Private, public, or both?
On the scope and impact of transnationalism in immigrants’ everyday lives
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Abstract

The paper deals with transnationalism from the viewpoint of immigrants’ relationships and belongings at distance emerging in their everyday lives. Drawing on an ethnographic study, concerning a group of Ecuadorian immigrants recently settled in Italy, I contend that the transnational emphasis on the ongoing relationships with one’s homeland, and even on immigrants’ “double lives”, reflects their persistent identities and affective ties, rather than the actual scope of their ordinary actions. Indeed, my fieldwork limits the empirical relevance of transnational practices – as far as “common people” in a long-distance migration are concerned – to the private realm of family life, between kin set apart. In the public sphere, instead, immigrants’ life is increasingly rooted in the local receiving contexts, with few opportunities – and perhaps even less interest, out of a merely symbolic patriotism – to get in touch and interact with their sending country.

The issue remains whether the coexistence of a private engagement and a public, matter-of-fact detachment, with respect to one’s homeland – within the same group of individuals – may be simply subsumed as “transnationalism”; and whether the semantic and operational field of transnationalism itself should properly comprise immigrants’ self-identifications, belongings and nostalgias – even when they hardly bolster any social practice at distance, or are addressed to immigrants’ earlier lives, much more than their present or future interactions with origin countries.

Introduction

Research on immigrant transnationalism has shifted, over the last decade, from a primary concern with “transnational migrants” – aiming to identify specific groups of people (or even communities) somewhat qualifying as transnational (e.g. Portes et al., 1999) – to a wider focus on the transnational features which may be found out, to various degrees, in immigrants’ everyday lives. This may allow to shed better light on their structure of opportunities and on their subjective experiences, besides showing their ongoing interdependence, if any, with origin countries (Vertovec, 2004; Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007). Nevertheless, the use of “transnational” as an overall theoretical category, in sociology at least, still belies relevant ambiguities (Bauböck, 2003; Faist, 2004; Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 2004). One of them – the unspoken conflation of quite different objects of immigrants’ involvement at distance: one’s mother country (or local community), one’s family, one’s earlier life – lies at the core of this paper.

From a bottom-up, actor-centred perspective (e.g. Levitt, 2001; Smith, 2006), I develop some implications, as to the theoretical consistence of the transnational approach, of my own PhD fieldwork (Boccagni, 2008). This has involved a two-sited, ethnographic and biographic study of a relatively recent and unstructured migration flow from Latin America (Ecuador) to Northern Italy. Within a limited translocal case, allowing for an in-depth analysis mediated by my own systematic relationships with Ecuadorian immigrants (and their family members at home), I have generally found poor evidence of transnational social ties. The latter mostly apply to the practices of transnational caregiving, concerning families set apart by migration. They are quite sporadic and less effective, instead, in the public sphere: in other words, with respect to social relationships linking immigrants, or their groups, to social institutions – i.e. the political system, the market, civil society – back home. From this viewpoint, immigrants’ homesickness and persistent belongings by far exceed the scope and the relevance of their actions at distance.

The paper focuses first on the meaning of transnationalism I will follow here, drawing from a literature so rich and diverse, by now, as to result sometimes in inconsistent or overemphatic approaches. I will then read through the results of my ethnography, highlighting the variable relevance of transnational ties in the everyday lives of the immigrants (and of their “significant others”) I have personally met, from three complementary vantage points: an individual level, a family and a wider social group one. “Relevance”, here, stands for three key issues, variously criss-crossing in immigrants’ attitudes and behaviours:
- the potential viability of significant interactions at distance (whether in a political or economic domain, in a sociocultural one, or only in an affective one);
- the personal interests of immigrants to build on them, their expectations and representations in this respect, and the wider factors accounting for their variable orientations, if any, to the motherland (whether transnational, translocal, national-at distance, or indeed – as I will show – “a-national”, i.e. involving only one’s strict family, or primary care relationships, with far less concern for the wider national prospects);
- the fewer transnational relationships or practices emerging in their daily lives abroad, together with their usability and impacts.

I will then return to the theoretical framework of transnational migration. The poor fungibility between social action at distance and in proximity (especially in the affective
realm), and the need to distinguish between private and public features of immigrants' transnational action, will be the two key points to be dealt with in the final sections of the paper.

1. “Transnational ties”: a lens to approaching immigrants’ everyday lives?

As a theoretical introduction to my fieldwork, given the risk of (ab)using transnationalism as a catch-all label, I have built on a working definition of mine. My attempt has been to elaborate a construct more accurate and applicable to empirical research than the earlier, standard notion of Basch et al. (1992); and, at the same time, wider than the well-known definition of Portes and colleagues (Portes et al., 1999). The latter, though valuable for its greater empirical rigour, may be broadened up to include immigrants’ attachments at distance in the affective and the emotional realm, insofar as they fuel systematic relationships of mutual communication and support, not grounded on physical proximity.

I will thus approach Ecuadorian immigrants’ daily lives through the notion of transnational social ties – meaning by this any social relationship and practice “at distance” (along with the identity orientations they build on) allowing immigrants to exert a relevant influence on the social life of those left behind (and, vice versa, allowing the latter to impact on the former’s lifecourses in significant ways).

Such an “agential” approach to immigrant transnationalism (Kivisto, 2001; Morawska, 2003; Faist, 2004), centred on the differential involvement-at-distance of ordinary social actors (and on the variables accounting for it), can be reformulated in classificatory terms, with respect to three analytical levels (see table 1 for a synthesis, including a few examples).

Studying immigrant transnationalism may focus, first of all, on an identity-attitude level, showing that – in immigrants’ own life experiences – a strong and lasting attachment to "home" may persist even in the absence of frequent "crossings", either physical or symbolic ones, of the distances separating them from the motherland. In other words, migrants' twofold embeddedness may be persisting, at least as far as their affections are concerned, even without frequent contacts with their origin countries (Viruell-Fuentes, 2007). Hence the relevance of an in-depth analysis of identities, self-perceptions, belongings and expectations emerging through their own biographic accounts, as far as their migration experience is concerned. Empirical research, from this vantage point, still seems relatively undeveloped (among the exceptions, Levitt, 2001a; Haller and Landolt, 2005; Smith, 2006). However, insofar as immigrants’

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1 A few key literature reviews, helpful to shed light both on the proper and the not-so-proper uses of the notion of transnational in migration research, are however the following: Kivisto (2001); Levitt (2001b); Portes (2003); Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004); Vertovec (2004); Levitt and Jaworsky (2007).

2 Whose pioneering definition reads transnationalism as “the process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement” (Basch et al., 1992, p. 1). I will dwell at the end of the paper on the notion, as much cited, of “transnational social fields” (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004). The latter, in migration flows such as the one at issue here, makes a poor contribution to the understanding of the few, and mostly “privatized”, transnational ties being maintained by immigrants.

3 The authors delimit the field of transnationalism, in a proper sense, to “occupations and activities that require regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders for their implementation” (Portes et al., 1999, p. 219).
orientation keep being long “bifocal” (Vertovec, 2004a), or addressed to the co-national communities abroad or in the origin countries (Snel et al., 2006), they may lay the foundations for transnational social practices. Even when this is not the case, such attachments may account – in the medium term, and with especial respect to second generations – for partial and selective trajectories of assimilation (Waters and Levitt, 2002). The latter do not necessarily result, however, in a strong or exclusive identification with co-nationals in the immigration setting.

A different level of analysis of immigrant transnationalism, one relatively easier to be substantiated in empirical terms, involves social relationships at distance: the social ties with the mother country – or, more often, with a few “significant others” left there – immigrants can maintain, to variable degrees, thanks to visits back home, phone and ICTs communication, and different forms of “remittances”. This area of concern has been developed, for instance, in the framework of transnational families, or in the field of common identifications and sociabilities mediated, on a transnational level, by common religious belongings.

A still different level, in analytical terms at least, is the behavioural one. This involves a diverse complex of activities, behaviours and social practices, having as a commonality – in immigrants’ daily lives – the creation of connections spanning, with different degrees of frequency and intensity, between “here” and “there”. A good case can be made to include for instance, under this rubric, businesses linking origin and destination countries, political activism, hometown association initiatives, etc. Whatever the key aims underlying them – whether affective, instrumental, or “status-maintaining” ones – at stake here are phenomena which can be observed and analyzed in terms of visible social actions, involving some interaction between the two (complementary) sides of any migration process.

The distinction between social relationships and practices at distance – that is, between transnational ties and activities – is for sure a contentious one. Focusing on the latter, emphasis lies on immigrants’ behaviours in their own right, as they generally address the origin country or community, rather than specific individuals. Transnational relationships rely instead on interpersonal, reciprocity ties with “significant others” – especially family members – being the only ones “deserving” immigrants’ involvement in social actions at distance. In other words, interpersonal trust and reciprocity amount to the key threshold between a relationships level and a practice one, within a wider transnational perspective.4

Looking at a migration flow from below, in its daily reproduction, the relationships domain may prove, as a result of persistent family ties, a much more fertile ground – as to transnational involvement – than the practices one.

By combining the three analytical levels with as many social action domains, helpful in classifying transnational ties – an economic, a political and a sociocultural one5 (Portes et al., 1999; Portes, 2003) – a recapitulatory typology can be built (table 1). While the

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4 Even so, the distinction may fade away, when it comes to empirical research. Remittances, for instance, are no doubt a transnational social practice. Nonetheless, they may be more properly understood in a relationship framework, as they address only specific individuals – the only ones to whom sending money, from immigrants’ viewpoint, is warranted, and even due.

5 While the first and the second domain are relatively easy to delimit, the third is more ambivalent (and much less relevant than one would expect, in my case at least). The sociocultural dimension of transnationalism may include social actions bridging distance, which take place on affective or symbolic grounds, more than on instrumental ones. While not necessarily equating with selfless or disinterested actions, they are however driven by motivations wider than “instrumental-rational” ones. See also the remarks at the end of paragraph 2.3.
typology involves only abstract distinctions, immigrants’ transnational participation is in fact a quite selective and stratified social phenomenon. To the variables usually adduced as accounting for this – e.g. the structure of a migration flow, the role of networks, migration policies, communication infrastructures, physical distance and, on an individual level, one’s education and degree of “integration” – I will propose to add up a less debated question, concerned with immigrants’ own vantage point: the life domains – whether public or private ones – transnational ties mainly apply to.

Table 1 – A typology of the key forms of immigrant transnationalism, by analytical level and social action domain (source: own adaptation from Portes, 2003; Ambrosini, 2007; Snel et al., 2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Economic domain</th>
<th>Political domain</th>
<th>Sociocultural domain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitude-identity</strong></td>
<td>Predilection for consuming goods from the origin country</td>
<td>Patriotism and nationalism at distance</td>
<td>Homesickness (involving the motherland and/or the origin community)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>level</td>
<td></td>
<td>Attachment to the motherland’s citizenship</td>
<td>Prevailing social identification with co-nationals abroad or in the motherland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Affiliation to the motherland’s political parties</td>
<td>Self-identification with the culture, art, folklore, etc. of the motherland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Relationships</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Myth of return”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>level</td>
<td>Predilection for consuming goods from the origin country</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Behavioural</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Investments (houses, estates, small businesses etc.) in the motherland</td>
<td>Activities supporting parties, candidates or political institutions in the</td>
<td>Involvement in or support to festivities, sport, music or religious events - either</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Informal trans-boundary trade</td>
<td>motherland</td>
<td>in the motherland, or promoted abroad, but addressed to the motherland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnic enterprises promoting exchanges with the motherland</td>
<td>Distance voting</td>
<td>Start of/participation to social or cultural organizations in the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Circular international labour migration</td>
<td>Political activism – advocacy networks and other initiatives at distance,</td>
<td>motherland, or promoted abroad, but addressed to the motherland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>involving the motherland and the settlement country</td>
<td>Participation to solidarity initiatives in the motherland, or promoted abroad, but</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dual citizenship</td>
<td>addressed to the motherland</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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In the following paragraphs I will try to explore, in empirical terms, the contribution of such a vision of transnationalism to a better understanding of immigrants’ social, affective and emotional ties, in their everyday life away from home. This amounts not so much in assessing whether their orientations, relationships and practices are more or less transnational; or, arguably more often, increasingly localized in the receiving countries, whatever their wishes and expectations.

The real point is a deeper and more significant one: whether, to what extent, in which life domains and for how long, social relationships at distance – first of all between migrants and their “significant others” left behind – may offset the lack of physical proximity, or even substitute a co-presence relationships (or replicate it), in the life courses of those affected by a physical distanciation – not necessarily a short (or a predictable) term one – as a result of migration.

This will lead me to explore through multisited ethnography (Marcus, 1995; Fitzgerald, 2006), within a quite ordinary migration flow, the perceptions, utilization and maintenance of transnational ties, in immigrants’ daily life. This analysis will fuel further reflections, both on the contributions and the persistent dilemmas inherent in the transnational approach. The key issues, thus, will not be “is transnationalism empirically sound or not?” This, in properly restricted terms, is likely to be the real case only for a few self-selected minorities, in any migration flow (Portes, 2003). The question will be instead, more radically, “is transnationalism, as an approach, helpful to shed light on some remarkable aspect of ordinary immigrants’ life? At last, should a part of its assumptions be revised, to make the whole perspective more refined and consistent with empirical evidence”?

My own case selection is for sure an arbitrary one, even though the same might apply to most ethnographic field delimitations: the key criteria being not necessarily some a priori rationale, but rather the quality of the empirical analysis one draws out of the fieldwork. I have focused on a local group of Ecuadorian immigrants, settled in a North Italian area (the district of Trento) and mostly coming from the same area of origin (Pasaje, El Oro district, Southern Ecuador). My choice has been related both to a matter of viability – leading the whole research in Spanish, within a circumscribed context – and to a more substantive reason: it would be intriguing to see a contrario which assumptions of transnationalism make real sense, and under what circumstances, within a long distance, recent and relatively unstructured migration flow; one which, in principle at least, might leave little scope for transnational connections. So, is this really the case?

2. On the weight and the usability of transnational ties in immigrants’ everyday lives: From the Self, to the family, to one’s wider community

My research has built on the participant observation of the daily social life of a few Ecuadorian immigrants – some hundred people – in a local immigration context in Italy, and of their manifold exchanges with those left behind in Pasaje, Ecuador. For one year and a half, I have done ethnographic research in the receiving context (as well as in the origin one), supported by biographic interviews. After a critical period negotiating access to the field, I have become familiar with immigrants’ own informal social events
in the extra-work time – associational meetings, parties, religious services, sport and cultural events, or the simple “going out together” – and have interviewed in-depth some 35 of them. Besides, I have been hosted, while in Ecuador, by a few of their family members left behind, in Pasaje.

By meeting immigrants, and gradually entering their informal sociability places, networks and public events, I have explored the connections between a theoretical construct, quite afar from their own self-perceptions – i.e. the “transnational” – and their daily behaviours and experiences, insofar as they reflect a persistent tie with their motherland.

In what follows, I will explore their own “transnational social field” (Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004) from three vantage points, in terms of accessibility, relevance and impact of transnational ties; assuming that such ties do exist and endure, which in fact, as I will show, is far from obvious. The three viewpoints I propose – an individual level, a family and a wider public sphere one – criss-cross in many ways, in immigrants’ ordinary life. Still, they are worth being distinguished on analytic grounds. Within my ethnographic material, drawing on a deeper account I have built through the field (Boccagni, 2008), I will report some illustrative quotes and extracts.

“Ecuadorian immigrants” applies, here, only to those I have personally met and observed, many a time, in their everyday interactions in situ and at distance. While such a comprehensive label may oversimplify differences related to gender, education or age, the picture emerging from the field – as to transnational involvement – is a quite consistent one, whichever the individual specificities. A case could be made, of course, for partially different patterns, were a different local context – for instance a metropolitan one, relying on a wider coethnic community, and possibly on an ethnic economy – to be considered.

2.1 On the individual level: belongings, cognition and communication from a transnational vantage point

A first terrain of analysis has to do with the actual relevance of transnational ties, let alone the clear potentiality to keep them alive, judging from immigrants’ personal attitudes. In this perspective, I will look at their identities and belongings, as well as at the actual scope and depth of their communication with the motherland, or anyway at their ongoing interest – if any – to the social life and the current events at home.

Most Ecuadorian immigrants I have met, whatever their “integration” in Italy, still feel overtly and proudly bound up with the mother country. Many of them would regard Italy, or their local receiving context, as little more than “the place where I work hard”, in order to save money to send back – or however to lay the foundations for a future better life of theirs – at home. Though arguably related to a time factor – most Ecuadorian emigration to Europe being less than a decade years old (Jokisch and Pribilsky, 2002) –, this is not without practical import.

“Italy”, in their own accounts, is basically a resource one (and one’s family) has invested in, to attain some key objectives, possibly urgent or not postponable ones; and, in the everyday life, the place where one may feel more or less exploited and misunderstood, or even helped and supported, but anyway unable (indeed, not allowed) to lead a “normal life”, as to keeping on with one’s earlier habits and lifestyles. Nearly
anybody, among the first generation immigrants I have stayed with, would ever claim to belong “here”, rather than to their home country (or even their home villages). Apart from self-identification, the unbroken relevance of the motherland often emerges in their accounts – whether family members have been left behind or not – both as a focus for nostalgia, and as an implicit standard to make sense of the values, the habits, the life experiences in the immigration context.

Homesickness for Ecuador concerns first of all immigrants’ emotions, perceptions and feelings related to their earlier everyday milieu – even let alone the detachment from those left behind. While their self-identification, on an abstract level (or in patriotic terms), may keep intact, the reminiscence of the more “sensory” features of their daily lives at home – as to colours, tastes, smells – may easily fade away. To the (limited) extent that they may be reproduced by immigrants, this is a result of the repeated social events with fellow countrymen here, rather than of the continuous relationships with co-nationals there. As S., an immigrant living again together with his wife and children (and thus showing an apparently good “functional adaptation” to life here), puts it:

The longer I stay here, the more I lose my identity – not really “my identity”, I know what I am – I am Ecuadorian, I lose... the pleasure of staying in my own land. [...] I lose this taste, I mean when you feel right there, don’t you? Yeah, it’s like when you get up in the morning [here], you get up and breath... you can smell it when it’s spring, when it’s autumn, the smell of the leaves... for me it was different, I used to wake up and there were banana plantations everywhere... and it smelt of wet land, of guayabas, of coffee...

(S., 36, in Italy for 6)

An especial reference to one’s earlier life – irreducible to a vague feeling of patriotism – can be substantiated in most immigrants’ accounts, including those who have actually built, or rebuilt, a regular family life here. The relevance of one’s continuously Ecuadorian identity, however, should not be reduced only to a matter of reminiscences. In immigrants’ own awareness, feeling still Ecuadorian results in an “identity reservoir” one can by no means be stripped of, whatever the hardness one may face in the settlement country. Hence the unwritten conviction that one’s own values, habits and lifestyle can still make a relevant contribution, for oneself and, even more so, for one’s children, hence a sort of a moral duty – well beyond a merely passive habit – not to lose them, whatever the interaction with the receiving society. Reaffirming one’s national identity, whether as an obvious fact or as a motive for pride, is a source of self-distinction from the all-embracing identity of “immigrants” – or, in its Italian stigmatizing version, extracomunitari – one feels being imposed by the receiving society. Whatever the regret or the disenchantment for the “ever worse” situation of Ecuador, one’s persistent national identity makes grounds for personal consistence, in front of the drastic changes resulting from migration.

The central position of “home”, in immigrants’ frames of mind, is manifest also in the orientation of their future life projects. The latter reportedly remain, with few exceptions (basically related to mixed marriages), strictly linked to the motherland. Nearly everybody, among the inhabitants of Pasaje I have met in Italy, would like to build a new house of theirs at home, or they are building it now, or – in the more successful cases – have already done so. Building one’s own house in Ecuador is a clear marker of the expectation (well-grounded or not) to return “soon” there; as well as a matter of social status maintenance, and a simple strategy of investment of the money saved here – that is, a complementary form of remittance.
Nobody would really deny the expectation to return home, albeit postponed in a “future” they are unable to determine. Indeed, the notion of a covert but pervasive “myth of return” (Jones Correa, 1998) would properly apply here. A good case, in this respect, is made in the self-account of H.: a woman in Italy for a decade, the first link of a chain including a dozen of family members, left in her wake. Though aware of the ambivalent gazes, as well as the expediencies, a migrant encounters when back home, H. sounds determined – no less than most her country fellows – to return, sooner or later, in order to enjoy the fruits of her labour and sacrifices abroad.

*When you return home*, it’s different, it’s no more the same, cos they think we’ve come here and made big money, which is not – and they look at you, they ask you for money: “You who come from there, lend me some money! 100, lend me 200, 300”, and as this is not so, one tells them “no”, and they get steamed up, they don’t look at you any more, one is nearly upset, cos it’s your own people... it’s no more the same. [...] We want to return, as we say our life is there, we’ve come here to work, we make sacrifices while we are young, and then we’ll go there. We don’t know how life will treat us, but we want to go back. (H., 38, in Italy for 9)

One may wonder, however, which is the primary object of their persistent self-projection towards the home country. As these quotes suggest, this has much more to do with the past of one’s country, or indeed with a few selected good memories related to it, rather than with the present state of its affairs. As to the latter, unless special emergencies are at stake (e.g. political upheavals, natural disasters, etc.) immigrants’ interest is generally poor, and their scepticism and mistrust – especially as far as politics is concerned (Boccagni, 2007) – quite widespread.

Ecuadorian immigrants can, and often do communicate at distance in a relatively easy way. Cheap phone calls, or “the social glue” of immigrant transnationalism (Vertovec, 2004b), are for sure a relevant and current social practice, especially within the family realm. Still, as a wider survey on Ecuadorian immigrants in Italy suggests (Boccagni, 2007), relevant information on the motherland involves one’s private sphere (i.e. family members left there), much more than the public one, on a local or a national level; and, as to the latter, the main channel of communication is provided by the parents at home’s own accounts, much more than by the internet, or other channels of autonomous access to information here.

Whether this has to do more with lack of interest and disenchantment to the public life there, or with the poor availability (and access to) ICTs or “ethnic media” here, is contentious. The fact remains that the apparent accessibility of information in real time on the public life at home does not equate, by any means, to an actual “information involvement” of most immigrants, nor to a real interest of them to do so.

Altogether, if a transnational attitude should properly qualify only as “feeling equally at home in both countries” (as Haller and Landolt, 2005, put it), one could object that such a condition is hardly satisfied for the people I have met. Their attachment to the origin country, as a matter of fact, by far exceeds that to the settlement one. However, I contend that such a definition – suitably applying only to a restricted, and self-selective, minority of “cosmopolitans” – may underestimate the relevance of persistent orientations to the motherland, as vague and unfocused as they may be. The transnational projection of Ecuadorian immigrants, as far as their identities and life projects are concerned, could hardly be regarded as a merely symbolic (Gans, 1979), or an abstractly patriotic one. Quite the contrary: such an orientation may exert a relevant impact in the patterns of consumption, in the ways of sociability, in the values and
narratives underlying children upbringing; and, for that matter, in future life expectations. The fact remains that, in terms of “actually existing” transnational relationships and practices, the family domain is the only one where – for some time at least – patterns of systematic interaction between migrants and the motherland can be empirically detected. The realm of family life, therefore, warrants a deeper investigation in its own right.

2.2 On the family level: “your body is here, your heart is there”. A real case for transnationalism (and its shortcomings)

If any widespread social practice may properly qualify as “transnational”, within the migration flow I have been concerned with, this is related to the social life at distance of the members of the same families, set apart by emigration. Building on the wider (albeit contentious) framework of transnational families (e.g. Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002; Landolt and Wei Da, 2005), I will especially focus on the interactions between migrant parents and children left behind; as to the subjective expectations informing them; the practices of “distance filling” (both in emotional and material terms) they result in; the dilemmas they are bound to face. More than on the structural features of the families involved, I will shed light on the everyday practices fuelling and reflecting, here and there, reciprocal commitment and obligations. The notion of a “transnational family life” (Sorensen, 2005; Smith, 2006; Banfi and Boccagni, 2008) may be especially helpful here.

In transnational mothers’ accounts, providing for their children’s livelihood stands out as the only stated, self-conscious mission of the new life beginning after leaving them behind — supposedly for a short period (although, in fact, this is not necessarily the case). The emphasis on the significant (though indefinite) material gains that should accrue from emigration may somewhat soften the relevance, let alone the suffering, of their actual affective loss:

You feel stronger as you say: well, I’m working for them [one’s children left behind]... that’s all! “Stronger”, I mean that... you think: who am I here for? I think: if I was alone, what’s the point of staying here? Why do I stay here, making sacrifices, staying alone... why? It wouldn’t make sense. [...] I – I love

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6 From the interview to L (44 years old, in Italy for 4), a mother with two children left behind in Ecuador.
7 Although no less significant, and even more troublesome, is the realm of evolving interactions at distance between partners, separated by the emigration of either: see, for the Ecuadorian case, Pribilsky (2004); Banfi and Boccagni (2008); Boccagni (2008).
8 Having said this, one of the inherent ambivalences of the transnational family discourse obviously lies in the variable meaning, and in the shifting boundaries, of the very notion of “family”. In my own case, however, I have systematically found a quite definite vision as to the difference, in terms of affections or (at least) of moral obligations, between properly family members — parents and children, partners (if any) and to a lesser degree brothers or sisters — and relatives. Only the former, in fact, are generally regarded as legitimate beneficiaries of remittances from abroad. Much more than the latter, the former — with an unwritten internal hierarchy (children first, then partners, then the rest) — are eligible as potential members of a future chain migration. As N. and M., parents of a girl left from Pasaje a few years ago, put it: “If the person who left here, and is married, succeeds in reuniting her children and her partner there, I think it’s been definitely successful... a reunion of all those closer to her: her mother, father and children... many people have managed to do it by now” (N. and M., interviewed in Pasaje, Ecuador, 02.12.2006).
my child, but I’m compelled to stay here. Cos you need money, to help him. But if you are alone... who are you fighting for?
(N., 25, in Italy for 5)

Unless the hope of an “approaching” reunion can be maintained, the condition of mothering at distance struggles – in women’s own accounts – to find a meaning and a justification in itself. Whatever the reasons inducing (or even compelling) them to leave, their efforts to keep in touch, and even the self-sacrifices they may be making here, hardly would transnational mothers deny that they have been missing something important: in the realm of affection, in their capability to bring up children, in their very mothering role. The latter may shift to a sort of “female breadwinner”, leaving at the centre stage of affections those who care for the children left behind. A few interview quotations may be helpful in illustrating each of these issues.

I’ve lost so many major things of my life... for instance my family, which now... exists no more. My husband, for instance. My children, who are growing up without me, which is still worse... I’m even losing my hope to see them growing up...[...] The only thing I will really bemoan, till my – my last days, is... for my children. For not being with them, right now.
(I., 45, in Italy for 5)

Most of them [immigrant mothers] – well, they don’t really “forget”: they trust those who stay here with their children... I know only this, they get used to staying without them. They forget that they are the mothers... [...] They think all is settled with the money they send back. And this is not...
(D., 41, former immigrant, interviewed in Machala, Ecuador)

Maybe you can reproach yourself... I mean: I went away, I didn’t see my children growing up... I’ve completely lost their childhood years. But at the same time you’re satisfied, as your children... never behave badly... I tell them: if you behave well, if you keep on studying, if you don’t give it up – I will be always proud of you. And I think they, while studying, have a good example of a mother who, from afar, can give them what – what maybe couldn’t have given them at close range. [...] My children have been growing up in the country, with my parents – for them, my parents are their own parents...
(M., 27, in Italy for 4)

Despite these inherent limitations, nearly all mothers-at-distance I have met make systematic attempts at retaining strict ties with their kids left behind: by sending remittances, communicating at distance and – to a lesser extent, given the costs involved – visiting back home. While the role of remittances, as well as their impact, would deserve a deeper analysis in its own right (Boccagni, 2008), some remarks can at least be made, here, with respect to communication at distance.

While calling up home, once a week or so, is a common habit for most Ecuadorian immigrants I have talked with, for transnational mothers the standard is usually a more frequent one – charged, or maybe overburdened, with greater meanings and expectations. For a parent communicating with children at distance, phoning can be a unique opportunity to recover – for a moment at least, and under their own control – a feeling of real proximity with them, through the voice contact. Hence a peculiar personal space, though ephemeral and even painful, through which those who left may dive into the everyday lives, and maybe into the emotional lives, of those who stayed.

At the same time, while communicating at distance, a transnational parent – and indeed, any migrant – may realize that hardly a real control can be exerted, from her own side, on the children (or anybody else) left behind. This is manifest, for instance, in the use of remittances. Whatever their endeavours, it is only those who take care of the children in situ, if any, who could really impose their will on them (despite being often devoid of
the authority or of the legitimation to do so). Once again, a physical proximity condition seems hard to be replaced anyway. At a closer gaze, indeed, even a frequent phone communication reveals its shortcomings. The loss – or the indefinite postponement – of physical proximity, much more so in the delicate realm of primary care relationships, is hard to heal. “Communicating always by phone” – M. remarks, pondering on her own experience – may recreate some feeling of proximity for adult people, but is unlikely to do the same when one’s children are involved:

No. They don’t accept you. They want you to be there. Phoning is not enough for them. My elder daughter can already understand you a bit, she knows why one stays here... the younger son instead, no – he wants to share all with you, the simple things of every day... no way.

(N., 25, in Italy for 5)

Most mothers, in communicating with their children and families, seem to leave intentionally behind – or even to disguise – actual references in depth to their own life conditions, including the manifold difficulties and troubles they may be facing:

Whenever I call them up, they tell me what happens there, what they’re doing, or how’s my child doing – what about school, what he did, what he didn’t... and anything more about him. All about my family: what’s happening, what will happen...all about them. If they ask me how do I do here, fine?, and I – even when I feel bad – I always tell them I feel well. Cos I – I don’t want them to suffer. So, I’d never... tell them how I do really feel.

(Y., 27, in Italy for 4)

At stake, as far as I have seen, is an attempt to prevent sufferings that may be hardly managed at distance, rather than simply to pass down an idealized picture of one’s conditions abroad. Whatever the case, distance communication between migrants and non-migrants – though instantaneous, and easily accessible – results in a highly fragmented and selective flow of information. The same, indeed, applies to the incessant flowing of gossips and rumours, which dominates the relationships between compatriots, in the immigration setting.

Ironically, however, the family members left behind in Ecuador seem quite aware of the “emotional filters” developed by their relatives abroad and, indeed, they tend to do the same.9 Only visits back home, ultimately, may really allow for an easier communication

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9 Besides this, during my fieldwork in Pasaje, I have found systematic evidence of a greater awareness, as to the life conditions of immigrants in Italy, than I would have expected. A couple of quotations of my fieldwork notes may be helpful here. The former is drawn from my visit to D., a former immigrant, whose children, still in Italy, I have often talked with. The latter refers to a fortuitous conversation, one that may happen, indeed, with most non-migrants in Pasaje.

“Here we are at Mrs. D.’s [...] In the dining room, along with the usual paintings of their ancestors hanging on the walls, I cast an eye on a small photo – right above the TV set. It shows a girl, in Italy, outside a Despar supermarket. Mrs D. has been to Italy, as an irregular migrant, and has come back. In her wake, an indefinite amount of children, brothers and nephews has left too. She says she would return now, but «only together with all my children». Only at last, while asking her for some more photos, do I realize that one of her children still in Italy, in their twenties, is S. (still irregular): a guy of those who seem to drink, play football and listen to (high) music all the time. He has not called up home «for five months», but she looks resigned, rather than worried. «He always drinks a lot, doesn’t he?». I try with a vague answer, but I feel really impressed by her lucid account of S.’s situation – despite living far from him for years, and despite – I guess – their poor communication. No room for migration myths, here. «They’re messing around, that’s all», she sighs at last”. [Field notes, Pasaje-Ecuador, 22.11.06]

“I’m on a taxi. A few loose questions, and that’s enough for the taxi driver to start with his story: his wife has been in Italy «for some years». There are so many people, he points out, who in Europe «clean the old folks’ bottoms», while here they stroll around so smart, with their new clothes and jewels...
between the ones and the others, without the ambivalent mediation exerted by physical distance.

In the accounts of migrant women leaving infant children behind, the most painful aspects of transnational motherhood typically result from the loss of topical moments such as birthdays, first Communions, religious feasts, etc. However “close” one may feel, and in spite of any remittance, physical distance seems here to remain an objective constraint – more much so when it cannot be bridged by frequent, circular migration. The very feeling of inability to overcome distance applies most blatantly to critical events such as a serious disease, or even the death, of any family member at home. This is, for instance, how I. has told me about her mother’s death, experienced from afar.

“You can participate] only with your own thoughts... as I know from the experience of my mother’s death. (...) We are accustomed, there [in Ecuador], to hold a wake at the dead person’s home (...). That day they did so, then they carried her to the cemetery... [here in Italy] we had a mass, the priest prayed for my mother’s soul too. (...) But at funeral’s time [night time, in Italy] I was alone. I was calling up my daughter all the time, and she was telling me: “We are almost at the cemetery now”; “We are praying”.... it was awful.

(I., 45, in Italy for 5)

On the whole, relationships at distance between migrants and their dear ones – whether children or not – are permanently exposed to a sort of unspoken uncertainty, due to the chance that some negative event takes place – here or there – without the “others” being able to participate directly, that is with their physical presence. It is right here that a transnational social relationship unfolds both its utmost import, in affective terms, and its utmost inadequacy, or even its impotence, in comparison with an ordinary co-presence relationship.

“We always sleep with the mobile on», N. abruptly tells me. You can never tell: «If they call us from there, all of a sudden, when something happens...»”.

(Field notes, Trento, 26.10.06)

Whatever may happen there, we do suffer here... we feel powerless, as we can’t help... my son, for instance, when he was there [as an irregular migrant, before being repatriated], he had once a bike accident, and I was despaired here, I didn’t know what I could do... you feel impotent cos you can’t stay there with your family, with your child... no way. You suffer, that’s all. All of us with some relatives there, we suffer the same.

(H., 44, mother of a former immigrant, interviewed in Pasaje, Ecuador)

Summing up: for most Ecuadorian families divided by emigration transnational ties are basically a tool for coping with the negative effects of an extended separation, both in space and in time terms. Such a condition impinges both on their private relationships and, broadly speaking, on the trust and on the scope for reciprocal control, inherent in any proximity relationship. Family life at distance is a matter of endurance, or of resilient affections – along with the social practices emanating from them (remittances, gifts, ongoing communication, etc.) – which are more likely to be effective (and even to make sense for those involved), the quicker they disappear, as a result of a family reunion. As in the self-reflection of T. and N., a couple of former emigrants who regret

It is as if those who stay knew pretty well what kinds of jobs are made by those who left, whatever the myths on them (and on the money they make)”. (Field notes, Pasaje-Ecuador, 27.11.06)
leaving their children alone for a few years (despite being apparently wishful, no less than most people I’ve known, to leave again, had they the chance do to so):

When in Italy, we had big Italian friends, they helped us very much – still we did suffer all the time, it was so sad – we used to get dressed with the stuff they gave us in the church, we didn’t spend money, not because we didn’t want to spend there but cos – the less we spent, the more we gained, the sooner we got back here. [...] If you leave, you must keep with the idea that you will return, otherwise, to me, it just doesn’t make sense – you leave, work so hard, and then stay there?!

(T. and N., a couple of former immigrants, Machala, 23.11.06)

Hardly ever, as my case suggests, is transnational family life perceived as a value, or a resource, in its own right; it is rather experienced as a natural, albeit hard, way to counter the injurious impact of migration in the affective realm (whether successfully or not; which is by no means predetermined). For this very reason, family life at distance is expected to be a transient condition, hopefully foreshadowing a return to live together, whether “here” or “there”. It is simply a constraint one is bound to live with, attempting to fill the distance gap with frequent communication, remittances, and a constant emotional involvement which in the medium term may prove – especially in the elective realm of couple relationships – quite difficult to sustain. Despite describing a similar set of relationships at distance, transnational family life has indeed little in common with the so-called transnational social practices, in the public sphere of immigrants’ “dual-focused” lives. Attention, however, is now required by the latter; which, in my case at least, are far less widespread and socially relevant than the former.

2.3 On a public sphere level: the motherland as a catalyst for transnational symbols, more than practices

A further key area, in approaching the transnational ties I have explored in the field, has to do with immigrants’ attitudes and behaviours in the public sphere – well beyond their personal orientations, or their family belongings. At issue, here, is whether their sociability patterns in the receiving context have some import on their ties with the motherland. Is there, in other words, a link between immigrants’ social life here – with especial respect to coethnic “community” events – and their ongoing involvement (if any) with the social life in their sending country?

A (seemingly) good starting point, here, is the so-called “sociocultural” facet of transnationalism, as some authors have described it. Quoting a well-known definition, (2002, p. 767), sociocultural transnationalism has to do with

transnational practices that recreate a sense of community based on cultural understandings of belonging and mutual obligation. We examine the scope and determinants of participation in institutionalized sociocultural transnational activities, that is, the formation of a community public space that spans national borders. (Itzigsohn e Saucedo, 2002, p. 767)

In empirical term, the authors draw attention – in the wider framework of a US survey on the transnational practices of three Latino groups (Portes, 2003) – on some key indicators: participation to hometown associations, money support for projects in one’s hometown, travels back home for public festivities, involvement in any club or charity linked to one’s origin countries. Under all these respects, as I will show, the structure of
the migration flow I have considered (and, indeed, of most immigration to Italy) is not ripe for such transnational practices to have a relevant impact. To put it differently, the approach, though possibly relevant in the US context (at least for selected minorities of immigrants), far overestimates the potentialities for a real public transnationalism, in a recent and poorly structured migration flow, such as the one at stake here.

In the local immigration context I have been in, informal sociability relationships with co-nationals – though not necessarily coextensive with solidarity relationships – play a significant role under many respects. First, co-nationals are generally a reference point for searching a job and an accommodation, and then in the leisure time and in friendship networks; second, a potential resource for organizing – or a market to be attracted in – informal sociability initiatives compounding, for instance in entertainment or in ethnic consumptions, a common feeling of belonging and of homesickness; third, co-nationals here are an ineludible touchstone for one’s reputation, which may incentive everybody to preserve some trust – or at least respect – from the others, in order to save their own status and honourability. For most people I have met, therefore, informal gatherings with co-nationals are a natural habit, somewhat recalling their earlier life at home, that needs no justification. Hence their frequent involvement, though within the boundaries of fragmented subgroups, in common social events such as parties, dinners, football matches, etc.

The scope of their informal sociability, however, is basically a local one, much more so as, in the context I have studied (quite isolated from the major Ecuadorian “colonies” in Italy), it cannot rely on the infrastructures on an ethnic economy; that is, on products or services dedicated to their own consumption, and even imported from the motherland. The low numbers (some 400 overall) of the Ecuadorian collectivity I have studied do not allow, whatever their wishes to do so, for a relevant circular flow of goods and resources from the motherland. Even apart from the impact of their number, one cannot but conclude that distance, once again, (still) matters.

To the extent that some transnational circulation of resources does take place, between here and the motherland, it is mediated by the networks of co-nationals returning to Pasaje (for holiday only), and then back here: no more than a few informal, charged exchanges of photographs, letters, clothes or small presents. A short fieldwork account may be helpful here.

In am at an organizational meeting of the first local Ecuadorian association. Curiously, it has been summoned right on Easter day. A public feast, which will take place a few weeks later, should be prepared; few are, as usual, those volunteering for this. Once again, I feel astonished by their emphasis on small details which an outsider would find quite irrelevant: the rules for electing the reyna, the girl who will be patroness to the event; [...] the three-colour band she will have to wear, which should be in velvet, with a number of ornamental frills I can’t even remember.

As petty as they may be, both details (as well as their emphasis on the national flag) may be symbolic of their continuous identification – an unspoken but resilient one – with earlier habits and rituals. More significantly: both for the velvet band and the association banner, they would like them to be brought right now from Ecuador: the hope being that some pasajerito, being on holiday just now, may return in the meantime. The only Italian guy there (apart from me), the husband of one of the leaders, makes an objection: well, they could just buy all that stuff right here, it would be even cheaper... nobody seems to agree with him. It is as if there were always, in their own background, a blurred (but potentially rich) intermediate social space – that is, the circulation of information and objects between here and there, along with the circulation (an almost uninterrupted one) of immigrants on holiday there, and soon back here – which they would like to build on, in order to put together the few symbols they will proudly exhibit on the feast day. It’s a pity that, for now, this “social space” is so discontinuous and not much trodden.

(Field notes, Trento, 08.04.06)
From a transnational viewpoint, thus, immigrants’ informal sociability looks ambivalent. Conspicuous references to the motherland – exhibiting the national flag, wearing the national football team t-shirt, reproducing the flag’s colours in one’s clothes\textsuperscript{10} – coexist with a poor interest in current news from the motherland, and with even fewer contacts – out of the family domain – with any social, political or economic institution at home. Hence a common vision of the motherland imbued with a sense of patriotism and homesickness, as an object of cultural consumption, rather than a relevant stakeholder or a point of reference in immigrants’ everyday life.\textsuperscript{11}

Even immigrants’ own associations, spontaneously emerging (and vanishing) quite frequently, build on the same pervasive feelings and symbols of patriotic affiliation, but are quite localistic in their scope and orientation. Whether concerned with leisure and sport activities or, sometimes, with advocacy and solidarity ones, such initiatives basically aim to satisfy common demands or needs, inherent in immigrants’ every day life. The motherland remains an evocative background symbol; the dimension of mutuality by far prevails on the transnational one, in the interests and practices of those involved. A few quotations illustrate, once again, that a common identification with the motherland, even when paving the way for a shared collective action, is hardly a channel for contacts or exchanges with the origin country itself.

In a year, or so, this is at least the third attempt to found an “association” involving the Ecuadorians in Trento. The initiative, this time, has been of I., in Italy for decades, married with an Italian. At the first meeting, while she talks of “representing Ecuador” or of “making solidarity” with their country, the others keep silent. They don’t look very persuaded. Apparently, they would rather expect to be able to claim more rights or opportunities here; for instance, an easier access to home loans, or to banking operations, as S. puts it. “Solidarity” is not an issue at stake here. Nor, indeed, is Ecuador. At most, the new association should be concerned with some Christmas initiative, involving entertainment and presents for their children, here.

(\textit{Field notes, Trento, 27.04.06})

The “start up” of the new association has been made, the second meeting of the “board” has begun. As frank as usual, K. summons up what most of them apparently think: “We’d better help first those of us who are here! And then, the rest…”

(\textit{Field notes, Trento, 02.06.06})

Another association, another annual meeting, as messy and inconclusive as usual. When her turn arrives, Q. vehemently claims: the association, instead of promoting leisure trips, or of buying Christmas presents for their children, should try to help “the poor people there”; in Ecuador. You must understand, Q. insists, that “in comparison with them, \textit{we, here, are pretty well}!” Someone nods, but nobody actually seems to agree. The meeting will deal with quite different topics.

(\textit{Field notes, Trento, 20.05.07})

Much caution is needed, therefore, with respect to the “sociocultural transnational participation” thesis. Itzigsohn and Saucedo (2002)’s claim of a growing “participation in immigrant organization, that promote cultural or social ties with the country of origin”, is likely to apply, in a few cases at least, to relatively structured migration

\textsuperscript{10} A similar ethnographical analysis, in terms of “symbolic nationalism”, has significantly been made by Pallares (2005), with respect to the sociability activities of Ecuadorian immigrants in Chicago.

\textsuperscript{11} Only in the latest few years, indeed, has the issue of emigration begun to raise some attention – on a discourse level at least – in Ecuadorian politics and policies. Judging from immigrants’ first distance voting in 2006’s national election, however, their participation – and much more so their political weight at home – is still quite marginal (Boccagni, 2007; SJRM-ILDIS, 2007).
systems, apart from being related with a significant integration in receiving societies (Portes, 2003). Here, instead, it exceeds by far empirical evidence. In the context of a recent, first generation migration flow, immigrants’ sociability in the public sphere acts as a channel for mutual support and recognition, or for a revival of the past, but definitely not – for the time being, at least – for “the creation of an institutionalized transnational public space, not dependent on local propinquity” (Itzigsohn and Saucedo, 2002, p. 779).

3. From the fieldwork, back to theory: emerging issues and relevant implications

The more days go by, the more it seems to me that, here and now at least, so-called “transnational social fields” are nothing but little paths, not always laid out well (nor much trodden). Seldom have they greater scope than family relationships, or contents other than exchanges at distance of affections... homesickness... and sometimes, whether to complement or to substitute for them, of remittances.

(Field notes, Pasaje-Ecuador, November 2006)

Altogether, Ecuadorian pasajeros immigrants I have stayed with may qualify, at least in the public realm of their everyday lives, as only “potentially transnational”. Most of them still feel emotionally bound up with their country of origin, or possibly with their earlier ways of living. Yet, given the high distances and costs separating them from the motherland (in travelling, and even in communicating), they prove unable to keep really in touch with it. Many of them would probably like to – as suggested by their patterns of sociability in the public sphere, which attempt to reproduce their earlier “social worlds”, i.e. their own habits, values and lifestyles (Guarnizo, 2003). Given the structural conditions of immigrant life, however, their actually transnational interactions are rare and inconsistent, and their knowledge of current events in the motherland just anecdotal and superficial – let alone their prevailing disregard and disenchantment to the political life there.

A somewhat different picture emerges out of their family life. At least as long as family members live apart – which especially applies to migrant mothers and children left behind –, evidence can be given of a constant flow of information, affections and even material resources, linking immigrant workers to their “significant others” at home. Though widespread, these affection-based relationships at distance are a reaction to an unwelcome separation – hopefully, but not necessarily, a short-term one – rather than a deliberate attempt to keep “living in two places”, building on the potential opportunities inherent in one’s double embeddedness within separate social systems.

Having said this, affective relationships of proximity at distance may be successful in the short term, and from an “instrumental” point of view (i.e. in making a livelihood). Hardly, however, can they endow migrants and non-migrants with the depth of communication, and the opportunity to negotiate and control each others’ behaviours, which are inherent in any co-proximity relationship (Urry, 2006). Unless the latter is restored in the middle term, or at least replaced by frequent (though expensive) journeys back home, proximity at distance seems bound to be an extremely vulnerable and weak condition; even more so in the realm of elective (i.e. couple) relationships.

Overall, my ethnographic evidence questions the inherent validity of a fashionable notion such as “transnational social field”. While some authors would have it as no less than an empirical research tool, my study suggests it is far too vague for fieldwork use, and at least contentious not only as a theoretical tool, but even as a simple metaphor.
Rather than transnational, most social ties maintained at distance by the people I have stayed with are actually translocal, as they involve only a specific local community of origin (Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 2004). The label transnational may instead apply, to some extent, to their wider patriotic or nostalgic orientations, in basically symbolic terms. Rather than long-range fields, Ecuadorian immigrants’ accounts reflect a set of fragmented and highly particularistic relationships, hardly ever stretching beyond the familial domain, and not always predictable – even within that domain – in their actual solidity and persistence. As significant as “crossborder contacts” may turn out to be – especially in the affective realm – they generally act, and are perceived, as a poor surrogate for physical proximity.

Given this weak scope for transnationalism, expressions such as “transnational social paths” – describing their privatized ties at distance, in the realm of affections – or “transnational social tracks” – that is, their even weaker transnational connections in the public sphere – may be more effective and proper metaphors.

Conclusions

Summing up: applying transnationalism to a recent migration flow, originating from a very distant country, highlights both frequent relationships and exchanges at distance, in the only realm of family life, and a growing embeddedness in the local immigration context. Properly “transnational practices” – as to entrepreneurship, political activism, socio-cultural initiatives, philanthropy, or whatever else – are instead, apart from remittances, definitely marginal. While transnational family relations are a socially relevant phenomenon, both in immigrants’ self-perceptions of their affective lives and in its wider societal reverberations, transnationalism in the public sphere is much more self-selective, contingent and even élitist.

It is only within the scope of kin ties – or, indeed, of primary care relationships – that transnational hypotheses are substantiated, at least as long as family members live afar. Under all other respects, the motherland is still a source of identity and belonging, but certainly not a relevant stakeholder – much less so a source of opportunities – in ordinary immigrant lives.

No wonder, Waldinger (2008) argues, that a relevant transnational engagement in one’s private sphere may coexist with a substantive embeddedness in the receiving country, under any other respect (let alone one’s persisting national self-identification). Still, if the diagnosis of an ambiguous coexistence of private transnationalism and public localism (not necessarily equating to straight “assimilation”) is correct, one may wonder if it still makes sense – from a sociological viewpoint – to frame the twofold phenomenon under a common analytical rubric. The persistence of significant social relationships at distance, in itself, may prove quite poor as a communal “theoretical qualifier”. The two forms of transnational social tie, in fact, are quite different in their extent, sustainability and impact.

On the one hand, private transnationalism is relatively widespread, but – from an individual viewpoint at least – likely to decline in the middle term, together with remittances, insofar as families come together again (or, instead, they split up once for all). On the other hand, public transnationalism – in terms of distinctive social practices interacting with the homeland, let alone common symbols or belongings – is much less frequent and more selective; indeed, in my own case study, almost non-existent.
Whether it may gain relevance, even in the middle term of first generations alone, depends on key structural factors, more than on immigrants’ own will: the potentialities for the development of an "ethnic economy", facilitating both ethnic consumption and transnational businesses oriented to the motherland; the political orientations prevailing in origin countries – e.g., whether voting at distance is bound to remain a merely symbolic fact, or a potential channel for a greater relevance of immigrants (in parallel with their huge economic weight) on the political life back home; the accessibility and costs of communication at distance, both in terms of ICTs and as to physical transportations to the motherland. From all these viewpoints, the translocal case I have studied suggests scepticism, which is likely to apply to the overall migration flow between Ecuador and Italy (or, indeed, Europe).

The very notion of transnationalism, ultimately, conflates no less than three different “motherland references”, which may be more or less relevant – but totally different the one from the other – in immigrants’ life experience:

- social ties at distance with one’s motherland, with especial respect to institutions – political, economic, or else – being still, for the migrants, a source of rights, opportunities, identities or belongings;
- social ties at distance with one’s family, or with a limited group of “significant others”, under a regime of mutual affections and obligations;
- emotional and affective ties with immigrants’ own earlier lives, whose nostalgic memory, possibly an idealized one, may even pave the way for ongoing contacts with home; though oriented to the past – in opposition to the current-day immigrant hard life – more than to a viable future “dual” life project.

Whether, overall, the notion of “transnational” should focus first on the public ties through the distance, or on the private ones, or even on the merely reminiscence-oriented ones – in a continuum of increasing empirical relevance, at least in my case study – is an issue that warrants far more attention, in future transnational migration studies.

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