

CHAPTER 5

Transnationalism

Migration is one of the global structures, as we have seen in chapter ‘Migration’, and so are the resulting **diasporas**, peoples who have permanently settled outside of their place of origin but still retain a bond as a nation. Examples of century-old diasporas are the Jews, Greeks and Chinese, who kept cultural, linguistic, religious and business ties with their community members across the borders.

From the late nineteenth century onward, migration that resulted in permanent settlement abroad increased significantly: Koreans migrated to Russia and China, Chinese and Europeans to the United States, Syrians and Lebanese to South America, Indians to Africa, to name just a few. A new surge of migration also took place after the Second World War, but this time the world witnessed a global inversion of migration: most migration was now towards Europe, at first from former colonies and for the recruitment of laborers from abroad, and later also for political and economic reasons.

Many of these peoples integrated into their new societies by identifying themselves as part of their new home, and many also maintained strong ties with their nation of origin. The interactions that the members of such communities maintain across borders is called **transnationalism**. These interactions usually relate to matters of family, religion or business, and are maintained with the country of origin, but often also with community members in other countries. In such instances, the identity of these people is also called a transnational identity because it transgresses national borders.

A **diaspora** consists of members belonging to a nation that have permanently settled in different places outside their place of origin and who retain a bond based on shared culture, language, religion. When this bond translates into cross-border interactions among people of this nation – like business or family relations – this is referred to as **transnationalism**.

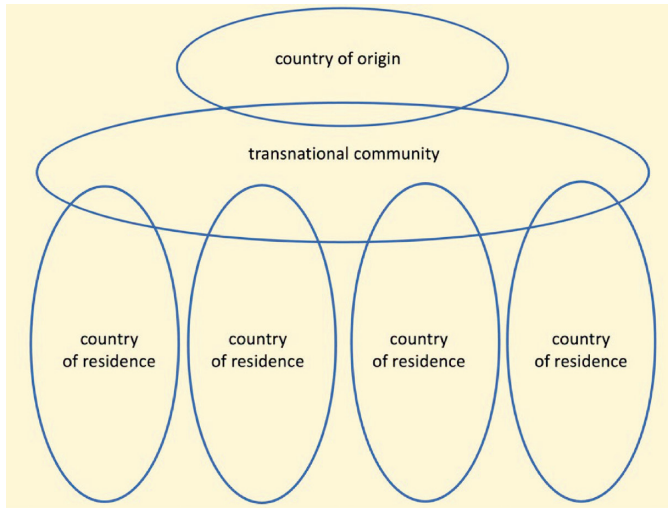


Figure III.5.1 Transnationalism

Transnational perspectives

Transnationalism as such is not new, but its occurrence has increased significantly since the 1990s. The reasons for this augmentation are not entirely clear but might be attributed to the increase of national self-identification (see chapter 'Identity') and to the increased availability of means of transport and communication. Irrespective of the exact reasons, academics and policy makers have started to pay more attention to this phenomenon. It has also provided new perspectives on a number of issues that were otherwise overlooked or considered self-evident. These issues will be discussed below.

National identity

There is a general assumption that growing up in a nation-state shapes people's thinking, identity and outlook on the world and, in effect, contributes to the identification with the 'nation' through its shared history, culture and language. But this assumption is challenged by the citizens of that state who have migrated from other parts of the world. Will they give up their own history, culture and language? Or merge it with that of their new home country? And, more importantly, will these processes take place within the confines of the nation-state? Transnationalism shows that this is not the case. From the perspective of transnationalism, therefore, the notion of the nation-state as a closed container in which a national identity is being shaped, needs to be revisited.

Belonging

Belonging is a complex notion, that may be described as the emotion of ‘feeling at home’ which, in turn, is based on the bond that one feels with one’s social, political and cultural environment, and is closely related to the concept of **imagined community**. However, this particular nation-state perspective may conflict with the transnational perspective. Do members of transnational communities feel a sense of belonging to their community, or to their country of residence, or to their country of origin, or perhaps to all of these simultaneously? For instance, the culture of the new country of residence may give a certain meaning to family or work relations, while the culture of the country of origin may add another layer of meaning to these relations. In that case, the culture of the country of origin is not being left behind but is taken along to the new country of residence. In other words, members of transnational communities share several social spheres or, as sociologists have termed it, ‘**habitats of meaning**’ or environments that contain their own sets of values and meaning. Managing the multiple habitats of meaning is not always easy and may lead to what is referred to as **liminality**, which refers to a feeling of being ‘in-between’. This term was originally used to describe the transition in rites of passage in non-industrial and traditional communities but is now also used to explain political and cultural transitions in general.

Liminality is the feeling of not really belonging, being ‘here nor there’. It describes a temporary state of people who are in transition. It can apply to a variety of human situations, like migration, religious conversion, gender identity.

Loyalty

Whereas belonging has a socio-cultural meaning, the related notion of loyalty has a socio-political connotation. It can be defined as the unconditional fidelity that one has towards one’s family, community, leader, religion or country. The quality of the unconditional is important: people loyal to a leader, for instance, tend to be forgiving for the leader’s faults and the same is true for family members, religions and states. Loyalty also works the other way round: families, communities, leaders, religions or countries expect loyalty from its members.

But do members of transnational communities feel loyalty towards their community, their country of residence or their country of origin, or perhaps to all of these at the same time? These questions are not only important from a social perspective, they have strong political implications as well. Nationals of a country may feel sorry for someone who lacks a sense of belonging to that society, but they may be suspicious or even hostile to someone who lacks loyalty towards their country. Even though loyalty can be hard to measure, it manifests itself in very diverse ways. For instance, people may frown on transnational citizens cheering

for the national team of their country of origin rather than for that of their country of residence. Or transnationals may oppose military involvement of their country of residence in another country because their geopolitical views are rooted in the perspective of their country of origin rather than their country of residence. While this doesn't necessarily mean that these transnationals are less loyal to their country of residence, their loyalty may be questioned by others.

Foreign influences

Another aspect of transnationalism is the influence exerted by countries of origin on people who have migrated abroad and have become residents there. The reasons for this can vary. They can be economic when a country of origin is dependent on a steady inflow of remittances. Cultural or religious support for fellow nationals can be another reason, with countries of origin like Japan and Mexico who provide language schools abroad, or Turkey and Morocco who send imams.

Some countries of origin reach out because they still consider these transnationals to be 'their' nationals. This can have a legal dimension when a migrant retains the nationality of the country of origin, which usually extends also to the next generations. Sometimes this involvement may have a political dimension, for instance when migrants still have voting rights in their country of origin where politicians might want these votes. This happened during the Turkish elections in 2019, when President Erdogan campaigned in Europe to secure the vote of people of Turkish origin who, due to their Turkish nationality, still retained the right to vote in Turkey.

Not all migrants who settled in their new country are pleased with this kind of attention from their countries of origin, especially not when they are the second or third generation and no longer have much of a connection with their country of origin. The new home country of these migrants may also feel uneasy or even threatened by the scrutiny its nationals receive from their country of origin.

Double nationality

Certain states hold that their nationals retain the nationality of the state, even if they have become the nationals of other countries. The nationality law of such state of origin often dictates that the nationality is passed on to the children, so that the next generations of migrants retain the nationality from their country of origin. In such cases, the men can remain eligible for military service in the country of origin. People with such nationality can usually do little about it: it is not the person but the state that can retract a nationality. So while the new home country may prohibit double nationality (that is: nationality of the new country as well as the country of origin), this prohibition cannot be enforced in these instances unless the country of origin retracts the nationality, which is very rare.

Further reading

- Zain Abdullah, "Transnationalism and the Politics of Belonging: African Muslim Circuits in Western Spaces", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. 427-449
- Caroline B. Brettell, "Global Spaces/Local Places: Transnationalism, Diaspora, and the Meaning of Home", *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, Vol.13, No.3, 2006, pp. 327-334
- Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas. An Introduction*, Routledge, 2023
- Thomas Faist, Margit Fauser and Eveline Reisenauer, *Transnational Migration*, Polity Press, 2013
- Steffen Mau, *Social Transnationalism: Lifeworlds Beyond the Nation-State*, Routledge, 2010
- Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism*, Routledge, 2009