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Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism

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Abstract

A review of recent research across several disciplines not surprisingly finds a wide variety of descriptions surrounding meanings, processes, scales and methods concerning the notion of ‘transnationalism.’ Here, several clusters or themes are suggested by way of disentangling the term. These include transnationalism as a social morphology, as a type of consciousness, as a mode of cultural reproduction, as an avenue of capital, as a site of political engagement, and as a reconstruction of ‘place’ or locality. These and other approaches to transnationalism are being explored in a newly commissioned ESRC research programme on Transnational Communities (see <http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk>).

keywords: transnationalism, transnational communities, diasporas, global networks

To the extent that any single ‘-ism’ might arguably exist, most social scientists working in the field may agree that ‘transnationalism’ broadly refers to multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states. Of course, there are many historical precedents and parallels to such patterns (see for instance Bamyeh 1993 as well as the introduction to this special issue).

Transnationalism (as long-distance networks) certainly preceded ‘the nation.’ Yet today these systems of ties, interactions, exchange and mobility function intensively and in real time while being spread throughout the world. New technologies, especially involving telecommunications, serve to connect such networks with increasing speed and efficiency. Transnationalism describes a condition in which,

despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders (and all the laws, regulations and national narratives they represent), certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common -- however virtual -- arena of activity (see among others, Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton-Blanc 1992, Hannerz 1996, Castells 1996).

Transnationalism represents a topic of rapidly growing interest witnessed in the proliferation of academic articles, university seminars and conferences devoted to exploring its nature and contours. While broadly remaining relevant to the description of 'transnationalism' offered above, however, most of this burgeoning work refers to quite variegated phenomena. We have seen increasing numbers of studies on 'transnational...' communities, capital flows, trade, citizenship, corporations, inter-governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, politics, services, social movements, social networks, families, migration circuits, identities, public spaces, public cultures. These are obviously phenomena of very different natures, requiring research and theorization on different scales and levels of abstraction. In the excited rush to address an interesting area of global activity and theoretical development, there is not surprisingly much conceptual muddling.

It is a useful exercise, therefore, to step back at this point in order to review and sort out the expanding repertoire of ideas and approaches so as perhaps to gain a better view as to what we are talking about as transnationalism is variously discussed.

Transnationalism as...

The different 'takes' on the subject are of course not exclusive; indeed, some rely on others. Nevertheless, the meaning of transnationalism has been variously grounded upon arguably distinct conceptual premises, of which six merit closer scrutiny.

1. social morphology. The meaning of transnationalism which has perhaps been gaining most attention among sociologists and anthropologists has to do with a kind of social formation spanning borders. Ethnic diasporas -- what Kachig Tölölyan (1991, p. 5) has called 'the exemplary communities of the transnational moment' -- have become the paradigm in this understanding of transnationalism. To be sure, diasporas embody a variety of historical and contemporary conditions, characteristics, trajectories and experiences (see Tölölyan 1996, Cohen 1997, van Hear 1998), and the meaning of the term 'diaspora' itself has been interpreted widely by contemporary observers (Vertovec 1998). One of the hallmarks of diaspora as a social form is the 'triadic relationship' (Sheffer 1986, Safran 1991) between (a) globally dispersed yet collectively self-identified ethnic groups, (b) the territorial states and contexts where such groups reside, and (c) the homeland states and contexts whence they or their forebears came.

Another feature central to the analysis of transnational social formations are structures or systems of relationships best described as networks. This is a handle on the phenomena in line with Manuel Castells' (1996) analysis of the current Information Age. The network's component parts -- connected by nodes and hubs -- are both autonomous from, and dependent upon, its complex system of relationships. New technologies are at the heart of today's transnational networks, according to Castells. The technologies do not altogether create new social patterns but they certainly reinforce pre-existing ones.

Dense and highly active networks spanning vast spaces are transforming many kinds of social, cultural, economic and political relationships. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992, p. 9) contend that 'Something like a transnational public sphere has

certainly rendered any strictly bounded sense of community or locality obsolete. At the same time, it has enabled the creation of forms of solidarity and identity that do not rest on an appropriation of space where contiguity and face-to-face contact are paramount.' Further, Frederic E. Wakeman (1988, p. 86) suggests that the 'loosening of the bonds between people, wealth, and territories' which is concomitant with the rise of complex networks 'has altered the basis of many significant global interactions, while simultaneously calling into question the traditional definition of the state.'

In these ways the dispersed diasporas of old have become today's 'transnational communities' sustained by a range of modes of social organization, mobility and communication (see especially Guarnizo and Smith 1998). In addition to the longstanding ethnic diasporas and newer migrant populations which now function as transnational communities, many illegal and violent social networks also operate transnationally as well. For the United States Department of Defense, transnationalism means terrorists, insurgents, opposing factions in civil wars conducting operations outside their country of origin, and members of criminal groups (Secretary of Defense 1996). These kinds of cross-border activities involving such things as trafficking in drugs, pornography, people, weapons, and nuclear material, as well as in the laundering of the proceeds, themselves require transnational measures and structures to combat them (see for instance Williams and Savona 1996, Stares 1996, Castells 1998).

2. *type of consciousness*. Particularly in works concerning global diasporas (especially within Cultural Studies) there is considerable discussion surrounding a kind of 'diaspora consciousness' marked by dual or multiple identifications. Hence there are

depictions of individuals' awareness of decentred attachments, of being simultaneously 'home away from home,' 'here and there' or, for instance, British and something else. 'While some migrants identify more with one society than the other,' write Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Szanton-Blanc (1992, p. 11), 'the majority seem to maintain several identities that link them simultaneously to more than one nation.' Indeed, James Clifford (1994, p. 322) finds, 'The empowering paradox of diaspora is that dwelling here assumes a solidarity and connection there. But there is not necessarily a single place or an exclusivist nation. ...[It is] the connection (elsewhere) that makes a difference (here).'

Of course it is a common consciousness or bundle of experiences which bind many people into the social forms or networks noted in the section above. The awareness of multi-locality stimulates the desire to connect oneself with others, both 'here' and 'there' who share the same 'routes' and 'roots' (see Gilroy 1987, 1993). For Stuart Hall (1990), the condition of diaspora or transnationalism is comprised of ever-changing representations that provide an 'imaginary coherence' for a set of malleable identities. Robin Cohen (1996, p. 516) develops Hall's point with the observation that 'transnational bonds no longer have to be cemented by migration or by exclusive territorial claims. In the age of cyberspace, a diaspora can, to some degree, be held together or re-created through the mind, through cultural artefacts and through a shared imagination.' A wealth of personal and collective meanings and perspectives may subsequently be transformed, such that, as Donald M. Nonini and Aihwa Ong (1997) describe, transnationalism presents us with 'new subjectivities in the global arena.'

Further aspects of diasporic consciousness are explored by Arjun Appadurai & Carol Breckenridge (1989, p. i), who suggest that whatever their form or trajectory,

‘diasporas always leave a trail of collective memory about another place and time and create new maps of desire and of attachment.’ Yet these are often collective memories ‘whose archaeology is fractured’ (Ibid.). Compounding the awareness of multi-locality, the ‘fractured memories’ of diaspora consciousness produce a multiplicity of histories, ‘communities’ and selves – a refusal of fixity often serving as a valuable resource for resisting repressive local or global situations.

Finally, in addition to transformations of identity, memory, awareness and other modes of consciousness, a new ‘the transnational imaginary’ (Wilson and Dissanayake 1996) can be observed reshaping a multitude of forms of contemporary cultural production.

3. mode of cultural reproduction

In one sense depicted as a shorthand for several processes of cultural interpenetration and blending, transnationalism is often associated with a fluidity of constructed styles, social institutions and everyday practices. These are often described in terms of syncretism, creolization, bricolage, cultural translation, and hybridity. Fashion, music, film and visual arts are some of the most conspicuous areas in which such processes are observed. The production of hybrid cultural phenomena manifesting ‘new ethnicities’ (Hall 1991) is especially to be found among transnational youth whose primary socialisation has taken place with the cross-currents of differing cultural fields. Among such young people, facets of culture and identity are often self-consciously selected, syncretised and elaborated from more than one heritage.

An increasingly significant channel for the flow of cultural phenomena and the transformation of identity is through global media and communications. Appadurai & Breckenridge (1989, p. iii) comment that ‘Complex transnational flows of media

images and messages perhaps create the greatest disjunctures for diasporic populations, since in the electronic media in particular, the politics of desire and imagination are always in contest with the politics of heritage and nostalgia.' Gayatri Spivak (1989, p. 276) describes 'the discourse of cultural specificity and difference, packaged for transnational consumption' through global technologies, particularly through the medium of 'microelectronic transnationalism' represented by electronic bulletin boards and the Internet.

Many other forms of globalized media are having considerable impact on cultural reproduction among transnational communities too, e.g. diasporic literature (for example, Chow 1993, King, Connell and White 1995). Concerning television Kevin Robins (1998) describes aspects of de-regulation affecting broadcasting regions that effect the emergence of 'new cultural spaces' necessitating a 'new global media map.' The expansion of satellite and cable networks has seen the spread of channels targeting specific ethnic or religious diasporas, such as Med TV for Kurds, Zee TV for Indians, and Space TV Systems for Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese and Koreans. Viewing is not solely passive, and there are emerging multiple and complex ways in which these media are consumed (see for instance Gillespie 1995, Morley and Robins 1995, Shohat and Stam 1996).

4. avenue of capital

Many economists, sociologists and geographers have seen transnational corporations (TNCs) as the major institutional form of transnational practices and the key to understanding globalisation (see for instance Sklair 1995). This is due not least to the sheer scale of operations, since much of the world's economic system is dominated by the TNCs (Dicken 1992). TNCs represent globe-spanning structures or networks that

are presumed to have largely jettisoned their national origins. Their systems of supply, production, marketing, investment, information transfer and management often create the paths along which much of the world's transnational activities flow (cf. Castells 1996).

Alongside the TNCs, Leslie Sklair (1998) proposes that there has arisen a transnational capitalist class comprised of TNC executives, globalizing state bureaucrats, politicians and professionals, and consumerist elites in merchandizing and the media. Together, Sklair claims, they constitute a new power elite whose interests are global, rather than exclusively local or national, and who thereby control most of the world economy.

In addition to the Big Players in the global economy, however, the little players who comprise the bulk of transnational communities are making an ever greater impact. The relatively small amounts of money which migrants transfer as remittances to their places of origin now add up to at least \$75 billion world-wide (Martin 1994). The scale of this activity has soared over the past thirty years: in Algeria, the value of remittances climbed from \$178 million in 1970 to \$993 million in 1993, in India from \$80 million in 1970 to over \$3 billion in 1993, and in Egypt from \$29 million in 1970 to nearly \$5 billion in 1993 (World Bank 1995).

Beyond what they mean to the families receiving them, for national governments remittances represent the quickest and surest source of foreign exchange. Indeed, a great number of national economies today, such as the Philippines, Pakistan and many Latin American states, absolutely depend on monetary transfers of many kinds from 'nationals' abroad. This fact has prompted many countries to develop policies for the 'transnational reincorporation' of 'nationals' abroad into the home market and polity (Guarnizo and Smith 1998). One often cited

case is India, which provides a range of favourable conditions for ‘non-resident Indians’ (NRIs) to use their foreign-honed skills and capital to invest in, found or resuscitate Indian industries (Lessinger 1992; cf. *The Economist* 6 June 1998). Such policies have impacts beyond the economic dimension. As Katharyne Mitchell (1997b, p. 106) observes, ‘the interest of the state in attracting the investments of wealthy transmigrants widens the possibilities for new kinds of national narratives and understandings.’

Resources do not just flow back to people’s country of origin but to and fro and throughout the network. Robin Cohen (1997, p. 160) describes part of this dynamic; anywhere within the web of a global diaspora,

Traders place order with cousins, siblings and kin ‘back home’; nieces and nephews from ‘the old country’ stay with uncles and aunts while acquiring their education or vocational training; loans are advanced and credit is extended to trusted intimates; and jobs and economically advantageous marriages are found for family members.

The strategy is often one of spreading assets (particularly if one of the geographic contexts of activity – ‘at home’ or ‘away’ -- is deemed unstable for reasons of political turmoil, racism, legal bureaucracy, shrinking labour market or simply bad business environment). While many transnational communities have found themselves dispersed for reasons of forced migration (van Hear 1998), others have largely spread themselves for economic reasons. Thus among the Chinese diaspora, Nonini and Ong (1997, p. 4) state that ‘it is impossible to understand such transnational phenomena unless strategies of accumulation by Chinese under capitalism are examined, for such strategies penetrate these phenomena and are in turn affected by them.’ Yet while economic objectives may be catalyst to the

formation of transnational groupings, such activities give rise to a host of others. Transnational activities are cumulative in character, Alejandro Portes (1998, p. 14) notes, and 'while the original wave of these activities may be economic and their initiators can be properly labeled transnational entrepreneurs, subsequent activities encompass political, social, and cultural pursuits as well.'

5. site of political engagement

'[T]here is a new dialectic of global and local questions which do not fit into national politics,' writes Ulrich Beck (1998, p. 29), and 'only in a transnational framework can they be properly posed, debated and resolved.'

Such a transnational framework -- a global public space or forum -- has been actualized largely through technology. Publishing and communications technologies makes possible rapid and far-reaching forms of information dissemination, publicity and feedback, mobilization of support, enhancement of public participation and political organization, and lobbying of intergovernmental organizations (see Alger 1997, Castells 1997). Certainly much needs to be done to realize the full civic potential offered by these, yet a considerable amount of political activity is now undertaken transnationally.

The most obvious and conventional forms of such activity are represented by international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), including the International Red Cross and various United Nations agencies. Their number has been rapidly increasing and in 1993 INGOs totaled 4,830 (Kriesberg 1997). The transnational dimensions are reflected in their ability to provide and distribute resources (especially from constituent bodies in wealthy countries to ones in poorer countries), facilitate complimentary or cross-cutting support in political campaigns, and provide safe

havens abroad for activities of resistance which are illegal or dangerous in home contexts. However many INGOs, claims Louis Kriesberg (Ibid.), simply reflect the status quo of hierarchy and power. Transnational Social Movement Organizations (TSMOs), on the other hand, are INGOs that seek to change the status quo on a variety of levels. 'TSMOs,' according to Kriesberg (Ibid., p. 12) 'work for progressive change in the areas of the environment, human rights, and development as well as for conservative goals like opposition to family planning or immigration.' The issues which concern TSMOs themselves are transboundary in character, and they draw upon a 'planetization' of people's understandings (Cohen 1998). Citing information published in the 1993 *Yearbook of International Organizations*, Jackie Smith (1997) observes that among 631 TSMOs twenty-seven per cent are explicitly concerned with human rights, fourteen per cent with the environment, ten per cent with women's rights, nine per cent with peace, eight per cent 'world order/multi-issue', five per cent with development, and five per cent 'self-determination/ethnic.'

Transnational political activities are also undertaken by ethnic diasporas. Robin Cohen (1995, p. 13) reasons that 'Awareness of their precarious situation may also propel members of diasporas to advance legal and civic causes and to be active in human rights and social justice issues.' Yet the nature of much diasporic politics is quite contested. Katharyne Mitchell (1997a) deeply criticises the assumptions of many postmodernist theorists (especially Homi Bhabha 1994) who contend that hybrid, diasporic 'third space' standpoints are inherently anti-essentialist and subversive of dominant hegemonies of race and nation. Mary Kaldor (1996) points to the presence of both cosmopolitan anti-nationalists and reactionary ethno-nationalists within diasporas. And Arjun Appadurai (1995, p. 220) writes that among transnational communities,

These 'new patriotisms' are not just the extensions of nationalist and counter-nationalist debates by other means, though there is certainly a good deal of prosthetic nationalism and politics by nostalgia involved in the dealings of exiles with their erstwhile homelands. They also involve various rather puzzling new forms of linkage between diasporic nationalisms, delocalized political communications and revitalized political commitments at both ends of the diasporic process.

The 'politics of homeland' engage members of diasporas or transnational communities in a variety of ways. The relations between immigrants, home-country politics and politicians have always been dynamic, as Matthew Frye Jacobson (1995) and Nancy Foner (1997) remind us with regard to Irish, Italians, Poles and Jews in turn-of-the-century America. Yet now expanded activities and intensified links are creating, in many respects, 'deterritorialized' nation-states (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994). Political parties now often establish offices abroad in order to canvass immigrants, while immigrants themselves organise to lobby the home government. Emigrants increasingly are able to maintain or gain access to health and welfare benefits, property rights, voting rights, or citizenship in more than one country (around half the world's countries recognise dual citizenship or dual nationality; see 'Traces' world news digest No. 1 on the Transnational Communities Programme website, URL address below). Other forms of recognition have developed as well. For instance, in Haiti, a country that is politically divided into nine departments or states, during President Aristide's regime overseas Haitians were recognized as the Tenth Department complete with its own ministry (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994). And in one of the strangest cases of transnational politics, the government of El Salvador has provided free legal assistance to political

refugees (fleeing their own regime!) in the United States so that they may obtain asylum and remain there, remitting some \$1 billion annually (Mahler 1998).

6. (re)construction of 'place' or locality

Practices and meanings derived from specific geographical and historical points of origin have always been transferred and regrounded. Today, a high degree of human mobility, telecommunications, films, video and satellite TV, and the Internet have contributed to the creation of trans-local understandings. Yet these are nevertheless anchored in places, with a variety of legal, political and cultural ramifications, not only for the practices and meanings, but for the places as well (cf. Kearney 1995, Hannerz 1996).

Some analysts have proposed that transnationalism has changed people's relations to space particularly by creating 'social fields' that connect and position some actors in more than one country (Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton-Blanc 1992, Castells 1996, Goldring 1998). Appadurai (1995, p. 213) discerns that many people face increasing difficulties of relating to, or indeed producing, 'locality' ('as a structure of feeling, a property of life and an ideology of situated community'). This, he reckons, is due not least to a condition of transnationalism which is characterised by, among other things, 'the growing disjuncture between territory, subjectivity and collective social movement' and by 'the steady erosion of the relationship, principally due to the force and form of electronic mediation, between spatial and virtual neighbourhoods.' There have emerged, instead, new 'translocalities' (Appadurai 1995, Goldring 1998, Smith 1998).

Researching transnationalism

The subject of transnationalism is receiving ever greater attention through a range of approaches and disciplines. Nonini and Ong (1997, p. 13), however, are critical the creeping dilution of research by a cultural studies approach ‘that treats transnationalism as a set of abstracted, dematerialized cultural flows, giving scant attention either to the concrete, everyday changes in people’s lives or to the structural reconfiguration that accompany global capitalism’ (cf. Mitchell 1997a,b).

While there is certainly much to be learned about the construction and management of meaning offered by cultural studies, there is immediate need for more, in-depth and comparative empirical studies of transnational human mobility, communication, social ties, channels and flows of money, commodities, information and images – as well as how these phenomena are made use of. As well as helping us understanding the rapid forms of change (and their historical antecedents) which transnationalism represents, more social scientific studies will help us to recognize how and why, as Nancy Foner (1997: 23) puts it, ‘some groups [and places] are likely to be more transnational than others – and we need research that explores and explains the differences. Within immigrant groups, there is also variation in the frequency, depth and range of transnational ties.’

Luis Eduardo Guarnizo and Michael Peter Smith (1998) outline some serious shortcomings in contemporary theorization of transnationalism. Perhaps foremost among these is the question of the appropriate level of analysis and the connection between scales. In the introduction to this special issue, Alejandro Portes, Luis E. Guarnizo and Patricia Landolt (1998) have addressed these issues and made significant strides in establishing, delimiting, analytically defining and typologizing transnational phenomena.

George E. Marcus (1995) has provided a useful methodological outline of ‘multi-sited ethnography’ essential to the study of transnationalism. Such research involves ‘tracing a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity’ (Ibid., p. 96) by way of methods ‘designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations’ (Ibid., p. 105). Marcus advocates approaches which either ‘follow the...’ people (especially migrants), the thing (commodities, gifts, money, works of art, and intellectual property), the metaphor (including signs and symbols or images), the plot, story or allegory (narratives of everyday experience or memory), the life or biography (of exemplary individuals), or the conflict (issues contested in public space).

While broadly concurring with the advantages of such a methodology, Ulf Hannerz (1998) adds that ‘the research may need to be not merely multilocal but also translocal. ...Serious effort must thus be devoted to an adequate conceptualization and description of the translocal linkages, and the interconnections between these and the localized social traffic.’ Hannerz (Ibid.) also sees the need for collaborative, multi-disciplinary teamwork among colleagues in a variety of locations, themselves supported by the new information and telecommunications technologies. Following and drawing upon all these approaches and insights, a major new multidisciplinary research programme has been developed with the aim of advancing both our empirical knowledge and theoretical understanding of contemporary forms of transnationalism.

ESRC Research Programme on Transnational Communities

In 1997 the Economic and Social Research Council of Great Britain (ESRC) launched a £3.8 million (\$7 million) research programme on the subject of Transnational Communities. Following a national call for projects, some 170 proposals were

received. Together with a Selection Committee comprised of fourteen academics and non-academics, over 250 peer referees contributed toward the final choice of projects to be funded. Nineteen projects have been commissioned, some within a single discipline, but most linking several. While the programme's Directorship is based at Oxford University, the projects themselves are managed from a variety of British universities with multi-site research to be undertaken throughout the world.

The programme projects will be linked by common methodological concerns surrounding the formation and maintenance of 'community' based especially on social, economic and political networks, the construction and expression of identity focused on the refashioning of cultural forms and symbols, and the reproduction or contestation of social relations including issues of gender and power. The projects are grouped under four themes (which co-incidentally parallel themes proposed in the introduction to this special issue):

1. NEW APPROACHES TO MIGRATION

- *Comparative Diasporas* – commissioned studies within this theme look at notions of incorporation within the Armenian diaspora, Hungarians of Hungary's periphery, Soviet Jews and *Aussiedler* (returned 'ethnic Germans') in Germany;
- *Transversal Migration* – projects here concern the social and cultural communities of seafarers and the expansion of transnational Chinese migration circuits;
- *Refugees and Asylum-Seekers* – comprised of comparative research on the role of exiles in post-conflict reconstruction in Eritrea and Bosnia;

2. ECONOMICS

- *Global Economic Networks* – a theme representing a core area of the programme, including a study of the Russian diaspora and post-Soviet economic restructuring, research on British experts in global financial centres, an examination of Chinese

global entrepreneurship with special reference to Southeast Asia, plus a study of production and marketing strategies surrounding commodity flows between India and Britain;

- *Transnational Corporations (TNCs)* – focused on a study of Japanese and Korean corporations and their managers in Britain;

- *Transnational Household Strategies* – work assessing the impact of legal status and children on the strategies of female migrant domestic workers in Britain, plus research on remittance patterns among Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in Britain;

3. POLITICS

- *Global Political Networks* – includes research on Turkish political networks in Europe and on the indigenous people's movement and its localization in Ecuador and Bolivia;

- *City, Region, National and Supra-National Policies* – consisting of a comparative study of dual citizenship strategies, of the state and of immigrants, in Canada, Germany and Britain;

- *Gender, Communities and Power* – addressed by a project examining gendered aspects of British and Singaporean transmigration to China;

4. SOCIETY AND CULTURE

- *Social Forms and Institutions* – concentrating on a set of three inter-linked projects concerning culture flows in societies of the Arab Gulf;

- *Cultural Reproduction and Consumption* – addressed by two teams, one concerned with literature and film within a variety of diasporas, the other with the place of broadcast media among Turks in Europe;

- *Transnational Religious Communities* – devoted to a multi-sited study of a prominent Sufi Muslim movement.

While conducted independently, the projects will gain a kind of synergy through their co-ordination as a programme.

The programme does not exist solely for the projects, however. Other facets include: a weekly seminar series; an annual conference, each year devoted to one of the programme's key themes; workshops organized within Britain and abroad focusing on a variety of issues and bringing together academics and non-academics. A Working Paper series including papers by such distinguished writers as Alejandro Portes (1998), Zygmunt Baumann (1998) and Stephen Castles (1998) has been established in both hardcopy and internet-downloadable formats. The Transnational Communities programme will also be supporting a newsletter, world news digest, and three book series. Information on the projects and all other aspects of the research programme can be found on the ESRC Transnational Communities Programme website (<http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk>).

Although invoked with a variety of meanings, 'transnationalism' provides an umbrella concept for some of the most globally transformative processes and developments of our time. The term's multi-vocality may actually prove to be advantageous: as Alejandro Portes (1998, p. 2) points out, 'the concept may actually perform double duty as part of the theoretical arsenal with which we approach the world system structures, but also as an element in a less developed enterprise, namely the analysis of the everyday networks and patterns of social relationships that emerge in and around those structures.' The ESRC Transnational Communities Programme, working in conjunction with parallel projects and programmes in Europe, North America and the Asia-Pacific will add significant new data and analyses to test some of transnationalism's more speculative conceptualizations.

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