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Transnational Dimensions of Immigrants and their Homelands

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The activities linking immigrants to their countries of birth -- the sending of remittances; travel; communication; political activity; business investment -- are increasingly important and visible. They are also generating controversy and acclaim in both new and old homes, while eliciting interest among policy makers looking for a way to reap migration's harvest in ways that might help the stay-at-homes.

Although widely studied, the phenomenon remains misunderstood, both by scholars convinced that globalization is leading to a de-territorialized world of unbounded loyalties and flows, and by policy makers hoping to turn migration into an engine of development. These views, however, ignore the ways in which contemporary nation-states (especially the most powerful among them) circumscribe the immigrants' social connections while transforming their identities. Social scientists, convinced of the newness of the contemporary pattern and inattentive to the relevant historiography, have also reproduced the familiar, unfortunate duality between an "open" present and a "closed" past. The historians have responded to the challenge by demonstrating relevant precedents, a crucial contribution yet one which begs the questions of how, why, and to what extent immigrants' "here-there" connections have changed.

International migration inherently generates cross-border connections: remittances, letters, phone calls, visits, investments, all yielding feedbacks affecting the places and people left behind. These connections lead to greater connectedness, driving down the costs

of cross-border exchanges and spurring additional departures; migrants' movement to a rich society provides them with the resources needed to keep up cross-border ties; those resources combine with the new freedoms made possible by emigration to produce continuing engagement with homeland politics, often providing the migrants with greater levels of influence than previously experienced; seeking to access those resources while controlling migrant behavior, sending states develop policies aimed at engagement with their diasporas.

These cross-state ties are put in place by masses of individuals taking a common path in the pursuit of a better life, doing so in parallel, without direction or coordination, and *against* the preferences of home and receiving states. While the build-up of immigrant populations, networks, and communities generates an institutional infrastructure, encompassing organizations dedicated to maintaining homeland ties and engaging in homeland affairs, the rank and file, having voted with its feet, is mainly interested in its own, non-political agenda. Though not bereft of homeland patriotism, and ready to dig into their pockets when disaster strikes the people at home, most migrants are mainly concerned with the cross-state ties that connect them to immediate kin, showing much less interest in the local communities left behind, and still less, in neighboring communities where they never lived.

The result of uncoordinated, mass behavior, migrant cross-state social action is conditioned by the stateness of the *receiving* environment. Wealth remains contained within the boundaries of the destination states on which South to North migrants converge, making it a technique for taking advantage of the gap between rich and poorer places, either by sending home money or saving it to be used for investments upon return. While borders

have become ever more heavily guarded, once traversed they prove protective, insulating migrants from the pressures of the home state, and providing them with political freedoms previously unavailable. The material and the political combine: the receiving country's wealth generates resources used for leverage back home; further weight comes from the skills, allies, ideas, and experiences acquired in a new political system.

For all these reasons, cross-border involvement – whether of the routine or more concerted type – is a recurrent aspect of the immigrant phenomenon, characterizing the current as well as the prior era of mass migration. The anthropologists and sociologists who first draw attention to migrants' cross-border connections – which they labeled “transnational” -- emphasized the unique nature of contemporary migrations, and the home country connections they fostered; it was this supposed uniqueness that made the phenomenon deserving of attention. The historians quickly noted that not much was new under the sun: remittances, return migration, involvement in homeland politics were all features of the prior age of mass migration. However, the social scientists' preference for novelty proved hard to let go. Conceding that the phenomenon was not without precedent, they fell back on another argument: since transnationalism illuminated previously unnoticed parallels linking past and present, the concept yielded significant added value. However, the historical research now clearly points in a different direction: today's era is indeed unlike yesterday's but in ways that impede, not encourage, home country connections. In contrast to the contemporary world, the last era of global migration saw people, not just goods, move freely around the world, encouraging circular migration, deterring settlement, quite the opposite of the current pattern, where tight border controls discourage the lucky migrants who have landed in rich countries from returning to their poorer homes. Ironically, a

literature stimulated by long-standing patterns of circular migration between Mexican and the United States celebrated transnationalism just when that migration entered a new phase, characterized by higher levels of settlement in the United States, than even previously seen.

Resemblance between eras of migration past and present can be seen in the ways in which today's ongoing, large-scale migration has created an infrastructure supporting cross-border connections of all types, lowering the cost and increasing the convenience of maintaining home society ties. While the long-term tendency is to withdraw from active cross-border activities, complete disengagement is relatively uncommon, because so many immigrants remain in a protracted state of transition. Given the size and impact of the various cross-border flows, other actors move into the game, with home country officials and non-governmental agencies particularly interested in channeling and capturing the resources flowing from migrants of their own volition.

Growing cross-border flows hide another, perhaps more important development: once the locus of significant social relationships shifts to the receiving country, home country ties weaken and often wither. Although an elite group of "transnationals" can maintain regular, recurrent home country engagements of varying type, that option proves impractical for the great majority. Long-distance communication is easier and cheaper than ever, but travel remains costly, which is why it is occasional and of limited duration; furthermore, only some immigrants can move back and forth across the border at will. Consequently, the typical migrant is likely to maintain ties of some sort, but high intensity linkages are relatively uncommon. Over time, moreover, the immigrants get transformed into nationals, willy-nilly picking up the everyday habits and tools that make it easier to fit into the new environment and acquiring experiences that make them increasingly different

from the stay-behinds. Whereas some scholars insist that migrants can lead lives across borders, that contention is pat, ignoring the dialectic between immigration *and* emigration and the tensions it produces.

For a minority of immigrants, the experience in the receiving country paradoxically *facilitates* their continuing home country engagement. In general, social identities change more slowly than social connections: even if no longer sending remittances or making periodic trips home, many immigrants retain an emotional attachment to their country of origin. Consequently, symbolic, homeland-oriented ethnicity persists, providing a base for homeland activists to mobilize (or manipulate). Other factors encourage them to maintain the homeland engagement: living abroad migrant political activists enjoy protection from home state officials eager to tamp down dissent. Over time, most migrants, including the disadvantaged, get ahead: the economic resources leveraged as a result of migration gives them clout that homeland officials generally cannot afford to ignore.

For the most part, national pride and national identity do not translate into a politicized identity, in which migrants consciously identify with and mobilize to support a group or homeland abroad. Among a minority, however, they often do, which is why homeland engagement is a salient feature of the immigrant experience. Whether involving efforts to create new states, change existing regimes, alter nationality or voting laws in ways that would facilitate migrant participation in homeland politics, defend homelands beleaguered by enemies or disasters, or lobby hostlands on homelands' behalf, home country national loyalties consistently impel a minority into activism. Ironically, these efforts reflect the boundedness of the new environment, providing the migrants both with

the material resources needed to make a difference at home, as well as the political protection against home state interests that might seek to control them.

On some occasions, homeland activism resonates broadly; for the most part, however, it has little appeal. The challenges of life in a new land tend to re-orient concerns, diminishing interest in homeland matters, which also receive reduced attention in the new, foreign environment. The circumstances of settlement also lead to spiralling disengagement. Though geographic convergence is the modal pattern, areas of high ethnic density lack the ethnic institutional completeness needed to stimulate engagement with home country matters; political messages are even weaker in areas of lower ethnic density. While emigration states are eager to gain access to migrants' economic resources, show particular interest in making sure that remittances keep flowing, and are eager to convert emigrants into ethnic lobbyists, they hesitate to encourage more direct forms of homeland engagement, on the grounds that visible manifestations of emigrants' home country loyalties might impede their acceptance by the society where they live as *immigrants*.

Whether involving routine or concerted activity, immigrants' cross-border engagements make a difference in the places from which they come. However, clear-cut evidence of positive impacts is hard to find. Some scholars and many policymakers increasingly think that connections to the expatriates lost due to migration can be turned to sending countries' gain. Motivating this view is increased awareness of the size of remittance stream, seen as an effective means of reducing poverty *and* as a form of self-help. While remittances may cushion migrants' families against a variety of setbacks, their protective value depends on the nature of the shock; they certainly cannot trigger development, in the absence of deeper, structural changes. Remittances can also exacerbate

inequality, both within high-emigration regions and across regions that differ in emigration density; in agricultural areas, migrant property owners often take land out of production or enlarge holdings by buying out the stay-at-homes; either outcome tends to lower employment.

While policy-makers invest hope in grass-roots immigrant philanthropy, the immigrant “philanthropists” do not necessarily share the interests of the stay-behinds; rarely do they pursue the possibilities most likely to facilitate development; often, the development potential is inherently limited, thanks, in part, to high levels of emigration. At the macro political level, migrant influences are no more benign, with many emigration countries striving to find a way to accommodate the demand for non-resident voting, a matter of little interest to the vast majority of immigrants, but intensely important to the relatively few that have retained their home country connection.

As opposed to the globalists who see immigrants living in two worlds and nationalists insisting that these same home country connections be cut, the more realistic view shows that international migrants are instead in-between here and there, keeping touch with and trying to remain true to the people and places that they have left behind, while simultaneously shifting loyalties and allegiances to the place where they live. Further scholarly understanding requires attending to the collision between the processes that recurrently produce international migrations, extending social and political ties across states, and those that cut those linkages at the water’s edge, transforming immigrants into nationals and shifting their preoccupations and social connections from home to host states.

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