



Transnational migration studies. Reframing sociological imagination and research

Andreea Lazăr¹

Abstract

The multidisciplinary making of transnational migration studies has inevitably produced different definitions of transnationalism and, consequently, several approaches of transnational dynamics, each aiming at the development of the most appropriate analytical and methodological tools. In this paper, we look at theoretical innovations and promises having emerged in the field of transnational migration studies, outlining some internal points of tension / agreement and their conceptual and methodological implications, not only for the future of transnational scholarship, but also in terms of their contribution and connection to general social theory. We do not assume the daunting task of summarizing transnational research in different domains of social inquiry (culture, economics, politics etc.) but try to highlight some of the most challenging epistemological interrogations and to identify possible paths of integration which will reflect even better the interdisciplinary vocation of transnational migration studies.²

Keywords

Transnational studies, methodological nationalism, methodological territorialism, globalization, locality

The contemporary structuring of world economic and political boundaries has led to intense discussions on the appropriate theoretical and methodological framework for the study of international migration; this has proven fruitful to the reconsideration of the epistemological strength and value of such concepts as nationalism, transnationalism or globalization (Vertovec 1999; Pries 2001). While the development of the work on migrant transnationalism was associated with the critique of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002) in the social sciences, in this conceptual essay it is argued that the latter is a strong case not only for exposing the XIXth century-inherited

¹ Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, andreea_l_lazar@yahoo.com

² This paper was presented at the Third Annual Seminar *From Time to Space? Current Conceptual Challenges in History and Sociology*, Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology, 7-9 February, 2011.

presupposition that the nation-states are overlapping/delimiting societies, but also for a broader reflection on the conceptualization of society and culture as being territory-bounded and requiring the physical co-presence of participants³. With national boundaries being blurred by migration practices, (how) can we begin to think of societies as going translocal, transnational, de-territorialized (Appadurai, 1996) or even global?

By analyzing the genealogy of transnational migration studies, we first discuss the relevance of the theoretical literature on transnational migration by highlighting its contribution to an epistemological extension of nationalist studies (Hobsbawm, 1990; Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and to focusing social scientists' attention on the methodological necessity to carry out not only 'locality', but also 'multilocality'-oriented research. The paper deals secondly with the contested definitions of transnationalism and scrutinizes the sources of controversy, including the struggle between two opposing tendencies: achieving a clear differentiation of the concept or maintaining a degree of indeterminacy allowing for a larger research space under the umbrella of transnational studies. Finally, we attempt to see in which ways the growing body of transnational research could influence the sociological imagining of the society and nation-states.

Foundations and challenges of the transnational approach

To begin with, I will briefly introduce a foundational definition of transnationalism in order to see which is the groundwork for the deconstruction of the nationalist blinders of the modern social sciences. 'We define 'transnationalism' as the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call these processes transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders.' (Basch, Glick-Schiller and Szanton-Blanc, 1994). Transnational migration research has been established on the anthropological deconstruction of the prevalent assimilationist perspective which was the mainstream conceptual approach in classical migration scholarship (Glick Schiller, 1999; Basch, Glick Schiller, Szanton Blanc, 1994; Glick Schiller, Basch, Szanton Blanc, 1995). The pervasiveness of this perspective was accounted for in terms of 'methodological nationalism', that is a penchant towards imagining the social as contained by the nation-state and, consequently, the epistemological tendency to take for granted the nation-state and its boundaries as defining the objects of social inquiry.

Extending the 'reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism' (Anderson, 1983) in the area of the history of sciences, Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002) have treated 'methodological nationalism' as an expression of the long-inherited relation between modern sciences and nations-states and have identified several variants of this historical phenomenon. Three of these modalities have been the most influential and widespread: a. ignoring the fundamental nationalist assumptions in representing modern societies; b.

³ To give just an example, Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) distinguish between ways of being and ways of belonging to a social field.

the naturalization of the assumption that nation-state boundaries adequately trace the limits of analytical units (in international relations, economics, sociology, modern history, functionalist anthropology), with the consequence that researchers operated with the unproblematic national-international distinction, which reflected the taken-for-granted dichotomy between inside-state / outside-state processes; c. the territorial confinement of social sciences research to the boundaries of nation-states: ‘the web of social life was spun within the container of national society, and everything extending over its borders was cut off analytically (thus removing trans-border connections and processes from the picture)’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002, p. 307).

This devaluation of the nation-state as the proper unit of social analysis is shared with globalization studies, with some exceptions (including different genealogies - Sørensen, 2007, p. 7). One of them lies in the fact that countering methodological nationalism does not necessitate and does not rely upon the imagination of a global post-national regime. However, this does not contradict the main globalization studies argument, according to which transnational processes undermine the sovereignty and regulatory power of the nation-states (Sassen, 1996; Bauböck, 1994; Soysal, 1994): ‘if we remove the blinders of methodological nationalism, we see that while nation-states *are still extremely important*, social life is not confined by nation-state boundaries’ (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004, p. 1009). But it parts ways with the globalisation thesis according to which as former provinces of the state get increasingly detached from national contexts, methodological nationalism would be automatically and *de facto* brought into question and the national-international distinction would become increasingly obsolete.

Another aspect of the globalization thesis that is questioned within the field of transnational studies is the consistency of the ‘local-global’ conceptual division (Guarnizo and Smith, 1998). Such an understanding of local communities which brings together substantial attributes of communities local = stasis / backwardness = inside = depth = boundedness and opposes them to another class of substantial attributes global = dynamic = outside = shallowness = unboundedness proves to be much weaker analytically than a relationalist approach, which disrupts those essentialist binaries by criticizing the unrealistic image of a deterritorialized, global, a-national, postnational culture (Faist, 2000). This focus on situational, contextual social practices, simultaneously articulated inside and between nations which views locality as “complex, contingent and contested outcomes of political and historical processes” (Smith, 2005, p. 248) might be one of the most important strengths of the transnationalist paradigm.

Besides speaking out against methodological nationalism, the proponents of the transnational approach formulated another major critique, warning against the analytical pitfalls of ‘methodological territorialism’ (Scholte, 2000, p. 56) – a perspective which, in a traditional Weberian vein, is based on the assumption of the congruence between state, territory and society. The scholars of citizenship are the most likely to benefit from a reformed approach, which would enable them to more rigorously inspect, for instance, the relation between or the decoupling of territorial residence, state affiliation and social rights, and to develop a more systematic theory of differential (Vertovec, 1998; Young, 1990) or multilayered citizenship (Yuval-Davis, 1999).

The adjustment of methodological approaches to the specific set of questions raised by a transnational perspective on migration calls for 'multi-sited' ethnography (Marcus, 1995) producing the data on which an analysis of the 'pluri-local social spaces' (Pries, 2004) could be built upon. Another original proposal regards the benefits of adding historical depth to ethnographic accounts, by revisiting research sites. The temporal extension is just one strategy for the successive reconstruction of social theory on the basis of the fourfold extended case method: 'the extension of the observer into the lives of the participants under study; the extension of observations over time and space; the extension from microprocesses to macroforces; and, finally and most importantly, the extension of theory' (Burawoy, 2009, p. xv). Examining the historical particularities of places and the way in which they shape patterns of migrant activities and experiences could serve the analysis of the multifarious production of transnational social fields at different spatial scales under the impact of global forces (Glick Schiller and Çağlar, 2008).

Disciplinary debates forging the concept(s) and study of transnationalism

Any discussion of the transnational approach must pay attention to the fact that the perspective itself is multifaceted and that an overall critique or praise would be highly unstable if not plainly fallacious. In the following section, we try to avoid this vulnerability by highlighting internal ambiguities, disagreements, generational distinctions as well as clarification and integration efforts.

While there is no unique overarching theory of transnationalism, already in the early '90s strong indicators of a new research paradigm were being built up around the following points of agreement: (1) the critical appraisal and devaluation of a vision of society as 'discrete and bounded entity with its own separate economy, culture and historical trajectory' (Basch, Glick-Schiller and Szanton-Blanc, 1992); and (2) the need to analyse sending/receiving societies as a single field (Vertovec, 2001) constituted of networks of social relationships connecting actors across borders.

Since transnational migration scholarship is not by far a unitary body of research, theoretically and methodologically bounded, several waves have dealt with different dimensions of transnational migration (identity formation, economic practices, political involvements, shifting cultural representations etc.) which of course makes it difficult to assess the power of transnational-oriented research to cope with current conceptual challenges and to foster innovative social thinking. Besides that, the success of the transnational approach stirred up cross-disciplinary controversies about the opportunities and pitfalls of achieving a clear differentiation of the concept vs. maintaining a higher degree of indeterminacy. Instead of celebrating this concept's claim by many disciplines (economy, social sciences, cultural studies, political sciences, globalization or gender studies) one might think of it as threat to theoretical unity and conceptual rigor.

Moreover, the lack of an all-encompassing theory (sometimes celebrated as heterodoxy) is correlated with the articulation of a domain in itself, somewhat disconnected, through either achievements or ambitions, from social theory

developments in other fields - which is especially true for public policy-oriented scholarly production still bearing the marks of seeing-like-a-state assumptions. This is most notoriously illustrated by the persistently contradictory portrayals of migrants as both emancipated from national borders and as 'the fundamental challenge to social cohesion and the stability and welfare of the states in which migrants settle' (Glick Schiller, 2010, pp. 109, 112).

Yet another source of ambiguity in the field of transnational research derives from the fact that the concept of transnationalism refers to both the processes and the collective outcomes of multiple forms of transnational processes. The efforts of clarification are structured along two main dimensions: ontological considerations and epistemological / methodological incentives.

A first generation of ethnographers by education and/or practice have used the term transnationalism in order to account for the emergence of a new form of migration (Glick Schiller and Fouron, 1998; Kearney, 1991; Glick Schiller et al. 1992, Guarnizo, 1997; Levitt, 1998). While acknowledging the need to assess the scope of this new phenomenon, to refine analytical tools and to advance theoretical production in this newly highlighted niche, the scholars mainstreaming the transnational perspective in the field of sociology were less inclined to focus on the novelty of transnational migration *per se*⁴, shifting their attention toward the regularity, significance and durability of transnational activities (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt, 1999, p. 219). The anthropologists having widely contributed to the empirical grounding of the new paradigm have been soon suspected of pre-selecting confirmatory cases, that is taking their *explanans* for their *explanandum* – a *petitio principii* fallacy whose implications would have been the loss of conceptual sight and methodological track of dis-connections, dis-integrations, irregularities, and weakened ties.

The new perspective was decisively counter-anomic and even celebratory, breaking away with Durkheimian modernist skepticism. But burgeoning ethnographic evidence has soon pointed at multifaceted and profound power asymmetries, such as the fact that simultaneous transnational incorporation is the privilege of very few (since residence does not automatically entail membership), while many others have transnationalized little more than their working force, to put it rather bluntly, living otherwise 'suspended, in effect, between two countries' (Portes and Rumbaut, 2006: 131). With studies showing that mobility is the exception, rather than the rule - despite the obvious increases in global interrelatedness - and that 'regular transnationalism' is itself fairly limited in scope (Guarnizo et al. 2003; Portes et al. 2002), critics of the transnational paradigm have begun to notice that, under the influence of both globalization studies and postmodernist assumptions, it yielded a set of statements that, in a form or another, were all the expression of an optimism that was soon to be judged as highly questionable (see Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 2004).

⁴ 'By setting up immigrants' transnationalism as a new and exciting idea, sociologists and anthropologists (...) have reinforced each other's success strategies, removing from their 'cognitive sight' even a suspicion that their novel phenomenon may not be so new at all'. (Morawska, 2005, p. 215).

The most salient critiques⁵ indicated two more or less commonly occurring flaws: a) the technological determinism and the consequent methodological blindness and analytical muteness in matters regarding not only the disparities of access to mobility-enhancing and simultaneity-enabling technologies, but also the social articulation of connectivity or the social foundation of multi-situated interaction; and b) the reading of cross-border flows as an indication of vacillating nation-states and of their questionable exclusive sovereignty on their citizens, both in terms of identity resources and in terms of control (Kearney, 1991). This second aspect has already been extensively clarified by transnational scholars, who have maintained that, on the one hand, their approach should not be understood as an argument of the complete irrelevance of nation-states⁶, and, on the other hand, a considerable analytical gain derives from the interest for the ways in which transnational migration augments, not only diminishes, the power of states. In order to promote further disambiguation, Pries (2007, p. 3) advances a distinction between units of analysis, units of reference and units of research and stresses the importance of a definition of 'the specific relation between the (transnational) units of analysis, the (local, national, regional or global) units of reference and the (micro, meso or macro) units of research; these components characterise the transnational perspective and distinguish it from a global or simply comparative point of view'.

Definitional disputes lead to a conceptualization of the transnational continuum, in terms of density, intensity, durability, significance. The nature of simultaneous embeddedness in more than one nation-state (Glick Schiller, 2003, p. 105⁷), its various forms, the factors that contribute to it as well as its variable outcomes have been outlined in numerous descriptive studies, but a more integrated approach is lacking. For instance, if Portes and his colleagues viewed in the 'regular and sustained social contacts overtime across national borders' (Portes et al. 1999, p. 219) the main indicator of transnationalism, Castles argues that 'it is possible that transnational affiliations and consciousness will become the predominant form of migrant belonging' (2002, p. 1158), while many acknowledge that the *alternative* (pragmatic, strategic) orientation to home and host countries and the preoccupation to build and conserve ties would reflect better the nature of transnational phenomena.

These discussions are just some of the definitional struggles defining and delimiting the field of transnational studies, which are an indication of the mosaic design of transnational scholarship, but which also prove a deep preoccupation with disciplinary introspection and self-reflexivity: the identification and evaluation of transnationalism, as well as the analysis of its determinants had to go through definitional rites of passage.

⁵ For a larger and more systematic inventory, see Vertovec (2004).

⁶ Levitt and Glick-Schiller acknowledge that a national focus remains relevant insofar as it allows the proper analysis of 'the relative importance of nationally restricted and transnational social fields' (2004, p. 1009).

⁷ See also Ayse Çağlar (2001, p. 607): 'Current scholarship on transnationalism provides a new analytic optic which makes visible the increasing intensity and scope of circular flows of persons, goods, information and symbols triggered by international labour migration. It allows an analysis of how migrants construct and reconstitute their lives as simultaneously embedded in more than one society'.

Along with the second-generation of scholarship, the questions raised regarding the truly new aspects of globalization and transnationalism – which have added historical layers to a more modest and prudent position (Morawska, 2001) –, the discussions about the proper *locus* of examination of transnational processes and about the adequate tools to describe, measure and account for transnational migration paved the way for the refinement of analytical and methodological techniques.

Society: social boundaries and transnational bonds

As a general remark, it would be difficult to over-emphasize one major contribution brought by transnational migration studies to the reconfiguration of social sciences' conception of their object of inquiry: rather than postulating or taking for granted *sui generis* social units, the transnational approach redirects the focus toward the processes of organization and structuration of translocal/transnational connections and new social formations. The scientific representation of society has gained considerably from this paradigmatic shift breaking away with the implicit assumption that nation-states would be the most important, strong and persistent framework for the construction of belonging, social identification, emotional attachment and shared symbolic constellations. Inquiries into identity formation process, migrant political involvement, flexible network arrangements allowing individuals to make the most of their transnational lives and translocal conditioning of local development have been particularly fruitful.

This contribution has become most obvious in microsociological analyses, but, as Glick Schiller (2010) points out, holding on to the notion of levels of analysis is misleading and unpromising, since connections cannot be (any longer) neatly situated at a local, regional, national, and global level, given the simultaneous and differentiated embeddedness of individuals in multiple social fields: 'if looking beyond the nation-state is conceptualised as a higher level of abstraction – that is to say, a macro-level analysis – then we are unable to observe and theorise the interpenetration between globe-spanning institutions that structure imbalances of power and migrant experiences within and across states borders' (2010, p. 114). Transnational perspectives on migration should help us notice not only how power disparities between states trigger and orient migration (the classic push-pull theory), but also how transnational migration, like other cross-border processes⁸, contribute and sustain these inequalities and how it diminishes or enhances state powers.

But if we are to maintain an analytical vocabulary considered inadequate by Glick Schiller, it is the micro-macro linkages that show the full strength of the transnational approach. Moreover, it is in this way that the critique of the all-too-optimist transnational

⁸ Even if we cannot any longer persist in the illusion that the analysis of local processes could be analytically disconnected from a discussion of global power reconfigurations, the focus on transnational connections is still useful in preventing an essentialist dichotomization of the local/global. Hannerz argues in the introduction to *Transnational connections* that 'the term 'transnational' is in a way more humble and often a more adequate label for phenomena which can be of quite variable scale and distribution, even when they do share the characteristic of not being contained within a state' (1996, p. 6).

studies that imagine social actors as free, heroic artisans of their own destinies would be easily counterbalanced, by looking not only at the means by which social agents shape their social universes, but also at the way in which the world system of emerging and changing structures of opportunities and constraints fosters, shapes or disables local agency.

Though it is generally accepted that the interaction approach (instead of impact analysis) would bridge (global) macro- and (local) micro-perspectives (Vásquez and Marquardt, 2003, p. 227), this has proven so far not to be the most productive strategy, since the large flows of ethnographical descriptions produced by transnational scholars remain actor-centred (Burawoy et al., 2000) and (mono-) locality-oriented. This cultural essentialism correlated with methodological nationalism has been somewhat re-established on another scale, especially in some community studies focusing on the transnational extensions of the social relations supposedly bounded by the administrative demarcation of a village (most of the times), thus overestimating the power of *Gemeinschaft*-like determinants (internal homogeneity, kinship, friendship, belonging). This means that researchers who followed specific local groups across the borders of nation-states have faced the risk of overlooking ‘the importance of cross-community interactions as well as the internal divisions of class, gender, region and politics, and (...) those cases where no transnational communities form among migrants or where existing ones cease to be meaningful for individuals’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002, p. 324).

In terms of rethinking the very notion of society, transnational studies contributed with the disarticulation of the taken for granted relation between territorially bounded units and social analysis entities. While strongly shaking the dominant conceptual framework, some transnational migration scholarship remained decisively ‘groupist’ (Brubaker, 2006) in their analysis and understanding of ethnic (or religious) identities and ways of belonging. The neo-communitarianist strand of transnationalist scholarship has tended to understand social fields and networks spanning across national borders as communities, and thus to paradoxically revitalize the essentialist concept of society as static container.

Transnational scholars have undertaken many steps beyond the critique of traditional conventions in understanding and examining place, space and locality⁹. However, an alternative and integrated, systematic theoretical perspective is still awaited. When Glick Schiller and Çağlar proposed an analysis of the ways in which migration restructures localities, they have identified three main conceptual drawbacks hindering the development of a theory of locality in migration studies: ‘(1) the long standing tendency of migration researchers to build theories about migrant settlement and incorporation from research about migration in specific paradigmatic cities; (2) the

⁹ For important contributions, see Smith (2005), Brettell (2006), Salzbrunn (2007) – who calls for an analysis of the relocalization of transnational networks – and, more recently, Dahinden (2010, p. 51-71) who tries to bridge the conventional theoretical gap between locality and mobility, which allows her to challenge the rather spread understanding of transnationalism and integration as alternative or mutually exclusive.

channelling of discussion about global processes and urban restructuring into a scholarship of global and gateway cities; (3) the pervasive use of the ethnic group as the basic unit of analysis and object of study.’ (2008, p. 2).

Other obstacles can be related to the specific transnational approach, which has been more interested in grasping the decoupling of social and spatial spaces and the articulation and persistence of social relations at a distance. The critique of methodological nationalism has deconstructed the assumption that social life *takes place* within the boundaries of nation-states containers. This has led to a shift in the analytical focus from the classical ‘place of origin’ / ‘place of destination’ to the migrant ‘worlds in motion’, to the ‘the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement’ (Basch et al., 1994, p. 6) and to the connections enabling and perpetuating cross-border livelihoods (Sørensen and Olwig, 2002). The ‘bi-localist’ weakness of this approach (Lucassen, 2004) was later rectified, in the attempt to conceptualize ‘transnational social formations’ (Guarnizo, 1997 and Landolt, 2001) or ‘social fields’ (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004). The methodological translation of these efforts is the general consensus that the discipline should go beyond the classical anthropological analysis of locality through thick descriptions and community studies which inadvertently produce homogenizing conceptualizations of the transnational social space.

The two elements considered to be crucial in addressing the limitations discussed above are the examination of ‘the connections between transnational migrants and actors within the various localities in which they settle and into which they move’ and ‘the study of migrants and non-migrants within social fields of differential power’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002, p. 324). These major tasks opened up promising ethnographic paths and possible ways to influence not only mainstream migration studies, but also general social theory, mainly through the effort to understand the social and political forces shaping contemporary world and its scientific representations (without putting forward dated objectivist claims or utopian visions of a theoretical framework uninhibited and uninfluenced by the very phenomena observed).

With regard to the emphasis on connections, we have already noticed that the investigation of transnational sociality, togetherness and integration was filled with enthusiastic portrayals of migrants crossing political, territorial, symbolic boundaries. There was far less interest for border reinscription processes – the ways in which migrants re-enact and experience borders during their multiple two-way crossings (except notable research on feminine work migration). This wouldn’t necessarily entail a comeback to the vision of migrants as uprooted, but a redirection of the stress on integration to the complementary sensitivity to disintegrations and ruptures and to the effects of multiple absences (instead of simultaneous incorporations).

The biggest challenge that scholars encounter on the new transnational research avenues is perhaps the conceptualization of stabilization and dynamics, that is thinking of ‘transnational spaces (...) as being inbetween a space of places and a space of flows’ (Faist, 2000). Peter Jackson et al. (2004, p. 8) deplore the ‘hyperbolic equation of transnationality only with discourses of flow, movement, flight and smooth space the

dialectical relations of the grounded and the flighty, the settled and the flowing, the sticky and the smooth.’ Building on the work of Henri Lefebvre (1992), transnationalist scholars argue that while social units do have a spatial dimension, space can only be understood as socially constituted¹⁰, which also means that social space and spatial space are not necessarily congruent or nested.

As the works of Smith (2005), Brettell (2006), Salzbrunn (2007), Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2008) and Dahinden (2010) point out, since the imagination of society has traditionally relied on spatial metaphors, the scholarship on transnational processes, as well as general social theory, would benefit immensely from a theorization of place/space/locality, in the attempt to bring together specific transnational social formations, history and wider social forces framed by neo-liberal regulatory systems. This would be the occasion to integrate dimensions of transnational research previously rarely hyphenated: culturally-oriented accounts (religious practices, changing representations of gender roles, motherhood, work), economic perspectives (remittances and development, brain drain) and political sciences privileged domains (restrictive / assimilationist migration policies, citizenship debates, ethnic exclusionism, migrant political participation).

One supplementary step would be to try to reckon and describe not only the connections between those who move and those who stay at home, but also the relations between migrants and host societies’ citizens at a time when the latter’s states embody neo-liberal restructurings which alter the social components of citizenship. From this perspective, the fortification of national-security discourses (in France, Italy, Hungary etc.) and the projection of migrant ethnocultural difference as stigma can be understood not only as an indicator of strong nation-states’ will to preserve the desirable national resources for their ‘own citizens’, but as the sign of a neo-liberal making of citizenship, affecting both the lives of current citizens and of immigrants or citizens-to-be. We have pointed elsewhere (Lazăr, 2010) at the emergence of a new meaning of nation-state membership in France, which can be very descriptively called ‘national-meritocratic citizenship’, since it allows us to suggest the imbrication of the anti-immigrants nationalist ethos and the neo-liberal reconfiguring of governance and ‘good citizens’ making: two competitive principles of citizen subjectification are in place and, thus, two mutually reinforcing tracks of citizenship self-entrepreneurship are set for migrants and natives alike, who are expected to pledge allegiance to both the national-state and the neo-liberal normativity to be implemented and embodied. On the one hand, *de souche* French people appear as better, more authentic citizens than persons of foreign extraction who would be a threat to national cultural integrity and would undeservingly claim access to valuable ‘national’ goods such as jobs or public education; on the other hand, independently of their origin, good, responsible citizens are conceived as tax-paying workers (including desirable highly-skilled migrant workers) not depending on and/or not asking for social support and public-funded social services – not the

¹⁰ See, for instance: ‘Every social space is the outcome of a process with many aspects and many contributing currents, signifying and non-signifying, perceived and directly experienced, practical and theoretical. In short, every social space has a history’ (Lefebvre, 1992, p. 110).

unemployed young people or the retired persons singled out as too-heavy weights on the fragile chest of social protection systems.¹¹ While this last dimension is less obvious since the migranhood of educated, rich (white, Western etc.) *mobile* professionals is insidiously rendered invisible, it still undermines the conceptual divide between ‘natives’ and ‘foreigners’.

The above-mentioned challenges are particularly difficult to address. The focus on the communities of origin and destination has oriented scholars’ attention towards the constitution and maintenance of transnational social spaces. In general, transnationalist researchers share the conviction that accounting for the complexities of multi-local interactional processes enables us to grasp global workings and dynamics. But the study of the mutual constitution of local and global situations faces the researcher with serious and diverse conceptual and methodological problems. For instance, if transnationalist scholarship has been particularly successful in conceptualizing identity formation and maintenance across borders, this can be attributed to a significant extent to the epistemological choice of focusing on migrating populations delimited according to their (supposed) national origin or common cultural/ethnic background (Glick-Schiller, 2010). In addition to that, in their attempt to counter the view of migrants as uprooted, transnational migration scholars have tended to privilege a “look behind” perspective focused on the ties or self-projections that connected migrants to home and limited to the bifocal analysis of the transnational space stretched between the sending and the receiving states. Casting these processes against a broader global context and highlighting the interconnections and contradictions activated by globalization would facilitate the articulation within migration studies of an important contribution to a (less metaphorical) theory of spatialization of social processes. In the direction of this stream of thought, the theoretical concept of *transnationalisation* has set a good ground for the study of the interrelatedness of globalization and localization processes, thus enabling an empirically-based disruption of the local/global dichotomizing perspective.

Conclusion

Looking back at two decades of transnational research, the vigour and fecundity of the transnational paradigm appear as undeniable. The numerous and influential studies, conferences, research programs aiming at describing social relations spanning across borders of nation-states tried to match the ontological complexity of their object of focus with a theoretical and methodological armamentarium equally sophisticated. The early-years optimism regarding both the empirically-documented freedom of social actors undermining state control and the epistemological emancipation from methodological nationalism has opened up the way for more sagacious assessments going beyond the strengths approach characteristic of innovation booms. These evaluations point at two kinds of weaknesses: 1) the approach has not been

¹¹This describes precisely the ‘entrepreneurship of the self’ idea advanced by the already notorious injunction „One has to deserve French nationality. One has to prove being worthy of it” (Nicolas Sarkozy, Grenoble speech, 30th Jul. 2010).

‘transnational enough’, meaning that there is still not enough attention paid to all the kinds of relatedness between globally-spanning and localizing social processes and 2) the approach can be judged to be ‘inherently shortsighted transnational’, in the sense that the focus on transnational connections had hindered the description of ruptures, obstacles, distances and their understanding as normal, not exceptional.

My central concern in this paper was a rather broad inquiry into some of the implications of conceptual and methodological proposals and promises put forward by transnational scholarship. This field has provided a fresh look upon multidisciplinary unconsciousness and doxa and has contributed to an original articulation and reframing of long-established binomial tensions (micro/macro, local/global). Raising questions about the ways in which dominant methodological assumptions may work well for a science of/for the state while being of disservice to the state of science was a good start for cutting a path towards the current commitments to the much engaging study of the re-configuration of transnational social fields within global power uneven arrangements.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, B. (1983/1991) *Imagined Communities*. London, Verso.
- Appadurai, A. (1996) *Modernity at Large: Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- Basch, L., Glick Schiller, N. & Szanton Blanc, C. (1994) *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation States*. New York, Gordon and Breach.
- Basch, L., Glick Schiller, N. & Szanton Blanc, C. (1992) Transnationalism: A New Analytical Framework for Understanding Migration. In: Basch, L., Glick Schiller, N. & Szanton Blanc, C. (eds.), *Toward a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity and Nationalism Reconsidered*. New York: New York Academy of Sciences, pp. 1-24.
- Bauböck, R. (1994) *Transnational Citizenship. Membership and Rights in International Migration*. Aldershot, Edward Elgar.
- Brettell, C. B. (2006) Introduction: global spaces/local places: transnationalism, diaspora, and the meaning of home. *Identities*. 13, 327-34.
- Brubaker, R., Grancea, L., Feischmidt, M. & Fox, J. (2006) *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Burawoy, M. (2009) *The Extended Case Method. Four Countries, Four Decades, Four Great Transformations, and One Theoretical Tradition*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Burawoy, M., Blum J. A., George, S., Gille, Z. & Thayer, M. (2000) *Global Ethnography: Forces, Connections and Imaginations in a Postmodern World*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Çaglar, A. (2001) Constraining metaphors and the transnationalisation of spaces in Berlin. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. 27(4), 601-13.
- Castles, S. (2002) Migration and community formation under conditions of globalization. *International Migration Review*. 36(4), 1143-68.
- Dahinden, J. (2010). The dynamics of migrants’ transnational formations: Between mobility and locality. In Bauböck, R. & Faist, T. (eds.) *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, pp. 51-71.

- Faist, T. (2000) Transnationalization in international migration: implications for the study of citizenship and culture. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 23(2), 189 – 222.
- FTV and AFP, 2010, *Le discours de Nicolas Sarkozy à Grenoble*. [Online] Available from: <http://info.france2.fr/politique/le-discours-de-nicolas-sarkozy-a-grenoble-64287493.html>. [Accessed 2nd August 2010].
- Glick Schiller, N. (2010) A global perspective on transnational migration. Theorising migration without methodological nationalism. In Bauböck, R. & Faist, T. (eds.) *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, pp. 109-129.
- Glick Schiller, N. and Çağlar, A. (2008). *Migrant Incorporation and City Scale: Towards a Theory of Locality in Migration Studies*. In: Willy Brandt Series of Working Papers in International Migration and Ethnic Relations 2/07.
- Glick Schiller, N. (2003) The Centrality of Ethnography in the Study of Transnational Migration: Seeing the Wetlands instead of the Swamp. In Foner, N. (ed.) *American Arrivals*, Santa Fe, School of American Research Press, pp. 99-128.
- Glick Schiller, N. (1999) Transmigrants and Nation-States: Something Old and Something New in the U.S. Immigrant Experience. In Hirschman, C., Kasinitz, P. & DeWind, J. (eds.) *The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience*. New York, Russell Sage, pp. 94-119.
- Glick Schiller, N. & Fouron, G. E. (1998) Transnational lives and national identities: The Identity politics of Haitian immigrants. In Smith, M. P. & Guarnizo, L. (eds.) *Transnationalism from Below*. New Brunswick and London, Transaction Publishers, pp. 130-161.
- Glick Schiller N., Basch, L. & Blanc-Szanton, C. (1995) From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration. *Anthropology Quarterly*, 68(1), 48-63.
- Guarnizo, L., Portes, A. & Haller, W. J. (2003) Assimilation and Transnationalism: Determinants of Transnational Political Action among Contemporary Migrants. *American Journal of Sociology*, 108(6), 1211-1248.
- Guarnizo, L. & Smith, M. P. (eds.) (1998) *Transnationalism from Below Comparative Urban and Community Research*. New Brunswick and London, Transaction Publishers.
- Guarnizo, L. (1997) The Rise of a Transnational Social Formation and the Mirage of Return Migration Among Dominican Transmigrants. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 4(2), 181-233.
- Hannerz, U. (1996) *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places*. London, Routledge.
- Hobsbawm, E. (1990) *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Hobsbawm, E. & Ranger, T. (eds.) (1983) *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Jackson, P., Crang, P. & Dwyer, C. (eds.) (2004). *Transnational Spaces*. London, Routledge.
- Kearney, M. (1991) Borders and Boundaries of State and Self at the End of Empire. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 4 (1), 52–74.
- Landolt, P. (2001) Salvadoran economic transnationalism: embedded strategies for household maintenance, immigrant incorporation, and entrepreneurial expansion. *Global Networks*, 1, 217-42.
- Lazăr, A. (2010) *Transnaționalism intracomunitar, re-naționalizare, excludenism etnonațional*. Paper presented at the conference “Dezvoltare comunitară și incluziune socială în perspectivă socio-economică”, Iași, 10-12 Dec. 2010 (forthcoming as Conference proceedings at University A.I. Cuza Press).
- Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The Production of Space*. Oxford, Blackwell.

- Levitt, P. & Glick Schiller, N. (2004) Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society. *International Migration Review*, 38 (3), 1002-1039.
- Levitt, P. (1998) Social Remittances: Migration Driven Local-Level Forms of Cultural Diffusion. *International Migration Review*, 32(4), 926-948.
- Lucassen, L. (2004). *Is transnationalism compatible with assimilation? Examples from the Western Europe since 1850*, Paper for the conference Migrants, Nations and Citizenship, CRASSH, University of Cambridge, 5-6 July 2004. [Online] Available from: <http://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/oldwww/events/2003-4/LucassenPaper.pdf>. [Accessed 22nd August 2010]
- Marcus, G. E. (1995) Ethnography in/of the world system: the emergence of multi-sited ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, 95-117.
- Massey, D. S., Arango, J., Hugo, J., Kouaouci, A., Pellegrino, A. & Taylor, J. E. (1998) *Worlds in Motion Understanding International Migration at the End of the Millennium*. London, Oxford University Press.
- Mills, C. W. (1959/2000) *The Sociological Imagination*. London, Oxford University Press.
- Morawska, E. (2005) The Sociology and History of Immigration: Reflections of a Practitioner. In: Bommers, M. & Morawska, E. (eds.) *International Migration Research: Constructions, Omissions, and the Promises of Interdisciplinarity*. London, Ashgate, pp. 204-242.
- Morawska, E. (2001) Immigrants, Transnationalism, and Ethnicization: A Comparison of This Great Wave and the Last. In Gerstle, G. & Mollenkopf, J. H. (eds.) *E Pluribus Unum? Contemporary and Historical Perspectives on Immigrant Political Incorporation*. New York, Russell Sage, pp. 175-212.
- Portes, A. & Rumbaut, R. (2006) *Immigrant America*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Portes, A., Guarnizo, L. E. & Haller, W. J. (2002) Transnational entrepreneurs: an alternative form of immigrant economic adaptation. *American Sociological Review*. 67, 278-98.
- Portes, A., Guarnizo, L. E. & Landolt, P. (1999) The Study of Transnationalism: Pitfalls and Promise of an Emergent Research Field. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 22(2), 217-37.
- Pries, L. (2007) *Transnationalism: Trendy Catch-all or Specific Research Programme? A Proposal for Transnational Organisation Studies as a Micro-macro-link in COMCAD (Working Papers, No. 34)*. Bielefeld.
- Pries, L. (2001) The Approach of Transnational Social Spaces: Responding to New Configurations of the Social and the Spatial. In: Pries, L. (ed.) *New Transnational Social Spaces. International Migration and Transnational Companies*. London, Routledge, pp. 3-33.
- Salzbrunn, M. (2007) *Localising Transnationalism: Researching Political and Cultural Events in a Context of Migration*. COMCAD Working Papers, No. 17. Bielefeld
- Sassen, S. (1996) *Losing control: sovereignty in an age of globalization*. New York, Columbia University Press.
- Scholte, J. A. (2000) *Globalization: a critical introduction*. London, Macmillan.
- Sørensen Nyberg, N. (ed.) (2007) *Living across Worlds*. Geneva, International Organization for Migration.
- Sørensen Nyberg, N. & Fog Olwig, K. (eds.) (2002). *Work and Migration: Life and Livelihoods in a Globalizing World*, London, Routledge.
- Smith, M. P. (2005) Power in Place: Rethorizing the Global and the Local. In: Lin, J. & Mele, C. (eds.) *The Urban Sociology Reader*. New York, Routledge, pp. 241-250.
- Soysal, Y. (1994) *Limits of Citizenship: Migrants and Postnational Membership Europe*. Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press.

- Vásquez, M. A. & Marquardt, M. F. (2003) *Globalizing the Sacred: Religion across the Americas*. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press.
- Vertovec, S. (2004). *Trends and Impacts of Migrant Transnationalism*. Centre on Migration, Policy and Society Working Paper No. 3. University of Oxford.
- Vertovec, S. (1999). Conceiving and researching transnationalism. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 22(2): 447-462.
- Vertovec, S. (1998). Multicultural policies in modes of citizenship in European Cities. *International Social Science Journal*, 156, 187-99.
- Waldinger, Roger and David Fitzgerald. 2004. "Transnationalism in question" in *American Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 109 (5), pp. 1177-1195.
- Wimmer, A. & Glick Schiller, N. (2002) Methodological nationalism and beyond: nation-state building, migration and the social sciences. *Global Networks*, 2 (4), 301-334.
- Young, I. M. (1990) *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton, University of Princeton Press.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (1999). The 'multi-layered citizen': citizenship in the age of 'glocalization'. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 1(1), 119-36.

Andreea Lazăr has pursued her undergraduate studies in Sociology in Cluj-Napoca/Strasbourg. She holds a MA degree in Anthropology and Multicultural Studies. As a PhD student in Sociology (at Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj), she has taught Sociology and Anthropology seminars. Her research interests lie predominately in the area of migration, ethnicity and nationalism studies, gender studies and sociology of sciences.