

## Transnationalism reloaded: the historical trajectory of a concept

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### ABSTRACT

In this commentary, I discuss the importance of Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt's article, focusing on three specific points. First, I argue that this 1999 article represented a turning point in transnational migration studies, in that it made it possible to address important weaknesses in this field of study. Second, I reflect on the article's lack of reference to the nation-state and its power to shape transnational fields. Third, I argue that the cumulative knowledge gained over the last two decades – triggered in part by the claims of this 1999 article – have been steadily integrated into this field of investigation, rendering possible important theoretical alterations. These insights have made possible a shift towards a new stance, a transnational perspective whose specific epistemology makes it possible to develop explanatory frameworks for current transformation processes and to revise social theory more generally.

**KEYWORDS** Transnationalism; transnational migration studies; transnational perspective; nation-state centred epistemology; prevalence of transnationalism; social theory

### Introduction

"Transnational migration studies form a highly fragmented, emergent field which still lacks both a well-defined theoretical framework and analytical rigour" (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999, 218). Such was the critique Alejandro Portes, Luis E. Guarnizo and Patricia Landolt formulated in 1999 while simultaneously trying to find an appropriate definition of transnationalism. Today, roughly twenty years of debate later, scholars still regularly raise similar

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concerns, pointing to the modest theoretical framework underpinning transnational migration studies and the field's often descriptive, context-dependent analysis of migrants' cross-border connections (among others Pries 2008; Waldinger 2015). While this observation is without doubt partly justified, it dismisses the cumulative gains in knowledge and theory construction which have been made over the last two decades – in part as a result of this seminal 1999 article. The insights presented in that article contributed, decades later, to a shift away from a static view of “transnationalism” towards a transnational perspective, both epistemologically and methodologically, on migration issues.

Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt aimed to accomplish nothing less than advance conceptual guidelines in order to establish a clearly demarcated research field of “transnationalism”. In hindsight, the significance of this article is that it represents a turning point in the debates which began in the early 1990s, which were characterized by “the discovery of migrant transnationalism”. The authors discussed the conditions a new concept – like transnationalism – needed to meet in order to be justified, and they posed a clearly delimited definition which made the phenomenon “measurable”. These clarifications were trendsetting, and the article opened up a new venue in this field of research, a second phase of debate, where critical voices – among others later the authors of this article themselves – started to differentiate and radically put into question the utility of the new concept.

Commenting on this 1999 article is an interesting and challenging intellectual exercise. It offers the opportunity to pause for a moment and reflect on the historical trajectory of a concept and a field of study. The objective of my commentary is therefore twofold. First, I will try to situate the contributions of this article from today's perspective: when looking back, what was its unique contribution and what has its lasting influence been? Given the limited space I have at my disposal, I will focus on some specific aspects while disregarding others. Second, will I address the question of what has happened to the concept of transnationalism (and reformulations of the term like *transnationality*, *transnationalisation*, *transnational fields*, etc.) in the almost twenty years since the article's publication? In no sense I am aiming to present a complete history of this field of study – other scholars have done so in brilliant ways (see, among others, Levitt and Jaworsky 2007; Vertovec 2009; Faist, Fauser, and Reisenauer 2013; Waldinger 2015). Rather, I will contest the idea that this field of study has not advanced in the last two decades, despite the persistence of conceptual questions. My main argument is that the “transnational turn” of the 1990s was mainly a paradigm shift in migration research that advanced an alternative stance on migration issues. It brought new theoretical and methodological approaches to the fore, making us understand social processes which had hitherto been opaque, and it has allowed us to contribute to general social theory.

## **Introducing the “prevalence of transnationalism” and subsequent refinements of the concept**

What the authors advocated for in their article was a clear conceptual definition of “transnationalism” in order to justify a novel area of investigation. Concretely, they aimed to advance “a set of conceptual guidelines (...) that seeks to turn the concept of transnationalism into a clearly defined and measurable object of research” (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999, 218). They argued that the existing scholarship had proposed a concept – transnationalism – for a phenomenon that had not yet been confirmed to exist: “(...) it is not enough to invoke anecdotes of some immigrants investing in businesses back home or some governments giving their expatriates the right to vote in national elections to justify a new field of study” (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999, 218). In a nutshell, they maintained that researchers first need to demonstrate that a “prevalence” of transnationalism existed, and only then would a new concept and a new field of investigation be justified.

Upon what backdrop did Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt expand their claims and arguments? Since the early 1990s, a debate had unfolded within the field of migration studies regarding a new phenomenon – “transnationalism” – which, as many argued, had been neglected by migration scholars. Most importantly, social anthropologists Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Christina Blanc-Szanton argued that contemporary migrants could not be characterized as “uprooted”, contrary to the general assumption in classical assimilation theory. Rather, they claimed that many were *transmigrants*, meaning that they became firmly rooted in their new country but simultaneously maintained multiple linkages to their homeland, bringing together their societies of origin and settlement (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992; Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994). Through qualitative ethnographic case studies, they showed how migrants engaged in social, economic and political activities across international borders. This “discovery of migrant transnationalism”, the first phase in this debate, was appealing because of its intellectual perspective and because of the phenomenon it pointed to, and it caught the interest of other international migration scholars. It was at this point in the debate that the prominent international migration researcher Alejandro Portes, together with Luis E. Guarnizo and Patricia Landolt, leveraged the new paradigm and increased its popularity. In their widely read article, they proposed a new line of investigation by looking at the phenomenon through a quantitative epistemological lens – a different one than the early social anthropologists had been committed to – changing, as a result, the nature of the questions asked regarding migrant transnationalism.

The authors identified three conditions which they believed needed to be fulfilled to justify a new area of investigation and a new concept. First, the

phenomenon had to involve a *significant proportion* of persons; second, the activities of interest were not fleeting or exceptional, but possessed a certain *stability and resilience* over time. And third, the content of these activities *could not already be captured by a pre-existing concept*, making the invention of a new term redundant. In their terms, "To be useful, a new term should designate a distinct class of activities or people different from those signified by more familiar concepts" (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999, 219). Consistently with this reasoning, they delimited the concept of "transnationalism" to occupations and activities that require regular and sustained contacts over time across borders in order to be implemented. "What constitutes truly original phenomena and, hence, a justifiable new topic of investigation, are the high intensity of exchanges, the new modes of transacting, and the multiplication of activities that require cross-border travel and contacts on a sustained basis" (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999, 219).

Phrased differently, Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt called into question the picture drawn by the social anthropologists of, put bluntly, a social world that could only be understood through an ontologically transnational perspective. Glick Schiller and her colleagues understood the phenomenon of "transnationalism" to be a reflection of political and economic global structural transformations and particular power constellations, and they simultaneously put into question traditional concepts of migration research, above all assimilation (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994). Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt, in contrast, asked for a kind of "reality check" regarding the perceived proliferation of transnational activities among migrants, and they identified a need for quantitative surveys measuring transnationalism. It is in this context, and in retrospect, that the significance of this article for the future development of this field of study can be found. First, it is beyond doubt that the authors' identification of concrete conditions which would justify a new concept was timely. And importantly, such considerations are of importance not only in the field of migration research, but for the social sciences in general. Second, Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt's arguments fell on fertile ground. Their ideas were received immediately, and a new line of research developed which in turn served to clarify some of the weaknesses in the early debates (see below). Finally, the article triggered a vivid debate between scholars from different disciplines representing varying epistemological positions, a "battle" of intellectual ideas which was sometimes fought intensely and lasted for at least a decade. In fact, these developments were significant for the field of study under discussion. Without them, we would not be today where we are, as I will elaborate below.

Portes and Guarnizo tested their claims themselves and were among the first scholars to conduct quantitative surveys (Portes, Haller, and Guarnizo 2002; Guarnizo, Portes, and Haller 2003). Their surveys revealed that only a

minority of the Dominicans, Salvadorans and Mexicans they studied participated in regular and sustained transnational political and economic activities. In other words, they showed that “transnationalism” – when limited to regular and sustainable activities or networks – was far from being a “lifestyle” among migrants, and that not every migrant was “transnational”. The existence of an encompassing, automatic transnationalism following migration was rejected on empirical grounds. Some years later, the same issue emerged when the significance of transnationalism among the second generation of migrants was investigated. Again, quantitative studies showed – applying a definition of transnationalism limited to regular contacts – that ties with the parents’ country of origin seem to loosen across generations (among many Rumbaut 2002). All together, these results were read as supporting the old established hypotheses of linear and segmented assimilation theory, raising the question of whether the concept of transnationalism would become obsolete (Kivisto 2001).

But not all transnational migration scholars considered this debate to have come to an end. One strand of researchers continued to defend the idea that a more encompassing definition of transnationalism could result in new theoretical insights. As Levitt (2002), among others, argued, the focus on “core transnationalism”, understood as stable and sustainable practices, causes researchers to overlook important transnational realities based on occasional practices covering a wide array of spheres (marriage, death, crises, etc.). In a similar vein, Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) pointed to the importance of not only transnational “ways of being” – activities, practices, networks, etc., the sole focus of the 1999 article – but also “ways of belonging”. Ideas of solidarity, reciprocity and belonging are crucial for the establishment and maintenance of transnational fields. However, kinship solidarity or collective representations of ethnicity and groupness are not given, much less across borders. Rather they are “done” or “undone” in transnational space, within and between generations, and they are closely linked to local contexts which provide constraints or resources (Faist 2000; Dahinden 2010). A second strand of scholars took the results of these quantitative surveys as the point of departure in order to address how and why transnational fields emerge and under which conditions they are maintained, fade away or change. In principle, this line of research showed that transnational fields are the outcome of not only migration, but also the structural constraints and opportunities created by multi-scalar contexts which are imposed on migrants at all points along the transnational chain. The establishment, maintenance or dissolution of transnational fields depends not only on global capitalist extension, as Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt argued in 1999 (see below), but also on the economic, cultural and social resources of migrants (Al-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001; Dahinden 2009), on degrees and types of discrimination and marginalization (Dahinden 2005; Itzigsohn and Gioguli Saucedo

2005) and on nation-state migration regimes and border politics (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004).

These debates, which I have only sketched out here, contributed to important differentiations in this field of investigation. Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt merit recognition for having laid the ground for a wide spectrum of new research, questions and refinements which pushed transnational migration studies a big step forward.

### **Capitalism and the emergence of transnational fields: and the role of nation-states?**

The second point I'd like to make concerns the lack of any reference in this 1999 article to the nation-state and its power to shape "transnationalism". This absence is especially surprising, given that the article does reflect on the necessary preconditions for the emergence of transnationalism. The authors explained the phenomenon as resulting from a new conjuncture in global capitalist expansion and migrants' subsequent strategies of resistance to it. "Contemporary transnationalism corresponds to a different period in the evolution of the world economy and to a different set of responses and strategies by people in a condition of disadvantage to its dominant logic" (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999, 227). Methodologically, they extrapolated their argument by contrasting the present situation to earlier periods of immigration. Through selected case studies, they showed that there had been precursors to the current immigrant transnationalism. However, they remarked that these precursors were, for the most part, exceptional and lacked the novel features that had captured the attention of researchers and that could justify the forging of a new concept.

On what contrasts did they rest their explanation? They pointed to an enhanced demand for migrant labour in post-industrial societies – a demand for, as they identified it, "raw material for the rise of the transnational enterprise" (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999, 228) – and to the fundamental restructuring of societies towards an hour-glass economy. Together, this setting created new conditions which in turn, they argued, triggered transnational activities. Migrants were decreasingly employed in industry, and increasingly in low-paid service work with few possibilities for career advancement. This created new incentives for immigrants to seek other avenues for economic mobility. In this situation, migrants learned to adapt to their new conditions by developing new strategies, of which "knowledge and access to goods and services across national borders" were especially important (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999, 228). In addition, the authors referred to technological developments that made communication and travel across national borders much easier than in earlier immigrant periods. "The ready availability of air transport, long-distance telephone, facsimile communication, and electronic

mail provides the technological basis for the emergence of transnationalism on a mass scale" (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999, 223). It is under this new capitalist conjuncture that the mobilization of social networks for engagement in transnational activities offered immigrants, in the eyes of the authors, a superior alternative. In this vein, they posited the hypothesis that "transnational activities may evolve into the normative adaptation path among those groups seeking to escape the fate of cheap labour at home or abroad" (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999, 230). They saw the possibility that transnational fields could create another adaptation path than assimilation for migrants. Transnational activities could be understood, as they argued, as a resistance to this new capitalist conjuncture.

Transformations in the dynamics of capital accumulation undoubtedly signified a particular historical conjuncture when the article was written. What is striking, however, is the total absence of any reference to the role and power of nation-states in shaping migrant transnational fields. First, the formation of the modern nation-state was closely tied to the development of capitalism (and colonialism), as scholarship has shown in detail (Gellner 1983). Second, it is intrinsic to the logic of modern nation-states – according to which there is a supposedly natural congruence between national, territorial, political, cultural and social boundaries – to seek to control movements across their territorial borders and manage migrants' supposedly natural differences through assimilation/integration policies. Nation-state migration regimes therefore have far-reaching consequences on people's options for movement and social identities, and they impact on the formation of transnational fields – a point which was identified by social anthropologists as a premise for the emergence of "transnationalism" early in this debate (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994, 34–45). The absence of all of these facets in this 1999 article might be understood as a result of the zeitgeist at the time. On the one hand, migration scholars at the time often unconsciously reproduced the categories and logic of the nation-state – an approach that would later be criticized as "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). On the other hand, this was the time when the claim that, as a result of increasing globalization, nation-states would in due course lose their ability to control their borders and form and discipline their subjects was at its peak. In hindsight, there is abundant evidence that this hypothesis must at least be contested. In Europe, we have observed a reassertion of national identities for over a decade now, as can be seen in the success of right-wing populist parties (and something similar can be seen in the US, in terms of the presidency of Donald Trump), a backlash against and fear of diversity and the subsequent introduction of neo-assimilationist policies. Furthermore, over the last couple of decades we have witnessed the increased securitization of migration – in the US as much as in Europe – which has been paralleled by the reinforcement of

migration (border) apparatuses and the emergence of state and non-state migration-control industries, all of which have had a profound impact on many people's migration options. To make a long story short, nation-states may be losing sovereignty with regard to their ability to regulate socio-economic realities in general, but when it comes to migration issues, the nation-state, its institutions and its inherent logic remain strong, impacting and co-shaping transnational fields in multiple ways. Taking into account this political dimension means nothing less than taking the "nation" part in "transnational" seriously.

### **Adopting a transnational perspective in terms of a particular epistemological stance**

There were good reasons to attempt to develop a theoretical framework for "transnationalism" – the way Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt did at the end of the 1990s – given the state-of-the-art of this field of study at the time. Even more, a clear definition of "transnationalism" that made the phenomenon amenable to quantitative surveys made possible new discoveries which were complementary to the results of the qualitative, ethnographic studies that had already been conducted. Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt made it possible to pose a new set of questions that pushed transnational studies further, both empirically and theoretically. From our current perspective, however, the endeavour to "measure" transnationalism (or transnationality, the term most scholars use today) or to develop a theory of transnationalism seems problematic and runs the risk of essentializing social processes (like transnationalisation) by severing them from broader social dynamics, historical trajectories, specific multi-scalar historical conjunctures and concomitant power relations. At the same time, however, it obviously cannot be the ultimate aim of researchers to simply add another context-dependent case study by describing the "transnational activities" of a particular ethnic or national group. The main merit of the "transnational turn" in the 1990s, I would argue, is that it triggered a paradigm shift within migration research, away from the study of migrant "transnationalism". Embracing a *transnational perspective* became a way to develop explanatory frameworks for current transformation processes and to revise traditional social theory. A transnational perspective stands for endorsing a particular, alternative stance on migration issues in order to bring to light processes which are still poorly understood in the frame of traditional migration research, thus contributing to social theory more generally (for a similar argument see Faist, Fauser, and Reisenauer 2013, 10 ff, Glick Schiller 2015).

The *transnational perspective* builds cumulatively on both the insights of the work of early transnational scholars (particularly their insistence on the

role of political and economic structures in the emergence of “transnationalism”) and the findings of the second phase, initiated by Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt, pointing to the conditions, tensions, contradictions and constraints of transnational living and politics. But a transnational perspective in the sense discussed here is clearly distinct from both of these, and it can be thought of as constituting a third phase in this debate. Applying a transnational perspective means *adopting an explicitly de-nationalized epistemological stance and concomitant methodologies in order to investigate and theorize cross-border social phenomena by non-state actors. Such cross-border phenomena are understood as the outcome of particular processes which are embedded in multi-layered structures (political, economic, social) at simultaneously local, national and supranational scales and the agency of non-state actors.* I will attempt to sketch the main contours of this stance briefly.

Building on the earlier debates on “transnationalism”, a transnational perspective focuses on *non-state actors* – which is what Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt pleaded for in 1999 (1999, 220) – and their cross-border activities, connections, linkages, positions and belongings, leading to what scholars came to refer to as transnational fields (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004) or transnational spaces (Faist 2000). These fields or spaces are characterized by a combination of multiple, sometimes unequal ties and positions in networks (of migrants and non-migrants) that cut across state borders and are embedded in particular power relations and multi-layered structural contexts. Apart from economic structures, which were emphasized by Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt, these contexts also include specific discourses, “cultural repertoires”, regulations and institutional settings which are simultaneously located in specific places, at both the nation-state and supranational levels (see also Glick Schiller 2015).

An explicitly *de-nationalized epistemological stance* builds on the insights of the transnational scholars of the first phase, who demonstrated that immigration scholarship was subject to a traditional nation-building perspective, and that a revision was needed in order to be able to perceive and analyse transnational fields (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994) – the facets Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt disregarded in their 1999 article. This stance relies moreover on the body of work which, years later, called for more reflexivity with regard to the nation-state and ethnicity-centred epistemology that informs a large share of migration and integration research (Brubaker 2004; Glick Schiller, Çağlar, and Guldbrandsen 2006; Wimmer 2009). Adopting a transnational perspective means tackling these epistemological critiques and following a *de-nationalized epistemology* while simultaneously analysing the potential force of nation-state categories and their underlying logic in terms of their power to shape actors’ identities and the structures they are embedded in and act upon (Dahinden 2016). Additionally, by going “beyond national containers” a transnational perspective also strives to overcome the “sedentarist bias” (Tarrus 1993; Urry 2007) characteristic of

migration studies, again due to the nation-state logic, by taking into account the fact that transnational fields are created by diverse mobilities – migration being one of them – and immobilities. Finally, this epistemological stance goes along with particular transnational methodologies (for instance, mobile methods or multi-sited approaches) which aim to de-centre research from immigration countries, where to this day most of the research has been conducted (Amelina and Faist 2012).

In a nutshell, I argue that by focusing on particular social processes through a transnational perspective, scholars can contribute – also with single case studies – to different fields of general social theory that go beyond mere descriptions of social realities. Therefore, a transnational perspective opens up new possibilities to reflect on a wide range of topics to which traditional migration research has been blind, and which as a result have been insufficiently researched and theorized in social theory. In this vein, transnational scholars have contributed for instance to reformulations of *theories of social inequalities* by showing that the investigation and theorization of such issues needs new frames outside “national containers” and by bringing together different modes of national incorporation within one framework (Weiss 2005; Nieswand 2011). Others have pushed *Bourdieu’s theory of capital* further – overcoming the methodological nationalism and overall neglect of migration and transnational mobility inherent in the original theory – by demonstrating that migrants navigate in social fields that are embedded in multiple societies characterized by status inconsistencies (Nowicka 2013; Moret 2014). What these studies – and there are many other examples – have in common is that, by embracing a transnational perspective and working on migration issues, they succeed in revising current social theory. They contribute to the establishment of new explanatory frameworks for current transformation processes. These new frameworks – and this is the essential point here – all lie outside the “migration theory container”. However, and significantly, in order to be able to make this shift, we first needed to be pushed to think about how to define “transnationalism” and the necessary conditions for a “prevalence of transnationalism”. Alejandro Portes, Luis E. Guarnizo and Patricia Landolt merit full recognition for having given us this push in their 1999 article.

### **Disclosure statement**

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