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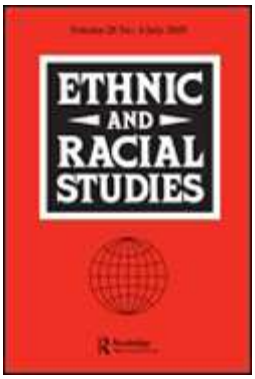

Towards a Transatlantic Dialogue in the Study of Immigrant Political Transnationalism

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Towards a Transatlantic Dialogue in the Study of Immigrant Political Transnationalism

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The political involvement of migrants in their country of origin, combined with the governments of sending countries' reciprocal intervention in the political activities of migrants in the receiving countries, partly explain what is commonly described as transnational politics. Yet, as the literature shows, this generic term covers a wide range of political activity. The purpose of this special issue is to establish to what extent the place in which immigrants settle (namely the region or country) might determine the types of political activity in which they engage. More precisely, we aim to ascertain whether and for what reasons different forms of transnational political activity develop in the United States and Europe. To achieve this rather ambitious goal, through looking at a series of case studies from Europe and the USA we try to identify the full range of such activities, while at the same time noting various similarities in the actions undertaken by communities based in the same area.[i]

The underlying challenge of this collective effort is thus to demonstrate the usefulness of a transatlantic dialogue and transatlantic comparisons in the study of

immigrant political transnationalism. Before trying to argue in favour of such an exercise, however, it is necessary to question the value of making comparisons between the USA and Europe in the first place. Despite it having become fashionable in the past decade, does it really make sense to compare US and European experiences in this area given the huge historical and present-day differences between these two parts of the world? First, the USA is nowadays often presented as a 'nation of immigrants', as a nation-state built by immigrants even though this was not always the case in the past (Zolberg 2006). But Europe, on the other hand, while undoubtedly a *de facto* immigration continent (Thränhardt 1992; Martiniello 2007), is seen as a non-state (Wiener 1998) formed by different nations built before the large-scale immigration that was basically unwanted as a permanent component of the nation. Second, the historical 'racial divide' originating in slavery between black and white, which continues to play a major role in debates and policies in the USA, finds no equivalent fracture in Europe.

This is not of course to say that racism does not exist in Europe, but that the heritage of slavery plays differently in current debates on immigration, ethnicity and race on each side of the Atlantic. Third, the European continent hosts several former colonial and imperial powers, while the USA is a former colony that has progressively become an imperial power. Fourth, the role of religion in both societies seems quite different. Whereas many European countries became more secularized in the twentieth century, the USA seems to remain globally a more religious country. Fifth, Europe, at least the older member states of the EU, is characterized by a relatively strong welfare state, though there is some debate about its future, whereas the social safety net remains less protective in the USA and this difference is relevant in the context of debates on immigration. Sixth, NAFTA and the EU are very

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different integration processes and, for the purposes of this special issue, we regard the difference in terms of freedom of circulation and movement of people as well. Finally, national unity is not a political issue in the USA, whereas in Europe unity of member states is regularly questioned, especially by ultra nationalist and separatist forces in several of its member states (like, for example, Belgium, Italy and Spain).

Beyond these differences, however, there are similarities between the USA and Europe in terms of migration, ethnicity and race. First, both regions are magnets for millions of potential migrants, many of whom take huge risks to cross increasingly militarized borders. Second, similar contradictory trends can be observed on both sides of the Atlantic, especially in urban settings, towards social, economic, ethnic, racial and religious fragmentation on the one hand and towards cohesion, group border crossings and interculturalism on the other. Finally, similar limits to public action, in the field of migration and in post-migration policies, are noted in the USA and Europe.

It seems as if the historical distinction between traditional countries of immigration (the USA, Canada and Australia) and nations that existed as such prior to migration (the EU member states) is becoming increasingly blurred. The USA and Europe are both *de facto* regions affected by international migration. On both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, immigration and integration are hot political, policy and public issues. Old immigration policies and old patterns of integration and assimilation seem obsolete; in the USA and in Europe any issue that touches on transnationalism acts as a potent indicator of this obsolescence. This makes comparison a valuable tool in one's attempt to make sense of global phenomena that might affect the two parts of the industrial and post-industrial word differently.

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If one is to define immigrant political transnationalism appropriately, it is first necessary to discuss the broader concept of transnationalism. After looking at earlier uses of the term, we focus on its reappearance in the context of globalization, in which different scientific disciplines describe specific forms of cross-border exchanges. Then, having examined the context, development and controversies that transnationalism creates we turn to a precise form of transnational activity, namely immigrant political transnationalism. Here again, we discuss different viewpoints expressed in the literature and support a definition of the concept that is both precise and operational.

In the next section of the paper we ask what scientific use immigrant political transnationalism may have for the study of migrants' political activities. We also articulate the limits of the concept and suggest some directions for future research in which knowledge is currently weak. Finally, we examine the comparability of transnational political phenomena as studied in the USA and Europe and discuss how this special issue contributes to the greater comparability we believe is necessary.

Transnationalism: context and definition

The interest of different social-science disciplines (including economics, sociology, political science and anthropology) in studying globalization and its impact on society has shed light on the concept of transnationalism in such a way that a variety of definitions now exist. All these definitions, however, agree that transnationalism is a way of describing cross-border exchanges.

The emergence of transnationalism as a scientific concept for studying migration is actually considerably older than the 1990s, when the term is often

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believed to have been coined. In fact, as early as 1916 Randolph Bourne wrote an article that cast doubt on the melting-pot hypothesis and argued instead for the creation of a 'Trans-national America'.

The 1990s thus saw a reappearance of the concept in new research programmes, in the creation of new journals and in the publication of numerous books and special issues of journals. This infatuation with the term was especially visible in North America. The quantity of literature produced on the topic soon revealed a major controversy over its origins, nature and pertinence. Is transnationalism a concept, a theory, a field, an approach or a discipline? Does it describe a new reality or is it an old wine in a new bottle? Who engages in transnational activities? These are only some of the questions that animate discussions on it and that illustrate one of Kivisto's (2001, p. 550) criticisms that 'the concept suffers from ambiguity as a result of competing definitions that fail to specify the temporal and spatial parameters of the term and to adequately locate it *vis-à-vis* other concepts'.

A frequently quoted definition of immigrant transnationalism is that of Basch, Glick Schiller and Blanc-Szanton who define it as

> the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call these processes transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders (1994, p. 7).

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This definition contains three major elements in the apprehension of immigrant transnationalism. First, it implies that, contrary to assimilationist views, the links between the individual and the nation-state are not exclusive but multiple. Migrants involved in transnational activities develop simultaneous social, political or economic involvements in the country of origin and in the country of destination. Obviously, this potentially sparks off debates about state sovereignty in much the same way as the question of double (or multiple) citizenship had done before.

Second, the space within which migrants work, conduct their social, political and religious lives or even raise a family cannot be clearly divided between the home and receiving country. Here, the work of Thomas Faist must be mentioned, for he sees transnational social spaces as 'combinations of social and symbolic ties, positions in networks and organizations that can be found in at least two geographically and internationally distinct places' (1998, p. 8). Transnational spaces are thus not static but rather dynamic entities that can change over time. However, to qualify as transnational, it is not necessary for migrants to move physically within this new space. The mere impact of the economic, social, political or religious activity can be qualified as such (Lafleur 2005). To call a migrant's actions transnational does not therefore require that he or she lives in two spaces simultaneously. Few migrants, except perhaps the so-called Asian astronauts, can actually pretend that they do (Faist 1998). According to this last criterion, communities such as German Kurds or Cuban Americans may conduct transnational activities even though they face difficulties moving back and forth between the host and home country.

Third, this definition implies that transnationalism potentially concerns every aspect of a migrant's life – family life, work, political involvement and associative

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activities can all have transnational implications. Yet, the intensity of transnational political activity may vary substantially from one individual to another. Indeed, a migrant's life can also have no or very few transnational implications.

Basing themselves on the work of Merton, Portes et al. (1999, p. 218–9) suggest that the creation of a new scientific concept can only be justified if the activities under study happen on a stable and recurring basis, involve a significant share of the migrant community and if other concepts fail to capture the new reality. This has several implications. Occasional transborder contacts, doing business once in a while or keeping the right to vote in the home country are insufficient in themselves (these sporadic activities may, however, reinforce existing transnational linkages). Furthermore, to mobilize the concept of transnationalism, a significant part of the community has to be involved in these practices. The idea is that the concept 'should designate a distinct class of activities or people' that are not covered by another concept and therefore transnationalism should aim to describe a new reality.

The question of the concept's novelty and how it differs from other international, postnational, supranational or diasporic practices is central to the literature on transnationalism (see Castles 2002; Kennedy and Roudometof 2002). Some scholars point out that migrants have always kept links with their country of origin, even at times when communication technologies were less developed than they are today. For instance, early Italian migrants to the United States were called 'birds of passage' because of their frequent returns to Italy (Piore 1979). Others – like Stephen Castles (2002; 2003) – go even further back in time and state that what some scholars call 'transnational communities' are merely modern forms of what used to be called diasporas. Vertovec (2004b), however, has pointed out that one

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should not fall into the trap Merton described as the 'fallacy of adumbration', which implies that one looks into the past for proof that a practice is not new.

While it is clear that transnational practices present some similarities with these old activities, globalization and technologies have added two new characteristics to diasporic practices. These are intensity and sustainability. Indeed, these old diasporic practices of maintaining links with the country of origin have, thanks to globalization, the potential to concern larger parts of a migrant community and be sustained through time (Smith and Guarnizo 1998; Pries 2001). Not the least of the changes brought about by globalization is the development of communication technologies and the greater affordability of transport that facilitate both the movements and various exchanges between the country of residence and the country of origin (Vertovec 2004a). This nuance to the novel character of transnationalism does not answer the concerns of Waldinger and Fitzgerald because it insists 'on a qualitative distinction between an ill-defined and unperiodized now and then. [By] claiming discontinuity, the students of immigrant transnationalism have effectively dehistoricized the present' (2004, p. 1187).

Another major debate found in the scientific literature refers to the nature of transnationalism. Long before the emergence of this literature, Sayad (in a seminal article written in 1975) repeatedly stressed the importance of studying emigration to understand immigration more fully. In other words, migrants are not citizens who cut the links with the home country on the day of arrival in the host country. Without naming it as such, Sayad thus introduced transnationalism as a research perspective in the study of migration.

Defining transnationalism as a perspective or scientific concept is the appropriate choice at this stage. Albrow (1998) supports this idea while emphasizing

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that transnationalism is a field to which different disciplines contribute but by no means a discipline by itself. Caglar (2001, p. 607) too perceives transnationalism as a new lens that serves to analyse these new movements stimulated by globalization. To avoid the difficulty attached to community-based comparisons (see below), we recommend that research should now focus on *transnational practices* rather than on *transnational communities*. Kivisto (2001, p. 561) rejects this recommendation on the grounds that 'the study of immigrants can never be simply the study of individuals and families, but must at all points take account of the corporate life within which individuals and families are embedded'. While we agree that the study of immigrants' transnational activities must be connected to the social context in which they take place, we nonetheless maintain that it is scientifically dubious to *essentialize* transnationalism because, although all migrants can potentially and to different degrees be involved in transnational activities, no migrant community is by nature transnational. Because community-based studies naturally tend to emphasize those factors that are specific to a community, they tend to essentialize transnationalism, while studies that focus on practices could provide researchers with a clear object with which to conduct comparative work from a non-essentialist perspective.

Facing those transnational practices, one may further distinguish a more general *transnational condition* that emerged in the context of globalization (Portes et al. 1999). It refers to the increasing duality that characterizes certain migrants' lives. Speaking two languages, having two passports, owning a house in two countries or earning money by doing business between two spaces are different characteristics of the transnational condition.

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Immigrant political transnationalism: migrants and politics in the era of globalization

In the study of migration, the concept of political transnationalism has been used to describe a great variety of activities, such as those of citizens being members of associations active in two different countries, political parties running campaigns across borders, and lobbying national authorities of one country in order to influence its foreign policy toward the community's country of origin. Portes et al. (1999, p. 221) sum up their view of political transnationalism as 'the political activities of party officials, governmental functionaries, or community leaders whose main goals are the achievement of political power and influence in the sending or receiving countries'.

Following this definition, the concept of political transnationalism has also been mobilized in the study of public policies of sending states that influence the migrants' level of homeland political participation (for example, citizenship and external voting policies). In a critique of Smith and Guarnizo's (1998) division of transnational practices between 'transnationalism from above' associated with the activities of corporations and states and 'transnationalism from below' associated with migrants, Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004, p. 1180) argue that '[d]escribing the actions of states as transnational, however, deprives the concept [of immigrant transnationalism] of analytic leverage, as it meant to distinguish cross-border, non-state actors from states and to show how the two constrain and shape one another'.

In line with this comment, this special issue hence puts the focus on the transnational political activities of migrants and, as is illustrated in different papers, supports the idea that the action of the state and the migrants are sometimes closely

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intertwined, leading states to revise their policies based on the pressure exerted by its emigrants. It is, however, necessary to add that state policies can also influence migrant political activism that is determined by factors such as a modified political opportunity structure foreign to the immigrants.

Several scholars have tried to classify immigrant transnational activities. One of the most interesting of these attempts has been made by Østergaard-Nielsen, who identifies three broad categories of transnational political activity. The first, homeland politics, consists of the political activities in which migrant communities engage in the host country on issues that exclusively concern the home country. Through 'transnational activism', the migrant community shows its support or hostility for the political regime of its homeland or, as Guarnizo et al. (2003, p. 1239) put it, the term 'is a constructive phenomenon through which people respond to long-distance social obligations and belonging and seek to transform political practices in their sending countries'.

The second, immigrant politics, refers to the political activities undertaken by the community to improve its social status in the host country. Immigrant politics includes attempts to fight discrimination or to gain more political, economic or social rights. However, not all immigrant politics is transnational but it may become so when the authorities in the home country take an interest in the debate on the integration of their emigrants in the host country (Østergard-Nielsen 2003, p. 21) or when communities proceeding from the same country of origin but residing in different destination countries organize their demands across borders.

The third, translocal politics, differs from the other two categories in that it does not necessarily involve the governments of either the host or home country. It refers to the initiatives of migrant communities or individuals who seek to provide

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concrete support to specific localities in the home country (generally in the area from which they originate). Using Moroccan development networks as an example, Lacroix (2003, p. 126–7) has shown that states are eager to have a say in these migrants' projects in the home country. On the one hand they see it as a useful means of developing rural areas and on the other they want to be involved because they are concerned that migrant associations might encroach on some of their powers.

Even though this typology is helpful in understanding the full diversity of transnational political activities, it should not be accepted without criticism. For instance, it fails to make clear how translocal politics differs from homeland politics. Also, relying too heavily on this typology could give the impression that, from a normative viewpoint, immigrant transnational political activity is always desirable, plays a positive role or is well regarded by the political actors of both the receiving and sending countries. This statement is not supported by the recent violent confrontations between Kurds and Turks in various European countries, and the host state's reaction to them. These events have shown how homeland politics may challenge security and cohesion in the receiving country. At a different level, the perception that the emigrant vote played a decisive role in recent elections in Italy and Galicia has led observers to raise doubts about the legitimacy of external voters and about the positive effect of transnational political participation on consolidated democracies.

To return to ∅stergard-Nielsen's typology, the mere act of designing a category risks giving the impression that spaces of political action are clearly separated from one another, which is obviously not the point we are trying to make here. The same community can engage in immigrant and homeland politics jointly. In other words, the fight for a better status as a migrant in the host country is not

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incompatible with political action in the home country. However, if one is to look at different practices in relation to the concept of transnationalism, one has necessarily to show how they differ from traditional migrant political practices. Relying on the earlier definition by Portes and on the work of ∅stergard-Nielsen, we suggest the following operational definition of the concept of immigrant political transnationalism.

Immigrant political transnationalism covers any political activity undertaken by migrants who reside mainly outside their homeland and that is aimed at gaining political power or influence at the individual or collective level in the country of residence or in the state to which they consider they belong. Such power or influence may be achieved by interacting with all kinds of institutions (local, subnational, national or international) in the country of residence and/or the home country, by supporting movements that are politically active in the country of origin or by intervening directly in the country of origin's politics.

When analysing political power in the country or countries of residence, one may speak of immigrant political transnationalism when the activities are conducted by migrants of the same national origin but residing in different destination countries, or when the state authorities of the sending country interfere with their emigrants' activities in the country of residence.

Advantages and limits of the concept of immigrant transnationalism in developing research on migrants' political participation

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Once having attempted to clarify the concepts with which this special issue deals, we can better identify their strengths and weaknesses in the development of fresh research on migrant's political practices in Europe and the United States.

One of the major assets of the concept is that it underlines the link between globalization and immigrant practices. Technological progress in communication technologies, the increasing intensity and velocity of exchanges of all sorts (goods, services and information) and the development of affordable long-distance travel have provided migrants with new means with which to connect with their home country. By stressing the duality of some migrants' lives, transnationalism questions a traditional approach to migration that would focus solely on the country of residence, which is a major weakness of traditional research in this field.

A further advantage of the concept of transnationalism is that it potentially challenges methodological nationalism (Glick Schiller et al. 1992). In the study of migration, methodological nationalism translates into an exaggerated focus on the country of residence. As mentioned earlier, Sayad has proved beyond doubt that immigration cannot be understood fully if the study of emigration is neglected. The social links created by transnational activities cross geographic, cultural and political borders and thus oblige researchers to take the two spaces into account. Transnationalism therefore gives one a chance of avoiding methodological nationalism by encouraging researchers to consider the object of their research from different national perspectives. Yet, replacing methodological nationalism with methodological transnationalism is not without risks. Indeed, the dominance of American researchers in the study of transnational practices also implies that transnationalism is strongly rooted in the US experience. The risk is to neglect other viewpoints such as the major findings by French scholars like Ma-Mung (1996),

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Peraldi (2002), or Tarrius (2001; 2002). These authors, among others, have stressed the importance of looking at migration as a circulation within social and economic spaces that encompass both what are often called 'countries of origin' and 'countries of residence'.

The focus of transnationalism on two specific national spaces has revealed another major advantage of the concept: it encourages researchers to conduct detailed studies on specific communities that move across these borders (see for instance Levitt 2001 or Østergaard-Nielsen 2003). The tendency in these studies to privilege richness of detail over generalization has, however, meant that little comparative work has been done so far. It is accordingly very difficult to draw general lessons from this variety of case studies.

One difficulty a researcher faces when comparing case studies has to do with the relationship between immigrants' involvement in transnational activities and their integration in the country of residence. In a study on transnational practices among Mexican Americans, Roberts et al. (1999, p. 261) support the idea that these practices are an answer both to social stratification and to individuals' lack of access to opportunities in the host and home countries. Indeed, they argue that 'transnational fields of activity are more consequential for poorer, less-skilled migrants and will result in stronger transnational migrant communities. The highly-skilled professional or large-scale entrepreneur has less need to depend on purely transnational fields of action'. In later research on transnational political practices in Colombian, Dominican and Salvadoran communities in the United States, Guarnizo, Portes and Haller draw a different picture of Latino transnational activism. It shows that 'results indicate that transnational political activities are not the refuge of marginalized or poorly educated immigrants' and that, contrary to assimilationist views, the 'length

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of residence in the United States does not reduce interest or involvement in home country politics but actually increases it' (Guarnizo et al. 2003, p. 1238). More recently, in an article comparing the involvement of Colombian, Dominican and Mexican immigrant transnational organizations in development projects in the country of origin, Portes, Escobar and Radford (2007) have underlined how the socio-economic profile of the migrants involved in these activities, their level of politicization or the implication of the sending state may vary between these communities. While these comparative efforts contribute to a better comprehension of why different communities living in the same receiving area develop different practices, they do not answer one of Waldinger and Fitzgerald's (2004, p. 1191) concerns about the influence of the political culture of the receiving country, for which they recommend 'within-group comparisons across different national incorporation systems'.

This last example introduces another question related to transnationalism that concerns the links between transnational political practices and citizenship. Can a citizen be politically active in two national spaces? Can allegiance to the state be split? What impact do these multiple political participations have on the migrants' identity and sense of belonging? All these questions and their citizenship dimension remain unsatisfactorily answered in the current literature on transnationalism.

These questions relate strongly, however, to three dimensions of modern citizenship as defined by Leca (1991) – a legal status that grants civic, political and social rights and obligations to its holders; a set of social roles that allows an individual to make choices in public affairs (like being a voter or activist); and various civic qualities deemed necessary to be a 'good citizen' (one of which is that all citizens agree to respect the primacy of a public interest).

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While being critical of the concept of immigrant transnationalism, Kivisto recognizes that the attitude of some homeland governments to their emigrant populations has recently changed as many now try to create links with them. The consequence is that:

> rather than condemning their decision to exit or enticing them to return, they [the homeland governments] instead work to create relationships with the immigrants that are beneficial to the homeland. To the extent that immigrants perceive these relationships to be mutually beneficial, the potential for a transnational social field arises (2001, p. 563).

Similarly, Bauböck (2003) perceives that states are now involved in promoting new forms of political participation (for instance by extending the right to vote to emigrants or by reserving seats in parliament for their representatives). Sending states that promote the transnational political participation of their emigrants necessarily modify the three dimensions of citizenship. Legal status is the most visible change when, for instance, double nationality is allowed to emigrants but the social roles attached to citizenship are also affected by transnational political activities (for example by adding a symbolic value to the emigrant vote). Finally, with these practices and new citizenship opportunities, the migrant becomes a citizen who lives abroad yet still retains a stake in the country of origin's internal affairs. This explicit recognition is also an extension of the civic qualities deemed necessary to be a good citizen (which sometimes coincides with the home country government changing its attitude from seeing migrants as traitors to treating them as heroes). Bauböck (2003, p. 703) thus argues that political transnationalism consists of more

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than political activities across borders. It also includes the 'changing and increasingly overlapping boundaries of membership in political communities'. In other words, the real novelty is the increasing ability the state grants to migrants to combine internal and external memberships without having to choose in which country they want to be politically active. Two comments must, however, be made. First, as we mentioned earlier, this new ability does not necessarily result from the immigrants' transnational activism but may well stem from a change of opportunity structure foreign to the migrant community. And second, there are also cases when dual citizenship does not entail dual membership of political communities (for example, before 2005, Mexico's legislation permitted dual citizenship but formally forbade duals citizens from voting in Mexico).

Towards a comparative approach in the study of transnational political activities

In some respects, though we have come to the conclusion that formal political relations between the emigrant community and homeland present some novel characteristics compared with older practices, the persistence of political links with the home country is much older. Nonetheless, it seems as if, during the process of migrant inclusion in the host country's political arena, a different place has been given to a migrant's links with his or her home country. This is what we try to show in the following paragraphs in which we describe the evolution of immigrant transnational political participation in the United States and Europe.

In the United States, a significant place has traditionally been given to these linkages through ethnic lobbying. Tony Smith splits its history into three parts

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(Smith 2000, p. 48). The first period is from 1910 to 1930. At that time, the major ethnic actors were of European descent (Germans, Scandinavians, Irish and later Italians). Before then, American foreign policy was completely in the hands of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) Americans. Until the First World War, celebrating one's ethnic origins was not considered incompatible with a migrant's attachment to the American nation. American culture was deemed powerful enough to assimilate migrant communities over time. Hyphenated Americans were therefore not discouraged from keeping strong links with their home country.

During the First World War, migrants from countries at war with the United States were suddenly suspected of being disloyal to their country of settlement. For this reason, many German Americans were keen to demonstrate their attachment to the United States by abandoning their customs and language or by changing their names. The question of loyalty would become even more acute during the Second World War when the so-called 'enemy-aliens' would strongly feel its consequences.

The second period, which is from 1945 to the end of the cold war, is epitomized by the internationalization of US foreign policy. Thus, the fight against communism, wherever it existed, gave huge leverage to several lobbies on American foreign policy. The importance of ideology to the USA and the common goals the government shared with some lobbies explain this new influence. The Cuban American lobby that developed at the turn of the 1980s is probably the best example of an ethnic group having derived great benefit from the anti-communist ideological context.

The third period starts after the fall of the Berlin wall. For Smith, the Clinton era represented a peak in ethnic group influence on American foreign policy. Some

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examples of this influence are American involvement in the peace process in the Middle East and military interventions in Somalia and Haiti.

What made the USA so receptive to the demands of ethnic groups? The rise of multicultural policies in the 1980s and even more so in the 1990s may have had something to do with it. This was also when candidates to a national election first started to travel with their political campaigns to host countries with a view to collecting migrant votes and funds. Similarly, recipient countries made it easier to acquire dual nationality and they set up programmes and administrations to control transnational activities (Roberts et al. 1999, p. 247).

For Shain (1999, p. 51) multiculturalism is partly the result of the African American struggle for civil liberties, which later benefited migrant communities. Shain gives three other reasons for the rising influence of ethnic lobbying in the twentieth century. First, the US liberal-democratic ethos enfranchises citizens no matter where they are from. Second, the media have contributed to the empowerment of migrant communities by publicizing their work and amplifying the impact of their actions. More specifically, the ethnic media have strengthened some migrants' sense of belonging to a community and their feelings that their community has specific issues to address. The third and last element is the fragmentation of the US foreign policy decision-making process. According to Shain, the US Congress, by its very nature, influences positively the power of ethnic groups. It is split between two parties, its members do not follow a strict line defined by the party, and this room for manoeuvre empowers each individual member of Congress. These individuals, in return, more easily submit to the influence of lobby groups (irrespective of whether or not they are ethnic) (Shain 1999, p. 80). US legislation on electoral donations, which encourages lobbies to finance political campaigns in exchange for candidates'

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later support for the lobbies' interests, further increases this pressure (Smith 2000, p. 101).

Ethnic lobbying in Europe differs greatly from that in the United States. First, European countries confronted large immigration movements later than the United States. Second, migration to Europe after the Second World Ward was mostly organized by state-run labour recruitment schemes, which aimed to ensure that no worker settled permanently in Europe. For this reason, European nations waited for a long time before considering the integration of their migrant communities.

The Belgian case, to take just one example among others, illustrates this trend very clearly. After the Second World War the Belgian authorities set up a labour recruitment programme for alien workers. The programme was designed to allow only temporary migrants and it therefore ensured a rotation within the migrant community. As mentioned, this delayed the implementation of a real integration policy by the authorities. As guest workers, these migrants were deprived of any political rights in Belgium. Labour unions thus offered the best chance of defending their interests as workers in the host country and they helped many migrants become familiar with the Belgian political system (Martiniello 1998, p. 109–10). At the end of the 1960s, migrant local consultative councils (MLCCs) were set up in 35 Belgian cities to establish contact between local politicians and the migrant population. In several cities, national groups got well organized and came up with an electoral list that reflected divisions in the home country. The elections that followed gave migrants an opportunity to elect their MLCC representatives. While this form of political participation did little to improve the status of migrants, it did, however, encourage some migrants to organize politically and to establish some links with

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Belgian political parties. It also created a favourable context in which Belgians of foreign origins could participate in Belgian elections (Martiniello 1998, p. 112–13).

The Belgian case is an illustration of why European researchers approach migration differently from their US counterparts. In Europe, the focus has been on migrants' struggles to improve their status in the host country because, as temporary workers, they were not accepted as citizens. There was thus less call than in the United States for studies on ethnic lobbying and homeland politics (∅stergaard-Nielsen 2003, p. 6). Yet, one should not infer from this that ethnic lobbying and homeland politics were non-existent in Europe. There are numerous examples of migrant communities in Europe keeping strong political ties with their homelands over long periods of time. As such, the interest in transnationalism that has developed in European academic circles has progressively narrowed the gap between US and European researchers.

The strength of this special issue lies in the fact that it draws attention to differences and similarities in the preoccupations of researchers on both sides of the Atlantic, but also suggests different angles upon which comparative projects can be built.

We suggest that there are three elements that could be used to support the idea that continuing differences may exist between US and European research on political transnationalism.

First, a partial comparison of José Itzigsohn and Daniela Villacrés's article on political transnationalism and the practice of democracy with Antoine Dumont's article on Moroccan political transnationalism and Moroccan migrants' representation in France, could support the argument that ethnic groups in the USA

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organize to gain political influence, be it in their host or home country, while the question of the integration and citizenship of immigrants in Europe remains unresolved.

Second, in her article Peggy Levitt shows that the current preoccupations of these societies still in some respects imply a choice between different issues and create different approaches to the study of political transnationalism. She examines the influence of transnational religious practices on civic engagement. Showing how different religious communities may import different visions, she makes an innovative contribution to the American debate on the separation between state and church.

The contributions of the three European researchers demonstrate the third element, namely the tendency to analyse the transnational practices of well-established communities or of those in which the host country has historical links with the country of origin. In the European case, this often involves a preference for research on the transnational political activities of former guest-worker communities or of migrants proceeding from former colonies. Rarely does this lead to what Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004) call 'within-group comparisons' between Europe and the United States.

Facing the apparently enduring differences between research on political transnationalism in Europe and in the USA, the contributions to this special issue also show a path for possible comparative research.

Researchers on both sides of the Atlantic would undoubtedly gain from looking at the question from the perspective of the host country, particularly its role in democratization. An absence of democracy in the homeland and the specificity of the migrants' position on that issue are recurring themes in Itzigsohn and Villacrés's

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article, in Simon Turner's article on the role of the Burudian diaspora in the evolution of the home country, and in Michael Collyer's article on the reinvention of a traditional political structure in a transnational context.

The importance of the economic dimension in the development of transnational political practices represents yet another side to transatlantic comparative research. Mexicans abroad have clearly gained numerous advantages from the economic weight of the migrant community. In his article on the contradictions of diasporic institutionalization in Mexico, Robert Smith in fact shows that financial strength does not necessarily mean that rights will be fully effective. In the case of migrant communities in Europe too, several of their homeland authorities have been incited to increase the dialogue with communities abroad (especially on issues such as their right to vote) to stimulate or maintain the flow of remittances.

A last comparative perspective proposed in this special issue concerns what Bauböck (2003) has described as an increasing capacity to participate politically in several countries. The cases of Morocco, Mexico and Dominican Republic illustrated in this article (but also for instance of Italy) make it possible to make comparisons within a specific form of transnational political activity, namely electoral participation. The use of the right to vote in the home country and the consequences this has for citizenship in the host and home societies is still largely unexplored in Europe and in the United States.

To conclude this conceptual introduction, it is necessary to remember that the quantity of literature on transnationalism available today has been achieved in a relatively short amount of time. The fruitful debate between supporters and opponents of the concept in Europe and the United States has made this possible. With regard to political transnationalism, this special issue aims to demonstrate that,

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despite strong historical differences between the United States and Europe, the substantial growth of European literature on transnational political participation raises the possibility that a similar conceptual approach might lead to innovative research in both regions. The purpose of the articles contained in this special issue is therefore not only to open up the debate on the comparability of these activities but also to provide ideas for possible comparative projects in the future.

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Notes

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