

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

Prof. Sarbani Banerjee

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, English

Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee

Lecture 27


Lecture 27 : Transnational Lives and Identities


Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. So, today we are going to discuss transnational lives and identities. So, talking about transnationalism, transnationalism emerged as a significant concept in social sciences during the 1990s, highlighting social relations that transcend national borders. It explores how power dynamics and social inequalities manifest in contexts that go beyond single nation-states.

The term transnationalism first appeared in an essay written by Randolph Bourne in the year 1916, where he advocated for a US identity rooted in international cosmopolitanism, rather than strict assimilation of migrants into white American culture. However, this work did not gain widespread recognition until some time later. In the subsequent decades, political scientists, specifically Joseph S. Nye and Robert O. Keohane, promoted the concept of transnationalism in 1971 to shift focus from nation-state-centric research

Transnationalism : An Introduction

- Transnationalism emerged as a significant concept in social sciences during the 1990s, highlighting social relations that transcend national borders. It explores how power dynamics and social inequalities manifest in contexts that go beyond single nation-states.
- The term first appeared in an essay by Randolph Bourne in 1916, where he advocated for a U.S. identity rooted in international cosmopolitanism rather than strict assimilation. However, it did not gain widespread recognition at that time.
- In subsequent decades, political scientists, notably Joseph S. Nye and Robert O. Keohane (1971), promoted the concept to shift focus from nation-state-centric research to a broader analysis of capital and transnational organizations in international relations.
- This shift aimed to better understand global dynamics beyond traditional state boundaries.



2

toward a broader analysis of capital and transnational organizations within the larger scheme of international relations. This shift aimed at a better understanding of global dynamics beyond traditional state boundaries. Economists have also employed the term

transnationalism since the 1970s, using it to describe corporations that operate across multiple countries while maintaining a primary base in one nation. This multidisciplinary engagement has enriched the understanding of transnationalism, highlighting its relevance in various contexts, from migration and social relations to global economics and political frameworks.

So, all we are trying to say, put simply, is that transnationalism as a phenomenon can be approached through different disciplinary lenses, including literature, literary studies of aesthetics, through the lens of economics, through the lens of political science and international relations, and also an emergent field called migration studies. So, transnationality refers to the characteristics of social phenomena such as families, organizations, and economic flows that exist across borders. Conversely, transnationalization emphasizes the processes that create and sustain these cross-border social connections. The narrower definition of transnationalization focuses on the expansion as well as the deepening of social relations and entities that exist across multiple nation-states without any centralized headquarters, right?

So, when we are talking about one referent home, that becomes part of diaspora studies, whereas when we are talking about transnationalization, it involves multiple nation-states without any central headquarters as such. So, it includes transnational families, organizations, as well as social institutions that represent enduring social networks rather than fleeting interactions. These units, be it a family or an organization, can be analyzed at various levels—micro, macro, as well as meso—and they reflect complex and lasting social entanglements.

So, in this specific context, we have to understand that transnationalization is distinct from other allied and overlapping concepts, somewhat overlapping concepts including globalization, cosmopolitanism, as well as diasporization, because it emphasizes the importance of national contexts as references for understanding transnational phenomena. So, the term transnationalism is grounded in the existence of nation-states. It cannot really overlook the entity of the nation. So, transnational relations only make sense against the backdrop of national boundaries.

Transnationalization is often contrasted with the top-down approach of corporate and state-driven globalization from above, as noted by critics Luis Eduardo Guarnizo and Michael Peter Smith. Note that transnationalism is a bottom-up process, right? It is not a top-down approach of corporate and state-driven phenomena such as globalization. While

globalization from above emphasizes the influence of powerful entities such as multinational corporations as well as governments, transnationalization highlights grassroots social realities and movements. It is more localized, more specific, and pertains to people on the fringes of social and economic practices and resources.


So, this transnational perspective focuses on how everyday individuals and communities navigate, adapt to, and shape transnational connections, thereby fostering social ties and relationships that often emerge from local experiences and identities. So, by examining transnationalization, researchers can gain insights into how these bottom-up processes work. Transnationalization, being a bottom-up process, interacts with larger global forces, revealing a more nuanced understanding of social dynamics in a globalized world. So, transnationalization is pitted against larger schemes of globalization. That actually reveals an understanding of society and social dynamics in a more well-rounded manner.

Further, transnationalization challenges ideas of deterritorialization. Or the diminishing importance of geographical boundaries, thereby asserting that national contexts remain crucial for analysis. So, the nation as a category cannot be overlooked, but Yet it can be transcended to understand human relationships and the dynamics of a given society in its localized context. We both need the category of nation as well as an understanding that mainland culture does not solely define people, especially those living in borderland areas.

They have more transnational identifications, transactions, habits, and cultures, as well as transnational linguistic proficiencies. So, they become something more than only what is offered within the boundaries of a nation. So, transnationalization serves as a counter to methodological nationalism, which posits that national societies should be the primary units of social science research. So, transnationalization actually emphasizes borderland communities and their layered, complex nature of living that sometimes defies or becomes something more than the mainland culture, right? Something more complex, more layered than the mainland culture.

Challenges and Critiques

- Further, transnationalisation challenges ideas of de-territorialisation or the diminishing importance of geographical boundaries, asserting that national contexts remain crucial for analysis.
- It also serves as a counter to “methodological nationalism,” which posits that national societies should be the primary units of social science research (Andreas Wimmer & Nina Glick Schiller, 2002).
- By highlighting transnational dynamics, researchers can develop a richer understanding of social interactions that transcend borders while acknowledging the enduring significance of nation-states.
- Transnational migrants, or transmigrants, often blur the lines between their regions of origin and arrival, creating a complex hybrid identity that encompasses elements from both places.



6

So, the borderland culture cannot be adequately understood through the prism of an approach such as methodological nationalism, right? By highlighting transnational dynamics, researchers can develop a richer understanding of social interactions that transcend borders while acknowledging the enduring significance of nation-states. Like I said, transnationalization and transnationalism as phenomena do not reject, defy, or overlook borders. Nation as an entity—it says that nation as a point of reference is very important only in order to realize how certain practices actually transcend this category or this entity. So, transnational migrants or transmigrants often blur the lines between their regions of origin and arrival, thereby creating a complex hybrid identity that encompasses elements from both places.




Importantly, the focus on transnational concepts does not diminish the relevance of nation-states. This is what I have been trying to explain several times in this lecture. Rather, transnationalism acknowledges that while nation-states continue to shape social lives, they are no longer the only frameworks within which social interactions can occur. So, transnationalism illustrates a more complex social reality where multiple layers of identity

and community coexist across different geographical contexts. In this regard, we note Nina Glick-Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton as

The three critics, Schiller, Basch and Szanton, state that, I quote, contemporary immigrants, unlike earlier ones, forge and sustain simultaneous and multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement, to the extent that their daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders, unquote. So transnational migrants, you know, maintain connections to their countries of origin while also forging new experiences and social ties in their new environments. This sort of duality allows migrants, the transnational migrant populace to navigate their lives across different contexts, drawing on diverse resources, cultural practices and networks.

Challenges and Critiques

- They maintain connections to their countries of origin while also forging new experiences and social ties in their new environments.
- This duality allows them to navigate their lives across different contexts, drawing on diverse resources, cultural practices, and networks.
- While direct political control over migration is limited, acknowledging transnational social relations can explore new opportunities for crafting effective policies that respect migrants' multifaceted identities and experiences.
- By addressing these realities, policymakers can create more inclusive and adaptive strategies that support both migrants and host communities.



The slide is titled 'Challenges and Critiques' and contains four bullet points. The first three points discuss the dual nature of transnational migration, the challenges it poses for policy-making, and the potential for more inclusive policies. The fourth point suggests that addressing these realities can lead to better strategies. A small image of a woman is positioned to the right of the text.

While a nation's direct political control over migration is generally limited, it is an imperative to acknowledge transnational social relations and explore new opportunities for crafting effective policies, you know, effective national policies pertaining to the migrants, which respect the migrants' multifaceted identities and experiences. So that kind of policymaking on the part of the different nations is very important where, you know, even the migrants feel, you know, represented and included as well as their culture, their habits are respected and they are not simply marginalized and invisibilized. So by addressing the realities, the baggages, the cultural baggages that the migrants travel with, that the migrants bring to the host society, the policymakers can create more inclusive and adaptive as well as flexible strategies which support both the migrants and the host communities. Such policies can enhance and facilitate communication,

a better lifestyle, a better experience of living for both the migrants as well as the host population. So theorists like Arjun Appadurai, Nina Glick-Schiller, Rainer Baubock, Alejandro Portes, Devin I.G. Khagram, Peggy Levitt as well as Saskia Sassen, identify

both new phenomena and historical trends which actually shape this framework and show how transnationalism captures the complexities of contemporary social, economic as well as cultural interactions in a globalized world. So, some of the salient features or characteristics

associated with transnationalism include a increased flow of goods and labor, so the growing movement of products, commodities and workers across borders. Next, global migration, so the rise in people relocating internationally which impacts the cultural and social dynamics. Next, we have evolving identity formation, so once transnational population moves to a new land, to a host country, they often experience complex shifts in their sense of identity in their sense of belonging and even their notions of home. All these concepts are kind of complicated, revisited and problematized.

Next, we have the changing role of the nation state. The nation state's influence may be diminishing progressively as we see in the last several decades. And in certain contexts, we see that it tends to reshape governance and social relations. Another factor associated with transnationalism include global flow structures and institutions. So, various frameworks and organizations facilitate as well as hinder international exchanges.

Next, transnationalism is associated with enhanced communication. So, advances in digital media have accelerated the process of sharing of ideas as well as connections across borders, right? And allied with this factor, we have technological advancements, you know, with communication, faster communication, faster commuting, transportations becoming more sophisticated and enabling more frequent and easier cross-border travel. We see that the world has become a smaller place. The globe has become a smaller place, right?

The next factor associated with transnationalism is economic shifts, right? So, changes in late capitalism and neoliberal policies have transformed economic relationships and actors on a global scale. The terms 'transnational' and 'transnationalism' have garnered both support as well as criticism from different scholars. For instance, Michael Smith emphasizes transnational lives over the broader expression 'transnationalism.' Smith prefers to use the expression 'transnational lives' rather than 'transnationalism,' arguing that the latter lacks sufficient explanatory power regarding the diverse influences on individuals' experiences.


So when we add 'lives,' you know, we are adding plurality to this entire phenomenon. So it's not a homogeneous phenomenon. Of course, it, you know, it is different with respect to different people coming from different backgrounds. So when we talk of transnational

lives, we are taking into consideration this heterogeneity, these dissimilar experiences, right? Smith critiques

transnationalism as a buzzword. So, the expression 'transnationalism,' according to Smith, is a buzzword that does not fully capture the complexities of people's lives across borders. Further, Victor Zuniga and Edmund T. Hamann suggest the term 'sojourners.' So they are not even talking about transnationalism, not even transnational lives. They would suggest the term 'sojourners' as a more nuanced descriptor or marker for those who are engaged in transnational activities, practices.

Transnational lives and Identities

- The terms "transnational," "transnationals," and "transnationalism" have garnered both support and critique from scholars.
- For instance, Michael Smith (2006) emphasizes "transnational lives" over the broader "transnationalism," arguing that the latter lacks sufficient explanatory power regarding the diverse influences on individuals' experiences.
- He critiques it as a buzzword that doesn't fully capture the complexities of people's lives across borders.
- Victor Zúñiga and Edmund T Hamann suggest the term "sojourners" as a more nuanced descriptor for those engaged in transnational practices, indicating a need for terms that better reflect the lived experiences and processes involved.




11

indicating thereby a need for terms that better reflect the lived and living experiences and processes involved in activities across the border. Next, we see that Guarnizo and Smith highlight how the concept of transnationalism has diversified in its application, leading to increased ambiguity. They note that while transnationalism has gained prominence, its shifting meanings can complicate empirical research and theoretical frameworks. Despite all these criticisms, many researchers continue to find value in using transnationalism as an analytical lens. It serves as an important framework for understanding the intricate social, economic, and cultural ties that individuals maintain across national borders, thereby acknowledging the realities of migration, identity, and belonging in a globalized world.

Transnational lives and Identities

- Guarnizo and Smith (1998) highlight how the concept of transnationalism has diversified in its application, leading to increased ambiguity. They note that while transnationalism has gained prominence, its shifting meanings can complicate empirical research and theoretical frameworks.
- Despite these critiques, many researchers continue to find value in using transnationalism as an analytical lens.
- It serves as a framework for understanding the intricate social, economic, and cultural ties that individuals maintain across national borders, acknowledging the realities of migration, identity, and belonging in a globalized world.
- Lynn Stephen (2007) introduces the concept of “transborder lives,” exploring similar themes found in transnational studies, such as migration patterns, the diminishing role of the state, and the impacts of capitalism.



12

Critic Lynn Stephen introduced the concept of trans-border lives in the year 2007, exploring similar themes found in transnational studies, including migration patterns, the diminishing role of the state, as well as the impacts of capitalism on individuals and groups that are moving their bases from one country to another. Stephen focuses on indigenous individuals from two small towns in Oaxaca, Mexico, examining their experiences in California and Oregon. She highlights historical patterns of movement between Mexico and the United States, as well as more recent trends of back-and-forth migration, where the definition of home is almost nonexistent because the movement or the trajectory is not once and for all. The movement is not with any sort of finality.

There is also this concept of destination migration being problematized; just as the home blurs, in the same spirit, the concept of destination is also blurring, almost disappearing, right? So, rather than reaching a final destination or having any kind of telos, a teleological movement, it is a back-and-forth migration. Stephen's research emphasizes the complexities of a participant's indigeneity, revealing how indigenous Mexicans often face misunderstandings and are perceived as inferior in both countries, both in Mexico and in the United States.

It's a situation that is rooted in colonial legacies. Additionally, some of her participants engage in political and economic organizing across borders, thereby advocating for improved agricultural working conditions in the U.S. While also supporting community festivals in Mexico. So there are both these phenomena. On the one hand, a people that are marginalized, that are kind of rendered an inferior status in both the home and the host land.




On the other hand, we have participants who are contributing to both the home and the host society. They are supporting festivals back home, in the homeland as well as supporting agro-based activities in the host land, right. So, there can be all these nuances taken into consideration when talking about transnational lives and identities. Transnational studies are evolving within the increasingly globalized and neoliberal context of the world.

Scholars argue for the need to refine and specify appropriate categories of analysis in order to better understand transnational phenomena, particularly in relation to social inequalities, power dynamics, as well as collective actors. Future developments in transnational studies would aim for more nuanced perspectives on individuals, communities, as well as multinational interactions in both empirical research and theoretical frameworks. By integrating insights from diaspora studies, transnationalism can benefit from critical historical analysis as well as use diasporic communities as their foundation for understanding transnational processes. What is more, incorporating research from subaltern perspectives and voices can highly enhance the richness of transnational analysis, which would be similar to the approaches observable in diaspora studies. So, cross-border activism illustrates the resilience and interconnectedness of subaltern identities and communities, contributing to a richer, more well-rounded understanding of trans-border experiences.

Transnational lives and Identities

- This cross-border activism illustrates the resilience and interconnectedness of the subaltern identities and communities, contributing to a richer understanding of transborder experiences.
- Peggy Levitt, in her book *The Transnational Villagers* (2001), focusing on Miraflores, the Dominican Republic, and New York City, highlights the collective nature of transnational practices and their deep ties to community life.
- Levitt examines how transmigration impacts the sending community of Miraflores (people sending remittances), noting that it often leads to disruptions and new pressures, such as the desire for more material possessions in newly constructed homes.
- Social remittance – ideas, behaviors, identities and social capital flowing from receiving-to-sending-country communities.
- Her analysis reveals that transnational political organizations in Miraflores frequently align with the interests of wealthier groups in New York, often prioritizing projects like improved school facilities without necessarily enhancing educational quality.



15

Peggy Levitt, in her book, *The Transnational Villagers*, which came out in 2001, focuses on Miraflores, the Dominican Republic, as well as New York City, and highlights the collective nature of transnational practices and their deep ties to community life. So, Levitt examines how transmigration impacts the sending community of Miraflores. By 'sending community,' we are referring to the section of the population sending remittances back to their homeland. The work notes that it often leads to disruptions and new pressures, such as the desire for more material possessions in newly constructed homes.

So, when we talk about social remittances being sent back to the homeland, to begin with, we are referring to money. But we are also referring to ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving to sending country communities. Right. So, Levitt's analysis reveals that transnational political organizations in Miraflores frequently align with the interests of wealthier groups in New York, often prioritizing projects such as improved school facilities without necessarily enhancing educational quality.

So, talking about the impact of remittances back in a home country, especially if the home country is less developed, which is often the case. When there is a capital flow—economic capital, social capital, cultural capital— from the host land, which is a more developed society, to the homeland, there could be more pressure and disruption rather than benefit as a result of this kind of flow, this kind of exchange. Because, as we can understand from the last example I gave, some of the ideas that flow from the transnational population—a more sophisticated and affluent population—their ideations may sometimes be impractical, not feasible. They can leave a very superficial influence back in the home society.

So, the facilities that come through remittances from developed countries are may not, you know, actually end up benefiting the home society. It may lead to new disruptions and new forms of pressure because they do not solve the problems of the home country itself in a

more thorough fashion, in a more comprehensive way as they should. Just, you know, bringing some ideas in a superfluous manner or money superficially cannot truly enhance the quality of life back in the home country, in the home society.



So with this, we come to the end of our lecture today, and let's meet for another round of discussions on a new topic in our next lecture. Thank you.