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The Cross-Border Connection: A Rejoinder

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My paper responds to critiques by Susan Eckstein, Thomas Faist, Nina Glick Schiller, Peggy Levitt, and Jose Itzigsohn, all appearing in that same issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies*

The burgeoning literature on immigrant transnationalism is one of the academic success stories of our times. In 1990, Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton called on migration scholars to adopt a new perspective, one encompassing societies of emigration *and* immigration and attending to the circulation of ideas, resources, and communal engagements that international migrations invariably trigger, as well as the sending and receiving state responses that ensue (Glick Schiller et al., 1992). First announced at a conference and then delineated in *Nations Unbound* (Basch et al., 1994), the transnational perspective productively enlarged the boundaries of inquiry beyond the sociology of *immigration* with its single-minded focus on the state and society of reception.

But in one fell swoop, Glick Schiller and her colleagues slipped from a perspective on migration to a claim about the nature of the phenomena extending across borders and the ties between places of origin and destination. Thus, the transnational gave birth to transnationalism and the transmigrants, the first “the processes by which immigrants forge

and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement,” the second, the people who “take actions, make decisions, and develop subjectivities and identities embedded in networks that connect them simultaneously to two or more nation-states (Basch et al., 1994: 7).”

This same text noted that while some of the people crossing state boundaries conform to the transmigrant model, not all do, acknowledging that others behave like conventional immigrants – settling down for good – and others opt for circular patterns. A reader might understandably want to know why some migrants could “reconfigure space so that their lives are lived simultaneously within two or more nation-states” (Basch et al., 1994: 28), but others would not. No less pertinent is the question of whether the “transmigrants” ever became “immigrants” and if so, how and why. But even the most careful perusal of *Nations Unbound* leaves these questions unanswered.

More than two decades after its appearance, *Nations Unbound* remains required reading. So too do the publications authored by the contributors to this symposium, whose scholarship, like that of this author, bears the indelible mark of the transnational turn pioneered in the early 1990s. Yet despite the burgeoning of “transnational migration studies,” the field has not done much to solve the mystery it posed years ago. One can, as does Peggy Levitt, shrug one’s shoulders in perplexity over the many, puzzling ways of the world: thus, we read that “workers and professionals, members of religious congregations, sports fans, hobby enthusiasts” each pursue cross-border connections in their own inimitable ways; that events apparently coming out of nowhere – e.g., 9/11 – inexplicably alter the options for homeland connectedness; and that some migrant ties are on the wane while others are on the rise. Not much help to be found here. Or, like Nina Glick Schiller,

one can veer back and forth between asserting that some undefined and undefinable quality of global capitalism determines whether migrants “abandon or reconstitute cross-border ties and identities” and the contention that the modalities are instead produced by the “global historical conjuncture” of the moment – whatever that might be. Another option is offered by Thomas Faist, who insists that transnationalists have always emphasized the salience of states in shaping cross-border connections. Yet by describing transnationalism as focusing “on civil society actors and specific groups such as migrants” he makes the state disappear, leaving one to wonder how the characteristics that distinguish migrants moving *internationally* – their entry into the territory of a different state as aliens and members of a foreign polity – affect their capacity to maintain ties to people, places, and communities left behind.

Thus, while the transnational perspective has given rise to a new, much-needed sensibility, highlighting connections between place of reception and place of origin, it has yet to rise to the challenge it posed: how to *systematically* understand the sources and types of variations in the cross-border linkages that international migrations invariably produce. Why might these ties persist, attenuate, or simply fade away? What different patterns characterize the many forms of cross-border involvement – whether occurring in political, economic, or cultural spheres, or involving concerted action as opposed to every day, uncoordinated activities of ordinary immigrants? What happens as the experiences and resources acquired through migration feedback to home territory? And how do the distinctively political aspects of population movements across state boundaries affect the interplay among emigrants, stay-behinds, and states of emigration and immigration?

These are the questions tackled in *The Cross-Border Connection* (Waldinger, 2015), which, contrary to the less generous of my commentators, doesn't strive to offer additional neologisms for a field sagging under the weight of the many new concepts stimulated by the transnational turn. Rather, focusing on international population movements that take migrants from poorer, developing states to richer democracies, the book seeks to *explain* how the very conditions bringing places of origin and reception together subsequently transform the ties linking international migrants to the places and people left behind.

I start with the premise that the people opting for life in another state are not just *immigrants*, but also *emigrants*. Because international migrants move by using the resource on which they can almost always count – each other -- social connections between veterans and newcomers lubricate the process. As migration is selective, with those most likely to gain going first, others following slowly, if at all, and the elderly often staying behind, the process yields a long-term internationalization of families, linked across borders by chains of mutual help and the continuing exchange of information and ideas. Still *of* the sending state, even though no longer *in* it, migrants transplant the home country society onto receiving state ground: alien territory becomes a familiar environment, yielding the infrastructure needed to keep up here-there connections and providing the means by which migrants can sustain identities as *home* community members, while living on *foreign* soil. In that sense, by moving to another country, the migrants pull one society onto the territory of another state, creating a *zone of intersocietal convergence*, linking “here” and “there.”

However, the argument doesn't so much rest on the concept, but on its account of what happens next. Here, the point of departure is an observation that the transnationalists, to borrow a phrase from Thomas Faist, are loath to concede: globally,

international migration remains an exceptional event, as the overwhelming majority of the world's population never departs the country of birth. But the global tendency hides striking regional variations, especially the ever-greater shift of people moving from the developing to the developed world. The motivation to leave home stems from a reality at variance with the emphasis on circulation and fluidity at the heart of the transnational perspective: the migrants depart because displacement lets them capture the resources contained in the developed world and that can only be accessed there. Thus, in a world where how one fares increasingly depends on where one lives, not what one does, migration provides a means for people in the developing world to exploit the world's rich. One only has to stand at the U.S.-Mexican border to see how true is the real estate agent's maxim of location, location, location: well-being in the poorest county in one of the U.S.'s poorest regions exceeds the level anywhere on the Mexican side (Armstrong and Gerber, 2009).

International migration is also an implicitly political act: unknowingly and perhaps unconsciously, the migrants are voting with their feet, against the state of origin and for the state of destination and its institutional structure. That institutional structure undergirds an economy allowing a Bolivian or Filipino immigrant living in the United States to earn roughly four times what his statistically equivalent compatriot makes at home (Clemens, Montenegro, and Pritchett, 2008: 21). But the relevant institutions are more encompassing, including governments that invest in public goods, officials that provide services without demanding kickbacks, polities that are at least somewhat responsive to voters' preferences, elections that aren't rigged, and streets that can be safely walked. The gains for the movers are therefore myriad, yielding not only significant material benefits, but also substantial

gains in overall well-being (International Organization for Migration, 2013). Hence, the paradox of migration kicks in. The encounter with the distinctive behaviors, institutions, and resources contained within the states of the developed world transforms the migrants, making them increasingly unlike the people left behind.

This transformation begins as soon as migrants encounter a *foreign* environment, which must be *learned*. That imperative yields immediate behavioral changes involving small, imperceptible steps, each making the next advance easier. As the strange becomes familiar, migrants steer their way through a formerly foreign world without thought, using new skills to demonstrate competence in ways that bring recognition and reward and yield exposure to people different than those known before departure.

The migrants thus transition from the outer towards the inner bounds of the zone of intersocietal convergence, with ensuing paradoxical consequences. As they gain greater control over their new environment and greater awareness of how to capture more of its resources, their potential for making a difference back home grows. Their capacity to invest in the connection, whether by traveling home with greater frequency or engaging in activities oriented to the hometown community or homeland polity, also expands. For much the same reasons, the migrants trigger the attention of home states, which reach out across boundaries to nationals abroad, seeking to gain their share over the human and financial resources generated by the migrants' move to a richer country.

However, the greater capacity that the emigrants acquire from entry into the economy of a developed state also transforms the relationships crossing boundaries. Over time, the initial, rough equilibrium between flows emanating from new and old homes falters, as advantage shifts to the migrants. Consequently, the migrants gain leverage, with

resulting power asymmetries affecting their interactions with the stay-at-homes. That greater sway lets them influence community matters from afar, as exemplified by the role of hometown associations in promoting community development and shaping community priorities in the places from which the migrants come. Leverage also facilitates the migrants' emergence as political actors capable of both helping and harming home state interests, further motivating states to develop the extraterritorial infrastructure needed to connect with and influence citizens abroad.

Thus, *intersocietal convergence* gradually gives way to *intersocietal divergence*, as the balance in the duality between *emigrant* and *immigrant* shifts from the former to the latter. Distance yields effects that few can escape, changes in communication technology notwithstanding. In the end, the absent cannot be present, no matter how strongly they insist otherwise: Migrants and stay-at-homes inevitably undergo different experiences, producing differences that accent the impact of geographical distance. Moreover, both foreign-born, and especially their offspring, take on the traits of those around them, willy-nilly picking up the everyday habits and tools that make it easier to fit into the new environment and adapting to the greater abundance and individuation of the socioeconomic context in which they live. Hence, the ties extending back home paradoxically become vectors of conflict.

The locus of the migrant's key connections also tends to shift over time. Regardless of the motivation leading any one family or individual to leave home, the core familial network almost always moves gradually, erratically, and incompletely: some significant other is usually to be found at home. However, as the sojourn abroad persists, the social center of gravity tends to cross the border, at which point the motivation to keep up cross-

border ties falters. The needs of life in the place where the migrant resides soak up an increasing share of disposable income, reducing the resources available to relatives still living in the migrants' former home.

Movement across the zone of intersocietal convergence thereby strengthens *and* weakens the linkages that cross borders. But the inherently political nature of international migration also comes into play. While the social and economic logic of migration encourages families to internationalize, receiving states' ever greater focus on migration control has the same effect. Under these circumstances, as Susan Eckstein's comment notes, those leaving home are the people most likely to either gain passage, whether enjoying legal authorization or not; those lacking that capacity stay behind. Reunification may later occur, but the protracted, uncertain nature of the process further debilitates cross-border family ties. Economic success facilitates cross-border engagements, yet alone it doesn't suffice: Only those lucky enough to combine economic resources with the legal entitlements needed to move freely back and forth across borders can pursue the full range of cross-border connections. As for the rest, increasingly severe receiving-state efforts to impede entry and permanent settlement tend to yield territorial capture and immobility (Hernández-León 2008). It may well be, as Susan Eckstein notes, that parental departures yield even more negative effects when mothers, rather than fathers, migrate and leave dependent children behind. But whether it is mother's or father's leaving that matters most, the key point is simple: global regimes of migration control limit the possibility of "fluidity, connection, and movement," much vaunted by Peggy Levitt, yielding instead long-term familial separations that corrode cross-border kinship ties.

The states that the migrants leave *as well as* those they enter are linked to meaningful social identities understood in territorial terms. Since national identity is relational, defined in contrast to alien states *and* people, the migrants' quest to belong both "here" *and* "there" is contested by nationals on both sending *and* receiving sides. Whether at place of origin or destination, the prevailing view is that "we" are "here", while "they" are "there," alien states, located on the other side of the border, and where the aliens are contained. Thus, while migration shows the social scientist that social relations are not inevitably contained within states, nationals in both sending *and* receiving states are disinclined to accept the message, *believing*, instead, that territory and identity *should* coincide, one reason why states everywhere try to control movements across their borders. The linkage between territory and identity circumscribes emigrants' capacity to legitimately pursue homeland concerns, as they are simultaneously foreigners where they reside and persons living on foreign ground in the places from which they stem. That linkage also explains why Peggy Levitt should not have been surprised by the spillover from the attack of September 11, 2001, as international political events and international migrations – as well as the policies that govern those movements – are inextricably intertwined. The anarchy of the world system, in addition to the instability of the very states from which the emigrants depart, produces international conflict, the ebb and flow of which has recurrently altered emigrants' options for maintaining loyalties and connections to foreign places and people.

The migrants' combination of resources – deriving from their residence in a rich country -- and vulnerabilities – deriving from their foreign status – activate interventions by *home* states seeking to influence and protect nationals abroad. Though out of sight, the

migrants are not out of mind, as the many social ties stretching across borders make them too connected for sending states to ignore. Moreover, a failure to respond to their problems often produces political difficulties back home. As Jose Itzigsohn points out in his comment, sending states and emigrants can have convergent interests, most notably when it comes to policies facilitating the sending of remittances. Yet one still has to note that the decision to service the needs of citizens abroad is yet another reflection of the same global inequalities that triggered the migrations, as sending states allocate resources from citizens who chose to stay to migrants who opted to exit, thereby reaping advantages unavailable to their compatriots still at home.

Having moved to a new political jurisdiction, emigrants escape the sending states' coercive power; having entered a democratic state, they benefit from civic rights, gaining the capacity to organize, protest, raise funds and lobby, even if destination society citizenship and full political rights remain out of reach. When combined, the freedoms and economic resources made possible by emigration have the potential to pack a powerful punch, forcing home state officials to listen to and sometimes accommodate people they would have despised had the emigrants not been able to depart.

However, foreign residence weakens the emigrants' claim to membership in the national community in the place where they no longer live. As noted by the historian, Nancy Green (2012), the expatriate can easily slip into the *ex-patriot*, in which case exit may be seen not as departure, but rather as desertion and hence disloyalty, sentiments that are widely shared. The migrants' claim to identity with the stay-at-homes may ring true to some, but definitely not all, as those with in-person contact can readily detect the ways in

which the immigrants have become *unlike* those who have stayed behind (see Itzigsohn, 2009:150-151).

While homeland politics leaves the mass of rank and file largely indifferent, some fraction of the emigrants wants full citizenship rights and therefore tries to pull the home country polity across boundaries. As indicated by the growth of expatriate voting, cross-territorial polity extension is increasingly common. That phenomenon mainly involves the politics of recognition, not the politics of redistribution, as home states have limited capacity to respond to the number one concerns of their citizens abroad – which have to do with matters of immigration *not* emigration. Consequently, the extension of voting rights often entails little more than a costly exercise in symbols, of little interest to rank and file immigrants intent on a better life. For illustration of the point, I recommend that readers consult chapter 7. There they will learn that whereas more than 7 million Mexican citizens in the United States obtained Mexican consular identity cards, useful for resolving some of the practical problems associated with their lives as *immigrants*, a tiny fraction made use of the right to vote in Mexican presidential elections, at great financial cost to the Mexican taxpayers who had decided not to venture to *el norte*.

Not particularly keen on the demands made by voting rights activists, sending states paradoxically favor the acquisition of host country citizenship: it furthers integration into the destination society, thereby increasing emigrants' capacity to transmit resources back home and allowing them to speak out for home country interests in ways not possible when still standing outside the polity. But as Thomas Faist points out, without noting the significance of what he says, receiving states, not sending states, hold all the cards. Since sending state changes in citizenship laws only generate effects when acquisition of

receiving state citizenship lies within grasp they are irrelevant to the millions of undocumented or irregular immigrants living in the United States or Europe. Though receiving states have proven more open to dual citizenship, they have simultaneously heightened the bar to naturalization for those who might be eligible to begin the process.

Thus, in the end, the very same decisions that produce inter-societal *convergence* eventually yield inter-societal *divergence*, though often in a form that leaves the migrants betwixt and between. The immigrants, since they are also emigrants, find themselves confronted with an inescapable dilemma, as they seek to be both "here" *and* "there", part of the "we" in the society where they reside while still belonging to the "us" of the people left behind. However, receiving state policies effectively keep many in a condition of long-term familial separation while simultaneously impeding the route across the internal boundary of citizenship. Settlement anchors the migrants and their descendants in the society of reception, yielding tastes, behaviors, and expectations common to the people around them. Yet it does so without in any way guaranteeing acceptance, which is why the oft-repeated assertions about the compatibility of home country ties and assimilation – a concept that this book rejects – are far too pat. Instead, as Jose Itzigsohn so acutely observes, "incorporation into American society is ...a process fraught with tensions and contradictions."

With long-term residence, the migrants and their children come to understand themselves as being both *in* and *of* the society of reception – just like the young immigrant activists who present themselves as embodying the American dream in order to further their quest for U.S. residence and citizenship rights. However, nationals are not always ready to accept that point of view, tending instead to see the immigrants and their

descendants as still *of* them, there – some foreign people and land -- and hence bearing dubious claims to belonging. Likewise, the immigrants' foreign attachments may be tolerated, but only up to a point; the more insistently and visibly the immigrants and their descendants engage abroad, the more they may threaten their acceptance. Regardless of how the migrants behave, disturbances from the international arena invariably constrain the degree to which they and even their descendants can pursue international ties.

Things are not that different on the other side of the chain. The *emigrants* may insist that they are still *of* the society of origin even if no longer *in* it. However, those who remain behind are rarely of the same opinion; in their view these are *immigrants* who are no longer like "us" but rather like "them," the foreign people among whom they live. In fact, the stay behinds are not entirely mistaken, since the longer the *emigrants* stay abroad and the more deeply they sink their roots in new soil, the more they differ from those who never left home, which is why the forms of belonging sought by the emigrants are often rejected by those who opted not to leave. While democracy may be deepened through extraterritorial extension of the electorate, as insightfully argued by Jose Itzigsohn, one has to note that the stay-at-homes, wondering about the justice of voting by emigrants who don't suffer the consequences of their decisions, often beg to differ. That tension over the appropriate bounds of the imagined community – Should it be bounded at the territorial frontier? Should it extend across borders? Can it extend from here to there? – lies at the heart of this book.

Hopefully, I've persuaded readers that *The Cross-Border Connection* offers an argument more complex and more plausible than some of my critics would have one believe. But they are correct in noting that a book claiming to make a general argument

nonetheless builds that case on empirical material focusing on migrations in the North American system. The first two empirical chapters examine every day, cross-border social connections and emigrant politics, demonstrating the contrast between the pervasive, though ultimately, vulnerable ties linking emigrants and their closest associates left behind, and the far more limited reach of homeland-oriented political engagements, even among emigrants with intense homeland connections. While these two chapters principally treat the receiving side, the next three empirical chapters expand the focus to encompass the country of origin, in so doing swiveling to zero in on the *zone of intersocietal convergence*, linking places of *emigration* with places of *immigration*. A first chapter develops a political sociology framework for understanding the interplay between emigrants and emigration states; a subsequent chapter implements that framework by comparing two different, recent episodes in the relationship between Mexico and Mexican emigrants in the United States; a last empirical chapter continues to scrutinize the zone of convergence, this time tightening the frame to see what happens when immigrants come together to do good for the local communities they left behind.

Since parochialism is always to be deplored, this author agrees that the better approach would have been to expand the book's geographic focus to encompass a fuller set of the developed world's migration nodes. On the other hand, every author needs to find a balance between depth and breadth. I am confident that a fair-minded reader perusing the book with attention to the many data sets used, the variety of migration experiences analyzed, and the multiplicity of sources consulted will find ample diversity in its pages.

But the key issue, not raised by my critics, concerns the implications of case selection for any conclusions about the broader universe to which the case belongs:

migrations from developing to developed, democratic states. Does a focus on migrations in the North American system yield a systematic bias? And if so, does the bias work against or in favor of the arguments advanced in the book?

Indeed, a moment's contemplation suggests that any bias works *against* the arguments developed in this book. Chapter 4 contends that distance isn't dead; but as it also notes that distance matters, the geography of U.S. bound migration should facilitate the maintenance of home country ties. Unlike Ecuadorians living in Spain who would need to stay up until midnight in order to call relatives in Quito at 6 PM, Dominicans living in New York reside in the same time zone as their compatriots still at home; yet when calling home Dominican New Yorkers mainly do so on weekends, evidence that the routines of daily life impinge on the capacity to keep-up long distance ties. While Mexican immigrants have dispersed throughout the U.S. over the past two decades, the overwhelming concentration remains in California and the Southwest, at most several hours from the Mexican border. Yet the typical Mexican immigrant has never returned home after arriving in the United States. Should we expect that the typical Bangladeshi living in London will have behaved differently? Chapter 8 shows that activists wanting to help communities they left behind nonetheless find that doing so proves problematic: the complexities of cross-border coordination are daunting, especially for hard-working immigrants with modest technical skills, trying to be cross-border citizens in their limited spare time. Is there any reason to assume that these obstacles have been somehow heightened by Mexico's and El Salvador's efforts to *encourage* hometowners' collective remittances? Likewise, the U.S. offers an especially fertile environment for political mobilization around homeland causes: its political structure facilitates homeland oriented activism, pursuits also legitimated by the

long history of rallying around homeland causes. Yet, as chapter 5 demonstrates, homeland political attention typically starts low and flags quickly, with deeper engagements only emerging among a smaller minority. Should one think that an environment more hostile to homeland attachments – let's say France – or dual loyalties – let's say Germany – would stimulate broader, more persistent homeland political involvements?

Of course, it's not for me to answer these questions as once published a book no longer belongs to its author, but instead has a life of its own. Thanks to the editors of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* who kindly sponsored this symposium, to Peter Kivisto who generously organized it, and to the esteemed colleagues who engaged so seriously with my writing, *The Cross-Border Connection* book has been launched with the type of attention that all authors seek. May the debate continue!

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