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## Transnationalism: Novel Perspective or Novel Phenomenon?

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In the age of globalization have borders faded to the extent that immigrants are able to straddle across them exerting influence in two or more countries at the same time? In the recently published, “Theoretical Convergencies and Empirical Evidence in the Study of Transnationalism” (*International Migration Review* Vol. 37, No. 3 (Fall 2003): pp. 874-892), Alejandro Portes presents five conclusions relevant to emerging theories on transnationalism. His findings – part of a growing consensus among immigration scholars – are supported by empirical data drawn from recently completed surveys in the Comparative Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project (CIEP):

### **1. *Transnationalism represents a novel perspective, not a novel phenomenon.***

Historically, transnational activities have always been part of the study of immigration. Nevertheless, advances in technology and transportation have greatly expanded the means at the disposal of today’s immigrants by contrast to those available to their predecessors. There are instances of transnational activity among Italian, Polish, and even Chinese immigrants in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. At present, however, the scale of across-border activity has burgeoned because immigrants can use the same routes opened by corporations to pursue their own interests. The same airlines ferrying American tourists to exotic Caribbean locations are used by shuttle traders to regularly purchase domestic wares or handbags in New York for sale in the Dominican Republic or Jamaica.

### **2. *Transnationalism is a grassroots phenomenon.***

Sharpening the focus of transnationalism requires a shift away from the study of governmental bureaucracies that were part of earlier investigations toward the activities of grassroots, private actors who are engaged in cross-border activities. Since their inception, nation states have pushed to maintain territorial sovereignty and monitor the capacity of firms, corporations, and citizens to interact with equivalent groups in other countries.



Mexican President, Vicente Fox, greeting the Director of the IME (translated as Institute for Mexicans Abroad). November 2003.

What is different today is the increased ability of individuals to ignore or circumvent established definitions in their economic, political, and even religious pursuits. A case in point is the growing number of unauthorized immigrants from Mexico and Central America who see the United States as a place of employment while their sense of identity remains anchored in home towns where they send much of what they earn in the form of remittances. Those monetary flows are often used to start small businesses or build homes to which immigrants hope to return after retiring.

### **3. *Not all immigrants are transnationals.***

Transnational activities have occurred throughout the history of immigration but the scale, regularity, and diversity of across-border activity is unprecedented. In that sense, transnationalism comprises and is defined by the **recurrent or habitual movement of individuals across international borders as part of their established income-generating, political, or cultural endeavors**. Transnationals thus constitute only a small subset of the immigrant population. Portes calculates that somewhere between 5 and 8 percent of immigrants are transnational in the sense defined above.

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#### **4. Immigrant transnationalism has macro-social consequences.**

Although transnational immigrants are not in the majority, their activities have broad repercussions – they are a key source of export for many sending countries and provide individuals with an opportunity to mobilize long-distance networks. Because they confront limited economic and political opportunities in their home countries, the capacity of individuals to elevate their social and economic status is significantly enhanced through their involvement in transnational activities. In that sense, transnationalism has geographical effects. Remittances, for example, have become a kind of grassroots foreign aid program enabling entire communities in countries of origin to rise above expected economic standards. The uneven character of transnational processes may also be accentuating inequalities – local communities not benefiting from external contributions illustrate that phenomenon.

#### **5. The extent and forms of transnational activism vary with contexts of exit and reception.**

Portes notes that immigrants fleeing violence and extreme oppression are less likely to engage in transnational activities and seek more rapid integration into the host society. By contrast, immigrants experiencing a hostile reception in the host country tend to settle in highly concentrated ethnic communities that protect them from external hostility and allow them to engage in transnational activities providing opportunities that would otherwise be denied.

### **Comparative Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project (CIEP)**

The Comparative Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project is the most ambitious attempt to document the transnational, economic, political and socio-cultural activities of immigrant groups. The survey consisted of two phases. Phase one involved interviews with key informants in six U.S. areas of immigrant concentration, and six foreign cities, including the capital of each sending country. Phase two involved surveys in the three targeted immigrant communities in the U.S. to: (a) identify individuals involved in entrepreneurial activities; (b) specify the character of those transnational activities; and (c) establish their

determinants. The three targeted populations were immigrants from Colombia, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic and were chosen based on their diversity and their size, which is currently estimated at over one million strong for each group. Jointly they represent nearly twenty percent of the Latino population in the United States.

Analysis of the CIEP data shows that transnationalism is not a dominant mode of adaptation for immigrant groups or a universal phenomenon. On the other hand, CIEP results demonstrate that transnational activities do indeed occur – there exists a core of committed entrepreneurs and activities within these immigrant populations, and, at least occasionally, a significant minority of immigrants is active transnationally.

Conventional assimilation theory would expect transnational activities to predominantly engage newer members off the immigrant community who are in a more difficult economic situation and whose memories of the home country are most recent. CIEP data suggest otherwise, supporting a positive correlation between educational level and levels of transnational participation. Similarly, length of time spent in the United States *increases* transnational political activities contrary to conventional expectations.

Transnational participation is consistently associated with higher social capital resources, in the form of stronger networks. Transnational political and cultural activists and entrepreneurs are overwhelmingly male and mostly married males with children. Finally, despite many cultural and linguistic similarities among the groups included in the CIEP, results indicate that significant differences exist in terms of the likelihood of members of each group to engage in transnational activities. Immigrants from the Dominican Republic and El Salvador have significantly greater propensities toward cross-border economic and political ventures than Colombians. Reasons for the difference center on the contexts of exit and reception of each group. Salvadorans, for example, come mostly from rural communities to which they remain fiercely loyal. Their distinct physical features lead to discrimination in the United States. That encourages them to remain close to their own ethnic group and engage in frequent communication and travel to their hometowns.





Colombians, on the other hand, are more educated and come from more urban backgrounds. They have no “hometowns” to be loyal to and their generally lighter physical features allow them to more easily mix with the mainstream white American population.

### Future Implications

- 1) *Traditional modes of assimilation do not fully account anymore for socioeconomic and political adaptation to the host society.*

Economic, political, and socio-cultural transnationalism may provide novel means of successful integration into the host society while supporting enduring ties with the countries of origin.

- 2) *Cross-border initiatives, even when occasionally enacted, can have important effects on the development of home nations and communities.*

Remittances and migrant investments have grown exponentially and have provided a significant resource in the development of sending countries.

- 3) *Further understanding of the ramifications of this phenomenon is necessary for a full grasp of the dynamics of contemporary immigration and immigrant adaptation.*

Identifying the range of transnational activities in other realms not discussed here – such as religion, science, the professions, and sports – is still needed to map the full extent of this phenomenon

The study of transnationalism requires further use of diverse research methodologies, ranging from strict quantitative analyses and longitudinal studies to detailed ethnographic probes to extend our state of knowledge in this field. Transnationalism is still a novel approach, played out in multiple forms across different immigrant groups. The findings summarized in this article indicate that it warrants inclusion in future theories of immigration and development and in the policy decisions of both sending and receiving nations.

### Workshop on the Role of Art in U.S. Immigrant Communities

In collaboration with the Princeton Center for Art and Cultural Policy Studies, the CMD held the first conference on migration and the arts on June 1-2, 2006. Paul DiMaggio, research director of the CACPS, Patricia Fernández-Kelly, and Nancy Doolan, assistant director of the CMD, were the organizers. The purpose of the event was to better understand how music, dance, drama, and painting facilitate immigrant adaptation and connect immigrant communities to the host society. Six papers focusing on the art of Cubans, Mexicans, Chinese, Arabs, Haitians, and Vietnamese formed the core for the lively discussion. As a complement to the workshop an art exhibit was installed in Aaron Burr Hall. The exhibition, entitled “Angels on the Border: Religious Paintings by Mexican Immigrants” featured sixty *retablos* from the extraordinary collection owned by Douglass Massey (Princeton University) and Jorge Durand (Universidad de Guadalajara).

### 2006 Fall Colloquium Series

– Mark your calendars--Professor Richard Alba (SUNY, Albany) a major figure in immigration studies will deliver a presentation on his recent work on Thursday, October 12th, at 4:30 pm, at 300 Wallace Hall. Alejandro Portes will serve as a discussant.

– This term, we are pleased to showcase the work of undergraduate and graduate students who have received support from the Center for Migration and Development. Prospective speakers include Filiz Garip and Margarita Mooney from the department of sociology, Adam Abelson '05 and Danilo Mandic '07.

– On December 7th, 2006, the 20th anniversary of its first release, the CMD will present the Emmy-Award winning documentary "The Global Assembly Line" co-produced by Patricia Fernandez-Kelly (Princeton Sociology Department) and filmmaker Lorraine Gray.

