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International Perspectives on Transnational Migration: An Introduction

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Josh DeWind
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This special issue of the International Migration Review on transnational migration represents both a victory and a challenge. For those who have advocated for the recognition of transnational migration, this publication is a victory in that it attests to the importance and growing acceptance of a transnational perspective among migration scholars. It is also a challenge because many of the criticisms raised initially by detractors have been quite valid. Making sense of transnational practices and placing them in proper perspective still requires much conceptual, methodological and empirical work.

The recognition that some migrants maintain strong, enduring ties to their homelands even as they are incorporated into countries of resettlement calls into question conventional assumptions about the direction and impacts of international migration. At the same time, the significance of such “transmigrants” for migration studies is strongly debated. Some critics doubt that transnational practices are widespread or very influential. Others contend that migrants’ transnational practices are not new and that, as in the past, they will diminish over time among migrants and be of little significance for their children. Still others charge that the findings from the primarily case-study-based research on transnational migration are often exaggerated or skewed. Resolving these debates is made even more difficult because what is meant by “transnationalism” and what should and should not be included under its rubric are not always clear. The contributors to this volume each address these challenges in a variety of ways.

The articles presented here grew out of two encounters between European and U.S. scholars that were held at Oxford and Princeton Universities in 2000 and 2001, respectively. These meetings were sponsored by the International Migration Program of the Social Science Research Council, the Transnational Communities Program at Oxford University, and the Center.
for Migration and Development at Princeton University.\textsuperscript{1} The purpose of these meetings was to assess international research about transnational migration and to redress some of the weaknesses that had characterized some of the scholarship in this area. The meetings brought into conversation scholars from Europe and the United States who had approached similar questions from different vantage points. As a result, the papers prepared for this publication have much to say — from an international perspective — about the “how, why, and so what?” of transnational migration and the concepts and methodologies employed in its study.

Reflecting the organization and ensuing discussion at the two meetings, the first group of articles in this volume is concerned with general analytical challenges posed by transnational migration research. Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller show how the nationalist assumptions inherent in so much of social science have deterred scholars from recognizing social phenomena and relations which transcend nation states. Ewa Morawska explores the theoretical, methodological and terminological assumptions that keep transnational migration scholars, based in many different disciplines, from engaging in a truly interdisciplinary dialogue. Steven Vertovec suggests ways in which scholarship about transnational migration might benefit by borrowing concepts from research on other types of transnational social formations such as social movements and business networks.

The second group of articles in the volume presents the broader implications of empirical research on particular aspects of transnational migration. To clarify some of the conceptual muddiness that has characterized earlier scholarship, we asked each contributor to focus on a particular aspect of transnational social life — economic, political, sociocultural, and religious. By doing so, we did not mean to suggest that transnational political practices, for example, could be viewed in isolation from their economic and social counterparts. In fact, some of the most interesting insights in this volume concern the interaction between transnational practices in different sectors. Adapting a sectoral focus was a heuristic strategy we hoped would illuminate aspects of the nature and magnitude of various transnational practices.

\textsuperscript{1}Both activities were organized by Alejandro Portes and Peggy Levitt, as Co-Chairs of the Transnational Migration Working Group of the SSRC’s International Migration Program, Steven Vertovec, as Director of the Transnational Communities Programme, and Josh DeWind, as Director of the SSRC’s International Migration Program. Funding was provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Economic and Social Research Council, based in Great Britain, and the Center for Migration and Development at Princeton University.
The studies included here by Luis Guarnizo, Rainer Bauböck, Robert C. Smith, Eva K. Østergaard-Nielsen, Karen Fog Olwig, Patricia Pessar and Sarah Mahler, and Peggy Levitt address economic, political, sociocultural and religious sectors of transnational migration at different levels of social organization. Some of these authors focus on individual identities and households while others are interested in the intermediary organizations, such as political parties and hometown organizations, that enable transnational belonging. Still others stress the broader interactions between migrant groups and states or supranational economic and political regimes.

Finally, a concluding essay by Alejandro Portes supplements theoretical arguments contained within the earlier papers by summarizing results of some of the research upon which they are based. He outlines the ideas he feels reflect a general consensus in the field and places them within the context of a survey he and several colleagues conducted to measure the extent of transnational economic, political, and sociocultural activities among various immigrant groups. His contribution ends with recommendations for future research.

How can all of these perspectives, characterized by distinct sectoral foci and levels of analysis, be integrated coherently? In our discussions at the meetings that produced this volume, participants tried to identify what they saw as the shared premises underlying their draft papers. These premises are reflected, to varying degrees, in the final drafts of the articles published in this volume. In what follows, we summarize what we see as the central concerns and emerging intellectual frameworks characterizing transnational migration studies.

The first premise underlying the articles in this volume is that transnational migrants are embedded in multi-layered social fields and that, to truly understand migrants’ activities and experiences, their lives must be studied within the context of these multiple strata. For example, analyses of the connections between migrant and nonmigrant actors – at home and abroad – are incomplete if they do not take into account relations at the subnational, national, and supranational levels. Individuals’ transnational experiences must be understood with reference to their families and households; their participation in political, religious and community organizations; and their relation to the national and international policy regimes within which transnational activities take place. Furthermore, it is not simply that global forces influence local actors but that the local economic, political and reli-
igious practices of individuals act back — interrelationships that are mediated differently with respect to different social spheres, the distinct levels at which they are enacted, and the linkages between them. Thus, a key set of concerns guiding these articles is how the different strata of transnational activities mutually interact and transform one another.

A second shared premise is that states continue to exert a strong influence on transnational migration. Earlier research in this area, and in other transnational fields, speculated that state sovereignty had diminished and that states’ ability to regulate, protect and make demands of their citizens — migrant or not — was declining. Some argued, for example, that individual rights based on personhood, and protected by global rights regimes, weakened national citizenship and state policies. In contrast, the contributors to this volume find many ways in which state policies still matter. Their findings suggest that the state is here to stay. In fact, several authors focus on the ways in which states reconfigure themselves and redefine national membership to maintain ties to and profit from their transnational constituencies.

A third common premise is that whether or not transnational migration has a “liberating” effect on migrants is a question that needs investigation. Some early writings on transnational migration assumed that transnational lifestyles would imbue migrants with the resources and power they needed to challenge the class, gender and racial hierarchies that had constrained them. A political project was implicit in this orientation, and the questions guiding some of this early work had this bias embedded within them. More recent research and writing calls into question these assumptions and asks a more nuanced set of questions about who transnational migration benefits, under what circumstances, and why?

A fourth shared premise is that aspects of migrants’ lives that were largely ignored by much of the early transnational migration scholarship ought to be taken into account. Religion, for example, is salient in many migrants’ day-to-day lives and exercises significant influence over the ways in which migrants are incorporated into host societies and stay attached to their homelands. Yet, until recently, most studies ignored the role of religion in transnational migration. The ways in which transnational migration is gendered is another area that has not received sufficient attention. While gender is considered more fully in some of the analyses in this volume than others, most of our contributors agree that gender is a central organizing principle of migrant life, that transnational migration affects men and women differently, and that it alters relations between them.
The fifth premise is that enduring transnational ties are not new but were also a factor in earlier flows, such as the wave of transatlantic migrations at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Nonetheless, the contributors to this volume agree that, despite similarities between earlier and contemporary patterns of transnational migration, significant differences in the factors facilitating and encouraging contemporary transnational ties need be taken into consideration. Today, new technologies of communication and transportation allow migrants to sustain more frequent, less expensive, and more intimate connections than before. Such technologies enable migrants to remain active in their sending communities more regularly and influentially than in the past. Furthermore, more uncertain labor market demand and employment encourage the maintenance of ties to resources back home. In the United States during the early 1900s, rapid industrialization required masses of low-skilled laborers who did not need to speak English. In contrast, today’s migrants enter an economy increasingly based on post-industrial enterprises. It offers stable employment to the relatively small portion of the immigrant labor pool who are highly-educated and skilled and more short-term employment to unskilled migrants with little English.

In addition, today migrants encounter a social context that is much more tolerant of ethnic diversity and long-term transnational connections compared to the past when assimilation was demanded more strenuously. Rather than feeling pressure to abandon their unique traits, some migrants feel encouraged to maintain, if not celebrate, their social and cultural differences that are sustained through ties back home. At the same time, the spread of a global culture is reducing some of the distinctions between home and host societies that migrants must bridge in order to live in more than one country. Finally, many states that have become dependent on migrants’ economic remittances and political clout are now implementing policies aimed at strengthening emigrants’ homeland membership and participation.

The sixth premise shared by the contributors to this volume is that not all migrants are engaged in transnational practices and that those who are, do so with considerable variation in the sectors, levels, strength, and formality of their involvement. As the articles here illustrate, migrants take part in cross-border activities that are either limited to, or link between, the economic, political, sociocultural and religious sectors of their lives at different stages of their life cycles. For example, there are individuals and groups whose economic livelihoods depend upon regular transnational activities while their political and religious lives focus on host-country concerns. But there are also migrants who participate regularly in religious and political transnational
practices and only occasionally send money back to family members or invest in homeland projects. Individuals whose transnational practices involve many arenas of social life can be said to engage in “comprehensive” transnational practices, while others who take part in only a few are more “selective.” Most of the individuals described in this volume participate in selective transnational practices as well as selective assimilation into their host societies.

Similarly, the levels of transmigrant activities also vary. The links between migrant associations and their home towns, or church-to-church ties between sending and receiving communities, are often aimed at establishing very specific and local (what some call “translocal”) connections. But for some groups, transnational practices are no longer about affirming identities to a specific place, but instead about their enduring membership in broader ethnic, religious or occupational groups that might have local, regional and national levels of organization. Thus, a migrant’s loyalty to place – a village or district – might take a back seat to wider affinities of genealogically and religiously-defined networks or communities.

The strength of transnational ties also varies with regard to their frequency or intensity. The transnational activities of individuals whose livelihoods are dependent on multiple on-going business interests, who are fervent political party activists, or who regularly take leadership roles in church affairs can be characterized as intensively transnational. More common are migrants whose transnational activities are periodic or occasional, who engage in cross-border trade, participate in hometown associations, or join political or religious groups only when a specific campaign or crisis occurs.

Transnational activities also vary with regard to their formality. While some groups regularize their transnational allegiances by expressing them within institutionalized structures, others act through much more informal, ad hoc relations. The connection between institutionalization and frequency of transnational practices is not as straightforward as it may seem. While institutionalized arenas facilitate transnational engagement, less formality can also enable greater flexibility and speedier responses to the different challenges that transnational migration poses over time.

The range of transnational activities in which migrants engage also varies in relation to their compatibility with global culture. The proliferation of global models of organization and governance provide migrants with models for creating their own transnational alliances. Comparability between global practices and discourse and migrants’ transnational activities also encourages greater transnational activism. That heightened global intercon-
nectedness is taken as a given underscores that living transnationally has become an accepted and expected way of life.

The seventh premise the contributors to this volume share is that host-country incorporation and transnational practices can occur simultaneously. Migrants configure packages of livelihood strategies, piecing together opportunities in their sending and receiving countries to reap the greatest rewards. The kinds of activities in which migrants participate, the institutional arenas where these activities take place, the class resources to which they have access, and their life-cycle stage determine the resulting balance between transnational involvement and assimilation. Some migrants continue to participate actively in the economic, political and religious lives of their homelands and achieve upward mobility in both contexts. Others engage in transnational practices but advance only in a single setting. Still others engage in a set of transnational practices inhibiting their mobility in both the sending- and receiving-country contexts.

Eighth, all of our contributors question the applicability of the terminologies that have been traditionally used in the emigration-immigration-assimilation paradigm. They each propose their own solution to the challenges of lexicon, seek broader concepts and frameworks, and propose new research strategies that can capture the transnational migration experience more fully and accurately. Employment of the term “transnational migration” (and its variations as “transmigrant” or “transmigration”) represents a major step forward, although there is still considerable debate about how and when it should be employed.

Finally, recognition is growing, more explicitly for some contributors than others, that the subjective as well as objective dimensions of transnational practices matter. Much of transnational political and economic life involves observable actions, such as investing or voting, which can be easily measured and interpreted. But religious and family life tend to be more subjective, involving imagination, invention, and emotions that are deeply felt but not overtly expressed. These aspects of transnational lives are more difficult to capture but, nevertheless, critical for the emergence of transnational identities and landscapes. The memories, stories, and artistic creations that are harnessed to express transnational membership ought not be overlooked, even if they fall outside the purview of traditional research methods. Indeed, new approaches are needed which fully capture these aspects of transnational engagement and ensure that they are given the attention they deserve.
TOPICS AND INSIGHTS: THE AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The first section of the volume, on theoretical and methodological issues, opens with a piece by Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, who argue that the almost parallel birth of the social sciences and the modern nation-state system has fundamentally shaped the ways in which migration has been perceived. “Methodological nationalism,” or the assumption that the nation state is the natural mode of social organization, has blinded us to the many social processes that transcend national boundaries. But, while questioning nationalized concepts, Wimmer and Glick Schiller also caution against throwing the baby out with the bath water, or seeing everything as fluid, mobile and independent of the national. Instead, they call for the development of a new set of concepts and methods that are better suited to capture the many social relations and processes which transcend the boundaries of the nation state.

In exploring why interdisciplinary inquiry is so difficult when questions of migration are central to so many different fields, Ewa Moraw ska examines the assumptions implicit in the disciplinary vocabularies and theoretical approaches of sociology, anthropology, history and political science. She shows how each discipline has a different understanding of what is knowable, how it ought to be theorized, and what kinds of strategies are acceptable for doing so. Based on this critique, she proposes ways in which researchers in these fields might better communicate with one another.

Steven Vertovec asks whether the insights gleaned from studies of other kinds of transnational social phenomenon can be applied to studies of transnational migration. He points to some longstanding sociological concepts like social networks, social capital, and embeddedness and illustrates how to use these to elucidate aspects of the transnational migration experience. He turns to newer work on transnational social movements and business networks for terms like mobilizing and opportunity structures, economics of synergy, tacit knowledge, and nexus of competences to also further this goal.

In the first article in the more empirically-based set of articles in this volume, Luis Guarnizo draws our attention to the intersection between migrants' economic activities, their sociocultural impacts, the state, and global economic processes that shape and are shaped by transnational practices. Migrants’ remittances, entrepreneurial activities, and support for local projects generate demands for goods and services that produce backward and forward economic linkages, involving small-scale businesses, corporate activ-
ities, and the state. These dynamics reorganize the relationship between local and global economic life, inextricably connecting the activities of individual migrants with those of global capital. When the creditworthiness of highly-indebted countries is updated on the basis of expected future remittances, Guarnizo argues, transnational migration’s significant impact on global capital is clear. Within the context of global capitalist expansion and migration, not only does labor follow capital but capital also often follows labor.

Eva Østergaard-Nielsen wants to bring to light the “how” and “then what” of transnational political engagements. She conceives transnational politics as a multilevel process enacted through the interaction between sending and receiving country political authorities, global human rights norms and regimes, and networks of other nonstate actors with which migrants’ transnational political networks are often intertwined. Because migrants’ local political agency and institutions are shaped not only by local discourses and modes of organization but also by global factors such as rights regimes, traditional ideas about political transparency and accountability need to be revisited. Østergaard-Nielsen also urges us to think about the short- and long-term implications of transnational political processes on domestic and global politics.

Rainer Bauböck’s article resonates with Østergaard-Nielsen’s. He wants scholars of transnational politics to broaden their focus by considering the ways in which transnational politics challenges conceptions of membership and rights. Our work, he argues, should not only be about how migrants indirectly or directly participate in sending states but also about how their transnational activities affect the political institutions of their host country. A wider lens, he argues, would lead future scholarship beyond descriptive analyses to questions about normative theories of democracy. Such a perspective would challenge researchers to abandon their state-centered focus and consider political communities and systems of rights that operate sub- or supranationally. Bauböck explores three types of transnational political practices, including the expatriate vote, dual citizenship, and extra-territorial nation-building, and analyzes the ways in which these activities redefine the rights and obligations associated with external citizenship.

Robert C. Smith also calls for an expanded notion of transnational politics. He argues that to understand relations between sending states and their diasporas, we must analyze migrants’ evolving relations to the global system, their domestic politics, and their ability to exercise autonomous or semi-autonomous political action with respect to their homelands. Migration cre-
ates a diasporic transnational public sphere that expands and limits opportunities for migrants and engenders new forms of membership. In his analysis, however, Smith emphasizes regional considerations. By looking at various ways in which states redefine their relationships with their emigrant nationals over time, Smith suggests that states are also negotiating different relations to the global system.

Karen Fog Olwig questions the whole notion of “transnational,” arguing that the Caribbean migrants she studies have a wholly different understanding of “nation” to begin with. Movement for these individuals does not signify crossing national borders as much as relocation within the extended sociocultural systems and family networks to which they belong. In such contexts, migrants do not construct or perceive places of origin and destination in terms of their transnational character but rather with regard to particular place-based cultural values and social ties.

Patricia Pessar and Sarah Mahler argue for making gender central to transnational migration studies. They call attention to the role of the state in engendering transnational migration and to the ways in which gender relations are enacted and negotiated across space. They look at four types of transnational transactions between men and women including communication between spouses, the organization of work tasks when family members are distant, negotiations over whether to stay abroad or return home, and readjustments in the nature of family life once migrants return. They also explore how nonmigrants imagine changes in the gender relations of their migrant peers and how these transformations challenge notions about successful marriages and suitable marital partners. By so doing, they highlight the central role of the imagination in living transnational lives.

Peggy Levitt introduces what has been, until now, an understudied sphere of transnational activism – religion. Unlike the contributors that precede her, she does not call for an expanded understanding of transnational religion but, instead, attempts to define what studies of transnational migration and religion might look at and how they might be done. Her article summarizes what is known to date about religious life across borders, focusing in particular on religious institutions, the relationship between religious and political landscapes, and the interaction between transnational religion and politics.

This special issue concludes with a piece by Alejandro Portes in which he describes areas of scholarly consensus and addresses some of the key criticisms that transnationalism has provoked. Portes substantiates his view by
summarizing results from the Comparative Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project (CIEP), a large-scale study of Colombians, Dominicans and Salvadorans on the American east and west coasts. The CIEP data indicate significant characteristics of transnational migrant phenomena, posed with both ‘broad’ and ‘strict’ definitions of the concept. Finally, Portes goes beyond current studies to suggest important areas for new research and theoretical development in the field.

We believe that these selections add empirical, conceptual and methodological clarity to the study of transnational migration. As Portes and several other contributors to this volume propose, there is still much work to be done. The scholarly collaboration that culminated in this volume resulted from bringing together United States and European scholars from a variety of disciplines to compare their diverse theoretical perspectives and empirical research on migrant transnationalism. We hope that the future challenges facing the field – obtaining greater conceptual precision, determining how widespread transnational practices actually are, developing a better understanding of relations between migrants’ transnationally- and locally-based activities, and analyzing relations between transnational migration and other transnational phenomena – will be taken on through similar international collaborative and comparative efforts.