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## Transnationalism. Old Issues in New Clothes?

In recent years among researchers concerned with migration, dispersed ethnic groups and multiculturalism high popularity has gained the concept of 'transnationalism'. A new analytical research approach assumes that as a result of increasing migration flows and differentiation of ethnic populations there have developed new forms of socio-cultural, economic and political activities of migrating individuals that cross countries' borders. As noted by Alejandro Portes, one of theoreticians of the new concept, transnational activities can be defined "as those that take place on a recurrent basis across national borders and that require a regular and significant commitment of time by participants" [1999, p. 464].

In this context, the objective of the article is thus to demonstrate what new arrangements the increasingly popular transnational perspective introduces to studies of migration, ethnicity and multiculturalism. It will be also important to stipulate the usefulness of transnationalism in studying of individuals' life strategies while staying abroad. Furthermore, as the new concept raises many controversies, it will be necessary to present critical approach towards transnationalism.

### 1. Intensification of migrations

Migration, both within and between countries, is obviously not a new phenomenon. For centuries movement of people across borders was a manifestation of existing socio-economic disparities and individuals' seeking better living conditions and security. In the post-Cold War period, however, migration adopted a new character resulting from advancing processes of globalization. Nicholas Van Hear has distinguished four novel phenomena that gave migrations a new dimension and contributed to their intensification, and consequently – an increase of interest among researchers [1998, p. 2]. The first

factor has been the technological revolution in the area of communication and transport, as a consequence of which information about new (real or imagined) opportunities in other countries has become more accessible and cheaper to large parts of the world's population. The emergence of technological innovations have contributed notably to the increasing migratory flows from countries of the "South" (the developing countries) to the "North" (the developed countries). Another feature in raising the importance of global migration movement has made the political constraints of mobility loosened after the collapse of the communist bloc, marking out new areas of migration on an East-West direction. Liberalization of political regimes in Asian countries (particularly in China) may further intensify movement of migrants. Third factor has been the rebirth of nationalist, ethnic and religious aspirations and tensions, resulting in destabilization of nation-states and further forced migrations. The fourth and final factor has been the "rights revolution", i.e. the diffusion of individual rights and entitlements (such as polyethnic rights and anti-discrimination policies), but also the growing importance of ethnic, migrant and refugee lobby groups (especially in host countries) that often facilitate migration. It also results in growing migrants' capacity for political organisation in both sending and receiving countries [Van Hear 1998, p. 3; see also Faist 2006, pp.3-4; Vertovec 2001, p. 573].

Following the processes described above, increasing numbers of people move to countries of settlement (and back to their countries of origin) with unprecedented ease. Furthermore, new communication technologies allow migrants to maintain free contacts with family or friends in their homeland. However, freedom of crossing the nation-states' borders does not only apply to people, but also to goods, financial capital, technology, ideas and cultural patterns [Trąbka 2009, p. 74]. On the other hand there are also new factors that inhibit migration. Part of receiving countries that have accommodated migrants in the past are now proving unable or unwilling to accept successive waves of newcomers, pointing to the limited absorption of labour by local economies. Growing negative perception of migrants in political, social and security terms, as well as a general failure of foreigners' integration in the developed countries further constrain free movement of people. As a result, paradoxically there are more and more migrants but at the same time a shrinking number of places where they could settle down [Van Hear 1998, p. 3].

## **2. Transnational approach**

One of the consequences of intensification of global migrations in recent decades is a creation of new forms of mobility across national borders – transnational migration. This new approach to migrants' activities is associated with the change of understanding the concept of migration itself. Since the beginning of the XX century scholars' interests were mainly focused upon migrants' assimilation

processes in their places of settlement. However, in early 1990s. researchers on migration noticed importance of migrants' stable attachments to families, communities, traditions and cultures outside the countries to which they have moved [Vertovec 2001, p. 574]. At the same time scholars started to note that both differentiation between migrants and people staying in sending countries as well as assimilation concept that predominated in studies of migration, ethnicity and multiculturalism are theoretically and ideologically inadequate [Kołbon 2006, pp. 203–204].

The first researchers to conceptualize a new phenomenon of transnationalism in beginning of 1990s. were Americans, anthropologist Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, who conducted research on migrants from Latin America and Asia living in the United States [Trąbka 2009, p. 74]. Other notable scholars who have later contributed to the development of the transnational perspective were Alejandro Portes, Peter Kivisto, Thomas Faist and Steven Vertovec. From the very beginning the new approach has been raised many controversies. For many scholars it has appeared as a methodological revelation giving a fresh overview of today's migration processes and therefore it has gained many supporters in academic circles in the USA, Great Britain or Germany (interestingly, the transnational perspective is still nearly absent in the Polish scientific discourse). At the same time for some it has just become a trend gaining more and more popularity with limited explanatory capabilities. The dispute over the transnationalism's adequacy has determined its development. Therefore we can observe two general phases – the first one relating to excessive interest in transnationalism arising from opposition towards dominant assimilation concept, and the second being focused on the process of proving and strengthening its theoretical significance [Kołbon 2006, p. 203–204]. It is also worth noticing, that the term 'transnationalism' may refer to two separate phenomena. The first one (*transnationalism from above*) relates to activities conducted by representatives of governmental structures, groups of countries or multinational corporations. It is thus close to initial understanding of the term "transnational" that refers to specific character of companies operating in many markets simultaneously. However, what will be the main focus of attention is so called *transnationalism from below* which pertain only to cross-border activities initiated by single individuals or groups of migrants [Kindler 2008, p. 51].

Clear overview of the presented problem was given by L. Basch, N. Glick Schiller and C. Blanc-Szanton. They related transnationalism to processes of creating and sustaining by migrating individuals multiple social, cultural, political and economic (and of a different nature) relations that link both sending and receiving societies: „We define *transnationalism* as the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call these processes transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields

that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders... An essential element is the multiplicity of involvements that transmigrants sustain in both home and host societies” [Basch et al., 2003, p. 7].

As a result of transmigration a new model of migrants has been developed, individuals and groups who maintain multiple territorial affiliations as nowadays precisely limited identification with one community or locality is outdated and individuals’ identities do not depend on concrete space but are deterritorialized or territorialized in a different way. Consequently, transmigrants are involved in activities and build their life strategies across national, political, or socio-cultural boundaries. Thus, the transnational nature of migration determines the diversity of flows between countries, resulting from the bonds created by migrants with people and institutions in the country of origin and other co-ethnic members around the world. However, transnational activity does not only relate to those who left their homeland, but also to those who remained in it, as they create transnational ties by maintaining contact with their relatives or friends abroad. Finally, it results in creation of transnational networks between all contacting parties [Van Hear 1998, p. 3; Kindler 2008, pp. 51–52; Trąbka 2009, pp. 74–82].

The network character of transnational linkages is also underlined by other researcher on transmigration – Alejandro Portes. He mentions that as a result of accumulation of migrants’ social networks that cross state borders, there have developed transnational communities that are located “neither here nor there”, but in two (or more) places simultaneously [1998, p. 3]. At the same time migrants are engaged in transnational activities across borders at the same time in order to gain primarily economic and social position. However, this requires them to maintain regular and timely ties with both the hosting and the sending societies. As it was noted before, transnational activities can be initiated either by ordinary individuals and whole groups of migrants (*transnationalism from below*), as well as relatively powerful actors, such as representatives of governmental structures and international corporations (*transnationalism from above*). These activities are not limited solely to establish and then maintain international economic ties, but also include various cultural, social, political and religious initiatives, which are equally important in creation of international social capital [1999, p. 464]. A. Portes emphasizes that the phenomenon of transnationalism has cumulative character, as, for instance, initially little financial support from migrants to families in the homeland can turn into structured activities that extend to other, non-economic spheres of life [Trąbka 2009, p. 75].

Also a German scholar Thomas Faist refers to this two-dimensional character of contemporary migration processes when he writes about “transnational social spaces”. Individuals that move across borders form a “bridge” between the sending and receiving communities, which is a factor of high importance in their

adaptation processes. Transnational social spaces are characterized by a high density of informal ties and institutional linkages that are part of social networks and organizations in several countries. Informal ties are constituted by various forms of social capital of spatially mobile and immobile people. Its scope relies on mutual trust, group solidarity and self-help between migrants in a situation of uncertainty caused by the migration process. On the other hand, transnational networks are also influenced by the regulations imposed by particular countries (for instance migration and multicultural policies). Transnationality is thus determined by the complex relationships between both governments and social organizations in sending and receiving countries and transnational groups – migrants [Faist 2000, p. 192–193; Faist 2006, p. 3; Kindler 2008, p. 53]. As Thomas Faist remarks: “The reality of transnational social spaces made up of migrants indicates, first, that migration and re-migration may not be definite, irrevocable and irreversible decisions - transnational lives in themselves may become a strategy of survival and betterment. Also, transnational webs include relatively immobile persons and collectives. Second, even those migrants and refugees who have settled for a considerable time outside the original country of origin, frequently entertain strong transnational links. Third, these links can be of a more informal nature, such as intra-household or family ties, or they can be institutionalized, such as political parties entertaining branches in various countries of immigration and emigration” [2006, p. 6]

Contrary to traditional economic understanding of migration, which highlights the movement of financial capital and goods across state borders, in the transnational approach the emphasis is rather put on the essence of social and symbolic ties, and thus on a form of social integration of foreigners. What is of special importance, migration is here so understood as processes and circumstances increasing possibilities of individuals and groups rather than just a result of unfavourable conditions that push people out of homelands [Kindler 2008, p. 53].

### **3. Consequences of transmigration**

Both Alejandro Portes and Thomas Faist refer to factors enhancing the transnational dimension of contemporary migration flows. Firstly, Portes singles out political factors (revolutions, rebellions, persecutions, etc.) that foster sustaining linkages by migrants (or refugees) with community members in their countries of origin. Secondly, transmigration might be reinforced by individual – successfully completed – mobility of community members, who make up relatively stable connections with relatively immobile group in the sending country. Transmigrants often form chains of migration within which migration of one member of the sending community involves more people (for instance family members) emigrate. It is worth mentioning that these migration networks make use of similar mechanisms as transnational corporation. They

benefit from the development of communication and transport technologies as well as differences in economic conditions between countries. Thirdly, the maintenance of transnational ties is determined by the scope of discrimination that is faced by both migrants abroad and their families in the homeland. Consequently, high importance has the degree of migrants' integration with the host society, including access to its structures and institutions [Portes 1999, pp. 464–465]. On the other hand, as mentioned above, both Nina Glick-Schiller and Thomas Faist stress that receiving and sending countries' policies (especially migration policies) and their institutional processes also strongly contribute to the development of transnational ties. Faist underlines that the more liberal immigration policy and more tolerant society towards cultural diversity in the receiving country (and thus foreigners are not forced to assimilate), the more opportunities to preserve identity and cross-border ties with the homeland immigrants have. In case of sending countries their policies towards own citizens living abroad (like encouraging migrants to re-invest remittances and gained knowledge in the country of origin) may also empower transnational tendencies [Faist 2006, p. 3–4]. Finally, working in international environment may further foster process of transnationalization. It seems that particularly employees of transnational companies and organizations, whose daily routine is connected with working and commuting between different countries, can easily maintain transnational practices. However, it should be emphasized that not every person traveling from country to country and living there automatically becomes a transmigrant. As Portes argues, transnational communities are “characterized by dense networks across space and by an increasing number of people who lead dual lives. Members are at least bilingual, move easily between different cultures, frequently maintain homes in two countries, and pursue economic, political, and cultural interests that require a simultaneous presence in both” [1998, p. 16]. Consequently, transmigrant is the one who maintains the potential for life in both the sending county and the host country (countries).

It is thus not a situation of incomplete migration, when a migrating individual does not integrate with the host society, or a pendulum migration, when a migrant lives abroad from time to time, usually conducting seasonal work. Transmigrants are equipped with sufficiently high social and cultural capital (and thus rather highly qualified) that allows them to function in different environments, i.e. to maintain numerous and, above all, sustained contacts across the frontiers or even re-construct own identity in relation to more than one nation-state. Furthermore, they are often able to run more than one household and to be “in touch” with the situation in both countries and participate in making decisions about current affairs. For instance, transmigrants might act in favour of changing political situation in the home country or work in cultural institutions/charities aimed at the home country [Portes 1998, p. 16; Trąbka 2009, p. 75]. Their activities across countries' borders might be also partly determined by the

need to fulfill cultural, social and religious etc. responsibilities arising out of the homeland-shaped habitus.

Next to the above-mentioned socio-cultural and political impacts of transnational migration, it has also considerable economic significance. Most of migrants make their decisions to emigrate for economic reasons. Despite minor changes, the traditional pattern of migration is present – people generally migrate from poor countries to developed ones, while in the opposite direction migrants make transfers of earned money. As mentioned before, transmigrants usually first assist financially their families and invest money in the homecountry and then extend their activities across borders to other non-economic spheres of life. According to Alejandro Portes emergence of transnational communities is therefore inherently linked to the logic of capitalism, i.e. a constant demand for cheap or low-skilled workforce and, on the other hand, infiltration of consumption patterns and popular culture to the peripheral societies of the world [1998, p. 4].

Transnational linkages have thus appreciable economic effect on migrants, their families and communities in homelands, as well as all localities in which they variably dwell [Vertovec 2001, p. 575]. It is worth to mention that remittances that migrants send to their countries of origin are constantly growing. According to the World Bank data, the sum of the international monetary transfers made by migrants through official channels in 1975 amounted to 2,9 billion USD, while in 2010 they are expected to raise up to 440 billion USD. Remittances transferred through unofficial channels may be even 50% higher. The new EU member states are among the biggest beneficiaries of these transfers. For example, according to the World Bank's estimations in 2010 Polish emigrants transferred to Poland over 9 billion USD. [Mohapatra et al., 2010, p. 1; Trąbka 2009, pp. 76–79]. However, significantly high money transfers may have both positive and negative effect on particular groups and countries. The economies of developing countries became highly reliant upon migrants' money as they reach amounts comparable to exports, development aid or tourism. For instance, in 2005 the total amount of money transferred by Polish emigrants equalled almost 10% of the whole Polish exports that year. Migrants' money do not only support families (as they can be used for both current consumption or investment), but may progressively rework gender relations, support education and facilitate local community development through new health clinics, water systems or cultural and sports facilities. On the other hand, remittances may also undermine local labour markets, create new status hierarchies and generate patterns of economic dependence [Portes 1998, pp. 4–5; Vertovec 2001, p. 575].

#### **4. Opposition towards assimilation concepts**

As it was mentioned before, transnationalism has raised as an opposition towards theory of assimilation that had predominated studies of migration and

multiculturalism. The latter was criticized as the concept that implies a static vision of societies, which represent constant, separate and easily identifiable dominant or subordinate cultures. Thus it also assumes valuing cultures, which leads to relation of superiority and inferiority of respective cultures. Furthermore, critics emphasized that assimilation is in fact a one-way and irreversible process of migrants' integration into the host society and therefore it puts migrants in passive role, where a foreigner is only an object (not subject) forced to melt with the dominant culture and its institutions in order to guarantee his/her social advancement [Kołbon 2006, pp. 203–207].

On the contrary, due to emphasis on the phenomena associated with incessant mobility, diversity, ambiguity of identification resulting from postmodernism, the shift in migration and multiculturalism studies is frequently named "a transnational turn". What is of particular importance, while analyzing identification strategies of migrants, transnationalism takes into account the context of both the host and sending countries. Migrant uses social capital gained and rooted in both places while moving back and forth. He/she is thus not a passive object dependent on institutions of the host society, but an active subject of social life both in the county of origin and the country of the current stay [Kołbon 2006, p. 204].

Furthermore, contrary to preceding approaches that implied maintaining ties with homelands by migrants as a symptom of their social maladjustment or a failure of the receiving country's integration policies, according to the transnational perspective migrants' efforts to sustain and even strengthen linkages across borders are perceived as a voluntary and conscious choice. It is an effective strategy of reducing costs related with staying abroad. As a transnational migrant does not aspire to become a full member of the host society, adaptation to the receiving county is not a purpose in itself for them. Transmigrants are rather conscious decision-makers who take a strategy of minimal adaptation or even decide not to adapt at all. Thus migrating individual is not a vulnerable person overwhelmed by foreign country's structures as there is no structural determinism that forces migrants to adapt to a certain society (to choose one territorial affiliation) and thus one localized identity [Kołbon 2006, p. 208]. As noted by Steven Vertovec, nowadays „the identities of numerous individuals and groups of people are negotiated within social worlds that span more than one place” [2001, p. 573]. Negotiation of identity in relation to more than one nation-state, when a migrant has multiple territorial affiliations also results in individual's multitude of identification possibilities. Consequently, it can lead towards deterritorialized identity. Furthermore, due to processual character of migration experience, which is not only a one-time event, migrant's identity is full of inconsistencies and contradictions, what may foster in development of a hybrid identity [Kołbon 2006, p. 212].

## 5. Critical voices

Despite growing popularity of transnationalism among numerous researchers on migration, ethnicity and multiculturalism, from the beginning the new approach has been arousing controversies. The critiques refer to not enough satisfactory grounded theoretical basis as well as unconvincing empirical proofs of transnationalism.

Firstly, the opponents have been underlining that maintaining various forms of cross-border contacts by migrants with communities and institutions in their places of origin was not a new phenomenon. It had been observed by researchers since at least the turn of XIX and XX centuries when, for example, East European migrants in the USA had been sustaining ties with families and communities in Europe by mail correspondence or remittances [Vertovec 2001, p. 574]. However, Arjun Appadurai replies that the scale and character of transnational ties and flows is qualitatively different from those observed earlier [Trąbka 2009, p. 82]. Therefore, despite existing structural similarity, those two phenomena should not be compared.

Secondly, it seems also that the role of technology advancement in transport and, particularly, telecommunications in creation of transnational patterns is overstated, as it rather accelerated or enhanced transnational processes rather than caused them. On the other hand, Steven Vertovec replies that it is quite easy to find historical confirmation for the newly formulated theory, but it does not disavow the theory itself. Furthermore, thanks to today's higher technological advancement the links of migrants with their homeland are much more tangible and intense. Transmigrants are also more capable to influence and participate in decision making processes relating to situation in their families or country in general [2001, p. 574; 2004, p. 4].

Thirdly, another accusation refers to lack of precise boundaries separating the new approach from the previous theories of migration. As noted by S. Vertovec, "transnationalism does not represent an altogether new theoretical approach, but one that inherently builds upon a number of preceding ones (including those of the Chicago School of Sociology and the Manchester School of Anthropology). Differences and similarities with prior theories of migration and immigrant experience should be elucidated so that we can realise whether theoretical advances are really being achieved, or whether we are merely pouring old wine into new bottles" [2001, p. 576]. Furthermore, the opponents argue excessive use of transnationalism in reference to today's migratory flows. The term itself has become over-used to describe too wide range of phenomena (for instance migrant communities, migrants' families in countries of origin, ethnic diasporas or even travellers and tourists) [Vertovec 2001, p. 576].

Fourthly, it is imputed that the transnationalism is poorly grounded in theoretical and empirical terms in comparison with preceding concepts and policies

of assimilation, acculturation, cultural pluralism, integration, multiculturalism, etc. [Kindler 2008, pp. 52–53; Kołbon 2006, pp. 201–202]. Alejandro Portes et al. note: “Transnational migration studies form a highly fragmented, emergent field which still lacks both a well-defined theoretical framework and analytical rigour” [Portes et al., 1999, p. 218]. There are also many empirical areas that have not been examined at all or they were examined in limited extent. For instance, processes and patterns conditioning the intergenerational succession and reproduction of transnational ties and practices (in the second generation of immigrants, who were born and raised in host countries) are not sufficiently researched. There is also a need to examine the relationship between states’ structures, the formation of national identity and transnational processes, e.g. in the areas of borderlands, where there may be a multiplicity of national identities [Kindler 2008, pp. 52–53; Vertovec 2001, p. 577].

Furthermore, it seems that some concepts developed within transnational approach are similar to prior described phenomena. For instance, critics underline the notion ‘transnational community’ is just a new term to describe previously know ‘disapora’ that also refers to the world members of one nation dispersed throughout who maintain contacts with each other. However, other scholars, like Nicholas Van Hear, note that ‘transnational community’ is a broader term as it refers both to traditionally understood diasporas as well as neighbouring communities that are not dispersed. Moreover, diaspora is usually a result of forced migration out of the country of origin, whereas transnational movement also refer to voluntary movement between countries [Van Hear 1996, pp. 3–6; Krzyżowski 2009, pp. 21–22].

Critics also argue that as transnational linkages take so many forms in socio-cultural, economic and political arenas, they may be ‘broad’ or ‘narrow’ and may vary over time, depending on intensity of exchange and communication, we should single out a typology of transnationalisms and the conditions that affect them rather than a single theory of transnationalism that does not involve all described phenomena [Vertovec 2001, p. 574]. Finally, it is underlined that transnationalism does not have to oppose assimilation. Maintaining various ties between two (or more) countries does not only mean the total orientation of an individual towards the homeland, as it can also create new quality in the country of settlement basing on social and human capital that has been gained in both (or more) countries [Kołbon 2006, p. 211].

## 6. Conclusions

The emergence and growing popularity of the concept of transnationalism has raised many controversies. As presented in the paper the opponents argue it is just a highly emergent and fragmented concept with limited explanatory capabilities in reference to contemporary migration flows and migrants’ activities in a foreign environment. They particularly underline lack of well-

defined theoretical framework, analytical inconsistency and not satisfactory empirical proofs of transnationalism.

However, while some researchers deny its novel and inspiring approach to the study of migration and multiculturalism, it seems the new perspective allows to better understand current conditions and capabilities of migrants' adaptation in host societies. What is of a particular importance, the transnational approach implies empowerment of migrating individuals. Migrants' lack of adaptation with the hosting society and, at the same time, constant efforts to maintain ties with homeland is not an indication of their social exclusion or inefficiency of state's integration policies, but a consequence of migrants' conscious choice and strategy. Transmigration also increases identification possibilities of individuals and groups. In this context full adaptation to the receiving society is not a purpose in itself for migrants as structural and technological conditions allow them simultaneously to be 'in touch' and identify with different locations.

### Abstract

*The paper focuses on the concept of 'transnationalism', which has recently gained high popularity among researchers on migration, ethnicity and multiculturalism. It implies that as a result of increasing migration flows and differentiation of ethnic populations there have developed a new model of migrants who maintain multiple territorial affiliations and thus are involved in activities and build their life strategies across national, political or cultural boundaries..*

*The article considers what new findings the transnational approach introduce to studies of migration. It also determines the usefulness of transnationalism in studying of migrants' life strategies. Finally, as the new concept raises many controversies, the article quotes most significant voices opposing new concept.*

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