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## **Immigrant “Transnationalism” and the Presence of the Past\***

by

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At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the view that nation-state and society normally converge has waned. Instead, “globalization” is the order of the day, with international migration bringing the alien “other” from third world to first, and worldwide trade and communications amplifying and accelerating the feedbacks traveling in the opposite direction. Consequently, social scientists are looking for new ways to think about the connections between “here” and “there,” as evidenced by the interest in the many things called “transnational”. The excitement is particularly great among those studying international migration: observing that migration produces a plethora of connections spanning “home” and “host” societies, scholars detect the emergence of “transnational communities,” from which they conclude that the era of nation-state societies successfully keeping themselves distinct has now been eclipsed.

But does transnationalism – as idea or reality – represent anything new? For contributors to the foundational document – the proceedings of a 1990, New York Academy of Science meeting organized by the anthropologists Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Christina Blanc-Szanton – the answer was a resounding yes. The development of social fields linking *particular* sending and destination countries, they argued, represented a decisive break with the past. Contrary to historical patterns and received social science notions, neither settlement nor the severing of home countries ties was inevitable. In the contemporary age of migration, rather, “transmigrants ... maintain, build, and reinforce multiple linkages with their countries of origins (Glick Schiller, et al, 1995:52).” In so doing, the long-distance movers of the contemporary age expanded the range of “home” to encompass both “here” and “there,” a change so fundamental that entirely new conceptualizations were required. “Transnationalism” became the label used for identifying the social connections between receiving and sending

countries and “transmigrants” denoted the people who forged those ties and kept them alive (Glick Schiller, et al. 1992).

Even at the very moment of this debut, however, the historians were there to say that nothing, or at least, not much, was new under the sun. While the social scientists were simply accepting the dictionary’s definition of immigration, as movement for the purposes of settlement, the historians knew better, reminding their colleagues that the last era of mass migration was characterized by a continuous ebb and flow across, indeed, around the trans-Atlantic. Nor was an immigrant or ethnic preoccupation with homeland politics anything new; au contraire, the literature told us, nothing was as American as agitating in favor of the homeland earlier abandoned.

Roughly fifteen years after debate began, we now all know better. Concerns generated by research on the international migrations of the contemporary era directed historians to patterns of which they had been aware, but perhaps not fully attentive. The social scientists have agreed that connections between here and there were indeed seen before – though most still insist that there is something distinctive about the host/home linkages of today. More importantly, there is a steady stream of publications seeking to make systematic past/present comparisons – as opposed to the original practice of just pushing the issue off the table.

But from my vantage point, the record of the past decade and a half provides scant ground for satisfaction. On the one hand, the phenomenon that immigration scholars call “transnationalism” is fundamentally mislabeled and misunderstood. After all, connectivity between source and destination points is an inherent aspect of the migration phenomenon – no surprise given the social networks that channel the process. However, those networks generate, not one, but a multiplicity of “imagined communities,” organized along different, often conflicting principles, whether related to the scale of aggregation (local v. national) or opposing visions of the “community” in question. Before the demise of the late, lamented workers’ movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, those “imagined communities” often conformed to the root meaning of *transnational* – extending *beyond* loyalties that connect to any specific place of origin or ethnic or national “group”. But that was then, this is now: what contemporary immigration scholars describe as “transnationalism” is just long-distance particularism – a form of social action antithetical to transnationalism in any meaningful sense.

Nor do the scholars of transnationalism do better when thinking about the possible relationships between present and past. To begin with, they dehistoricize the present, forgetting that it is but a moment in the flow of history, and therefore tomorrow’s past. Likewise, they take temporal boundaries for granted, assuming,

rather than explaining, just when and why the “past” stopped and the “present” began.

As to the existing debate, it has barely begun, having highlighted just one form of past/present connection – namely recurrence, by which I refer to the continued reappearance of trans-state immigrant and ethnic ties linking “here” and “there.” The finding is surely important – but it simply reminds us that networks of goods, information, and people repeatedly and regularly extend beyond the limits of state institutions. To a large extent, long-distance migrant networks operate in much the same way whether extending within or across state boundaries – which is why much of the transnational literature concerns bilocal connections bearing no inherent relationship to international migration whatsoever.

However, the relationship between past and present takes more than one form, extending beyond recurrence to include secular change and contingency. Secular change entails direction, not just cyclicity. In this case, movement involves a historical shift toward a world increasingly divided by states, seeking to control movement across territorial boundaries, regulating the internal boundaries of membership, and nationalizing their peoples. Consequently, while social networks do connect nation-state societies – allowing *some* migrants to live both here and there – they don’t always penetrate state boundaries, which is why the condition of having *no* home – *not having two homes* – is what distinguishes “now” from “then”.

If possessing direction, history is nonetheless indeterminate, reason for contingency to matter. Because international migration entails movement between states, it’s a phenomenon of an inherently political sort. Therefore, the political uncertainties inherent in the relationships among states impinge on the ability of immigrants and their descendants to engage in activities that link “here” and “there.” In particular, the security/solidarity nexus waxes and wanes with the degree of inter-state tension, with the “dual loyalty” issue becoming particularly intense when belligerency develops between host and sending countries. While the shadow of war repeatedly falls over the trans-state social ties of immigrants and their descendants, it does so unpredictably – and thus contrasts with the regular, recurrent activation of migrant networks.

Having now outlined these four different modalities by which past and present relate, I will use the time that remains to elaborate on each one.

### **Dehistoricization**

Right from the start, historians scoffed at the notion that migratory experiences organized both “here” and “there” represented something not seen before. Indeed, attention to the persistence and significance of migrants’ trans-state ties had long been on the historians’ agenda. As noted by the manifesto of modern immigration historiography – Frank Thistlethwaite’s celebrated *1960*

address – the migrations of the turn of the *last* century entailed trans-oceanic, back and forth traffic of such amplitude, that only some portion of the phenomenon fell into the standard categories of settlement and acculturation (Thistlethwaite, 1964). Thus, by the time that sociologists and anthropologists “discovered” transnationalism, the historians were documenting – in copious detail – that all was *not* new under the sun. A trio of books, published in the early 1990s by Dino Cinel, Bruno Ramirez, and David Wyman, and focusing on return migration, long-distance nationalism, and immigrant associational life at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, underlined the many commonalities between “now” and “then” (Ramirez, 1991; Cinel, 1991; Wyman, 1992).

That point has now been so frequently made that it has actually been heard. Even so, the argument for discontinuity has proven remarkably hard to abandon. As case in point, consider the writings of Alejandro Portes, our foremost sociologist of immigration. Portes and his associates first argued that the case for studying transnationalism rested on the very novelty of the phenomenon itself (1999). Shortly, thereafter, these same authors made due note of the historical precedents, but sought to rescue the concept by invoking the “fallacy of adumbration.” Conceding that the phenomenon was not new, the authors found that transnationalism illuminated previously unnoticed parallels linking “contemporary events with similar ones in the past (Portes, 2002: 184),” and therefore concluded that the concept yielded significant added value.

Today, the scholars of immigrant transnationalism repeat this very mantra, telling us that the transnational phenomenon may be old hat, but little matter, as the transnational concept does “new analytical work (Smith, 2003: 1),” to quote Robert Smith. Yet a close look at the writings of such diverse authors as Robert Smith, Luis Guarnizo, Peggy Levitt, and even our lunchtime’s distinguished speaker (Levitt, 2001a; Guarnizo, 2001; Robert Smith, 2001; Foner, 2000; Glick Schiller, 1999) shows that the emphasis on past/present divergence remains in place. According to these authors, a complex of factors makes “now” fundamentally different from “then”:

- the effects of technological change – reducing the costs and time entailed in communication and travel;
- the shift from the melting pot to multiculturalism – legitimating the expression of and organization around home country loyalties;
- the nationalization of home country societies – increasing the salience of the national identities with which immigrants arrived;
- the advent of a new international human rights regime (labeled “post-nationalism”) – diminishing the difference between “nationals” and “foreigners” by circumscribing the power of receiving states.

But whether it is the concept or the phenomenon that is thought to be new, the same basic problems remain. In claiming discontinuity, the scholars of immigrant transnationalism have fallen victim to the presentism characteristic of their disciplines and times. After all, the distinction they draw between the today's world of migrant connectivity and yesterday's world of migrant uprooting simply reproduces the familiar antinomies of social science, most notably that of a "closed" past and an "open" present (Amselle, 2002). As with the study of globalization or transnational relations, the original framing of the question has therefore produced exactly the same so-called discovery – that the phenomenon happened before and in surprisingly similar ways. On the other hand, if one hadn't started with these particular blinders, one might have asked more productive questions.

Moreover, the second line-defense, emphasizing the novelty of the transnational concept and the new illumination it sheds, only convinces if the concept correctly specifies the salient aspect of the situation at either point in time. But that's precisely what contemporary scholarship fails to do, emphasizing parallels while obscuring the fundamental contrast: that contemporary migrations, because they occur in a world carved up by nation-states, are both international and political in ways that were simply not true before. No doubt, parallels exist between now and then; for that reason, one has to note that they probably also extend to the factors that brought the earlier era to an end. While scholarship is right to emphasize the recurrence of migration, a point I'll return to in a moment, one need be attentive to other, less predictable events which can work in the opposite direction. And so if we take past/present parallels seriously, we need to concede that the current state of affairs is not an inevitability, but rather a contingent outcome, subject to unpredictable pressures that could burst today's era of global interconnection asunder, as occurred in the past.

To begin with, the technological determinism asserted by the proponents of immigrant "transnationalism" surely deserves second thought: after all, the simple letter did a remarkably effective job of knitting together trans-oceanic migration networks, as the reader of *The Polish Peasant* will surely recall. As the historians of globalization point out, moreover, the impact of the telegram was almost as fundamental as that of the internet; yet neither the telegram nor any other, contemporaneous advances in communications and transportation technology prevented the slide into autarchy experienced for much of the twentieth century. On the other hand, a political environment supportive of immigrant and ethnic long-distance nationalism should hardly be taken for granted. The evidence for the influence of international norms, or of an international human rights regime, is far from compelling. If instead, domestic political actors have been responsible for relaxing the distinction between nationals and foreigners, movement in the other direction is no less possible. Likewise, the greater legitimacy accorded expression of homeland loyalties is better understood as a product of the moment,

not a permanent feature of advanced democracies. The liberal universalism of those social and political groups supportive of immigrant rights does not naturally converge with the highly particularistic attachments of immigrant long-distance nationalists, especially if the latter creates new fissures among groups that first encounter one another in the American context, as for example, when African Americans and Cubans clashed over the visit of Nelson Mandela to Miami. The key point is that immigrants' ability to act here in pursuit of objectives located there is chronically a subject of contestation, which is why what the scholars call transnationalism, the public labels "dual loyalty". Regardless of what we think of such views, they matter, to be ignored at our own peril.

### **Recurrence**

Conventional social science views overlap with folk understandings: both assume that nation-states normally contain societies (as implied by the concept of "American society"), which is why the appearance of foreigners and their foreign attachments are viewed as anomalies expected to disappear.

The scholarship on migration tells us exactly the opposite: the advent of international migration is the *normal*, recurrent social outcome: networks of information, goods, and services *regularly* extend beyond the economy, which is why outsiders keep on showing up. In part, it is simply a story of capitalist economies relentlessly expanding beyond the ambit of any national society, even as they generate positions into which a newly activated labor force can move. In part, it is a story of the problem-solving strategies of the migrants, who use their most important resource – namely, each other – to consolidate networks linking "here" and "there" and that in turn make it easier for the poor to try to exploit the rich for purposes of their own. Whatever its causes, international migration is a native, *not* alien phenomenon – even though nation-state societies would like to pretend otherwise.

Consequently, the proliferation of ties extending beyond the territory that states seek to enclose reappears in virtually every migrant context – whether "now" or "then", whether in the United States or in any of the world's other major receiving nations. Moreover, population flows across borders leave large numbers of persons moving back and forth in a state of transition, not yet certain where to settle, let alone how much importance to place on the connections "here" as opposed to "there". Over the long term, the networks that breach the nation-state society also pull the migrants away from home environments and encourage settlement. The short- to medium-term horizons, however, may look quite different. As long as migration rises, so too does the density of persons for whom home is not "here," a factor affecting the predispositions of veteran migrants as well as the opportunities they confront. More migration tends to cause more cross-border ties.

But if connections linking here and there are a recurrent feature of the migratory phenomenon, they aren't a feature distinguishing international from other forms of population movement. Social networks lubricate long-distance migrations of all types, whether extending across borders, or linking country and city within the same state. In some respects, long-distance migrants are all one of a kind: as Michael Piore argued years ago, what matters is not the color of the identity card or passport, but rather that migrants are social outsiders, evaluating conditions here, in light of the standards there. Using a different terminology, the economic historians have confirmed this point of view: after the 1920s, when international migration was cut off, displaced rural Americans provided most, if not all of the substitutes that employers needed. And for further evidence, one can reference New York's own history of ethnic succession, where one group of migrant laborers has been more or less interchangeable for any other, regardless of whether origins were to be found within the United States or beyond its borders.

Consequently, long-distance migrants, whether international or internal, undergo a similar experience: displaced from familiar ground, they get treated as strangers, which is why they suddenly discover a commonality in people originating from the same place. Whether we call them *landsmann* or *paisano*, immigrant hometowners and their organizations are at once ubiquitous but also *fundamentally bi-local* -- that is to say, oriented toward attachments and activities linking *particular* places here and there. While these bilocal ties define the principal subject matter of the literature on immigrant transnationalism, the phenomenon bears no intrinsic relationship to international migration as such.

Moreover, even migrations internal to modern, nation-state societies can be sufficiently displacing as to generate new connections around the place left behind. As an uprooted New Yorker, I both know whereof I speak and connect with a longstanding tradition of strangers trying to adapt to the strange land called California. In the 1920s, for example, midwestern migrants to Los Angeles created state-based associations that picnicked, through the 1960s, in the very same L.A. public parks where Salvadoran and Guatemalan associations now gather (Boskin, 1965). Indeed, the Iowa association of Long Beach survives to this very today. In the 1930s, the displaced southwestern farmers made into "Okies" and "Arkies" by fearful Californians not only held on to their local attachments, but kept shuttling back and forth between the golden state and their old homes, in fashion quite similar to the Mexican field hands who replaced them when times improved (Gregory, 1989). In the 1950s, as Deborah Dash Moore has told us, second generation Jewish migrants to Los Angeles thought it necessary to form *landsmannschaften* to bring together, not ex-Bialystokers or ex-Pinskens, but rather the displaced New Yorkers from various parts of the Bronx or Brooklyn (Moore, 1994).

Of course, we do need to take the international dimension of migration seriously: trans-border bi-localism differs from intra-state bi-localism, and more so



now than before, when regional differences within the United States have declined. But the key point, to invoke the stilted language of social science, is that discovering connections between “villages” or “communities” here and there simply confirms the null hypothesis: social networks both lubricate long-distance migrations *and* provide the basis around which new forms of community are constructed after the move has taken place. However, these relationships also arise in almost any migratory context, whether within or across state boundaries. Therefore, they don’t identify the distinctive traits of international migration, regardless of whether our focus falls on the world of “now” or that of “then”.

### **Secular change**

The “concept of transnationalism,” contend Alejandro Portes and his collaborators in their widely cited and hailed reformulation, should be delimited “to occupations and activities that require regular and sustained social contact over time across national borders for their implementation (Portes et al, 1999).” It’s not for me to contest the claim. But I can note that this reformulation makes freedom of movement the point of departure, as if this were not a world divided by states, many of them expelling their undesirable residents, and whose humanity proves insufficient reason for the so-called liberal democracies to open their doors. In this respect, the proponents of transnationalism turn out to share the same biases as the advocates of assimilation, who tell us that “assimilation” is the decline of an ethnic difference (Alba and Nee, 2003), without noting that it is also the *making* of difference between national ‘peoples.’ As the sociology of assimilation obscures the coercion involved in excluding outsiders – via control of external borders – and in distinguishing between members and unacceptable residents of the territory – through regulation of the internal boundaries leading to citizenship and legal residence -- it also reveals itself to be ideology of the nation-state society. Consequently, the usual distinctions between assimilation and transnationalism mislead.

Neither transnationalism nor assimilation grapples with the inherently political nature of the phenomenon in question; for these reasons, the literature has yet to confront the alternative hypothesis, regarding past/present contrasts, advanced by Hannah Arendt (1951) a half century ago. Due to the global spread of the state system and the nation-state society, argued Arendt, the condition of having *no home – not two homes* – is what distinguishes “now” from “then”.

For Arendt, the old order exploded with World War I, though she conceded that the episodes of persecution and forced migration that followed the great war represented nothing new. “In the long memory of history,” as she wrote, developments of this sort “were everyday occurrences.” What had changed, rather, was the emergence of a world completely organized into nation-states, conceived of and understood in familistic and communitarian terms. Entire classes of peoples found themselves expelled, “not because of what they had done

or thought, but because what they unchangeably were.” And those deprived of a state, found “themselves thrown out of the family of nations altogether (294),” as “the loss of home and political status became identical with the expulsion from humanity altogether.”

While the Arendtian and turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century worlds may not be fully identical, she fully captured the underlying trend. In the long run, the rise of massive state apparatuses *controlling* population movements between states, and rationalizing distinctions between foreigners and citizens, represent the most striking developments. Unlike the situation at the turn of the century, persons migrating across international boundaries aren’t simply assessing the right mix of costs and benefits, as the economists insist. Today, they must also confront “a problem of political organization,” just as underscored by Arendt.

To begin with, international migration is a pervasive, yet quantitatively minor exception, to the system by which states bound mutually exclusive populations: after all, only 2.5 percent of the world’s population is currently living in a state different from the country of birth. What the liberal democracies dignify by the name of immigration policy is utterly mislabeled: rather, it is an exclusion policy, designed and maintained with the intent to keep out. Looking at the numbers of aliens who have entered the territory of this particular state, some large portion of whom have also been accepted into its nation, one might say that exclusion is pursued without effect. But if we consider the potential pool of migrants, not to speak of the lines patiently waiting for visas – whether permanent or temporary – in U.S. consulates and embassies all over the world, then the success of the fundamental policy is beyond doubt.

Moreover, the state-building efforts entailed in immigration restriction, and the state-spanning processes that occur when migration networks extend beyond the state container inevitably collide, yielding a set of cross-pressures that have increased, not diminished the political impediments to international migration. Thus, the United States earlier had a border, but scant territoriality, which is why immigrants could come and go as they pleased. As the historical studies have shown us, restriction didn’t so much choke off movement as alter its pattern. Bottling up established ports of entry simply pushed new flows toward less regulated areas, in turn eliciting yet a further exercise of state power to gain control over space. Though the process has been exceedingly protracted, the once near-open, informally regulated border, long managed in response to regional or local preferences, has now been completely politicized and formalized, with control extending to the entire perimeter of the United States. Of course, the border is leaky – but which border isn’t? But notice the intensity of the effort to keep people out, as evidenced by the steady militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border and the extension of check points to a zone well north of the border itself. Note also the rising toll of mortality among unauthorized border crossers – an outcome produced only when one prefers to extinguish rather than recognize the

humanity of people not like oneself, just as Arendt would have predicted. And though unsuccessful in deterring movement to *el norte*, and therefore derided as “smoke and mirrors” by the leading sociological authorities, current border policies have significantly discouraged unauthorized Mexican migrants from returning home – thus highlighting the newly created political obstacles to the sort of “regular and sustained social contact” across borders that supposedly distinguishes the immigrant transnationalism of today.

Of course, the students of immigrant transnationalism will insist that the political trends work the other way: today is a world increasingly governed by a trans- or post-national human rights regime, which is why immigrants can pursue their various forms of long-distance particularism with a freedom unknown before.

But in making this argument, they get the time order all wrong, as one can see by focusing on the refugee regime, an example of transnationalism in the very truest sense of the world. As implicitly argued by Arendt, and later reformulated with precision by Aristide Zolberg, the refugee is a product of the modern world. The migrants of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century certainly included people fleeing political hostility, but few, if any, for whom a failure to find safe haven would have meant death. Nor was that search for safe haven a desperate venture, as the immigration countries of the times exercised so little border control that they greeted revolutionaries and peasants with the same welcome hand. What better case exemplifies this unhappily long lost world, than that of Leon Trotsky, in February 1917 a Bronx man, in October 1917, a leader of the Russian Revolution?

It was the subsequent actions of states – expelling their undesirables, while closing themselves off to the unwanted – that impelled the creation of the inter-war refugee regime. And the career of our same revolutionary highlights the limits of this inter-war transnationalism: once unarmed and outcast, the prophet Trotsky discovered that virtually no place on earth would harbor the likes of him.

Like its interwar predecessor, the contemporary transnational refugee regime is not just a creation of and adaptation to the actions of states; it remains the weaker party, giving way when it clashes with claims to state sovereignty, as illustrated most notably by the experience of the United States. The U.S. never acceded to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, even though the convention largely applied to refugees from the Soviet bloc, precisely the outcome desired by the United States. In 1967, the U.S. finally agreed to observe most of convention’s obligations, but retained its own narrow view of how refugees were to be defined, which in practice made refugee policy not a matter of humanitarianism but of U.S. foreign policy. While things changed significantly with passage of the 1980 refugee act, the executive branch lost little of the latitude it had long possessed. Politics, not humanitarian considerations, determined where external boundaries would be enforced and with what degree of vigilance, as evidenced by the very different treatment accorded persons fleeing to the United States by boat from

Haiti, as opposed to those coming from Cuba. Although land borders have been more difficult to enforce, the insistence on sovereign control of internal boundaries is beyond mistake. Asylum remains granted for those coming to the United States for reasons approved by the executive branch, as Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees have learned to their distress. These unhappy experiences notwithstanding, the relatively liberal asylum regime introduced by the 1980 Refugee Act is already a thing of the past, with the advent of expedited removal reducing rights of review, and increasing the state's power to deport.

Of course, none of this precludes international migrants from seeing “themselves as transnational, as persons with two homelands,” to quote Glick Schiller and Fouron (1990: 341). Likewise, they can imagine themselves as “transnationals” and construct individual and social identities in transnational form, as Levitt and Waters have recently suggested. Those views, however, are hardly binding on anyone else. States not only exercise control over who enters the territory and enjoys rights of membership once there: their capacity to do so has increased significantly between the last age of mass migration and today's.

### **Contingency**

Whatever can be said for sociologists or anthropologists, the historians always knew that homeland attachments loomed large in the lives and communities of immigrants – with some significant degree of retention extended to second and third generations. But in those bad old days, before the correct terminology had been learned, scholars conceived of homeland attachments in terms of “dual loyalty” – as can be seen by opening the canonical 1980 *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, where an essay on just that topic is to be found.

Chronological time doesn't measure the distance between 1980 and 1989, when the short 20th century, as Hobsbawm called it, seemingly came to a close. With the Berlin Wall dismantled, and the cold war concluded, the onset of a more pacific era appeared to signal the end for the mutually exclusive national loyalties that had earlier prevailed. In this more relaxed context, states no longer had the same reason to greedily control the allegiance of members and residents. And all the more so for the world's hegemon, whose newcomers mainly came from poor, weak, and often small states – not of the sort to cause any one a threat.

How quickly things change! While the retrospective view is always 20/20, the possibility that tolerance of dual loyalties would respond to the ebb and flow of international tensions should be no surprise.

After all, national identity is relational: we define ourselves in contrast to alien peoples and external states. From this perspective, international migrants are the internal aliens, whose links to foreign people and places, so emphasized by the students of immigrant transnationalism, is precisely what renders them suspect.

It is the relationships among states that determine whether persons with foreign attachments are viewed benignly, adding to the spice of social life, or seen malignly, appearing as Trojan horses. In general, a peaceful world encourages states to relax the security/solidarity nexus; by contrast, international tension, let alone belligerence, provides the motivation to tighten up on those whose loyalties extend abroad (Armstrong, 1976). Of course, predicting just when such tensions will rise or fall seems to exceed the capacity of social science: no one forecast the sudden demise of the Soviet Union, let alone the bombing of the twin towers. On the other hand, history does seem to teach us that the pendulum inevitably shifts, which means that international phenomena can be expected to intrude on the political bona fides of persons whose social identities are largely framed by their connections to two very distinct, sometimes opposing states.

War provides the supreme challenge. One can *try*, when war breaks out, to profess allegiance to two mutually belligerent states, but that often proves a difficult effort to pursue. No one is more threatening than the detested and feared Other who happens to be located within the boundaries of one's own state. Moreover, the popular nature of modern wars threatens to transform immigrants from enemy countries into potential enemies, as happened in all the liberal democracies during each of the world wars.

Hopefully, we won't face this test again, at least not in our lifetimes. Even so: the relative international tranquility of the 1990s, shouldn't have blinded analysts to the threats on the horizon. Well before 9/11 one could have seen that immigrants originating from countries with unfriendly or tense relationships with the United States ran the risk of falling into the "enemy alien" trap. As shown by the Wen Ho Lee case, one only had to question a single person's loyalty for America's political rivalry with China to suddenly cast a shadow over the political legitimacy of an entire group. Though the shadow of suspicion receded after the case against Lee collapsed, the latent threat posed by potential conflict between an ever-more powerful China, and a U.S. prone to saber-rattling, never fully disappeared. Before the trade tower bombings one could have also noted that long-distance nationalism in all of its forms (including that of the time-honored ethnic lobby) did not come so easily to Arab Americans, reason to conclude that the exception proves the rule: when loyalty is in question, long-distance nationalism is a hazardous game.

Just how the sudden inflection of international tension in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century will affect the pursuit of immigrant and ethnic homeland loyalties is anyone's guess. But the lessons of history do indicate that the perception of external threat builds support for a more restrictive view of the national community. Past experience also shows that the American state has the *capacity* to monitor, control, and restrict the trans-state social action of international migrants and their descendants; whether and to what extent that capacity will be

activated is a matter to which scholars of immigrant “transnationalism” will now surely want to attend.

### Conclusion

The “transnationalism” field emerged with the conviction that the case of contemporary migrants living “here” and “there” represented something new. Understandably, critics responded by saying *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*. Alas, this sort of discussion is nothing but a trap. History involves change, which is why any particular historical constellation is distinct from other like developments encountered before. But no phenomenon lies beyond history or exists in and of itself. Consequently, historical knowledge develops through comparison: the task involves specifying both the similarities and the differences that distinguish one historical period from another. As I’ve argued today, the periodization of the contemporary era needs to be taken seriously; but in the end, we do want to know how and why “now” – whenever that may be -- differs from “then”.

If the historical project is to progress, we can’t proceed by making ourselves prisoners of our age. One understands that self-congratulation is no more alien to social scientists than to the man or the woman in the street, which is why we continue to construct oppositions between a supposedly open present and closed past. But the reality is quite different. While long-distance, trans-state migration has been seen many times before, the efforts of nation-states to keep themselves apart from the world represents something relatively new. Therefore, our question is how the recurrent, state-spanning processes of migration collide with the reactive, often illiberal, often coercive, efforts to enclose nation-state societies and bound a national community. As I’ve tried to argue tonight, the advent of that collision is a historical event, entailing an ongoing process encompassing us all. While contemporary immigrants living “here” certainly act in ways that yield leverage “there,” they do so in ways that reflect the continuing presence of the past. It is possible that the foreign attachments of America’s immigrants will continue to experience the acceptance enjoyed in recent years. But the storm clouds stirred up since September 2001 should leave us all wondering whether the present may not also yield place to the past.