

# Immigrant “Transnationalism” and the Presence of the Past<sup>1</sup>

Roger Waldinger

Department of Sociology, UCLA

Los Angeles, CA 90095

Fall 2006

Forthcoming in: Elliott Barkan, et. al., eds. *Borders, Boundaries, And Bonds: America And Its Immigrants In Eras Of Globalization*, New York: New York University Press

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the view that nation-state and society normally converge has waned. Instead, “globalization” is the order of the day, with international migration bringing the alien “other” from third world to first, and worldwide trade and communications amplifying and accelerating the feedbacks traveling in the opposite direction. Consequently, social scientists are looking for new ways to think about the connections between “here” and “there,” as evidenced by the interest in the many things called “transnational”. The excitement is particularly great among those studying international migration: observing that migration produces a plethora of connections spanning “home” and “host” societies, scholars detect the emergence of “transnational communities,” from which they conclude that the era of nation-state societies successfully keeping themselves distinct has now been eclipsed.

---

<sup>1</sup> Prepared for delivery at the 2003 Conference of the Immigration and Ethnic History Society, New York University, October 31, 2003.

But does transnationalism – as idea or reality – represent anything new? For contributors to the foundational document – the proceedings of a 1990, New York Academy of Science meeting organized by the anthropologists Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Christina Blanc-Szanton – the answer was a resounding yes.<sup>1</sup> The development of social fields linking *particular* sending and destination countries, they argued, represented a decisive break with the past. Contrary to historical patterns and received social science notions, neither settlement nor the severing of home countries ties was inevitable. In the contemporary age of migration, rather, “transmigrants ... maintain, build, and reinforce multiple linkages with their countries of origins.”<sup>2</sup> In so doing, the long-distance movers of the contemporary age expanded the range of “home” to encompass both “here” and “there,” a change so fundamental that entirely new conceptualizations were required. “Transnationalism” became the label used for identifying the social connections between receiving and sending countries and “transmigrants” denoted the people who forged those ties and kept them alive.

Even at the very moment of this debut, however, the historians were there to say that nothing, or at least, not much, was new under the sun. While the social scientists were simply accepting the dictionary’s definition of immigration, as movement for the purposes of settlement, the historians knew better, reminding their colleagues that the last era of mass migration was characterized by a continuous ebb and flow across, indeed, around the trans-Atlantic. Nor was an immigrant or ethnic preoccupation with homeland politics anything new; au contraire, the literature told us, nothing was as American as agitating in favor of the homeland earlier abandoned.

Roughly fifteen years after debate began, we now all know better. Concerns generated by research on the international migrations of the contemporary era directed historians to patterns of which they had been aware, but perhaps not fully attentive. The social scientists have agreed that connections between here and there were indeed seen before – though most still insist that there is something distinctive about the host/home linkages of today. More importantly, there is a steady stream of publications seeking to make systematic past/present comparisons – as opposed to the original practice of just pushing the issue off the table.

But from my vantage point, the record of the past decade and a half provides scant ground for satisfaction. On the one hand, the phenomenon that immigration scholars call “transnationalism” is fundamentally mislabeled and misunderstood. While the literature considers “transnational” and “trans-state” as if they were one and the same,<sup>3</sup> the cross-border ties established by international migrants take a variety of forms. Cross-border connections between source and destination points are an inherent aspect of the migration phenomenon – no surprise given the social networks that channel the process. However, those networks generate, not one, but a multiplicity of “imagined communities,” organized along different, often conflicting principles, whether related to the scale of aggregation (local v. national) or opposing visions of the “community” in question. Before the demise of the late, lamented workers’ movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, those “imagined communities” often conformed to the root meaning of *transnational* – extending *beyond* loyalties that connect to any specific place of origin or ethnic or national “group”. But that was then, this is now: what contemporary immigration scholars describe as “transnationalism” is long-distance, trans-state

particularism – a form of social action antithetical to transnationalism in any meaningful sense.<sup>4</sup>

Nor do the scholars of transnationalism do better when thinking about the possible relationships between present and past. To begin with, they dehistoricize the present, forgetting that it is but a moment in the flow of history, and therefore tomorrow's past. Likewise, they take temporal boundaries for granted, assuming, rather than explaining, just when and why the "past" stopped and the "present" began.

As to the existing debate, it has barely begun, having highlighted just one form of past/present connection – namely recurrence, by which I refer to the continued reappearance of trans-state immigrant and ethnic ties linking "here" and "there." The finding is surely important – but it simply reminds us that networks of goods, information, and people repeatedly and regularly extend beyond the limits of state institutions. As I will explain at greater detail below, long-distance migrant networks largely operate in the same way whether extending within or across state boundaries – which is why much of the transnational literature concerns bilocal connections bearing no inherent relationship to international migration whatsoever.

However, the relationship between past and present takes more than one form, extending beyond recurrence to include secular change and contingency. Secular change entails direction, not just cyclicity. In this case, movement involves a historical shift toward a world increasingly divided by states, seeking to control movement across territorial boundaries, regulating the internal boundaries of membership, and nationalizing their peoples. Consequently, while social networks in the contemporary world do connect nation-state societies – allowing *some* migrants to live both here and

there – they need to penetrate state boundaries of a formal, institutionalized type, far harder to cross than those encountered during the last age of mass migration. For that reason, it is the condition of having *no* home – *not having two homes* – that distinguishes “now” from “then”.

While history possesses direction, it is nonetheless indeterminate, which is the reason why contingency matters. Because international migration entails movement between states, it’s a phenomenon of an inherently political sort. Therefore, the political uncertainties inherent in the relationships among states impinge on the ability of immigrants and their descendants to engage in activities that link “here” and “there.” In particular, the demands for national solidarity wax and wane with the degree of inter-state tension: the foreign attachments acceptable in a tranquil world become grounds for suspicion when peace succumbs to international conflict, not to speak of belligerency between host and sending countries. While the shadow of war repeatedly falls over the trans-state social ties of immigrants and their descendants, it does so unpredictably – and thus contrasts with the regular, recurrent activation of migrant networks.

Having now outlined these three different modalities by which past and present relate, I will now elaborate on each one.

### **Dehistoricization**

Right from the start, historians scoffed at the notion that migratory experiences organized both “here” and “there” represented something not seen before. Indeed, attention to the persistence and significance of migrants’ trans-state ties had long been on

the historians' agenda. As noted by the manifesto of modern immigration historiography – Frank Thistlethwaite's celebrated 1960 address – the migrations of the turn of the *last* century entailed trans-oceanic, back and forth traffic of such amplitude, that only some portion of the phenomenon fell into the standard categories of settlement and acculturation.<sup>5</sup> Thus, by the time that sociologists and anthropologists “discovered” transnationalism, the historians were documenting – in copious detail – that all was *not* new under the sun. A trio of books, published in the early 1990s by Dino Cinel, Bruno Ramirez, and Mark Wyman, and focusing on return migration, long-distance nationalism, and immigrant associational life at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, underlined the many commonalities between “now” and “then.”<sup>6</sup>

That point has now been so frequently made that it has actually been heard. Even so, the argument for discontinuity has proven remarkably hard to abandon. As case in point, consider the writings of Alejandro Portes, our foremost sociologist of immigration. Portes and his associates first argued that the case for studying transnationalism rested on the very novelty of the phenomenon itself.<sup>7</sup> Shortly, thereafter, these same authors made due note of the historical precedents, but sought to rescue the concept by invoking the “fallacy of adumbration.” Conceding that the phenomenon was not new, the authors found that transnationalism illuminated previously unnoticed parallels linking “contemporary events with similar ones in the past,” and therefore concluded that the concept yielded significant added value.<sup>8</sup>

Today, the scholars of immigrant transnationalism repeat this very mantra, telling us that the transnational phenomenon may be old hat, but little matter, as the transnational concept does “new analytical work (Smith, 2003: 1),” to quote Robert Smith<sup>9</sup> Yet a close

look at the writings of such diverse authors as Robert Smith, Luis Guarnizo, Peggy Levitt, and Nina Glick-Schiller even our lunchtime's distinguished speaker shows that the emphasis on past/present divergence remains in place.<sup>10</sup> According to these authors, a complex of factors makes "now" fundamentally different from "then":

- the effects of technological change – reducing the costs and time entailed in communication and travel;
- the shift from the melting pot to multiculturalism – legitimating the expression of and organization around home country loyalties;
- the nationalization of home country societies – increasing the salience of the national identities with which immigrants arrived;
- the advent of a new international human rights regime (labeled "post-nationalism") – diminishing the difference between "nationals" and "foreigners" by circumscribing the power of receiving states.

But whether it is the concept or the phenomenon that is thought to be new, the same basic problems remain. In claiming discontinuity, these scholars of immigrant transnationalism have fallen victim to the presentism characteristic of their disciplines and times. After all, the distinction they draw between the today's world of migrant connectivity and yesterday's world of migrant uprooting simply reproduces the familiar antinomies of social science, most notably that of a "closed" past and an "open" present.<sup>11</sup> As with the study of globalization or transnational relations, the insistence that "now" is radically different from "then" has produced exactly the same so-called discovery – that the phenomenon happened before and in surprisingly similar ways.<sup>12</sup> On

the other hand, if one hadn't started with these particular blinders, one might have asked more productive questions.

Moreover, the second line-defense, emphasizing the novelty of the transnational concept and the new illumination it sheds, only convinces if the concept correctly specifies the salient aspect of the situation at either point in time. But that's precisely what contemporary social science scholarship fails to do, emphasizing parallels while obscuring the fundamental contrast: that contemporary migrations, because they occur in a world carved up by nation-states, are both international and political in ways that were simply not true during the earlier era, when migration was largely, albeit not entirely, uncontrolled. No doubt, parallels exist between now and then; for that reason, one has to note that they probably also extend to the factors that brought the earlier era to an end. Therefore, taking past/present parallels seriously implies that the current state of affairs is not an inevitability, but rather a contingent outcome, subject to unpredictable pressures that could burst today's era of global interconnection asunder, as occurred in the past.

To begin with, the technological determinism asserted by the proponents of immigrant "transnationalism" surely deserves second thought: after all, the simple letter did a remarkably effective job of knitting together trans-oceanic migration networks, as the reader of *The Polish Peasant* will surely recall. As the historians of globalization point out, moreover, the impact of the telegram was almost as fundamental as that of the internet; yet neither the telegram nor any other, contemporaneous advances in communications and transportation technology prevented the slide into autarchy experienced for much of the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, a political environment supportive of immigrant and ethnic long-distance nationalism should hardly



be taken for granted. The evidence for the influence of international norms, or of an international human rights regime, is far from compelling.<sup>14</sup> If instead, domestic political actors have been responsible for relaxing the distinction between nationals and foreigners, movement in the other direction is no less possible. Likewise, the greater legitimacy accorded expression of homeland loyalties is better understood as a product of the moment, not a permanent feature of advanced democracies. The liberal universalism of those social and political groups supportive of immigrant rights does not naturally converge with the highly particularistic attachments of those newcomers who use migration to a new land as a platform for long distance-nationalism --, especially if the latter creates new fissures among groups that first encounter one another in the American context, as for example, when African Americans and Cubans clashed over the visit of Nelson Mandela to Miami.<sup>15</sup> The key point is that immigrants' ability to act here in pursuit of objectives located there is chronically a subject of contestation, which is why what the scholars call transnationalism, the public labels "dual loyalty". Regardless of **what** scholars think of such views, they matter, to be ignored at our own peril.<sup>16</sup>

## **Recurrence**

Conventional social science views overlap with folk understandings: both assume that nation-states and national societies are one and the same (as implied by the concept of "American society"), which is why the appearance of foreigners and their foreign attachments are viewed as anomalies expected to disappear.

The scholarship on migration tells us exactly the opposite: the advent of international migration is the *normal*, recurrent social outcome: networks of information, goods, and services *regularly* extend beyond the economy, which is why outsiders keep

on showing up. In part, it is simply a story of capitalist economies relentlessly expanding beyond the ambit of any national society, even as they generate positions into which a newly activated labor force can move. In part, it is a story of the problem-solving strategies of the migrants, who use their most important resource – namely, each other – to consolidate networks linking “here” and “there.” Whatever its causes, international migration is a normal, *not* strange phenomenon– even though nation-state societies would like to pretend otherwise.

Consequently, the proliferation of ties extending beyond the territory that states seek to enclose reappears in virtually every migrant context – whether “now” or “then”, whether in the United States or in any of the world’s other major receiving nations. Moreover, population flows across borders leave large numbers of persons moving back and forth in a state of transition, not yet certain where to settle, let alone how much importance to place on the connections “here” as opposed to “there”.<sup>17</sup> Over the long term, the networks that breach the nation-state society also pull the migrants away from home environments and encourage settlement. The short- to medium-term horizons, however, may look quite different. As long as migration rises, so too does the density of persons for whom home is not “here,” a factor affecting the predispositions of veteran migrants as well as the opportunities they confront. More migration tends to cause more cross-border ties.

But if connections linking here and there are a recurrent feature of the migratory phenomenon, they aren’t a feature distinguishing international from other forms of population movement. Social networks lubricate long-distance migrations of all types, whether extending across borders, or linking country and city within the same state. In

some respects, long-distance migrants are all one of a kind: as Michael Piore argued years ago, what matters is not the color of the identity card or passport, but rather that migrants are social outsiders, evaluating conditions here, in light of the standards there.<sup>18</sup> Using a different terminology, the economic historians have confirmed this point of view: after the 1920s, when international labor migration was severely restricted displaced rural Americans provided most of the substitutes that employers needed.<sup>19</sup> And for further evidence, one can reference New York's own history of ethnic succession, where one group of migrant laborers has been more or less interchangeable for any other, regardless of whether origins were to be found within the United States or beyond its borders.<sup>20</sup>

Consequently, long-distance migrants, whether international or internal, undergo a similar experience: displaced from familiar ground, they get treated as strangers, which is why they suddenly discover a commonality in people originating from the same place. Whether we call them *landsmann* or *paisano*, immigrant hometowners and their organizations are at once ubiquitous but also *fundamentally bi-local* -- that is to say, oriented toward attachments and activities linking *particular* places here and there. While these bilocal ties define the principal subject matter of the literature on immigrant transnationalism, the phenomenon bears no intrinsic relationship to international migration as such.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, even migrations internal to modern, nation-state societies can be sufficiently displacing as to generate new connections around the place left behind. As an uprooted New Yorker, I both know whereof I speak and connect with a longstanding tradition of strangers trying to adapt to the strange land called California. In the 1920s, for example, midwestern migrants to Los Angeles created state-based associations that

picnicked, through the 1960s, in the very same L.A. public parks where Salvadoran and Guatemalan associations now gather.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the Iowa association of Long Beach survives to this very day. In the 1930s, the displaced southwestern farmers made into “Okies” and “Arkies” by fearful Californians not only held on to their local attachments, but kept shuttling back and forth between the golden state and their old homes, in fashion quite similar to the Mexican field hands who converged on agriculture when times improved.<sup>23</sup> In the 1950s, as Deborah Dash Moore has told us, second generation Jewish migrants to Los Angeles thought it necessary to form *landsmanschaften* to bring together, not ex-Bialystokers or ex-Pinskens, but rather the displaced New Yorkers from various parts of the Bronx or Brooklyn.<sup>24</sup>

Of course, we do need to take the international dimension of migration seriously: trans-border bi-localism differs from intra-state bi-localism, and more so now than before, when regional differences within the United States have declined. But the key point, to invoke the stilted language of social science, is that discovering connections between between “villages” or “communities” here and there simply confirms the null hypothesis: social networks both lubricate long-distance migrations *and* provide the basis around which new forms of community are constructed after the move has taken place. However, these relationships also arise in almost any migratory context, whether within or across state boundaries. Therefore, they don’t identify the distinctive traits of international migration, regardless of whether our focus falls on the world of “now” or that of “then”.

### **Secular change**

The “concept of transnationalism,” contend Alejandro Portes and his collaborators in their widely cited and hailed reformulation, should be delimited “to occupations and activities that require regular and sustained social contact over time across national borders for their implementation.”<sup>25</sup> It’s not for me to contest the claim. But I can note that this reformulation makes freedom of movement the point of departure, as if this were not a world divided by states, many of them expelling their undesirable residents, and whose humanity proves insufficient reason for the so-called liberal democracies to open their doors. In this respect, the proponents of transnationalism turn out to share the same biases as the advocates of assimilation, who tell us that “assimilation” is the decline of an ethnic difference,<sup>26</sup> without noting that it is also the *making* of difference between national ‘peoples.’ As the sociology of assimilation obscures the coercion involved in excluding outsiders – via control of external borders – and in distinguishing between members and unacceptable residents of the territory – through regulation of the internal boundaries leading to citizenship and legal residence -- it also reveals itself to be ideology of the nation-state society.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, the usual distinctions between assimilation and transnationalism mislead.

Neither transnationalism nor assimilation grapples with the inherently political nature of the phenomenon in question; for these reasons, the literature has yet to confront the alternative hypothesis, regarding past/present contrasts, advanced by Hannah Arendt more than a half century ago. Due to the global spread of the state system and the nation-state society, argued Arendt, the condition of having *no* home – *not two homes* – is what distinguishes “now” from “then”.<sup>28</sup>

For Arendt, the old order exploded with World War I, though she conceded that the episodes of persecution and forced migration that followed the great war represented nothing new. “In the long memory of history,” as she wrote, developments of this sort “were everyday occurrences.” What had changed, rather, was the emergence of a world completely organized into nation-states, conceived of and understood in familistic and communitarian terms. Entire classes of peoples found themselves expelled, “not because of what they had done or thought, but because of what they unchangeably were.” And those deprived of a state, found “themselves thrown out of the family of nations altogether,” as “the loss of home and political status became identical with the expulsion from humanity altogether.”<sup>29</sup>

While the Arendtian and turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century worlds may not be fully identical, she fully captured the underlying trend. In the long run, the rise of massive state apparatuses *controlling* population movements between states, and rationalizing distinctions between foreigners and citizens, represent the most striking developments. Unlike the situation at the turn of the century, persons migrating across international boundaries aren't simply assessing the right mix of costs and benefits, as the economists insist. Today, they must also confront “a problem of political organization,” just as underscored by Arendt.

To begin with, international migration is a pervasive, yet quantitatively minor exception, to the system by which states bound mutually exclusive populations: after all, only 2.5 percent of the world's population is currently living in a state different from the country of birth. What the liberal democracies dignify by the name of immigration policy is utterly mislabeled: rather, it is an exclusion policy, designed and maintained

with the intent to keep out. Looking at the numbers of aliens who have entered the territory of this particular state, some large portion of whom have also been accepted into its nation, one might say that exclusion is pursued without effect. But if we consider the potential pool of migrants, not to speak of the lines patiently waiting for visas – whether permanent or temporary – in U.S. consulates and embassies all over the world, then the success of the fundamental policy is beyond doubt.

Moreover, the state-building efforts entailed in immigration restriction, and the state-spanning processes that occur when migration networks extend beyond the state container inevitably collide, yielding a set of cross-pressures that have increased, not diminished the political impediments to international migration. Thus, the United States earlier had a border, but only limited controls which is why immigrants could come and go as they pleased. As the historical studies have shown us, restriction didn't so much choke off movement as alter its pattern. Bottling up established ports of entry simply pushed new flows toward less regulated areas, in turn eliciting yet a further exercise of state power to gain control over space.<sup>30</sup> Though the process has been exceedingly protracted, the once near-open, informally regulated border, long managed in response to regional or local preferences, has now been completely politicized and formalized, with control extending to the entire perimeter of the United States. Of course, the border is leaky – but which border isn't? But notice the intensity of the effort to keep people out, as evidenced by the steady militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border and the extension of check points to a zone well north of the border itself.<sup>31</sup> Note also the rising toll of mortality among unauthorized border crossers – an outcome produced only when one prefers to extinguish rather than recognize the humanity of people not like oneself, just as

Arendt would have predicted.<sup>32</sup> And though unsuccessful in deterring movement to *el norte*, and therefore derided as “smoke and mirrors” by the leading sociological authorities, current border policies have significantly discouraged unauthorized Mexican migrants from returning home – thus highlighting the newly created political obstacles to the sort of “regular and sustained social contact” across borders that supposedly distinguishes the immigrant transnationalism of today.<sup>33</sup>

Of course, the students of immigrant transnationalism will insist that the political trends work the other way: today is a world increasingly governed by a trans- or post-national human rights regime, which is why immigrants can pursue their various forms of long-distance particularism with a freedom unknown before.<sup>34</sup>

But in making this argument, they get the time order all wrong, as one can see by focusing on the refugee regime, an example of transnationalism in the very truest sense of the word. As implicitly argued by Arendt, and later reformulated with precision by Aristide Zolberg, the refugee is a product of the modern world.<sup>35</sup> The migrants of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century certainly included people fleeing political hostility, but few, if any, for whom a failure to find safe haven would have meant death. Nor was that search for safe haven a desperate venture, as the immigration countries of the times exercised so little border control that they greeted revolutionaries and peasants with the same welcome hand. What better case exemplifies this unhappily long lost world, than that of Leon Trotsky, in February 1917 a Bronx man, in October 1917, a leader of the Russian Revolution?<sup>36</sup>

It was the subsequent actions of states – expelling their undesirables, while closing themselves off to the unwanted – that impelled the creation of the inter-war



refugee regime. And the career of our same revolutionary [highlights the limits of this inter-war transnationalism: once unarmed and outcast, the prophet Trotsky discovered that virtually no place on earth would harbor the likes of him.<sup>37</sup>

Like its interwar predecessor, the contemporary transnational refugee regime is not just a creation of and adaptation to the actions of states; it remains the weaker party, giving way when it clashes with claims to state sovereignty, as illustrated most notably by the experience of the United States. The U.S. never acceded to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, even though the convention largely applied to refugees from the Soviet bloc, precisely the outcome desired by the United States. In 1967, the U.S. finally agreed to observe most of convention's obligations, but retained its own narrow view of how refugees were to be defined, which in practice made refugee policy not a matter of humanitarianism but of U.S. foreign policy. While things changed significantly with passage of the 1980 refugee act, the executive branch lost little of the latitude it had long possessed. Politics, not humanitarian considerations, determined where external boundaries would be enforced and with what degree of vigilance, as evidenced by the very different treatment accorded persons fleeing to the United States by boat from Haiti, as opposed to those coming from Cuba. Although land borders have been more difficult to enforce, the insistence on sovereign control of internal boundaries is beyond mistake. Asylum remains granted for those coming to the United States for reasons approved by the executive branch, as Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees have learned to their distress. These unhappy experiences notwithstanding, the relatively liberal asylum regime introduced by the 1980 Refugee Act is already a thing of the past, with the advent

of expedited removal reducing rights of review, and increasing the state's power to deport.<sup>38</sup>

Of course, none of this precludes international migrants from seeing “themselves as transnational, as persons with two homelands,” to quote Glick Schiller and Fouron.<sup>39</sup> (1990:). Likewise, they can imagine themselves as “transnationals” and construct individual and social identities in transnational form, as Levitt and Waters have recently suggested.<sup>40</sup> Those views, however, are hardly binding on anyone else. States not only exercise control over who enters the territory and enjoys rights of membership once there: their capacity to do so has increased significantly between the last age of mass migration and today's.

### **Contingency**

Whatever can be said for sociologists or anthropologists, the historians always knew that homeland attachments loomed large in the lives and communities of immigrants – with some significant degree of retention extended to second and third generations. But in those bad old days, before the correct terminology had been learned, scholars conceived of homeland attachments in terms of “dual loyalty” – as can be seen by opening the canonical 1980 *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, where an essay on just that topic is to be found.<sup>41</sup>

Chronological time doesn't measure the distance between 1980 and 1989, when the short 20th century, as Hobsbawm called it, seemingly came to a close.<sup>42</sup> With the Berlin Wall dismantled, and the cold war concluded, the onset of a more pacific era appeared to signal the end for the mutually exclusive national loyalties that had earlier prevailed. In this more relaxed context, states no longer had the same reason to greedily

control the allegiance of members and residents. And all the more so for the world's hegemon, whose newcomers mainly came from poor, weak, and often small states – not of the sort to cause any one a threat.

How quickly things change! While the retrospective view is always 20/20, the possibility that tolerance of dual loyalties would respond to the ebb and flow of international tensions should be no surprise.

After all, national identity is relational: we define ourselves in contrast to alien peoples and external states. From this perspective, international migrants are the internal aliens, whose links to foreign people and places, so emphasized by the students of immigrant transnationalism, is precisely what renders them suspect.

It is the relationships among states that determine whether persons with foreign attachments are viewed benignly, adding to the spice of social life, or seen malignly, appearing as Trojan horses. In general, a peaceful world encourages states to relax the security/solidarity nexus; by contrast, international tension, let alone belligerence, provides the motivation to tighten up on those whose loyalties extend abroad.<sup>43</sup> Of course, predicting just when such tensions will rise or fall seems to exceed the capacity of social science: no one forecast the sudden demise of the Soviet Union, let alone the bombing of the twin towers. On the other hand, history does seem to teach us that the pendulum inevitably shifts, which means that international phenomena can be expected to intrude on the political bona fides of persons whose social identities are largely framed by their connections to two very distinct, sometimes opposing states.

War provides the supreme challenge. One can *try*, when war breaks out, to profess allegiance to two mutually belligerent states, but that often proves a difficult

effort to pursue. No one is more threatening than the detested and feared Other who happens to be located within the boundaries of one's own state. Moreover, the popular nature of modern wars threatens to transform immigrants from enemy countries into potential enemies, as happened in all the liberal democracies during each of the world wars.<sup>44</sup>

Hopefully, we won't face this test again, at least not in our lifetimes. Even so: the relative international tranquility of the 1990s, shouldn't have blinded analysts to the threats on the horizon. Well before 9/11 one could have seen that immigrants originating from countries with unfriendly or tense relationships with the United States ran the risk of falling into the "enemy alien" trap. As shown by the Wen Ho Lee case, one only had to question a single person's loyalty for America's political rivalry with China to suddenly cast a shadow over the political legitimacy of an entire group. Though the shadow of suspicion receded after the case against Lee collapsed, the latent threat posed by potential conflict between an ever-more powerful China, and a U.S. prone to saber-rattling, never fully disappeared. Before the trade tower bombings one could have also noted that long-distance nationalism in all of its forms (including that of the time-honored ethnic lobby) did not come so easily to Arab Americans, reason to conclude that the exception proves the rule: when loyalty is in question, long-distance nationalism is a hazardous game.

Just how the sudden inflection of international tension in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century will affect the pursuit of immigrant and ethnic homeland loyalties is anyone's guess. But the lessons of history do indicate that the perception of external threat builds support for a more restrictive view of the national community. Past experience also shows that the American state has the *capacity* to monitor, control, and restrict the trans-state social

action of international migrants and their descendants; whether and to what extent that capacity will be activated is a matter to which scholars of immigrant “transnationalism” will now surely want to attend.<sup>45</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The “transnationalism” field emerged with the conviction that the case of contemporary migrants living “here” and “there” represented something new. Understandably, critics responded by saying *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*. Alas, this sort of discussion is nothing but a trap. History involves change, which is why any particular historical constellation is distinct from other like developments encountered before. But no phenomenon lies beyond history or exists in and of itself. Consequently, historical knowledge develops through comparison: the task involves specifying both the similarities and the differences that distinguish one historical period from another. As I’ve argued in these pages, the periodization of the contemporary era needs to be taken seriously; but in the end, we do want to know how and why “now” – whenever that may be -- differs from “then”.

Moreover, if the historical project is to progress, we cannot proceed by making ourselves prisoners of our age. One understands that self-congratulation is no more alien to social scientists than to the man or the woman in the street, which is why we continue to construct oppositions between a supposedly open present and closed past. But the reality is quite different. As I have argued in this chapter, the state-spanning processes of migration are a recurrent, regular feature of the current, as well as earlier, eras of globalization – which is why social, political, or cultural connections linking “here” and “there” emerge where– and whenever international migration is found. But these long-

distance connections collide with other pressures, most notably illiberal, often coercive, efforts to enclose nation-state societies and bound a national community. Moreover, the advent of that collision is a historical event, entailing the rise of massive state apparatuses *controlling* population movements between states, and rationalizing distinctions between foreigners and citizens. Though immigrants (and their descendants) are not always caught in the cross-pressures, often maintaining attachments to both countries of origin and of adoption, the tensions inherent in an unstable world make the pursuit of cross-border attachments an uncertain game.

In the end, contemporary immigrants living “here” certainly act in ways that yield leverage “there.” However, they do so in ways that reflect the continuing presence of the past. It is possible that the foreign attachments of America’s immigrants will continue to experience the acceptance enjoyed in recent years. But the storm clouds stirred up since September 2001 should leave us all wondering whether the present may not also yield place to the past.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton. *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism Reconsidered*. New York, N.Y.: New York Academy of Sciences: 1992

<sup>2</sup> Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, “From immigrant to transmigrant: theorizing transnational migration,” *Anthropological Quarterly*, 68 (1): 52.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in a recent view essay on “Unpacking ‘Transnational Citizenship’”, Jonhathan Fox writes that “To focus the discussion, ‘transnational’ will be defined in

---

common sense terms as ‘trans-border’ (and therefore, technically, trans-state).” (Annual Review of Political Science, 2005: V 8, p. 172. Similarly, Alejandro Portes writes that “the concept of transnationalism, as used in the literature, refers primarily to the cross-border activities of private grass-roots actors, including immigrants.” (“Conclusion: Theoretical convergencies and empirical evidence in the study of immigrant transnationalism,” *International Migration Review*, V 37, 3 (2003), p. 875.

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of the scholarship on immigrant “transnationalism”, as well as the distinction between “long-distance particularism” and a transnationalism consistent with the word’s meaning, see Roger Waldinger and David Fitzgerald, “Transnationalism in Question,” *American Journal of Sociology*, (2004) V 109, 5: 1177-95. As Fox (*op. cit.*, p. 186) notes, Fitzgerald and I define transnationalism in ways that put us at odds with most sociologists writing on the topic. As Fox also notes, we insist that “long-distance nationalism is inherently ‘particularistic’”. One wonders how it could be otherwise.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Thistlethwaite. “Migration from Europe overseas during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries,” Pp. 73-92 in H. Moller, ed. *Population Movements in Modern European History*. New York: Macmillan: 1964.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Wyman, 1992, *Round-trip to America*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 1992; Bruno Ramirez. *On the Move: French Canadian and Italian Migrants in the North Atlantic Economy, 1860-1914*. Toronto: McClellan and Stewart: 1991; Dino Cinel. *The national integration of Italian return migration, 1870-1929*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

---

<sup>7</sup>Alejandro Portes, Luis E. Guarnizo, and Patricia Landolt. "The Study of Transnationalism: Pitfalls and Promise of an Emergent Research Field." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (1999) 22, 2: 217-37.

<sup>8</sup> Alejandro Portes, William J Haller, Luis Eduardo Guarnizo. "Transnational Entrepreneurs: An Alternative Form of Immigrant Economic Adaptation." *American Sociological Review*. (2002) V67, 2:184.

<sup>9</sup> Robert C Smith. "Diasporic Memberships in Historical Perspective: Comparative Insights from the Mexican, Italian, and Polish Cases," *International Migration Review*., (2003) V. 37, 3: 725.

<sup>10</sup> Nina Glick-Schiller. "Transmigrants and Nation-States: Something Old and Something New in the U.S. Immigrant Experience." pp. 94-119 in *The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience*, eds. Charles Hirschman, Philip Kasinitz, and Josh DeWind. New York: Russell Sage: 1999; Luis E. Guarnizo "On the Political Participation of Transnational Migrants: Old Practices and New Trends." Pp. 213-63 in *E Pluribus Unum? Contemporary and Historical Perspectives on Immigrant Political Incorporation*, eds Gary Gerstle and John H. Mollenkopf. New York: Russell Sage:



---

2001.; Peggy Levitt . *The Transnational Villagers*. Berkeley: University of California Press: 2001; Robert C. Smith. “Comparing Local-Level Swedish and Mexican Transnational Life: an Essay in Historical Retrieval.” in *Transnational Social Spaces*, L. Pries, ed. New York: Routledge: 2001;

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Loup Amselle. “Globalization and the Future of Anthropology.” *African Affairs*, (2002.) 101: 213-229

<sup>12</sup> Harold James. *The End of Globalization: Lessons from the Great Depression*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2001; Audie Klotz. “Transnational activism and global transformations: The anti-apartheid and abolitionist experiences” *European Journal of International Relations*. (2002) 8, 1:49-76..

<sup>13</sup> On the ways in which earlier transformations sending and receiving societies, see Jose C. Moya, *Cousins and strangers : Spanish immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850-1930*, Berkeley: University of California Press. 1998.

<sup>14</sup> As argued by, among others, Christian Joppke, (*Immigration and the nation-state : the United States, Germany, and Great Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1998) and Virginie Guiraudon, (‘Citizenship rights for non-citizens: France, Germany and the Netherlands’ in Christian Joppke, eds., *Challenge to the Nation-State: immigration in Western Europe and the United States*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1998.

---

<sup>15</sup> For background on the conflicts produced by divergent long-distance loyalties among ethnic Miamians, see the account in Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick, *City on the Edge*, Berkeley: University of California Press. 1993. Of course, events in contemporary Miami are neither new nor particular to that place. As the historical record shows, disputes based on home country polarities yield internecine conflicts that belie claims of a transnational “community” – as in “the war of the little Italies” earlier in the century (John P Diggins. *Mussolini and Fascism; the View from America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1972.) or clashes between nationalists and Communists in contemporary U.S. Chinatowns (Zai Liang, “Rules of the Game and Game of the Rules: The Politics of Recent Chinese Immigration to New York City.” *Migration, Transnationalization, and Race in a Changing New York*, edited by Hector Cordero-Guzman, et. al. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 2001). Alternatively, opposing home country loyalties can create adoptive country cleavages, as illustrated by contemporary disputes among Arab-American and Jewish Americans (Yossi Shain. *Marketing the American Creed Abroad: Diasporas in the U.S. and their Homelands*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1999) and the earlier frictions between African-Americans and Italian-Americans, spurred by Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia during the 1930s, or the discord between Japanese- and Chinese-Americans, provoked by Japan’s invasion of China (John F. Stack, Jr. *Ethnic Conflict in an International City*, Westport, CT: Greenwood. 1979).

<sup>16</sup> That “transnationalism” refers to so many different phenomena is one reason why the sociologist, David Fitzgerald, has called for the concept to be “retired.” While anything

---

approximating the immigrant “internationalism” of the last era of mass migration is rarely found today, migrant long-distance attachments take a variety of forms. Some connect to large social aggregates, such as the existing or would-be nation-states supported by the long-distance immigrant nationalists discussed in this paragraph. Others, probably more common, are linked to smaller units, as witnessed by the hometown association, a grassroots organization, ubiquitous wherever and whenever long-distance migration occurs. In other cases, as Fitzgerald notes, immigrants engaged in trans-state social action are practical “dual nationalists”, aspiring to legitimate membership in two states, whether possessing the legal status of dual national or not.

<sup>17</sup> Settlement propensities and remigration rates vary, both cross-sectionally and across time. Circular migration was more common during the last era of mass migration, with remigration rates close to or exceeding the 50 percent level for many of the southern or eastern European groups. Estimates for 1961-1980 peg emigration from the United States at roughly the 40 percent level. (See Guillermina Jasso and Mark Rosenzweig, *The New Chosen People: Immigrants in the United States*, New York: Russell Sage, 1990: 145)

That being said, settlement propensities still vary greatly at any given time. Earlier in the century, Jewish immigrants were far less likely to return to Europe than their contemporaries among the Slavs, who departed from the same places. Historically, Mexican migration has contained a large circular component, a pattern that remains true today. Homeland attachments, moreover, are affected by expectations, in addition to behavior, as the myth of return often holds on long after settlement is an established fact.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Piore, *Birds of Passage*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

---

<sup>19</sup> Henry Gemery, "Immigrants and Emigrants: International Migration and the U.S. Labor Market in the Great Depression," in Timothy J. Hatton and Jeffrey G. Williamson (eds.), Migration and the International Labor Market, 1850-1939 (Routledge, London, 1994) pp. 175-203. As restriction was never extended to the western hemisphere, its impact was never pervasive. In the west, and to some extent, the Midwest, migration from Mexico accelerated once employers lost access to labor supplies on the other side of the Atlantic. Until the mid-1930s, moreover, Filipinos, as American nationals, had free access to the continental U.S. labor market. In the industrial heartland and in the classic immigrant receiving cities, the restriction of labor migration across the Atlantic created opportunities for migrant workers from rural areas in the United States.

<sup>20</sup> As I argued in *Still the Promised City? African-Americans and New Immigrants in PostIndustrial New York*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1996.

<sup>21</sup> For further evidence, see David Fitzgerald, "A Nation of Emigrants? Statecraft, Church-Building, and Nationalism in Mexican Migrant Source Communities", Unpublished dissertation, UCLA, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Boskin. "Societies and Picnics as Stabilizing Forces in Southern California." *California Historical Quarterly*, XLIV, 2 (1965), 17-26.

<sup>23</sup> James N. Gregory. *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1989.

---

<sup>24</sup> Deborah Dash Moore. *To the Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and L.A.* New York: Macmillan: 1994

<sup>25</sup> Alejandro Portes, Luis E. Guarnizo, and Patricia Landolt, *op. cit*, p. 219

<sup>26</sup> Richard Alba and Victor Nee, *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2003.

<sup>27</sup> For a fuller development of this argument, see Roger Waldinger, “Foreigners Transformed: International Migration and the Making of a Divided People,” *Diaspora*, (2003): 12, 2: 247-72.

<sup>28</sup> Hannah Arendt. *The Age of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt. 1951. [1996]

<sup>29</sup> Arendt, *ibid*, p 294 and *passim*.

<sup>30</sup> On the extension of border controls following passage of the 1924 immigration act, see Ramirez, *op. cit* and Mae M. Ngai , *Impossible subjects : illegal aliens and the making of modern America* Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Timothy J. Dunn, *The militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border, 1978-1992 : low-intensity conflict doctrine comes home*. Austin, TX: CMAS Press, 1996.

---

<sup>32</sup> Wayne Cornelius, "Death at the Border: Efficacy and Unintended consequences of US Immigration Control Policy." *Population and Development Review*, (2001) v27, 4: 661-685.

<sup>33</sup> Douglas Massey, Jorge Durand, and Dumas Malone, *Beyond smoke and mirrors : Mexican immigration in an era of economic integration*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. 2002.

<sup>34</sup> Yasemin Soysal, *Limits of Citizenship*, University of Chicago Press, 1994.

<sup>35</sup> Aristide Zolberg, "Matters of State: Theorizing Immigration Policy," Pp. 71-92 in *The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience*, eds. Charles Hirschman, Philip Kasinitz, and Josh DeWind. New York: Russell Sage. 1999.

<sup>36</sup> Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed*. New York : Vintage Books, 1965.

<sup>37</sup> Isaac Desutscher, *The Prophet Outcast*. London, New York, Oxford University Press, 1963.

<sup>38</sup> Gil Loescher and John Scanlon, *Calculated kindness : refugees and America's half-open door, 1945 to the present*. New York : Free Press: 1986.

---

<sup>39</sup> Nina Glick-Schiller and Georges Fouron. "Everywhere We Go, We Are in Danger: Ti Manno and the Emergence of a Haitian Transnational Identity." *American Ethnologist*. v. 17, no. 2 (1990), pp. 341.

<sup>40</sup> Peggy Levitt and Mary Waters, ed. *The changing face of home : the transnational lives of the second generation*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. 2002.

<sup>41</sup> Mona Harrington. "Loyalties: Dual and Divided." pp. 676-86 in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, edited by Stephan Thernstrom. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 1980.

<sup>42</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm. *The age of extremes: a history of the world, 1914-1991*. New York: Pantheon: 1994.

<sup>43</sup> John A. Armstrong. "Proletarian and Mobilized Diasporas." *The American Political Science Review*. Vol. 70, No. 2. (1976), pp. 393-408.

<sup>44</sup> As I argued with David Fitzgerald in "Transnationalism in Question," *op cit*.

<sup>45</sup> See David Cole, *Enemy Aliens: Double Standards and Constitutional Freedoms in the War on Terrorism*. New York: The New Press. 2003 and Gary Gerstle, "The Immigrant as a Threat to American Security," Pp. 87-108 in John Tirman, ed. *The Maze of Fear:*

**Abstract**

**Immigrant “Transnationalism” and the Presence of the Past\***

by

Roger Waldinger

Scholars of “immigrant transnationalism” tell us that the case of contemporary migrants living “here” and “there” represents something new. Engaging with the historical and contemporary literatures, this chapter argues that the relationship between “immigrant transnationalism” now and then takes a far more complex form. The chapter highlights three different modalities of past/present connection:



- 
- *recurrence* -- the continued reappearance of trans-state immigrant and ethnic ties linking “here” and “there, a feature, however, generic to all long-distance migrations, whether international or internal;
  - *secular change* -- the rise of massive state apparatuses *controlling* population movements between states, and rationalizing distinctions between foreigners and citizens, and thereby impeding ties between host and home states;
  - *contingency [CONTINGENCY]* -- the political uncertainties inherent in the relationships among states, leading the shadow of war or international hostility to repeatedly fall over the trans-state social ties of immigrants and their descendants.

## **Roger Waldinger**

### **Biographical Sketch**

Roger Waldinger is Professor, Department of Sociology, UCLA. He is the author of numerous books, including: *How The Other Half Works: Immigration and the Social Organization of Labor* (with Michael Lichter; University of California Press, 2003); *Strangers at the Gates: New Immigrants in Urban America* (University of California Press, 2001) and *Still the Promised City? New Immigrants and African-Americans in Post-Industrial New York*,(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996; winner of

---

the Robert E. Park Award, American Sociological Association and the Best Urban Politics Book 1996 Award American Political Science Association); and *Ethnic Los Angeles* (edited with Mehdi Bozorgmehr, New York: Russell Sage Foundation Press, 1996; winner of the 1006 Thomas and Znaniecki Award, American Sociological Association). His current research focuses on trans-state immigrant and ethnic politics and on the labor market experience of the second generation, in both historical and contemporary periods.