Commentary
Transnational migration research
by Derya Ozkul
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Introduction
Derya Ozkul’s article deals with the spread of transnationalism in migration studies as a new perspective which differs from globalization and diaspora studies. After describing transnational research from a historical perspective, Ozkul reviews some of the critique and concludes by outlining the most notable contributions to sociological research.

Critique
As many scholars who endorse the concept of transnationalism, Ozkul is concerned with demonstrating its potentiality. It provides a new lens, says Ozkul, to understand social phenomena, particularly those related to migration. Highlighting connections and flows between geographies, it underlines the importance of networks which migrants establish across borders rather than concentrating only on localities, such as ‘country of origin’ or ‘country of destination’. Nevertheless, there are some problems with the way in which the concept is delineated by Ozkul.

First, the author rests on flows, neglecting the consequences they could have at macro and micro levels. Individual actions which permit the establishment of connections and exchange among different places and societies have effects on nations, cities and individuals. Even though the author touches on the structural changes which can occur due to transnational activities, she does not go deeply into the issue and runs the risk of overlooking the local and the global levels.

Transnational connections have in fact several consequences. Think about the remittances that migrants send to their countries of origin. Remittances let migrants’ families left in the country of origin improve their economic conditions, send children to better schools, buy commodities and get a higher social status. Remittances have also consequences for the domestic economy of nations, contributing to the development of the migrants’ home countries. They could also produce negative consequences at the economic level (and not only), but this is not the context in which to discuss the issue. What I want to outline is that transnational connections lead to transformations in nations and cities in various spheres (economic, but also political, social or cultural). Similarly, they have effects on individuals and their everyday lives. A case in point is the process of construction of identities by second generations: by creating emotional connections (Wolf, 2002) with the country of origin, young people use ethnicity to construct their identity, mixing it with other identity references and creating new national identities. Transnational connections can also help people to renew their belonging to the homeland, strengthen ties and promote forms of participation (e.g. political) in the countries of origin. Therefore, transnational studies contribute to migration studies not so much because they refer to connections and flows per se (rather than localities), but because they strengthen the relationship between the micro and the macro level of analysis, by linking the two levels through the concept of network.

Second, and related to the above, concentrating on connections across different geographies leads one to ignore the national context and not to take into account the role of nation-states in influencing transnational practices (Massey et al., 1998). Even if I agree with Ozkul in affirming that migratory processes cannot be analysed concentrating only on the container of national borders and looking only at
pre-departure, departure and post-settlement phases, national legislations and immigration policies of states cannot be neglected. In my opinion Ozkul over-emphasizes the abilities and possibilities of people to develop and organize transnational relationships. Instead, structural factors are intertwined with individual factors in shaping the ways in which connections are established, their strength and characteristics. With structural factors I intend to refer here to the migration policies of national states, governments’ actions and law enforcement. These factors influence the types of migration flows and networks, and the ways in which people stay connected across borders. The migration policies of some national states (e.g. Canada, Australia) which have favoured skilled migrations are examples of this. Moreover, the historical background and traditions of a nation could influence migration policies, approaches towards migrants, attitudes of the nationals, and consequently transnational relationships. Italy, which has long been an emigration country, has a citizenship law based on *ius sanguinis*, which favours links with Italians around the world (and the transmission of Italian citizenship) but hinders the naturalization of immigrants. Such legislation might lead to a renewed interest in ethnicity as a sort of reaction by second generations, which would entail stronger links with the homeland. These are a few examples of the fact that states still matter (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002).

Third, Ozkul’s contribution omits the distinction between economic, political and sociocultural transnationalism (Portes et al., 1999). A discussion on transnational connections and activities without distinguishing the areas in which these activities are conducted is incomplete. The distinction between the three sectors of activities can contribute to the conceptual clarity that even in the author’s opinion is required in transnational studies. Transnational activities in the economic, political and social fields have different consequences on individuals and states, at macro and micro levels, and according to the degree of institutionalization (e.g. the participation in hometown associations founded by immigrants is different from political participation by voting in the elections of their country of origin).

Moreover, economic, political and sociocultural transnational activities entail different discussions on diverse issues. For example, political transnationalism leads scholars to discuss the concept of citizenship, while sociocultural transnationalism involves a reflection on the issue of identity. Even though the three areas of analysis are intertwined and cannot be considered as totally distinct (e.g. remittances can entail transformations in the sociocultural sphere, when relations between gender change due to the fact that women become the breadwinner of the family and send money to their husbands left in the country of origin), the classification into the three types of transnational activities can contribute to reduce some of the conceptual confusion related to transnational studies, and focus on different dimensions of cross-border connections.

**Conclusion**

Ozkul makes a valid overview of the concept of transnationalism, but she neglects some important aspects: the effects of transnational connections on nations and individuals, the role of nation-states in influencing types, strength and characteristics of networks, and the different areas of transnational activities. Her emphasis on flows leads to a neglect of these dimensions, which have to be taken into account to better understand transnationalism.

**References**


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