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# The Transnational Society: A Social Theory of Cross Border Linkages

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# Introduction

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If there is one thing that the Brexit has revealed, it is the links between British society and Europe. Before the 2016 referendum, the number of British citizens applying for a foreign passport amounted to around 5,000 a year. In the first half of 2019, at a time when the prospect of an effective divorce was becoming clearer, there reached more than 30,000. What these figures show us is the underground relationship that the British maintain with their European neighbours. They tell us about these personal and family ties and the need to protect them at a time when borders are closing. For the people concerned, the challenge is to preserve the possibility of going to see their family, of visiting their second home, of doing business, of preserving the possibility of making a life elsewhere and passing on this opportunity to their children... There was no shortage of reasons. And conversely, the number of new Britons originating from the continent was exploding for the same motives. This euro-British web of relations is just one instance of the many cross border social fields cutting across the whole of the European continent. They are the product of the Schengen area, lower transportation costs and new information technologies; they are the product of the deterritorialisation of labour markets and training; and last but not least, they are the product of the ebb and flow of populations. And this phenomenon is far from being confined to European countries. It applies just as much to Africa and Latin America, linked to the States of the North by post-colonial ties, as it does to Asia, whose diasporic ramifications extend throughout the world.

But Europe is also Moria, the camp on the island of Lesbos, the Calais Jungle and hundreds of other camps, both temporary and informal, and official detention centres. What they have in common is confinement, overcrowding, insalubrity and police presence. In the camps, there is no way of life other than waiting for the next departure, whether this is feared or hoped for. Despite everything, in this impossibility of living, the writer rediscovers the possibility of humanity.

*Dans les camps, ils rencontrent les non-lieux. Ils s'allient à des présences surgies des basses-fosses du monde, et endurent l'expérience du fait relationnel. Ils découvrent alors l'autre fraternité : celle d'un devenir qui n'installe pas une nouvelle communauté, qui ne fait pas village, mais qui révèle des trésors de contacts qui leur permettent de venir là, d'aller plus loin encore, d'exister dans un sillage dont l'origine serait perdue et dont l'arrivée va rester improbable. Ils réalisent que les corsets nationaux, les frontières aiguës et hostiles, nous empêchent de vivre et de considérer : une seule et même planète qui n'assigne à rien d'autre qu'aux solidarités.*

*La voici, notre planète, remise à plat dans le brouillon des camps, comme une main de cartes qui seraient rebattues, une esquisse, rude, dense et illisible, qu'ils vivent de l'intérieur avec tant de souffrances, mais tant d'aisances nouvelles. D'adaptations inouïes. Ils respirent déjà le vent encore violent d'un devenir commun, l'absence vertigineuse d'ailleurs dans l'ici-là bienveillant et grandiose.*

Patrick Chamoiseau, *Frères migrants*, Paris, Seuil, p. 114-115

It's as if migration had contributed to the emergence of two planets so antinomic that it's hard to believe they can coexist on the same plane of reality. One is made up of the global expansion of human proximities, the other is made up of the confinement of foreign people. One makes the world a village of instantaneous interrelations, the other makes it a wake with no tomorrow. The camp and the global village are the two irreconcilable metonyms of contemporary migration.

The world is the teeming theatre of activity of a myriad of players, from the simple exchange of letters and emails between members of dispersed families, to the networks of traders who supply markets over the world, not to mention the cultural, religious or political groups working to propagate their respective dogmas. Since the 1980s, migration studies have focused on studying and understanding these cross-border overflows of societies. Migratory circulation, transnationalism, diaspora... New terms have emerged to capture these realities. Alongside work on the integration of immigrants in host countries, and analyses of the causes and effects of emigration in sending countries, a new field of research has taken shape, focusing on the links and practices maintained between countries. The exploration of these cross-border socialities aroused a certain exaltation among scientists. It held out the promise of a cosmopolitan utopia, a world without borders offering an escape from the constraints of national identities. But these hopes were soon tempered by the security shift that governments took on migration issues. A whole range of policies, institutions and partnerships have been put in place to control what we might call, following Raymond Aron, transnational societies. This is true for emigration states which, under the guise of wanting to link migration with their own development, are seeking to regain control of the human, political and financial flows generated by their diasporas... It is even truer for immigration states for whom the fight against illegal arrivals has become a veritable obsession... Mobility is no longer a source of liberation. It is an assignment and a power relation. Migratory flows now represent the new conveyor for deploying State authority.

Globalisation has pushed societies and states beyond their territorial boundaries. The state has transformed itself to adapt to the new transnational order. While spreading its own institutions within and beyond its borders, it has itself become "transnationalised". It is this complex relationship between migratory transnationalism and the transformation of the state that this book sets out to decode. Current research struggles to fully grasp this relationship precisely because transnationalism has been thought of as a phenomenon 'outside the State'. It is seen as an

autonomous social dynamic, sensitive to public policy, but certainly not the product of it. The original sin of transnational studies has been to think of migratory transnationalism without the state, as if the nation-state were already history, destined to disappear in the more or less short term in the flows of globalisation. Today, the violence with which migration policies are implemented seems to belie this foretold end. State violence is now attracting the scholarly attention of migration research. So much so that migration specialists are tending to relegate the ongoing (trans)formation of the transnational society to the background.

Critics highlight the difficulty transnational studies have in grasping the weight of the State in the formation of flows. Does this mean that we are witnessing the end of the transnationalist perspective in migration studies? Today's research seems to be moving in two divergent directions, one focusing on stabilised groups capable of developing complex transnational social fields while another strand of work focuses on migrants on the move in a precarious situation. The latter studies move away from the transnationalist focus and concentrate on a face-to-face confrontation between migrants and the State. Some look at the uncertain trajectories of its actors, whose socialities have been deconstructed by the migration policies of Northern states. Others look at more established migrations, embedded in long-lasting cross-border social structures, or even produced by the diasporic policies of the countries of departure. These two approaches offer two readings of contemporary phenomena that are so radically opposed that they seem irreconcilable. We might be tempted to distinguish between studies that deal with the 'losers' of migration, who are kept in a state of forced mobility, and those that deal only with the 'winners', for whom circulation is a resource from which they benefit.

The two approaches not only offer two different focuses on migratory phenomena, but also two critical readings of the contemporary world that seem difficult to reconcile. Transnationalist studies are based on the idea of the deterritorialisation of social relations brought about by the globalisation of economies and labour markets, and by the globalisation of the imaginary brought about by new means of communication. Migratory transnationalism prefigures a new state of society shaped by different technological and economic forces, in which migrants are seen to represent a new 'normality' of the human condition. In contrast, more recent work postulates an extension of the prerogatives of the state with the aim of closing off societies. Migrants would then be kept in a state of subalternity on the margins of society. New normality for some, new marginality for others. These two approaches present opposing analyses, but also have symmetrical limitations: the transnationalist focus runs the risk of obscuring the relationships of domination that unfold within transnational spaces, and conversely, the critical focus on policies tends to restrict the analysis to a particular form of North/South circulation and obscures the much broader and more complex

contemporary dynamics. It has the advantage of highlighting power relations, but the disadvantage of reducing the idea of migration to that of a struggle against subordination. It confines the idea of migration in the lexical field of illegalism, precariousness and encampment, making the migrant a marginal being, regardless of the wide diversity of profiles of situations.

The aim of this book is not to choose one approach over another, but to place migratory transnationalism in the context of the transformation of the state and its policies. The migratory world is made of its mobilities AND its camps, by the centrality of migration in our societies AND by the marginalisation of certain categories of migrants. Migratory transnationalism is both a liberation and a power struggle, an old phenomenon with a new face, the joint product of the closure and opening up of societies. Migratory transnationalism is a dialectical phenomenon, reflecting the contradictions that affect our societies in both North and South. It is the expression of the liberal paradox (J. Hollifield 2004), the tension between the economic imperatives of opening up societies and the conservative forces of political and cultural closure. Migration is the site of a tension between the state and the market, or more precisely between a Westphalian and a neo-liberal conception of the state. Migration is therefore an observation point for the adjustment underway.

The aim of this book in two parts is to shed light on the relationship between the state and contemporary transnational dynamics. Migratory transnationalism is not simply the product of state action; it retains a structural autonomy in relation to the state. But state action urge migrants to adapt to the new conditions of their migration, to which the public authorities respond according to their agenda. Migration transnationalism is understood as the product of a relationship between the transnational state (i.e. the set of state policies and administration designed to regulate transnational flows) and transnational society (i.e. the web of social institutions that enable links, practices and relationships to be maintained across borders). The intention here is to understand how the state connects to transnational flows in order to stop, encourage or direct them. To do this, we need to unravel the workings of transnational fields, uncovering the pieces that make up their dynamics. To control it, the State must adopt the forms of transnational society, adopt its codes and spatial configurations: I therefore put forward the hypothesis of an isomorphism of the transnational state and society.

This book is the first part of this work. It focuses on the mechanics of the transnational society, its functioning and dynamics. It unravels its different building blocks: plural humans, migrant social institutions, cross-border moral territorialities, ecotones... We shall see in the second volumes how these building blocks serve as connectors, as points of support that enable the public authorities to

influence transnational behaviours, with a single aim: to filter these flows, to guard against influences that are detrimental to its objectives and, on the contrary, to encourage those that suit it.

This analysis is based on two decades of personal research into migratory transnationalism, particularly North African, but also Polish and Indian. It revisits various works published over the years on the transnationalism of migrants from rural areas, its effects on the development of the areas of departure, and the relationship between integration and transnational practices. It also draws on ongoing research into the role of cities in the governance of migration. From a methodological point of view, this work combines various field studies carried out in the areas of departure in Morocco and Punjab and in the cities of settlement in France, Great Britain, but also in Belgium and the Netherlands. In addition to observations, the case studies are based on interviews with migrants, members of their families and local and national authorities. In order to provide a narrative thread, this book is based primarily on interviews with Algerian Kabyles migrants in France. But it also draws on many other examples from our own research and from other studies carried out between North and South America, between West Africa and Europe, and even, more occasionally, in other regions of the world. It also draws on quantitative analyses based on the 'Trajectoires et Origines' database compiled by the Institut National des Études Démographiques (INED) (Cris Beauchemin, Hamel, and Simon 2016), and on personal databases, one on migrant organisations in Europe, carried out as part of the TRAMO (Transnational Migrant Organisations) programme (Pries and Sezgin 2012), the other on cities involved in the reception and integration of migrants, carried out as part of the PACE<sup>1</sup> (The Politics of Migration and Asylum Crisis in Europe) and Localacc<sup>2</sup> (L'accueil en question : les localités face aux migrations). Finally, it should be noted that the reflections on the notion of ecotones are drawn from a series of seven colloquia of the same name, held between 2015 and 2020<sup>3</sup>. This cycle is the product of a collaboration between Judith Misrahi Barak (Université de Montpellier Paul Valéry, EMMA) and Maggi Morehouse (Coastal University of Northern Carolina), and its aim was to establish a dialogue between researchers in the social sciences, literary studies and the arts, as well as architects, biologists and artists, around the notion of ecotone.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://anr.fr/Project-ANR-18-CE41-0013> consulted the 02/06/2023

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.icmigrations.cnrs.fr/recherche/les-projets/localacc/> consulted the 02/06/2023

<sup>3</sup> <https://emma.www.univ-montp3.fr/fr/valorisation-partenariats/programmes-europeens-et-internationaux/ecotones> consulted the 02/06/2023

Admittedly, to describe migratory transnationalism as a “transnational society” may be perceived as a provocation. The term was initially coined by Raymond Aron to name the “commercial exchange, migration of persons, common beliefs, organizations that cross frontiers and, lastly, ceremonies or competitions open to the members of all these units (i.e., states)” (Aron 1966, 105). The concept was further elaborated by Karl Kaiser (Kaiser 1969) and critics of the realist paradigm to steer attention to the role of non-state actors in International Relations. However, the notion did not diffuse beyond the scholarly circles of IR studies. Because the notion of society is closely associated with the notion of state, its territoriality, its boundaries, its history and its stability, researchers have discarded the term to account for migrant transnationalism, which, precisely break free from the boundaries of public authority. Geographers prefer to it the notion of ‘field’: they first endeavoured to identify the physical boundaries produced by the migrants’ mobility, the routes they took, the infrastructures they created to sustain these movements, the multiple points of residency it brought about and the flow of goods or money that these migratory connections entailed. This is how the concept of *migration field* **Erreur ! Signet non défini** came about: it refers to the space created by repeated contacts and the movement between a region of departure and (a) destination(s). It represents the distance that the migrants travel as a whole, and the space occupied by them (Simon 1981). Sociologists, for their part, offered a response at once close and complementary to this definition as they concerned themselves with the spatial forms that the different types of transnational social relations took up. Thomas Faist, for instance, has identified three forms of transnational social spaces based on the social institutions that underpin them: *transnational kinship groups*, formed by a network of cross-border family ties; *transnational circuits*, made up by an entrepreneurial system; *transnational communities* formed by diasporas and held together by a web of community organisations (Faist 2000, 202 and ff.). Ludger Pries understands social spaces as the super-imposition of a material space and transnational social relations. He defines them in the following terms: ‘(...) dense, stable, pluri-local and institutionalized frameworks composed of material artifacts, the social practices of everyday life, as well as systems of symbolic representation that are structured by and structure human life’ (Pries 2001, 8). This definition adds to the geographical approach a sociological dimension that is both material (i.e. concerning institutions and practices) and symbolical (i.e. concerning a system of representations). Lastly, with its notion of *territory of circulation*, mobility anthropology offers a reading of this transnational spatiality that is at the cross-roads of geographical and sociological approaches as it takes into account both the migrants’ local and long-distance ties as well as the material imprint they left in space (Tarrus 1996). Using his research on migrant entrepreneurship, Alain Tarrus shows how cross border territories of circulation emerge: they are the result of movements between countries as well as the ways in

which migrants transform some of the city neighbourhoods by their ways of living, the shops they open, the associations they set up... Migrants transform cities so as to facilitate their movements. Besides these material imprints, there are also the local modes of socialising as well as the construction of a collective migrant memory which is passed on from one generation to the next but also from one migrant group to another.<sup>4</sup> This collective memory of the practices linked to the migrants' movement and their commerce gives temporal depth to those territories of circulation. The concepts of migration fields, transnational social spaces and territories of circulation offer three different readings of transnationalism that are at once distinct yet complementary. As we summarise these different approaches, four constitutive elements of what I call a transnational society emerge: the flow of relations and movements; the institutionalising of practices; their imprint in space (in particular urban space, but not exclusively); the system of representations that underpin it. Each chapter of this section examines one of those elements. The first chapter presents the dynamics of transnationalism through its flow, its relations and their evolution in time. The second chapter defines the acting subject of transnationalism and then goes on to examine how three key migratory social institutions – the family, business and the associations – contribute to the emergence of transnational practices. The third chapter accounts for the spatial imprint left by transnationalism by harnessing the concept of ecotone. Finally, the symbolical dimension, both moral and temporal, of such spaces will be broached in the last chapter of this section.

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<sup>4</sup> Alain Tarrus explores the example of Marseille, a city that has known many waves of immigration throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Italians and Algerians at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Armenians after the first world war, Jews during the interwar period, then North Africans and more recently migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. Each successive wave opened up a moment of interaction between and substitutions of trading populations.