TRANSNATIONALISM, INTEGRATION, AND CITIZENSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES: THEN AND NOW*

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on two questions pertinent to debates about transnationalism and citizenship in the United States: How new is transnationalism in the United States? And do transnational ties, including those involving citizenship, impede incorporation or integration into American society?

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In considering the question of transnationalism and citizenship in the United States – and what might be called challenges to nationally bounded citizenship paradigms – the article focuses on two issues. How new really is transnationalism? And do transnational ties, including those involving citizenship, impede incorporation or integration into American society?

Both of these issues have been the subject of academic and popular controversy. A concern is that transnational ties, including dual citizenship, will detract from and hinder involvement in the United States. Such a situation – and indeed transnational ties themselves – have frequently been portrayed as something novel in American society, and earlier immigrants are often remembered as having been more committed and eager to assimilate to American society than are today's arrivals.

Contemporary immigrants are not the first newcomers to live what scholars call transnational lives. Indeed, transnational ties were alive and well among many of the millions of southern, central, and eastern European immigrants who came to the United States a hundred years ago. To be sure, there are many new dynamics to immigrants' transnational connections today, but there are also significant continuities with the past. Transnationalism – the process by which immigrants maintain economic, political, and social ties to their homeland – represents a novel analytical perspective, not a novel phenomenon (Portes 2003). As to the effects of transnationalism, there were widespread concerns one hundred years ago, like today, about the negative consequences of ties to the "old country." However, these concerns have again been greatly exaggerated. Incorporation into the new country and transnational practices can, and often do, go hand in hand.

Transnational ties, then and now

One hundred years ago, in the last great wave of immigration to the United States, southern, central, and eastern European immigrants often established and maintained familial, economic, political, and cultural links to their home societies, while developing ties and connections in their new land (Foner 2005, Morawska 2001). What social scientists now call "transnational households," with members scattered across borders, were not unusual. Early 20th century immigrants regularly sent money – and letters – to relatives left behind. There were also more organized kinds of aid. For example, Russian Jews sent millions of dollars to their war-ravaged home communities during and after World War I through hometown associations (*landsmanshaftn*). Italians often sent funds home to purchase land and build houses with the goal of returning to their homeland. Some were "birds of passage," going back and forth between Italy and the United States, which many Italian migrants referred to as "the workshop" (Wyman 1993).

When it came to politics, immigrants in the past followed news about and often remained involved in home-country political affairs through immigrant newspapers, letters from relatives, and, in some cases, physical movement between their country of origin and the United States. There is a long history of lobbying the American government about home-country issues. Moreover, immigrants in America have long been tapped by homeland politicians and political parties as a source of financial support.

A century ago, homeland governments were also involved with their citizens living abroad, the Italian case being especially noteworthy given Italy's active engagement with migrants in the United States and the fact that Italians made up more than one-third of eastern and southern European

arrivals in the first two decades of the 20th century. Among other things, the Italian government subsidized organizations in the United States that provided social services to Italian emigrants and helped provide ways of sending remittances cheaply and reliably. In addition to wanting to ensure the flow of remittances and savings homeward, the Italian government was eager to retain the loyalty of emigrants to the United States as part of its own nation-building project. A 1913 Italian law allowed returnees who had taken foreign citizenship to regain Italian citizenship after living two years in Italy. Although it did not come to pass until just recently, there was even discussion on the question of allowing Italian citizens established abroad to benefit from political representation in Italy.

If there are many parallels with the past, there is also much that is new today about transnationalism and immigrants' ties across national borders. Given enormous advances in transportation and communication technologies, immigrants can now maintain more frequent, immediate, and intimate contact with their home societies. They can hop on a plane or make a phone call to hear about news and people left behind – and be involved in everyday life in the home community in a fundamentally different way than in the past.

In the last few decades, changes have been dramatic. Plane fares are now relatively inexpensive. There are new types of communication such as e-mail and videoconferencing. With prepaid phone cards, telephoning has become cheap. In the late 1960s, when this author did fieldwork in a Jamaican village, there were no phones and the only kind of "instantaneous communication" was by telegram, filtered through the eyes of the village postmistress. Since then the village has gone through major changes, from a period when there was just one phone box in the community (with wait times of up to three hours to make a call) to several years when only a few people had private phones to today, when virtually everybody has a cell phone. According to one survey, nearly nine out of ten Jamaicans over the age of 15 own a cell phone (Horst 2006). Jamaican villagers talk to relatives in New York while working in the fields – and the calls may be frequent, often two or three times a day.

In the political sphere, there is also much that is new. Technological advances enable politicians from home to travel easily to the United States to raise funds and garner support, just as candidates for US electoral positions can (and sometimes do) return to their countries of origin for the same reason. Furthermore, many nations, which have become dependent on migrants' economic remittances and political clout, have implemented policies aimed at preserving and strengthening emigrants' loyalties and participation.

Among these are dual citizenship provisions that cover a growing number of immigrants. Although the US naturalization oath requires renunciation of other citizenships, US law has evolved in the direction of "increased ambiguity or outright tolerance in favour of dual nationality," – what has been called a "don't ask, don't tell" policy (Jones-Correa 2001). By 2000, 17 of the top 20 sending countries to the US between 1994 and 1998 allowed some form of dual nationality or citizenship.

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Transnationalism and integration

This leads to the question of the effects of transnationalism on immigrants' involvement in, and commitment to, the United States.

One hundred years ago, immigrants' ties to their home countries were often seen in a negative light. Return migration inflamed popular opinion. Immigrants were often seen as "plundering America" with an eye to returning home rather than adopting and appreciating American ways. There was a concern that they were not making a serious effort to become citizens and came only for economic betterment.

In fact, naturalization rates among early 20th century European immigrants were low – and not all that different from today. In 1920, 31% of foreign-born men who had resided in the United States for 10 to 14 years had naturalized, as had 44% who had lived in the United States for 15 to 19 years (Bloemraad 2006). Eighty years later, in 2000, 37% of the foreign-born who had lived in the United States for 10 to 15 years had become citizens, and the figure was 54% for those who had been in the country for 15 to 20 years (Portes and Rumbaut 2006). (In the past, Russian Jews had higher naturalization rates than did Italians; today, immigrants from many Asian countries have above-average naturalization rates, while many Latino immigrants have below-average rates, with Mexican rates being particularly low.)

It is useful to recall another parallel with the past, especially given complaints that immigrants today seek naturalization for "selfish" reasons – to secure government benefits, for example, or to sponsor relatives – rather than because they want to participate in the nation's political and civic institutions. Instrumental reasons have long been involved in naturalization decisions, with no obvious harm to the unity of the United States. In the 1920s, many immigrants sought citizenship to obtain the

rights, privileges, and protections guaranteed by the federal government – and to bring over relatives, because after the passage of restrictive laws in the early 1920s, naturalized citizens were able to bring in non-resident wives and unmarried minor children without quota limitations (Ueda 1982, Daniels 2004).

In hindsight, we know that anxieties about early 20th century immigrants' lack of commitment to America were greatly overstated. What now stands out – in popular memory as well as in the scholarly literature – is the earlier immigrants' attempts to get a foothold in American society through hard work and struggle, which then served as a launching pad for their children's successful assimilation into the American mainstream. Despite the initial slowness of southern and eastern Europeans to naturalize and despite the ties many maintained with their home countries, those who remained in the United States generally developed an allegiance to American society, became involved in a variety of US institutions, and worked to build lives for themselves and their children in the United States. This is similar to what happens today – and represents yet another parallel between the immigrant experience of yesterday and today.

As in the past, there are worries, although these have a different focus. There is now an official commitment to cultural pluralism and ethnic diversity in the United States; social and cultural differences that are sustained by ties back home are more visible and acceptable, and even celebrated in public settings. Anti-immigrant sentiment is certainly still with us, and immigrant loyalties still often questioned, but rates of return are not, as in the past, a key theme in immigrant debates. In an era of significant international money flows – including huge US corporate operations abroad and multimillion dollar money transfer businesses – there is less concern that immigrants are looting the United States by sending remittances home.

A new set of concerns has to do with the spread of dual citizenship. Some argue that dual citizenship and, more generally, many immigrants' continued engagement in home-country politics blur loyalties, undermine commitment to the United States, and hinder the assimilation process. Some scholars and popular commentators question whether the rise in dual citizenship dilutes Americans' political identities and the meaning of American citizenship – making citizenship akin to bigamy, in the words of one journalist (Geyer 1996). Political scientist Samuel Huntington (2004) takes a dim view of people with dual nationality, whom he calls "ampersands" and views as having dubious loyalty to the United States. Another political scientist, Stanley Renshon (2000), warns that multiple citizenship in an era of cultural pluralism will retard the assimilation process and is more likely to encourage the maintenance of home-country attachments than the development and consolidation of identification with the new country.

Available evidence suggests that such dire predictions are unwarranted. There is no denying that involvement in political and organizational affairs of the home country, by dual nationals as well as those not yet US citizens, *may* at times draw energies and interests away from political and civic engagements in the United States, but the word *may* should be emphasized. This is not always – or perhaps even most often – the case.

Often the most integrated immigrants – those who participate actively in American political and economic life – are also involved in transnational activities. Indeed, the experience gained in founding hometown committees or participating in other kinds of transnational organizations can be transferred and usefully applied to campaigns for local causes in US cities and towns.

For one thing, dual citizenship may actually encourage immigrants to naturalize. A study of Latin American immigrants shows that those who come from countries that recognize dual nationality are more likely to seek US citizenship than those from countries that do not (Jones-Correa 2001). Becoming a US citizen is an easier decision when it does not entail losing privileges in, or renouncing allegiance to, one's native land or the possibility of being viewed as a "defector" there. Naturalization is likely to encourage or reinforce immigrants' sense of belonging to the United States and their attachment to American values – and of course makes them eligible to vote in the United States.

In general, transnationalism and assimilation are not mutually exclusive and often coexist. To put it another way, it is not an either/or situation. While immigrants buy houses, start businesses, and influence political developments in their home societies, they are also involved in building lives in the United States, where they buy homes, become involved in neighbourhood associations, join unions, set up businesses, and take an interest, and sometimes become active, in political campaigns.

A number of studies maintain that transnational political engagements actually strengthen migrants' ability to mobilize support for political issues and elections in the United States and reinforce or encourage an interest in American politics. Often the most integrated immigrants – those who participate actively in American political and economic life – are also involved in transnational activities. Indeed, the experience gained in founding hometown committees or participating in other kinds of transnational organizations can be transferred and usefully applied to campaigns for local causes in US cities and towns.

Transnational activists are commonly involved in the political affairs of their home country as well as those of the United States. This comes out in Reuel Rogers' (2006) study of West Indian New Yorkers, which shows that the skills, aptitudes, and appetites for civic engagement that immigrants develop in the transnational arena may transfer well to the American context. West Indians with high levels of involvement in home-country civic activities (membership in home-country associations, for example, or campaigns for political candidates in the Caribbean) were more likely than others to vote in the United States as well as to engage in other forms of political activity such as raising money for New York politicians or becoming active in Democratic political clubs.

Conclusion

Whether the focus is on the past or the present, immigrants' transnational ties are not incompatible with successful integration and participation in American civic and political life, and do not necessarily depress their propensity to become engaged in American institutions and to develop allegiances to the United States. Transnational attachments and incorporation in a new state are not "binary opposites," and host-country incorporation and transnational ties influence – and sometimes actually reinforce – each other (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004).

Because research on transnationalism is still in its infancy, social scientists are only beginning to produce studies that investigate the consequences of cross-border ties. There is a need for systematic studies that will provide a fuller picture of the scope and intensity of transnational activities among contemporary immigrants and how cross-border involvements vary by such factors as national-origin group, gender, and generation. As scholarly work on transnational practices, relations, and communities expands – and as large-scale immigration continues apace – there is also a clear need for research that will allow us to get a better sense of how cross-border connections and transnational practices are affecting processes of incorporation, as well as social and legal citizenship, among the millions of recent immigrants to the United States. It is hoped that such research will stimulate parallel studies among historians on past immigration eras to add to our understanding of transnationalism in earlier times and further enrich our appreciation of just what is new about engagements across national borders today.

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Note

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