" organizations and activities would simply disappear. Second, there was not sufficient information at the time the article was written

to treat the role of national states in all but the most obvious terms just noted. Things have changed since then as both sending and receiving states have moved to engage actively with their expatriate communities.

Subsequent major studies by Iskander (2010), Goldring (2002), Zhou and Lee (2015) and others have brought attention to the role of sending states, not only in constraining transnational activities, but also in furthering them and engaging in various forms of dialogue with their expatriate communities. As it turns out, not only sending but also receiving states have entered the transnational field, changing it in profound ways. This aspect had not been noted in studies of immigrant transnationalism in the United States because the American state adopted a *laissez faire* stance towards these practices. It became immediately apparent, however, in studies of the same phenomenon in Europe. Under the label “co-development”, a number of Western European states have engaged actively with immigrants groups in their countries, seeking to identify organizational interlocutors and even creating them where none existed before (Morales and Ramiro 2011; Nanji 2011; Nijenhuis and Zoomers 2015; Pries 2008).

Thus, research during the last decade has significantly advanced our knowledge, making evident that governments not only regulate immigrant transnational activism, but actually engage with it, seeking to promote developmental projects or to neutralize the disruptive political potential of such activities (Lacroix and Dumont 2015). In partial compensation for the relative neglect of the role of the state in our earlier article, the senior author has recently co-edited a collection of studies of transnational organizations created by eighteen immigrant groups in the United States and four European countries. Sending and receiving states feature prominently in these studies, as well as in the book’s title, *The State and the Grassroots* (Portes and Fernández-Kelly 2015).

Subsequent research has also extended the focus of inquiry to include transnational migrant organizations’ interactions with a diverse set of non-state actors in sending, and more notably in receiving countries (Fausser 2012; Landolt and Goldring 2010; Mezzetti 2010). Transnational migrant organizations extend their reach and impact through these contacts and relations. This line of inquiry reaffirms the original intent of the framework: to examine the development and consequences of transnational practices from below.

Where Dahinden goes astray in the final part of her comment is in seeking to telescope transnationalism to the status of a paradigm or a perspective. Such attempt exaggerates the concept’s importance. A paradigm or perspective in social science consists of a set of core assumptions, explanatory concepts, typologies and theories assembled to produce a consistent view of the social world and to investigate it on the basis of this conceptual apparatus. Hence, we have, for example, the Marxist conflict perspective; the consensual-

functionalist perspective; and the rational market competition perspective in economics (Collins 1988; Kincaid 1996; Portes 2010).

The world-systems perspective – to cite a more recent theoretical development – consists of a typology of national states; a history of the evolution of the system since the XVI Century and the succession of core states in it; the core assumption that the only real unit of analysis is the capitalist world economy, functioning as a single entity in real time; and a series of ancillary hypotheses predicting the future evolution of this system. Nothing of that complexity exists under the label “transnationalism”. The much bandied critique of “methodological nationalism” may be applicable to traditional studies of assimilation in developed countries, but it is surely out of place among scholars of globalization, including world-systems theorists. They jettisoned the assumption of a world consisting of an assemblage of separate “container” states long ago (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1977; Sassen 2001; Wallerstein 1974, 1991).

As a strategic research site, the merit of transnational studies has been to call attention to the multiple activities of common people across national borders, seeking to adapt and, if possible, overcome the constraints imposed upon them by an expanding capitalist economy. It is, as we called it in past publications, a form of “globalization from below” set in partial opposition to the “globalization from above” implemented by major economic and political actors (Guarnizo 2003; Guarnizo and Smith 1998; Portes 1999). But calling attention to these activities is not the same as labelling them a new theoretical “paradigm”. We suspect that this attempt to catapult an important, but limited empirical discovery to the status of a major theory is what triggered much of the combative reactions against it (Waldinger 2015; Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004).

Transnationalism is not a theoretical perspective, but a mid-range concept designed to highlight a previously neglected patch of reality and to guide and encourage its investigation. As an outcome of studies in this research site in years past, we now have a better understanding of a situation where the grassroots initiatives of immigrants and their organizations vie with and are increasingly affected by the actions of actors “from above” seeking to guide, regulate and, some times constrain these popular initiatives.<sup>2</sup> Such findings amply justify the original coining of the term. They can also be incorporated in broader theories of national development, civil society formation, and the evolution of the global capitalist system. Herein lies the value and the promise of the concept.

## Notes

1. Examples abound and include such concepts as “status inconsistency”; “reference group”, and “dependency”, each widely used in its time and now mostly confined to oblivion.

2. It is worth pointing out, however, that migrants' transnational engagement are not limited to public organized actions, for the vast majority of these activities involve private relations with kin and friends across borders (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Sørensen and Guarnizo 2007).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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