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Negotiation of Identity in Transnational Contexts.
The Case of Romanian Temporary Workers in Italy

Abstract

This paper[1] looks at migrants' negotiation of identity in transnational contexts. Intra-EU migration has brought about changes in the nature and significance of citizenship, social relations and symbolic ties in communities. The transnational interconnectivity between homeland communities and the diaspora poses a challenge to discourses of national belonging. Under current deterritorialized experiences and technological advances, the simultaneous incorporation of migrants within and across national entities sees the advent of plural representations of identity and national societies. In our analysis of interviews carried with Romanians working in Italy we started from the assumption that temporary workforce migration is a specific type of transnational context, which generates new cultural practices and requires migrants to define ways of belonging towards the host and home countries and to negotiate identitarian attributes. Our hypothesis is that in this transnational context the migrants do not employ attributes of essentialist identity in routine discourses about themselves, but rather strategically mobilize these attributes in order to justify the dynamics of belonging to home or host countries.

Keywords: transnational social spaces; methodological transnationalism; Romanian migrants; identity; belonging.

Introduction

The diaspora, as a particular form of collective life in a transnational context, is the locus of many discourses on the significance of the homeland, identity, citizenship and ethical deliberation on good governance and society, in general. The existence of migrants forces the national state to permanently revise its hegemonic constructions of national identity. There is much negotiation of social meaning in diasporic communities, mainly because migrants have to navigate multiple allegiances towards different political systems, societies and claims on their identity.

Among the paradoxes of the diaspora is the permanent quest for the homeland, while actively engaging in the construction of transnational social fields. "Home" is unattainable, be-

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cause migrants' present lives have been allowed by this distancing. The spatial constraints "act as dialectical determinants of a moral imagination" (Quayson & Daswani, 2013, p. 18). The alienation and feeling of loss that ensue can sometimes encourage active, deterritorialized nationalism and convergence of political commitments, despite the variety of attachments to the idea of nation or, for that matter, the discontinuity and heterogeneity of diasporic experience.

The dynamics of this negotiable version of belonging depends on the relationship with both the home and host country and on the ties with the community back home or with other members of the diaspora. Recent research shows that in Romania "the topic of new migration is strategically used in the public space, determining the adoption of positions, agendas and forms of institutionalisation" (Beciu, 2013, p. 41). "The instrumentalization of the migration problem and its actors through essentialist mechanisms of inclusion" (Beciu & Lazar, 2015, p. 39) is in fact one of the staples of media discourse on labour migration in the EU.

In this context, we will investigate the dynamics of identity negotiation in a particular group, temporary workers in Italy. In our analysis of interviews carried with Romanians working in Italy we started from the assumption that temporary workforce migration is a specific type of transnational context, which generates new cultural practices and requires migrants to define ways of belonging towards the host and home countries and to negotiate identitarian attributes.

Literature review

Intra-EU migration has brought about changes in the nature and significance of citizenship, social relations and symbolic ties in communities. Early studies on migration focused on migrants' social dynamics in host countries, with analysts developing various conceptual frameworks to explain migrants' new status as either incorporation, assimilation, hybridization or multiculturalism (Alexander, 2006; Kivisto, 2005). Free circulation among EU borders, together with easy access to communication means and transportation systems, created new forms of overlapping identities, which challenged essentialist visions on bounded ethnic identities and national allegiances, highlighting the reality of transnational social spaces.

This new reality required a new theoretical framework which could account for the new social relations and new society emerging from cross-border encounters. The embedded assumptions of methodological nationalism were that nation-states are the relevant unit of analysis for social practices (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002), which was true in the 19th and 20th century, when social sciences became established as a field of study (Levitt & Khagram, 2008). "Methodological nationalism is the naturalization of the nation-state by the social sciences" (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2008, p. 104), because what is esentially a political/geographic limitation (the boundaries of the nation-state) is taken as the natural unit of analysis. In this respect, "diasporas are emblems of transnationalism because they embody the question of borders, which is at the heart of any adequate definition of the Others of the nation-state" (Tölölyan, 2008, p. 233). Conceptual categories such as race, ethnicity, nation are hegemonic constructions reflective of relations of culture and power and structurally pertaining to nation-building processes; migrants challenge these hegemonic categories, which need to accommodate migrants' identity and practices: "transmigrants of all classes live a complex existence that forces them to confront, draw upon, and rework different hegemonic construc-

tions of identity developed in their home or new nation-state(s)" (Basch, Glick Schiller & Szanton Blanc, 2008, p. 269).

These assumptions were challenged by methodological transnationalism (Khagram & Levitt, 2008), which addresses unhomogeneous, global political communities and multiple social relations in their complexity. The transnational optic (Faist, 1998; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002) looks beyond the nation-state, the traditional place of inquiry, toward the actual dynamic of social life, to see "when and how immigrants have managed to remain connected to and involved in their homelands" (Kivisto & Faist, 2010, p. 159). Early studies on transnationalism found that transmigrants not only move freely across borders, but connect host and home countries through "multi-stranded social relations" (Basch et al., 2008, p. 263). These cross-border relationships are the rule, rather than the exception; "migrants are often embedded in multi-layered, multi-sited transnational social fields" (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2008, p. 284).

Opening up the analytical perspective to a global scale has forced methodological transnationalism to renounce attempts to establish the primacy of one global context over another, or even over national ties (Nieswand, 2011, p. 36). It has also acknolwledged the reality of fluid identities – in contrast with both assimilation and cultural pluralism, which share a rather essentialist view of identity, in that they see it as immutable.

The transnational interconnectivity between homeland communities and the diaspora poses a challenge to discourses of national belonging. Previous analytical frameworks saw members of the diaspora bound together by territorial restrictions and a shared memory of the homeland. Under current deterritorialized experiences and technological advances, the simultaneous incorporation of migrants within and across national entities sees the advent of plural representations of identity and national societies. This simultaneous incorporation of migrants in global/local/national entities at different times can be activated by various factors and events and this heterogeneity (and unpredictability) of identity requires some innovation in the methodological tools.

The transnational optic moves the analytical focus from the cultural consequences of transnationalism (Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1996) to migrants' social relations. "Advocates for a transnational perspective argue that we ought not confine our subject matter to the boundaries of nation states, but instead consider the impacts of immigration on transnational social spaces that penetrate into two or more nation-states" (Kivisto & Faist, 2010, p. 8). The transnational lens reveals social processes and institutions that could not be visible under "the nation-state container theory of society" (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2008, pp. 284-286).

A transnational perspective on migration encourages several types of analyses (Levitt & Khagram, 2008, p. 11): analyzing one transnational form or process across space or time, various transnational activities (such as migration networks), interactions among forms of transnationalism, comparisons between transnational and bounded phenomena and the way they interact or compete with each other, as well as the circulation of ideas, symbols and material culture through networked social fields.

In a special issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Portes et al. (1999) delimited the unit of analysis of transnationalism: the individuals and their support networks (Portes, Guarnizo & Landolt, 2008, p. 277), in contrast with earlier studies on migration, which focused on either migrant community dynamics or governmental actions to integrate migrants. They also warned of the danger of assimilating all cross-border activities to transnationalism: to qualify, they need to have reached critical mass through high intensity of exchanges and complexity and

to be stable in time. Only migrants with higher levels of social capital can develop enduring transnational ties. Portes et al. also question the transmission of transnational ties to second generation migrants and conclude by treating transnationalism as one possible outcome of the new context of migration. In this respect, assimilation and transnationalism can be simultaneous, for instance (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

Faist (2000) broadens the scope of the new conceptual framework by placing it in a tradition of thought. Transnationalism overlaps with the world systems theory (following the relations of power between the center and periphery) and globalization studies (focusing on the effects of deterritorialization). Early transnationalist studies used the term "social fields" in the tradition of Bourdieu and the Manchester School. Levitt and Glick Schiller define the social field as "a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized and transformed" (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2008, p. 286). Social fields contain institutions, organisations and experiences "that generate categories of identity that are ascribed to or chosen by individuals or groups" (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2008, p. 287). People in transnational social fields are exposed to various layers of power that force a positioning towards identity.

Faist coins a new term, "transnational social space", which involves the circulation of ideas, symbols and material culture in the context of migration, and the social life, values and meanings that are born from a transnational context. Unlike Portes et al., in his analyses Faist includes transnational communities that share an ethnic collective identity, developing in a space that unites two or more nation states. Among transnational social spaces he includes kinship groups as well, to account for various remittances, and transnational circuits, around which various economic ties are structured. Consequently, the analyst can follow the migrant's involvement with various civic and governmental institutions in both host and home countries. Other relevant transnational practices are transnational entrepreneurship and political/social activism.

Some analyses, however, find that there is "continuing centrality of nation-states in regulating and policing migration and perceptions of migrant populations" (Werbner, 2013, p. 120); moreover, "the dismissal of the nation-state by transnational theorists as an instance of methodological nationalism is ironically denied by migrants themselves" (Werbner, 2013, p. 109). Migrants frame their experience with nation-states in terms of visa regualtions, work permits, rights and benefits, status and citizenship. In this circumstance, it is valid to ask whether migrant experiences are illustrative of rupture, rather than simultaneity, and of simultaneous attachment to two or more countries, rather than cosmopolitan engagement with a transnational social field. For instance, social remittances in the home country could then be taken as an instance of cosmopolitanization, rather than progress of migrants' social capital. The analyst should then focus on rupture and transnational networking with a holistic understanding of migrants' sociality: "the social universe of transnationalism is neither binary nor fixed at the moment of migration; on the contrary, it is expansive and incorporative, enabling new moral relationships in and across space as transnational migrants root themselves ontologically and experientially in their places of settlement – but without abandoning home" (Werbner, 2013, p. 120).

In this respect, Beck and Levy warned against cosmopolitanism as the analytical idiom opposed to methodological nationalism, because it is a normative concept, rather than an analytical tool, and can at best replace an essentialized notion of nationalism with a universal version of belonging (Beck & Levy, 2013). While social scientists agree on the constructed

nature of nationalism, they have not developed an equally constructivist perspective on the future of nations, under the current context of transnational migration and global experiences. Cosmopolitization (the proliferation of cosmopolitan affiliations) will be an essential process in nation-building, rather than an exclusionary force (Beck & Levy, 2013, p. 4), and cosmopolitan nations will be forged through an awareness of risks in the world society.

Methodology

In our analysis we started from the assumption that temporary workforce migration is a specific type of transnational context, which generates new cultural practices and requires migrants to define ways of belonging towards the host and home countries and to negotiate identitarian attributes. We wanted to see if the migrant defines himself in terms of essentialist national identity. When does he build solidarity with the people back home and when does he appeal to reflexive distancing? Is belonging defined in terms of responsibility towards the home country or towards other economic migrants? *Our hypothesis is that in this transnational context the migrants do not employ attributes of essentialist identity in routine discourses about themselves, but rather strategically mobilize these attributes in order to justify the dynamics of belonging to home or host countries.* In other words, the appeal to Romanianness (values and meanings, eternal symbols, cultural practices) is discursively employed when the migrants seek to increase or decrease distance from the home or the host country.

Furthermore, we expect a lack of reference to essentialist identitarian attributes in descriptions of transnational contexts. Temporary economic migration will be referred to in pragmatic, punctual terms, as economic or career opportunities, and mobility will be seen as a resource in a cosmopolitan understanding of the European economic context. In this respect, "adaptability", for instance, which presupposes border-bound traits of character, will not be invoked by economic migrants who do not necessarily seek to integrate in the host country. They recontextualize belonging partly because they see Europe as a continuous, fluid, cosmopolitan space, partly because of technological advances, that allow them to reconnect with the home community and lead simultaneous lives.

Another point of interest in our analysis was to follow how migrants position themselves towards the hegemonic construction of identity, either by the host or home country. The fluid identity of the diaspora allows multiple allegiances and political engagements (Drzewiecka explores the use of constitutive rhetoric to explain how "discourses of diaspora are deployed in specific circumstances in strategic enactment of cultural identities", put to use in political action, for instance – Drzewiecka, 2002, p. 2). In this respect, it was of interest to us to see how migrants act political solidarities with the home communities and what significance they attach to the meaning of citizenship. What is their relationship with political institutions and actors? How do they create agentivity: as cosmopolitan actors, as nationals?

In order to confirm our hypothesis, we looked at 19 interviews with Romanians working in Italy, conducted in the period June, 12 – July, 9, 2014 (part of the complex investigations carried out in the research project *Diaspora in the Romanian Media and Political Sphere. From Event to the Social Construction of Public Issues*, led by Camelia Beciu). Most migrants that were interviewed come from poor areas in Romania (Piatra Neamț, Iași, Bacău); some are young, recent migrants; others are middle-aged people from the first wave of mi-