

THEORIZING GLOBAL MIGRATION:
HOW DOES TRANSNATIONALISM MATTER?¹

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Migration experts from a variety of social science disciplines recently met for a workshop I organized at the Wissenschaftskolleg. The workshop provided a focused, high-level discussion on new trends, patterns and theories surrounding global migration. Specifically, the focus was on a recently developed approach to migration, namely transnationalism. This approach has been developed within migration studies over the past ten years.

While conventional treatments of migration issues tend to examine how migrants move to and settle or integrate into a new national context, the transnational approach is concerned with the ways migrants maintain strong emotional bonds, economic links and political loyalties with their places of origin. Today's migrants use numerous resources to maintain such connections with their homelands, including: advanced telecommunications (cheap telephone calls and faxes, satellite television, e-mail and the Internet), enhanced financial transfer services (to send remittances quickly and cheaply), along with fast, regular and relatively inexpensive air transportation.

I have been commissioned by the American Social Science Research Council (SSRC) to write a state-of-the-art piece on transnationalism, including an account of emergent transnational practices among migrants and an assessment of burgeoning methodologies for researching and theorizing transnationalism. The paper was presented at a special conference at Princeton University (May 23–25, 2003) entitled “Conceptual and Methodological Developments in the Study of International Migration” and published in the *International Migration Review*.

This paper provided the impetus for the workshop. The paper itself, entitled “Migrant Transnationalism and Modes of Transformation”, discusses the rise of the transnational

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approach in migration studies, and the criticisms levelled at it. The main body of the paper examines areas of fundamental change brought about by contemporary practices of migrant transnationalism. In the socio-cultural domain, transnationalism involves new patterns of long-distance communication and social organization (especially family structure) among migrants; in the political domain this concerns various challenges to nation-states, namely through increasing levels of dual citizenship and a range of homeland political activities among migrants; and in the economic sphere this mainly entails the massive scale of global remittances (officially over \$105 billion annually) and their impact on developing countries and local communities.

The experts gathered for the workshop at the Wissenschaftskolleg represented a range of disciplines, including two geographers, two political scientists, two sociologists and three anthropologists. Workshop participants presented and discussed their own approaches to, and critiques of, the transnational approach to global migration before focussing on the above mentioned paper. They provided critical feedback to sharpen the concepts, arguments and examples in the paper.

Participants

Ayşe Çağlar, Freie Universität Berlin

Felicitas Hillman, Freie Universität Berlin

Ruud Koopmans, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung

Khalid Koser, University College London

Ninna Nyberg Sørensen, Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen

Eva Østergaard-Nielsen, Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona

Ludger Pries, Universität Bochum

Werner Schiffauer, Europa-Universität Viadrina Frankfurt/Oder

Steven Vertovec, Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin and University of Oxford