

Studying social transformation and international migration

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**Beyond Methodological Nationalism: Researching Transnational
Spaces, Cross-Border Diffusion, and Transnational Histories**
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STUDYING SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AND INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

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This paper examines the methodological dilemmas that arise at the start of a five-year research project entitled ‘Social Transformation and International Migration’ (henceforth: STIM Project). The project is based at the Department for Sociology and Social Policy of the University of Sydney, and is funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC). This paper will discuss the research problems that arise in planning the project, and provide information on the conceptual and methodological strategies being considered. It is thus very much work-in-progress, and the author seeks critical comments and suggestions in the hope of refining the research approach.

Aims and structure of the project

Background

Australia’s economy and society have been fundamentally changed since the Second World War. The population has increased from 7.5 to 22 million. The economy has shifted from supplying wool, mutton and apples to the UK and the rest of the British Empire, through a phase of manufacturing expansion in the 1960s and 1970s, to a dualistic post-industrial economy providing, on the one hand, education, tourism and business services, and on the other massive commodity resources (coal, iron, copper and other minerals) to Japan, China and other Asian industrial economies. National identity has shifted from a monocultural emphasis on ‘Britishness’ to a widespread consciousness of belonging to one of the world’s most ethno-culturally diverse societies.

Clearly Australia has experienced a multi-faceted process of social transformation. The country has had a high rate of planned immigration ever since 1947. Is that immigration a result of broader processes of transformation affecting the economy, polity and society? Or has immigration triggered other forms of change? Those are the type of questions that underpin my research – but I ask them not only for Australia, but also for several other countries: specifically Mexico, Ghana and the Republic of Korea. Indeed the existence of simultaneous processes of social transformation and human mobility is characteristic of a great many areas of the contemporary world.

When I submitted my proposal to the ARC, I argued that Australia's existing model of planned and tightly controlled settler migration was breaking down, because it no longer corresponded with the reality of rapid economic and political shifts in the Asia Pacific region, as well as changing patterns of global mobility and transnational connectivity. It was essential for Australians to gain a new understanding of the forces driving 21st migration, and of the changing social dynamics of migratory processes at the global, regional and national levels.

Research aims

This study is therefore not about policy solutions, but about deeper social scientific understandings. Too much migration research focuses on specific aspects of migration while failing to analyse the changing social fields in which these are sited. There is often a gulf between migration studies and broader social theory. Thus my title – and my theoretical approach – puts social transformation first and migration second. Unlike most research in our field, I do not study migration and then try to put it in a social context. Rather I seek first to investigate societal changes linked with contemporary processes of cross-border economic integration and political power relations, and then examine how differing forms of human mobility arise within these processes.

The central project aim is thus to re-examine the theoretical and methodological basis of international migration research, in order to overcome the divide between migration theory and broader social theories. Both theoretical and empirical work is necessary to achieve this aim. Policy-makers and scholars concerned with migration often see it as abnormal and inherently problematic, and seek strategies to reduce movements (Bakewell, 2008). By contrast, the conceptual starting point for this project is the assumption that human mobility is a normal part of social life, through which people enhance their capabilities and human development (UNDP, 2009). At times of rapid change, migration tends to grow in volume and to become increasingly important as a factor helping to reshape societies.

Project phases

The first project phase is concerned with constructing a conceptual framework for analysing the relationship between social transformation and migration. This will involve both a critique of the methodological nationalism of much classical social theory, and of the frequently atheoretical and policy-driven character of much migration research. The theoretical phase also includes deliberations about methodology, seen as the epistemological basis for developing knowledge about social actions and the meanings of such actions for the people involved. Methodology provides the logical basis for deciding which methods are likely to provide the types of knowledge needed to answer specific research questions. In this case, answering the questions requires a mix of methods – including various types of both quantitative and qualitative approaches – as will be discussed later on.

The second project phase will involve fieldwork in regions strongly affected by both social transformation and migration. Although this applies to many regions of the world, the decision has been made to focus on Mexico and Ghana as predominantly origin regions for migrants and on the Republic of Korea and Australia as predominantly destination regions. Note that I am not seeking to pair countries within specific migration systems, but rather studying each society in its own right, and then making comparisons and generalisations. In each country research will be carried out in cooperation with local researchers, first at the

national level, using statistical and secondary sources; and second in a selected locality, using mainly ethnographic methods.

In *a third and final phase*, the national and local case study findings will be used to rethink the conceptual framework. However, this is not to be understood as some sort of universal theory of migration, but rather as a set of middle-range theories that can guide research, while remaining subject to constant revision (for a discussion of grand theory versus middle-range theory see Castles, 2007).

A social transformation framework for migration research

Complexity, diversity, context and temporal change

I have written in several places about the obstacles to theory formation in migration studies (see Castles, 2007; 2009; 2010). Apart from methodological nationalism and the policy-driven character of much migration research, a key problem lies in the specificities of the migratory processes themselves. Such processes are highly *complex* in their causes and consequences, and therefore not readily accessible to social-scientific models that seek to isolate and test specific factors. Complexity also implies *diversity*: if there are so many factors at work, the possible combinations become infinite. This in turn points to the crucial role of *context* – the links between migration and the other economic, social, political and cultural relationships at work in particular places at a particular historical juncture (see Collinson, 2009). An historical understanding of societies and the relationships between them is crucial. Finally, migratory processes unfold over *long periods* – they can be an enduring feature of individual biographies and indeed often transcend generations. Cross-sectional snapshots of migration will rarely provide understanding of the evolution of the process over time, and can often produce misleading results.¹

Awareness of the need to recognise complexity, diversity, context and temporal change in migratory processes unfortunately lead some observers of migration to believe that theory formation is impossible, since each case appears different. This could encourage a fragmentation of knowledge, based on the idea that everything is specific and that there are no broad social trends or institutional patterns. Yet such a perspective would ignore the reality of global integration processes that lead to higher and more pervasive levels of economic, political, social and cultural integration than ever before. Contemporary social relations do offer great diversity, but it is diversity within increasingly universal relationships of power and inequality. Thus the most important way to achieve advancement in migration studies is to link it more closely to wider social theory.

Karl Polanyi's theory of the 'great transformation'

Analysis of processes of social transformation could provide the basis for a new understanding of the links between global change and human mobility. Social transformation can be defined as a fundamental shift in the way society is organised that goes beyond the continual processes of incremental social change that are always at work. This implies a 'step-change' in which all existing social patterns are questioned and many are reconfigured. Social transformations are closely linked to major shifts in dominant economic, political and strategic relationships.

A useful point of departure for a contemporary theory of social transformation is Polanyi's (2001) work (first published in 1944) on the 'great transformation' of European societies. According to Polanyi, the market liberalism of the 19th century ignored the *embeddedness* of the economy in society (i.e. its role in achieving social goals laid down by politics, religion and social custom). The liberal attempt to *disembed* the market was a 'stark utopia', which would inevitably have destroyed the conditions which made capitalist production possible. Polanyi points specifically to the commodification of 'man' (i.e. labour) and 'nature' (i.e. land) in market ideology. Early industrialism threatened to destroy the working class family, which was crucial for future reproduction of labour power, as well as the natural environment (through unplanned rapid urbanisation, pollution and insanitary urban living conditions), thus undermining the very future of the liberal industrial system. Society sought to protect itself, according to Polanyi, through a *double movement* – a protective countermovement to re-subordinate the economy to society, through trade unionism, welfare systems and the regulation of industrial conditions. Unfortunately, in the early 20th century, the countermovement led inexorably to class struggle, corporatism and hence to fascism and world war (Polanyi, 2001).

Globalisation and social transformation

The closely linked processes of accelerated economic globalisation and the reshaping of political and military power relationships since the end of the Cold War represent a contemporary step change – a new 'great transformation'.² These fundamental economic and political shifts are closely interwoven with a transformation of social relationships. At the structural level, social transformation in developed countries can be seen in the closure of older industries, the restructuring of labour forces, the erosion of welfare states, the fragmentation of communities and the reshaping of social identities (Todd, 2005). In less-developed countries, forms of social transformation include intensification of agriculture, destruction of rural livelihoods, erosion of local social orders, and formation of vast slums within new mega-cities (Davis, 2006).

The forms of social transformation vary between rich and poor countries, but they should not be seen as separate processes. Rather the restructuring of economic, political, social and cultural relationships that we often label as globalisation is a truly transnational process, in which changes in North and South are interactive and complementary. A key aspect of this process is the vast growth of inequality since the 1970s. This increasing inequality is multi-faceted: it includes inequality between North and South, but also between specific social groups and locations in both North and South (Milanovic, 2007). We can see this complementarity in many areas; the emphasis on state security in the North is matched by pervasive human insecurity (internal warfare and human rights abuses) in the South; demographic decline in Europe, Japan and Korea corresponds (at least for the next few decades) with population growth and labour surpluses in the South; prosperity in the North corresponds with widespread impoverishment in the south and so on. All this, of course, only became possible because of the implosion of the 'real socialist' alternative offered by the Soviet Bloc until 1989. In a mono-polar global power system, neo-liberalism has had things mostly its own way – although this could be changing now in the wake of the global economic crisis of 2007-10, which may speed the rise of new economic powers to contest the US-led neo-liberal dominance.

Polanyi's idea of the 'double movement' can be seen through the modern lens of the concept

of *agency*. Social transformation processes are mediated by local historical and cultural patterns, through which people develop varying forms of agency and resistance. These can take the form of religious or nationalist movements, but also of individual- or family-level livelihood strategies, including rural-urban or international migration. The recent upsurge in South-North migration can best be understood through examination of these changes and their complex linkages. In other words, understanding of migration requires multi-level (i.e. global, regional, national and local) and interdisciplinary analysis.

Migration plays a crucial part in linking regions in transformation. Rural-urban internal migration within demographic giants like China, India, Nigeria and Brazil is an important aspect of the re-ordering of economic and social relationships. About half the world's population is already urban, and 95 per cent of future demographic growth up to 2050 is forecast to take place in the cities of the developing world (Davis, 2006, 2). Internal migration is much larger in volume than international migration (Skeldon, 2009). However, my research is concerned with international migration, which can be seen as part of the meso-structures of globalisation (i.e. the linking mechanisms between different types of economies and societies), especially in the context of the formation of global labour markets (Castles and Miller, 2009, chapter 10; Schierup *et al.*, 2006, chapter 9), but also with regard to transnational cultural change.

In fact, understanding of the linking processes within globalisation – of which migration is just one example³ – also makes it necessary to question the dichotomy of North and South (or of the developed and the developing worlds as official statements put it). Although I use the terms as convenient labels, there is no rigid dividing line: many transitional economies cannot be easily categorised as North or South, while certain social groups (including both entrepreneurs and professionals) move easily across both national and socio-spatial boundaries.

In the past, research on migration has had little impact on core theories of social order and differentiation. However, in recent times, globalisation has challenged national models in the social sciences and drawn attention to cross-border flows as key instruments of change. There are signs of a new emphasis on human mobility, and some major works on global change (such as (Bauman, 1998; Beck, 2007; Cohen and Kennedy, 2000; Held *et al.*, 1999) now stress the centrality of migration in social relations. This shift is not surprising: if the principle of the 'container society' in which all social relationships take place within the nation-state (Faist, 2000) is no longer sustainable (even as a myth), then flows across borders become a crucial area of investigation for the social sciences.

The concept of *embeddedness* can play an important part in understanding globalisation and its consequences for human mobility. Just as 19th century liberals portrayed economic affairs as separate from the rest of society, neo-liberals have promoted globalisation as a predominantly economic phenomenon. The 'new economy' was depicted as the result of growing foreign direct investment, the deregulation of cross-border flows of capital, technology and services, and the creation of a global production system (Petras and Veltmayer, 2000, 2). The basic premise of globalisation was 'the leadership of civilization by economics' (Saul, 2006, xi). This ideology was summed up in the 'Washington consensus' on the importance of market liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation (Stiglitz, 2002, 67).

But the neo-liberal attempt to disembed economic globalisation from its societal context was

in fact deeply political, because it made global change appear as an inevitable and desirable form of modernisation – that could only be resisted by backward peoples or fundamentalist leaders. Clearly globalisation was not just about economics: it was also a *political process*, conceived in ideological terms. The globalisation paradigm emerged in the context of the political strategies of the Reagan-Thatcher era designed to roll back the welfare states and the relatively high wage levels of the post-war boom period. Even a neo-liberal world economy needs control mechanisms, but these were to be provided not by national governments (which, in some cases at least, were democratically elected), but by international institutions, especially the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Their task was not to protect weak economies or vulnerable social groups, but rather to ensure that all economies and societies were exposed to the cold winds of competition – particularly through the mechanism of ‘structural adjustment programmes’ (Stiglitz, 2002).

The neo-liberal dream was undermined by the near-meltdown of the global finance sector in 2007-9. Although economists and politicians now speak of a ‘post-Washington consensus’ approach to world trade and investment, fundamental changes in economic power and governance have yet to emerge.

A theory of global change in which the economy is seen as disembedded from society, and the political and social consequences are treated as inevitable ‘externalities’ (as economists put it), leads also to a disembedded understanding of migration. This means seeking the determinants of migration in a range of rational choices based on economic interests. The essential link to massive changes in global economic and political power relationships and the resulting social transformation processes is absent.

An alternative approach is to conceptualise migration not as merely as a *result* of social transformation, nor as one of its *cause*, but as *an integral and essential part of social transformation processes*. That means that theories of migration should be embedded in broader social theory. It also means that research on any specific migration phenomenon must always include research on the societal context in which it takes place. Finally, because awareness of change starts usually at the local level, it is important to link local level experiences of migration (whether in origin or receiving areas) with other socio-spatial levels – and particularly with global processes.

Social transformation theory and migration theory

We can draw on emerging ideas from a range of disciplines to develop a new approach to understanding transformation-migration relationships. In economics, Stiglitz has provided a critique of neo-liberal economic globalisation, derived from Polanyi’s concept of transformation (Stiglitz, 1998; 2002). For him, the ‘double movement’ is represented by anti-globalisation activism (see Stiglitz’s foreword to (Polanyi, 2001). Milanovic shows that the neo-liberal claim of improving economic outcomes for poor countries has masked a vast increase in inequality (Milanovic, 2007). In political economy, the neo-liberal model is criticised as a new utopia of a self-regulating world economy (Petras and Veltmayer, 2000; Weiss, 1998). Such ideas echo Polanyi’s critique of attempts to disembed the economy from society, but they are essentially top-down critiques, which fail to analyse the local effects of global economic and political forces. In this respect, critical theories and neo-liberal approaches show a certain similarity in their determinism and exclusion of agency.

This one-sidedness can be countered by applying apply concepts and methodologies suggested by sociologists, geographers and anthropologists. The International Sociological Association (ISA) Research Committee on ‘Social Transformation and Sociology of Development’ (Schuerkens, 2004) uses the concept of ‘glocalisation’ to analyse links between global forces and local life-worlds, and has applied this approach to the study of migration and ethnicity. Other sociologists show how identity movements arise in reaction to globalisation (Castells, 1997). Social geographers have developed new ways of understanding the changing meaning of ‘territory’ and the relationships between spatial levels (Lussault, 2007; Sassen, 2006). Social anthropology has moved away from older ideals of authenticity and singularity to study individual and group reactions to globalising forces (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004).

Such trends in social theory have had considerable influence on migration studies. Economists have become increasingly critical of the assumptions of neo-classical theory, and are investigating the role of families, communities, and other social actors in migratory processes. The ‘new economics of labour migration’ (NELM) seeks to overcome neo-classical methodological individualism by using household surveys to understand how migration can be a collective risk-diversifying rather than an income-maximising strategy. NELM theorists analyse migration as a strategy to overcome local market and other development constraints through remitting money which can serve as investment capital (Stark, 1991; Taylor, 1999). In political economy a new approach designed to correct the traditional top-down macro bias is the development of ‘micro-’ or ‘relational’ political economy research on livelihoods and commodity chains in conflict areas (Collinson, 2009; Collinson, 2003).

One of the most widely accepted innovations in migration theory since the 1980s has been the adoption of network theories, which focus on the collective agency of migrants and communities in organising processes of migration and incorporation (Boyd, 1989; Portes and Bach, 1985). Informal networks provide vital resources for individuals and groups. In the context of sending countries they are often analysed as transmission mechanisms for *cultural capital* (especially information on migration opportunities, networks and routes), while in the context of migrant incorporation into receiving societies the emphasis is more on *social capital* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 119), (personal relationships, family and household patterns, friendship and community ties, and mutual help in economic and social matters). A newer trend towards analysing migrant agency is to be found in transnational theory (Guarnizo *et al.*, 2003; Portes *et al.*, 2007; Vertovec, 2004).

This brief review reflects the strength of new thinking about global connectivity in social theory, and shows how such ideas are influencing many aspects of migration research. The STIM Project is an attempt to advance this discussion by refining the theory and methodology of migration studies and linking it more closely to broader social theory.

Methodological dilemmas of a social transformation approach for migration studies

The theoretical ideas outlined above – which I hope to develop into a more coherent conceptual framework over the next 12 months – clearly have major consequences for the methodology and the methods of my research project. The aspiration is to avoid methodological nationalism and to analyse social transformation processes in the context of

globalisation and the emergence of transnational connectivity. It is easier to achieve this in theory than in practice (for useful accounts of methodological difficulties see DeSipio *et al.*, 2007). That is why the empirical case-studies, which form a central part of the project, are crucial. Here I want to map out some of the methodological dilemmas that arise in planning a transnational study, and then talk in each instance about the approaches that will be used to address these dilemmas in the STIM Project.

Theorising social transformation and international migration

As I have argued above, one of the main deficiencies of migration theory lies in its failure to connect adequately with social theory. *That is why it is crucial that a project of this kind should be 'theory-driven'* – that is, it should start with a set of ideas and questions that arise from theoretical analysis. Methodology is the bridge between social theory and research methods. The principles for a social transformation analysis of international migration have already been mapped out above – albeit in a provisional way. To summarise: migration theory is concerned with the social consequences of transnational or cross-border human movements. Migration studies should analyse movements of people in terms of their multi-layered links to other forms of global connectivity. Macro-trends in economic, political and military affairs are crucial in reshaping the global space in which human movements take place. The closely related shifts in social and cultural patterns are also important in influencing the forms and volume of mobility, and the social meanings they have for those involved.

Theorists of neo-liberal globalisation often argue that contemporary economic and political relationships imply shifts away from hierarchical power-structures towards network patterns, in which centralised power is being replaced by transnational functional cooperation. Multinational corporations or international organisations are seen as representing rational divisions of responsibilities, rather than top-down power hierarchies. Yet the differentiation of migrants between privileged possessors of human capital credentials and disadvantaged groups with weak legal status who can be easily exploited casts doubt on this positive view. By linking hierarchies of migration and citizenship to the power dynamics embedded in economic and political institutions, migration researchers can contribute to the analysis of new forms of social relationships. That is the programmatic principle of this project.

Global forces and local responses

One of the greatest methodological difficulties in migration studies is to find ways of understanding the mediation processes between global forces and local-level impacts and responses. *Political economy* approaches to globalisation tend to start from the macro-level, and often find it difficult to cope with the diversity of local-level experiences. *Anthropology* by contrast may find it hard to go beyond the specificity of the local to understand broader trends. A key dimension of migration theory lies in conceptualising the way social transformation processes act at different spatial levels (local, regional, national and global) (compare Pries, 2007). Analysing the mediation and transformation of global forces by local or national cultural and historical factors can help overcome the division between top-down and bottom-up approaches. Migration theory needs to be historically and culturally sited, and to relate structure and action.

In other words, the flows and networks that constitute globalisation take on specific forms at different spatial levels: the global, the regional, the national and the local. These should be understood as elements of complex and dynamic relationships, in which *global forces* have varying impacts according to differing structural and cultural factors and responses at the other levels (see Held *et al.*, 1999, 14-16). Historical experiences, cultural values, religious beliefs, institutions and social structures all channel and shape the effects of external forces, leading to forms of change and resistance that bring about very different outcomes in specific communities or societies (Castells, 1997).

But how can such theoretical and methodological principles be operationalised in research practice? Research needs to be planned and organised in specific ways if it is to help us understand the many dimensions and levels of the migratory experience. The STIM Project will adopt the following approaches:

- Linking local and national research to global analysis
- Organising research in transnational research teams
- Linking national-level data to local-level qualitative research on transnationalism
- Carrying out inter-disciplinary research using mixed methods, with the aim of linking socio-spatial levels and analysing relationships between structure and agency.

National and local case studies

The top-down global theorising that forms the first stage of the STIM Project could easily lead to abstract generalisations. That is why empirical controls are crucial, but these can only be carried out in specific places – that is at the national and local levels. In principle case studies could be carried out almost anywhere, since one result of 30 years of accelerated globalisation has been that most places in the world are now experiencing emigration, immigration or transit migration – or, often, all three at once. The four selected countries and localities (see below) reflect different aspects of these experiences, but also reveal differing historical, cultural, economic, political and social contexts. There is no such thing as a ‘typical’ trajectory of change, and a crucial research task is to analyse how specific mediations of global forces can lead to differing (or converging) outcomes.

In each country, the research team – which will include myself and Sydney-based doctoral students, as well as local senior researchers and research assistants - will start with *a national-level examination of social transformation and migration*, using a wide range of statistical sources and secondary literature, as well as interviews with researchers, government officials, representatives of NGOs and migrant associations. Themes include experiences and perceptions of change, economic dependence on migration, emergence of ‘cultures of migration’ (in mainly emigration regions) or of ethno-cultural diversity (in mainly immigration areas), and broader social and political effects of migration.

Following this, a *local study* will be carried out in each country. This will include an historical analysis of the local experiences of globalising forces, based on documentation and interviews with local officials and community leaders. We will then carry out qualitative interviews with 30-50 households in each locality, using purposive sampling to cover both genders, a range of ages, social statuses and occupations (similar in all case-studies). Interviews will include multiple-choice questions providing codable information on respondents (age, occupation etc.), as well as open-ended questions to explore experience of change across generations, shifts in gender roles and authority patterns, education and social

issues, occupational trajectories, migration experiences (internal and international), livelihood strategies and household budgets, and transnational connections.

The case studies will be carried out in:

Mexico, which has undergone rapid social transformation linked to its relations with the USA and its membership in the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA). Mexico is one of the world's main emigration countries, and is unusual in that nearly all migrants go to one destination: the USA. Mexico is now also experiencing transit migration and immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean (Delgado Wise and Guarnizo, 2007). *Zacatecas* has been chosen for the local study because of the economic and social importance of emigration: in many municipalities, between 20 and 37 per cent of households have at least one member abroad (Delgado Wise *et al.*, 2004).

Ghana, which has complex patterns of out- and in-migration to and from other parts of Africa and beyond. Ghana is a significant source of both highly-skilled (especially medical) and less-skilled workers (often irregular) for the UK and other European countries (Manuh, 2005; Vasta and Kandilige, 2007). Ghana provides a valuable example for studying colonial legacies and post-colonial links, return migration, and the complex dynamics of intra-African mobility. The local study will be carried out in a neighbourhood of Accra.

Australia. Fundamental changes in population, economy, society, national identity and international relations since 1945 have been closely linked to migration. The local study will be carried out in the City of Fairfield, which has experienced a shift since 1947 from a semi-rural area with market gardens and vineyards to an industrial area, and then to a mixed suburb with manufacturing and service industries as well as many commuters to the Sydney CBD. These shifts have been closely linked to arrival of successive groups of settlers including Italians, Vietnamese, Chinese, Iranians, Iraqis and Sudanese (Gow, 2005).

South Korea has undergone a rapid transformation from devastation and poverty after the Korean War, to a successful industrial economy. Korea's migration transition has also been dramatic: until the 1980s it was a source of 'brain drain' to the USA and of manual workers to the Gulf oil economies. Today Korea is increasingly dependent on immigration of manual workers and highly-skilled personnel, but is also experiencing 'return migration' of ethnic Koreans (especially from China) and bride migration. The government and business elites are developing new institutional arrangements for migration (Abella, 2007), while cultural diversity and national identity have become key public topics. The local study will be carried out in an outer suburb of Seoul that has undergone rapid change from a semi-rural area to an industrial and commuter area.

Transnational organisation of research

Transnational studies should be based on *transnational networks of researchers*, which can play an important role in surmounting linguistic and cultural barriers, countering methodological nationalism, and overcoming the nationalist and colonialist legacy of the social sciences (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2003).⁴ Transnational research networks can also help in the linking of socio-spatial levels. In the STIM Project, the Sydney-based research team will include doctoral students with cultural and linguistic roots in the areas to be studied. Moreover, this team will work closely with researchers from Mexico, Ghana and

Korea. The idea is that these researchers will be able to contribute their understanding of local social structures and cultural practices, while all the researchers will be able to work together to analyse transnational relationships and global social forces. The specific mechanisms to ensure effective cooperation include:

- Joint planning and implementation of fieldwork
- Co-authorship of working papers and publications
- Discussion of theoretical and empirical issues using a project website
- An international workshop to bring together the researchers from the various locations

Linking national-level data to qualitative research on transnationalism

Transnational studies have shown that, for many people, economic, political, social and cultural life-worlds are no longer determined by nation-state boundaries. For example, entrepreneurs and professionals now often pursue their economic goals in globalised markets. Similarly, many religious and cultural communities feel a sense of belonging that has little to do with national affiliations. The methodological precept that follows from this is that research should be based on transnational rather than national data. But how can such data be obtained?

This is a pragmatic research problem: most quantitative data is provided by national statistical offices and other national-level agencies. Reports by the UN, the World Bank and other international bodies generally aggregate national data at the regional or global levels. Transnational data sources providing quantitative information on cross-border activities and affiliations are hard to find. Most material on transnational behaviour and consciousness is the result of small-scale qualitative studies. Paradoxically, most transnational data tend to be collected at the local (or trans-local) level. For full understanding, we need both quantitative data that give information on the extent and the characteristics of transnationalism, and qualitative information on the social meanings of transnational activities. Mixed-methods approaches are therefore crucial.

In any case, it is easy to overstate the significance of transnationalism and to forget the continued salience of the state. This is particularly the case for lower-skilled migrants, whose mobility is still constrained by rigid national borders. Migration networks and the ‘migration industry’ may build meso-level linkages— yet these are constructed specifically in opposition to really-existing state power. Indeed it may be argued that states are more salient than ever before: in 1945 some 50 states came together to form the United Nations. Today, as a result of the dissolution of old empires (including most recently the Soviet one), the UN has 192 members. Transnational research therefore cannot ignore the state, and needs to address the contradiction between the simultaneous expansion of transnational connectivity and the increased salience of nation-states.

The approach adopted in the STIM Project to address this methodological dilemma is thus based on three steps:

- Developing a global theoretical framework for understanding social transformation and international migration
- Using national-level data and secondary literature to analyse a number of national models of change
- Local-level ethnographic studies to understand individual and community experiences of transnationalism.

The triangulation of information based on differing methodologies at various socio-spatial levels should help us to understand the ways in which individuals and groups experience the complex and diverse forces affecting their lives.

Interdisciplinarity and mixed-methods approaches

Most social scientists get their training in specific disciplines, and gain professional standing by advancing knowledge within a disciplinary framework and publishing in disciplinary journals. Mono-disciplinarity has been reinforced by the recent emergence of official assessment systems, like Britain's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). As a result, many migration research centres, programmes and projects are based on the theoretical and methodological approaches of specific disciplines. Even worse, within the disciplines, theory-formation is often fragmented on the basis of distinct paradigms, leading to strong divisions (e.g. between neo-classical and new economics of labour migration approaches in economics, or between functionalist and interactionist approaches in sociology).

Yet migration processes affect all dimensions of social existence and cannot be reduced simply to the subject areas of specific disciplines like anthropology, law, sociology, political economy or economics. Migration researchers need to take an *holistic approach*, linking research on specific migration experiences to broader studies of the transformation of whole societies and how this is connected to global trends. This in turn implies the need for *interdisciplinarity*: Migration researchers should work in interdisciplinary teams in larger projects, and make use of the published research findings of other disciplines in smaller ones. Specific studies need to be informed by a consciousness of how they fit together with other areas of social inquiry, and this in turn needs to be linked to a willingness to question both geographical and disciplinary boundaries – just because these are not 'social facts', but rather the product of layerings of past intellectual activity, which always takes place within specific societal contexts.

The STIM project is based in a sociology department, and takes its theoretical starting points from sociology, political economy and economic history. The yet-to-be recruited doctoral students will hopefully have a wider range of academic backgrounds. The collaborators in the case-studies areas include economists, sociologists and political scientists. The research methods take elements from global political economy, national-level economics, sociology and political science, and local qualitative sociology and ethnography. The hope is that this combine or interdisciplinarity and mixed-methods research will allow a deeper understanding of the many factors and relationships involved in migratory processes.

A key aspect of the work will be to investigate the *human agency* of migrants and of sending and receiving communities, and the way this agency interacts with macro-social structures and institutions. This requires *participatory research* to understand the perspectives of the different actors. Participatory research methods cannot be described in detail here (see Chambers, 1997); they require forms of investigation that makes it possible for individuals and communities to express their own views in ways that do not readily fit into the formalised questionnaire designs of quantitative social research. In the STIM project, ethnographic research will be carried out by local researchers, with interviewers of both genders, using appropriate languages. This should provide qualitative information, which can be interpreted

with the help of local colleagues, to allow understanding of relevant social processes and their meanings for those involved.

Challenges

This paper cannot end with a set of conclusions, because it reflects the beginning of a research process, and the outcomes remain uncertain. However, it may be useful to list the challenges that the research team will have to face. Here it is not possible to provide solutions – these will hopefully be developed in the course of the research.

First, is the scope of the project too big? The STIM Project aims to develop some broad, general ideas about the relationship between theories of social transformation (in the context of neo-liberal globalisation) and migration theories. The mechanisms for doing this are theoretical analysis and case studies in four different continents. Will it possible to make valid generalisations across the important differences that will be encountered? The rationale for attempting this task is that I have been involved in a very wide-ranging comparative research in the past, and this has led to very interesting theoretical results.

Second, are the logistics of research too difficult? Will it really be possible to organise a transnational research team with local components in such different locations? Here the justification for going ahead is that distinguished researchers in the various countries have expressed interest in participating.

How can the findings link to key debates in social theory and migration theory? The conceptual task will be very difficult; it requires a sound analytical framework to start with, plus the willingness to question this in the light of fieldwork experiences.

Finally, one has to ask whether transnational research is possible in a world of nation-states? However hard one tries, one has to speak of ‘countries’ and to use data sources that remain stubbornly national. As mentioned above, the highest analytical level – the transnational – is, surprisingly, based on local or at best trans-local research findings. The STIM Project’s response is to use mixed-methods and a triangulation across socio-spatial levels. Only time will tell if this approach is valid.

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¹ For instance surveys of recent labour migrants in destination countries usually find that the overwhelming majority wish to return home after some years of work abroad. However, after some years abroad, such intentions often change. Failure to understand such life-cycle changes has been at the root of failed guestworker policies in several countries (see Castles, 2004).

² See Josaph Stiglitz' Preface to (Polanyi, 2001). However, attempts to link transformation theory to globalization can be found in greater detail in (Munck, 2002; Stiglitz, 1998; 2002).

³ Other linking processes include the Structural Adjustment Policies of the IMF and the World Bank, discourses on good governance and the use of military force (especially by the USA) to impose Northern interests and principles, where these are questioned.

⁴ 'Methodological nationalism' refers to national specificity in the social sciences, namely in their modes of organisation, theoretical and methodological approaches, research questions and findings. It originates in the role played by the social sciences of the 19th and early 20th centuries in processes of constructing nation-states and national identities. See: (Beck, 2007; Castles, 2007).