Conclusion: Towards a new world – the origins and effects of transnational activities

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Abstract

The preceding set of articles is reviewed with a focus on the forces affecting the rise and character of grass-roots transnationalism and its effects in countries of origin and destination. The increasing visibility of the phenomenon has led to recent attacks based on its alleged disintegrative consequences for the host society and culture. From a review of the evidence in this volume and the recent literature on immigrant adaptation, I conclude that the opposite is the case. Implications of findings presented in this collection for official policies towards transnationalism and the latter’s effect on sending countries are examined.

Keywords: Transnationalism; reactive ethnicity; linear ethnicity; downward assimilation; dual citizenship.

Assimilation, instead of washing out the memories of Europe, made them more and more intensely real. Just as these clusters became more and more objectively American did they become more German, or Scandinavian, or Polish.

(Bourne 1916, p. 86)

The articles in this volume provide a wealth of information on the character, origins and dynamics of transnational activities. The preceding article by Vertovec complements this body of empirical information with a systematic overview of the definition and uses to which the concept has been put. While acknowledging the various perspectives in this field, including those advanced by several authors in this collection, I return to the methodological guidelines presented in the introductory article as the basis for summarizing what has been learned about the nature and consequences of this phenomenon. This is necessary because, without a set of common understandings, it is impossible to draw on empirical information for theoretical progress, as the latter depends on the way that specific processes or events are defined.
For this purpose, I limit the following discussion to transnational activities defined as those that take place on a recurrent basis across national borders and that require a regular and significant commitment of time by participants. Such activities may be conducted by relatively powerful actors, such as representatives of national governments and multinational corporations or may be initiated by more modest individuals, such as immigrants and their home country kin and relations. These activities are not limited to economic enterprises, but include political, cultural and religious initiatives as well. In the introductory article, we saw how the rise of transnationalism on a significant scale, involving not only the initiatives of powerful actors but those of a mass of ordinary people, requires a series of time- and space-compressing technological innovations and their commercial diffusion.

Determinants of transnationalism

a. Origins and resources

It is clear, however, that these necessary conditions do not suffice to bring about the rise of transnational endeavours. Some groups become deeply involved in them while others do not; within specific immigrant communities, some individuals and families create transnational enterprises as a route for socio-economic mobility, while others pursue a more conventional path as wage workers. The extent and character of political and socio-cultural transnationalism also varies widely. The question is therefore what can the results presented in the preceding articles tell us about determinants of this phenomenon and its variants. A first obvious conclusion is that the history of immigration and the modes in which migrants are received set the context for the direction that their activities, transnational or not, will take. When migration is massive and motivated by political convulsions at home, it is likely that immigrants remain morally tied to kin and communities left behind and, hence, are more likely to engage in a variety of activities to bridge the gap and sustain a common bond.

This type of solidarity is evident among Salvadoran refugees in the United States who, despite their poverty, have created myriad forms of making their presence felt in their homeland — from the travels of hundreds of viajeros to the civic committees organized in support of even the most remote home towns (Landolt et al., this issue.) On the contrary, where migration is a more individualized process, grounded on personal and family decisions, transnational activities are more selective and, at times, exceptional, lacking the normative component attached to them among participants in a political diaspora. Colombians and Mexicans migrating from urban areas provide examples of this pattern (Guarnizo et al., Roberts et al., this issue.)
It is equally clear that the character and scope of transnational enterprise depend a great deal on the cultural resources that a particular group brings with it. This is evident in the case of Otavalan Indians whose remarkable entrepreneurial success abroad is undergirded by a centuries-old artisanal and commercial tradition. Kyle (this issue) appropriately contrasts the experiences of Otavalans with that of mestizo Ecuadoran migrants who, despite their higher social status at home, end up in much less desirable occupational niches in the United States, because they lack the know-how and networks that sustain Otavalan transnational enterprise. At a more modest level, the Kanjobal Mayan migrant community of Los Angeles also draws on its distinct cultural make-up to shape the cultural and political activities tying it to its home communities (Popkin, this issue). In their analysis of Mexican transnationalism, Roberts and his collaborators (this issue) contrast the experiences of rural migrants whose strong home town networks furnish the basis for sustained activities across borders with those of urban migrants, whose more anomic origins prevent anything beyond individualized decisions to leave or return.

b. Reactive and linear ethnicity

The extent of discrimination and hostility faced by an immigrant group is a third factor that interacts with the previous ones to give direction to their adaptive strategies, including those of a transnational character. When, by reason of its racial features and culture, a foreign group is uniformly rejected and confined to a permanently inferior status, there is every incentive to reaffirm its collective worth and seek economic security through non-conventional paths. This motivation is reinforced when governmental reception is also unwelcome, repeatedly challenging the migrants’ rights to come, work, or settle. The clearest example is again provided by Salvadorans whose claims to refugee status were consistently rejected by US authorities, while the migrants’ distinct physical features and peasant origins confined them to the very bottom of the American social ladder (Landolt et al., this issue).

In such instances, there is no recourse but to draw a protective boundary around the group, identifying it with traditions and interests rooted in the home country and separating it symbolically and, at times, physically, from the host society. Immigrants in these situations are in the country, but are certainly not of it, preferring to see themselves as belonging elsewhere both socially and economically. A good illustration of this pattern came from one of the interviews for our comparative study of Latin American transnationalism, conducted in Los Angeles. The respondent was president of the civic committee pro-improvement of the small town of La Esperanza¹ in El Salvador. A man of obviously modest origins, he had difficulty understanding some of the questions, but
became visibly animated when the subject turned towards discrimination in the United States. Yes, he had been subjected to many instances of discrimination by neighbours, bosses, and co-workers; he was routinely followed around stores by suspicious employees and had been detained several times by police. And, yes, Americans considered themselves vastly superior to Salvadorans.

Yet, when asked if he planned to remain in the United States, he responded unambiguously in the affirmative. ‘Well, Mr. González, you have told us that you have suffered all kinds of discrimination in this country, that Americans treat you as inferior, and yet you intend to settle here. How come?’ asked the interviewer. González laughs and explains:

I really live in El Salvador, not in LA. When we have the regular fiestas to collect funds for La Esperanza, I am the leader and am treated with respect. When I go back home to inspect the works paid with our contributions, I am as important as the mayor. In LA, I just earn money, but my thoughts are really back home. It’s only three hours away.²

In his study, Popkin highlights the same pattern of reactive ethnicity among Mayan immigrants confronting a similar situation. The customs, language and traditions that these Indian migrants carry along are never forgotten, but they acquire heightened significance as a mechanism for self-defence and collective reaffirmation against the triple discrimination by native whites, native blacks and even other Spanish-speaking immigrants (Popkin, this issue).

The opposite situation occurs when governmental reception of immigrants of a particular nationality is not uniformly hostile and when the group is sufficiently small and dispersed not to raise major concerns among the host population. In these situations, there are no grounds for reactive ethnicity and the array of transnational activities associated with it. Immigrants may seek to avoid whatever stigma is associated with their particular nationality by claiming membership in a different group or even ‘passing’ as part of the host population.³ This is the case of Colombians in Los Angeles, a relatively small group whose members are dispersed and often avoid other Colombians as a means of escaping the stigma associated with the drug trade. Whatever transnational enterprises emerge in this situation are not associated with a reactive affirmation of national and local identities, but represent a ‘linear’ extension of the immigrants’ interests, past activities and contacts in their home country (Guarnizo et al.; Guarnizo and Díaz, this issue).⁴

c. Governments make their entrance

A final lesson from our case-studies is that grass-roots transnationalism is seldom initiated by governments from the sending countries, but that
governments enter the picture as the importance of the phenomenon becomes evident. This result supports the point in the introductory article that the main impulse for the rise of grass-roots transnationalism is found in the confluence between new communications and transportation technologies and the interest of ordinary people in overcoming a situation of subordination at home and abroad. In pursuit of this goal, immigrants and their home country counterparts have developed such a rich gamut of activities as to come to the attention of authorities who, previously, regarded immigrants solely as a source of remittances (Itzigsohn et al., this issue). Governments of the sending nations have started to perceive their expatriate communities as a source of investments, entrepreneurial initiatives, markets for home country companies and even political representation abroad.

For this reason, an increasing number of countries have rushed to grant their citizens abroad dual nationality, while encouraging them to naturalize and participate politically in the receiving nation. This policy represents a remarkable departure from earlier times, when emigrants were almost regarded as defectors and where naturalization in another country entailed the automatic loss of the original citizenship. This dramatic shift in policy is motivated by the desire of authorities in sending countries to retain the loyalty and, hence, the economic contributions of their expatriates together with the hope that they can further politically the interests of home country governments with their votes and political mobilization abroad (Roberts et al.; Glick Schiller and Fouron, this issue).

The mobilization of Third World governments in pursuit of the economic and political benefits of transnationalism has taken several forms that range from the creation of a specialized ministry or government department in Haiti and Mexico, the granting of dual citizenship and the right to vote in national elections in Colombia, and new legislation allowing the election of representatives of the diaspora to the national legislature in Colombia and the Dominican Republic. Consulates of Mexico, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic in areas of concentration of their respective nationalities in the United States have taken to promoting the acquisition of US citizenship or at least permanent residence by their nationals. From these policies, it is clear that sending governments do not want their immigrants to return, but rather to achieve a secure status in the wealthy nations to which they have moved and from which they can make sustained economic and political contributions in the name of patriotism and home town loyalties.

In pursuit of these goals, some governments have gone so far as to back up their citizens’ claims for political asylum abroad. As Popkin notes, this is the case of El Salvador and Guatemala whose support for political asylum of their nationals in the United States implicitly entails an admission that they were persecuted at home. In a remarkable turn of
events, consuls and ambassadors from these countries argue, in effect, that their governments are highly repressive and force tens of thousands of their citizens to flee, thus legitimately entitling them to asylum in the United States (Popkin; Landolt et al., this issue).

But, as Roberts and his collaborators (this issue) point out, immigrants can see through such official ploys. These authors draw from Hirschman’s (1970) analysis of exit, voice, and loyalty to argue that many Mexicans left their country precisely because they had no voice or were denied it by the authorities. Related attempts by the same elites to regain the immigrants’ loyalty are greeted with scepticism. Migrants may avail themselves of the new opportunities created by double citizenship or the right to vote in national elections, but without going along governmental efforts to line them up in support of the ruling party or its policies back home. Other articles in this collection describe the co-opting policies of Salvadoran authorities towards its immigrants in Los Angeles and Washington, DC, of Guatemalan officials towards Mayans settling in Los Angeles, and of Colombian consular functionaries towards its expatriate community in New York (Landolt et al., Popkin; Guarnizo et al., this issue). In every instance, these official efforts provoke a conflictive response, with some members of the respective immigrant communities supporting them, others declaring their opposition, and still others seeking to manoeuvre instrumentally around official intentions.

The most appropriate conclusion from this mass of evidence is that the interaction between grass-roots-initiated transnationalism and the co-optive version inaugurated by sending country governments is problematic, and do not necessarily reinforce each other. While the entrance of powerful political actors into the process may facilitate immigrants’ transnational investments and strengthen their political standing, it can have other less desirable consequences. These include fragmenting the internal solidarity of immigrant communities, politicizing the civic associations set up in support of home towns, and triggering a backlash in the host society. Powerful actors in the receiving country may come to perceive these co-optive policies as an unwanted intrusion of foreign governments, and as an attempt to derail the process of immigrant assimilation. As the rise of a transnational field linking countries of origin and destination become better known through journalistic reports and daily contacts, voices are bound to emerge denouncing these activities as a threat to the cultural and political integrity of the host nation, creating ‘fifth-columns’ of foreigners uninterested in integrating themselves into society’s mainstream. This line of argument has already made its appearance in the United States and deserves additional attention.

Is transnationalism bad?

A series of front-page articles in The New York Times recently informed its readers in minute detail about the extent and ramifications of
immigrant transnational activities in the United States. Political rallies and contributions to home country candidates, the fact that naturalized US citizens do not have to relinquish their original citizenship, and the extraordinary mobility of today’s immigrants were all vividly described:

Now, Chinese immigrants jet to Hong Kong for meetings with investors in their Queens banks; Bombay movie stars fly in for standing-room only performances at the Nassau Coliseum, and highland Indians from Ecuador fax home orders for more ponchos to sell on the streets (Sontag and Dugger 1998, p. 8).

The increasing visibility of these activities has begun to raise concern in some government circles and provoked a new chorus of protest by nativists and advocates of immigration control. The core of these concerns is the fear that transnational activities will slow down the process of assimilation and convert immigrant communities into ‘fifth columns’, representing and advocating foreign interests within the American body politic. Cases such as that of Jesus Galvis, a Colombian-born owner of a travel agency and elected official in Hackensack, New Jersey, who recently ran a campaign for a seat in the Colombian Senate add fuel to these fears (Fritz 1998.) They are cited in support of nativist views that contemporary immigration to the United States represents a serious threat to the integrity of the nation.

Although the oath of naturalization in the United States requires the renunciation of all foreign allegiances, in practice it is difficult to enforce it when other countries continue to grant the privileges of citizenship to their own. But beyond this practical issue, the more general questions are what effects does transnationalism have in sending and receiving nations and what consequences can be expected from attempts at suppressing it. In the remaining sections, I seek to provide a preliminary answer to these questions.

a. Effects on host nations

A first step in answering these questions is to note that transnational activities must be in the interest of those that engage in them since, otherwise, they would not invest the considerable time and effort required. At the grass-roots level, economic transnationalism offers an alternative to some immigrants and their home country counterparts against low-wage dead-end jobs; political transnationalism gives them voice that they otherwise would not have; and cultural transnationalism allows them to reaffirm their own self-worth and transmit valued traditions to their young.

But what is in the interest of individuals is not necessarily in the interest of nations and it may be argued that all these processes conspire against the cultural integrity and solidarity of the receiving society. There
are several reasons why these concerns are exaggerated and, if acted upon, would lead to negative consequences. First, it is important to keep a sense of proportion. The foreign-born population is but a fraction of the native-born population in America and is itself fragmented in widely different cohorts, nationalities and classes of origin. In the United States, foreigners still represent less than 10 per cent of the population, come from over 150 different countries, and include highly trained professionals and entrepreneurs along with manual workers, both legal and illegal. Nothing like a concerted pattern of resistance to assimilation can be expected from this disparate population (Allen and Turner 1986; Portes and Rumbaut 1996).

Second, the crux of the process of socio-cultural assimilation comes not in the first, but in the second generation. Adult immigrants always seek to retain their languages, identities, and customs (Zolberg 1989; Gans 1992). It is among their young that the crucial shift in language use, cultural preferences and loyalties takes place. The United States is notable for the rapidity and thoroughness of this transition. A good part of the effectiveness of this assimilative process is due to the absence of any interference by the state to enforce certain practices and prevent others. Instead, the process is left entirely to the forces of the society and culture, with individuals free to choose their own adaptive course. Elsewhere, as Brubaker (1996) tells us, attempts to enforce ‘polonization’, ‘germanization’, or ‘russification’ on foreign populations have backfired, triggering ethnic reaffirmation and militance on the part of the target communities. In the United States, on the contrary, a recent survey of over 5,000 second-generation youths found that, by age fourteen, 99 per cent spoke English well or very well, over 80 per cent preferred English to their parents’ mother tongue, and less than a third were fluent bilinguals—able to speak simultaneously English and a foreign language. The process of change in self-identities followed a similar course with majorities of these second-generation youths identifying themselves as hyphenated Americans (Mexican-American, Chinese-American, etc.), plain Americans, or as members of the pan-ethnic identities defined by mainstream American culture (‘Hispanic’, ‘Black’, ‘Asian’, etc.) (Rumbaut 1994; Portes and MacLeod 1996a; Portes and Hao 1998).

Results of this and related research show that the process of Americanization is very effective and swift and that, what is at risk in the immigrant second generation is the preservation of some ability in the parental tongue and knowledge of the parental culture. It is at this point that the onset of transnationalism becomes relevant. From the point of the host society, in this case the United States, the real question is not whether the immigrant second generation will assimilate, but to what sector of the society it assimilates. Children of modest class origins whose immigrant parents have been subject to sustained discrimination run the risk of adopting the adversarial stance common among impoverished minorities.
in America, thus blocking their chances for socio-economic mobility (Gans 1992; Portes and Zhou 1993; Waters 1994). The emergence of a ‘rainbow underclass’, composed of frustrated children of immigrants, unwilling to accept the modest jobs at which their parents toiled, and unable to move up in the occupational ladder, emerges as a distinct possibility from this situation.

The dangers of cultural homogenization and the downward assimilation brought about by the loss of cultural anchors are not new. In a prescient essay, Randolph Bourne described these dangers as they impinged on European immigrants and their offspring coming to America before World War I:

> Just so surely as we tend to disintegrate these nuclei of nationalistic culture do we tend to create hordes of men and women without a spiritual country, cultural outlaws without taste, without standards but those of the mob. . . . Those who came to find liberty achieve only license. They become the flotsam of American life, the downward undertow of our civilization (Bourne 1916, pp. 90–91; italics added).

The growth of transnational activities can act as an effective antidote to the tendency towards downward assimilation for reasons that correspond to the three types of grass-roots transnationalism discussed previously (Portes et al., this issue). Transnational economic enterprise offers opportunities to immigrants of modest origins to escape dead-end menial jobs and find their way into the middle class. This path, when successful, has two effects on children: First, it allows them to escape the inner city and acquire a good education; second, it creates durable economic opportunities that they themselves can exploit. While there are relatively few illustrations of generational succession in transnational enterprise, the case of the Overseas Chinese and other stable trade diasporas furnish historical illustrations of this pattern (Granovetter 1995; Cohen 1997). The case of Otavalans, described by Kyle (this issue) provides a contemporary example of generationally transmitted entrepreneurship.

Participation in transnational political activities can empower immigrants and invest them with a sense of purpose and self-worth that otherwise would be absent. As the case of Mr. González, the President of La Esperanza Committee, illustrates, participation in home town civic associations and similar activities can create a protective layer against the discrimination and contempt commonly found in the host society. This is particularly important in the case of children, who are usually exposed to ethnic slurs in school, but who can compensate for them with knowledge of the significant civic and political activities in which their parents are involved. When an American-raised adolescent travels to his parents’ home country and learns how respected they are, or when he takes part in a political rally with hundreds of others from the same country, his
identity and sense of self-worth change. He is no longer a member of another downtrodden minority, as defined by mainstream society, but part of a purposeful and self-respecting group with goals that transcend its present modest situation (Smith 1995; Landolt et al., this issue).

Socio-cultural transnational activities can have similar effects, reinforcing self-images and collective solidarities. Involvement in these activities does not block successful integration into the host society, but facilitates it by endowing second-generation youths with cultural anchors with which to face difficult external challenges. They provide assimilating immigrant youths with what Bourne called a ‘spiritual country’, a point of reference to establish their distinct identities and sense of self-worth. A Mexican-American teenager who is just another chicana in her Los Angeles school, but gets elected queen of her parents’ town’s annual fiesta achieves, by this fact, a novel perspective and appreciation of her community and of herself. The potential for downward assimilation is reduced accordingly.

Instead of being a denationalizing force conspiring against the integrity of the host society, transnational activities can actually facilitate successful adaptation by providing opportunities for economic mobility and for a vital and purposeful group life. For the second generation, in particular, it offers a valuable counterweight to a relentless process of acculturation that leads children, even at an early age, to abandon their parental languages and embrace unquestioningly the norms and styles of the host culture. In America, this process of acculturation carries the price of learning and introjecting one’s inferior place in the social hierarchy. That sense, which along with poverty, creates the conditions for downward assimilation, is neutralized by the economic and symbolic alternatives that transnationalism makes possible. Through them children of immigrants can find the spiritual resources required to succeed in their difficult journey.

Finally, it is worth noting how governments of the cities and regions where immigrants concentrate play a decisive role in the way that immigrants react and the form that their transnational initiatives take. An example is California, where a series of hostile measures designed to take benefits away from immigrants and weaken the use of foreign languages in favour of English have triggered a predictable reaction, marked by a more adversarial stance in immigrant communities and a stronger identification with the country of origin. A study of over 700 second-generation Mexican adolescents followed over the years in which these measures were enacted reported a notable change in ethnic self-identities. Whereas in 1992, prior to the enactment of these measures, only 17 per cent self-identified as ‘Mexican’, and 80 per cent chose American or the pan-ethnic label ‘Hispanic’; by 1996 over 40 per cent had shifted to a straight ‘Mexican’ identity, a clear reversal of the expected acculturative pattern (Portes and MacLeod 1996b; Rumbaut 1998).
This new national reassertiveness has been accompanied, paradoxically, by a drive to acquire US citizenship among Mexican immigrants and a sharp increase in their electoral participation. This move is clearly motivated by the desire to countermand the perceived hostility of Anglo-Americans and has already led to some surprising results. In one instance at least, a powerful conservative congressman who had championed the anti-immigrant measures found himself voted out of office and replaced by a youthful Mexican-American (González-Baker et al. 1998; Massey 1998).

In New York, on the other hand, the presence of immigrants is much less of an issue and elected officials are more likely to support and participate in transnational activities than to oppose them. As noted by Guarnizo et al. (this issue), the mayor of New York and other state authorities are regular participants in the festivities celebrating national independence days and other immigrant occasions. The New York legislature carefully observes ‘national days’ for the major foreign groups, and the travels and activities of officials and political leaders from the sending countries are taken as a matter of course. This cosmopolitan outlook has made immigrant adaptation and increasing participation much less confrontational. In such a context, transnationalism is able to play a more integrative role, protecting immigrants in the earlier stages of adaptation and devolving gradually into entry and participation into the host country mainstream.

b. Effects on sending countries

As reported in several articles in this volume, remittances and the business investment potential of expatriates are of increasing importance to sending countries. In smaller ones, such as El Salvador, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic, remittances now rival or surpass traditional exports as the main source of foreign exchange and entire sectors of the economy, are increasingly dependent on migrant investments. This is one of the main reasons leading home country governments to take vigorous proactive action towards their diasporas.

But consequences of this transnational traffic on sending nations do not stop with remittances or investments. They also extend to the polity and culture. Qualitative material presented in this collection also documents the influence that home town civic committees can have on the power structure of places of origin and the ways in which return migrants can help transform local life. Still more important are the moralizing and democratizing effects that transnationalism can have on the receiving nation and local community. To appreciate this, it is necessary to keep in mind three facts documented by the preceding studies. First, most migrants are of modest origin and, hence, not sympathetic to traditional élites in their places of origin; second, they live abroad and, hence, are
not subject to the repressive and co-optive mechanisms used by these élites to keep themselves in power; third, by virtue of their growing economic clout and freedom to organize abroad, migrants can wield much greater influence than comparable sectors of the sending country’s population (Itzigsohn et al., Guarnizo et al., this issue).

Immigrant communities are not beholden to the powers-that-be at home and thus have the freedom to denounce corruption and seek to improve their communities outside traditional political channels. This is the reason why so many civic committees abroad have declared themselves ‘apolitical’. The experience of living under a democratic system with an effective and autonomous judicial system socializes immigrants into a new political outlook and increases their expectation for change in their own countries. As governments engaged in co-optation programmes towards their immigrants have learned to their chagrin, this experience of political socialization leads migrant communities and organizations to resist playing by the old rules and demand higher political standards.

In effect, the belated decision of many governments to give their expatriates ‘voice’ through dual citizenship, rights to vote and the like, opens the door for them to play a significant role in local and national politics, commonly in opposition to entrenched structures of privilege. This is what has happened in Mexico whose Programa para Comunidades Mexicanas en el Extranjero (Program for Mexican Communities Abroad) was created at the Foreign Ministry to gain immigrant support for the government and ruling party and to prevent embarrassing mobilizations abroad in favour of the opposition. In the context of the new US-Mexico partnership under the North American Free Trade Agreement, the Mexican government sought, in particular, to stop damaging demonstrations abroad against human rights violations and fraudulent elections. In the event, the Program and accompanying legislation to extend dual citizenship to Mexican immigrants have ended up by greatly extending their capacity to mobilize for the same causes and to be heard, both in the United States and Mexico.

Thus, the President of the Zacatecan Confederation in Los Angeles reported in 1997 that ‘though the Consulate created the Federation to control us . . . it did not anticipate the result’ (Smith 1998, p. 21). Radio Bilingue in Fresno, California, headed by an Oaxacan Mixtec Indian, was used by Oaxacan organizations in both countries to put pressure on the Mexican government for the release of kidnapped Indian leaders: ‘If something happens in Oaxaca, we can put protesters in front of the consulates in Fresno, Los Angeles, Madera’, declared a local organizer. His view was supported by consular officials who lamented that Oaxacan Indian demands had to be given greater attention when made in California than in Oaxaca (Smith 1998, p. 20).

In general, the overall bearing of transnational activities on sending
countries is positive, in both an economic and political sense, even
tough they do not necessarily bolster the existing social and political
order. Migrant remittances and business investments promote economic
growth and, in this sense, contribute to stability in their nations. But
migrant transnational political activism is more likely to line up with the
forces of change, promoting democracy, lesser corruption and lesser vio-
lation of human rights at home. In this sense, political transnationalism
can be destabilizing, as it seeks to bring about higher standards for their
countries in the long run.

These effects are not entirely new. As the Introduction to this issue
showed, diasporas have often been the cradle from which independence
movements and revolutionary organizations have sprung in the past.
Nation-states have been created from abroad and dictatorial regimes
overthrown by the efforts of exiled citizens. There is a continuity
between these past events and present developments but with two sig-
nificant distinctions. First, political transnationalism is greatly aided at
present by technological developments and by the size and economic
resources of expatriate communities. Second, to the extent that home
governments become involved proactively in these activities, they create
the conditions for greater voice for immigrant organizations that can turn
them towards promotion of their own objectives.

These processes are not yet institutionalized and represent, in most
empirical instances, only tendencies. Hence, their present importance
should not be exaggerated. None the less, it is reasonable to expect that
as immigrant communities grow and their networks of communications
and exchange become more dense, the resulting web of transnational
activities will have a significant bearing on the economic and political
future of the home nations.

Notes
1. The names are fictitious.
3. Filipinos represent a similar case in the United States as they do not confront
official hostility, are highly educated, on average, and do not cluster geographically. Their
transnational activities are, accordingly, of a more individual character rather than reflect-
ing a common reactive pattern. See Espiritu (1996) and Wolf (1997).
4. The typology of linear vs. reactive ethnicity has been used in other contexts to
denote the difference between minorities whose cultural orientations and practices
represent a straight line continuation of their immigrant past in contrast to the emergent
cultural outlooks manufactured in interaction and frequently in confrontation with the host
society (Portes and Rumbaut 1996, ch. 4). In the present case, this typology is modified to
indicate differences between transnational activities that represent a direct continuation of
the practices and activities of immigrants prior to departure vs. those enacted in reaction
to the barriers confronted in the receiving society.
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