

Transnationalism: Trendy Catch-all or Specific Research Programme? A Proposal for Transnational Organisation Studies as a Micro-macro-link

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Ludger Pries*

Transnationalism: Trendy Catch-all or Specific Research Programme?

A Proposal for Transnational Organisation Studies as a Micro-macro-link*

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<http://www.comcad-bielefeld.de/downloads/Pries-2008-book-index.pdf>

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Introduction

During the 1990s, pioneer research on transnational migration and on transnationalism in general, especially when confronted with sceptical criticism, frequently concentrated its efforts on proving the mere existence of transnational phenomena. Today, the transnationalism approach as a research programme has spread into such different disciplines as geography, sociology, political science, anthropology, economics, literature and history; moreover, the actual occurrence of transnational ‘social facts’ can be considered to be substantiated in many ways. Sometimes the terms *transnational* and *transnationalism* are used so vaguely and indistinctly that they are likely to become ‘catch-all and say nothing’ terms, as was the case with the globalisation concept. Therefore, conceptual precision and debate, as well as more explicit and closely defined empirical research, is needed. As underlined by a number of authors¹, the main task is currently no longer to show that transnational social phenomena exist, but rather, as most fellows in this research field agree, to demonstrate that the successful establishment of transnationalism as a valuable concept has led to new theoretical and empirical challenges.

This paper aims at integrating some contributions of the transnationalism debate identifying the main advances and challenges of transnationalism as a research programme and at addressing the meso-level of transnational organisations. First, it identifies four main challenges of the transnational studies approach that result from a general reading of the transnationalism debate. In a second step, it concentrates on one of these pending problems: the appropriate definition of *units of analysis* and *units of reference* for transnational social phenomena and studies. It discusses different units of reference for analysing transnational phenomena and develops a proposal for conceptualising different ideal types of transnational social spaces. At the end, thirdly it concentrates on the meso-level of transnational social spaces that is: the level of transnational organisations as a micro-macro-link between everyday life and social institutions.

¹ Portes et al. 1999, Levitt 2001a, Vertovec 2004, the authors of the special volumes of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* No. 2/2003 and of *International Migration Review* No. 3/2003 (especially Vertovec 2003a and Levitt et al. 2003), as well as many contributions to *global networks*, the *journal of transnational affairs*.

Challenges to transnationalism as a research programme

Taking into account the aforementioned transnationalism literature, a general common sense approach to important pending problems of transnationalism as a research programme can be agreed upon. Four primary challenges can be identified. First, instead of expanding the notion of transnationalism to a new catch-all concept, and of 'viewing transnational relations in any corner', it is necessary to *define appropriate units of analysis for transnational societal phenomena*. The simplest transnational societal unit of analysis could be a 'transnational social relation', like the communication and interchange between a migrant and his or her family abroad. But is there anything new about these types of transnational relations? They have existed for as long as nations, nation states and national societies have existed – and with these socially constructed units, social practices, such as interchanging and trading goods and information across socio-geographic units, emerged (see Khagram/Levitt 2007). Therefore, transnational relations and transnational practices have existed since the very beginning of such social artefacts as nations, states and national societies.

In order to use the transnationalism concept in a more precise manner, transnational studies should focus not on transnational relations in general, but on transnational *societal units* as relatively dense and durable configurations of transnational social practices, symbols and artefacts (for this argument, see e.g. Hannerz 1996; Martínez 1998; Pries 2001 and 2004; Voigt-Graf 2004). To this end, it is necessary to explicitly define the specific relation between the (transnational) *units of analysis*, the (local, national, regional or global) *units of reference* and the (micro, meso or macro) *units of research*; these components characterise the transnational perspective and distinguish it from a global or simply comparative point of view. The following section of this paper will deal with the problem of defining the appropriate units of analysis for transnational research or, sticking to the terminology used by Sanjeev Khagram and Peggy Levitt (2007), will treat some aspects of *methodological transnationalism*.

A second task identified by the scholars of transnational studies refers to *empirical transnationalism* (Khagram/Levitt 2007) as the need to measure the *real empirical extent* of transnational social phenomena and especially of durable and dense *transnational societal units*. On the one hand, the multifaceted and ubiquitous existence of transnational social *phenomena* and *relations* is a direct result of building socio-geographic container units such as nations, states and societies - and in this broader sense transnational relations are recognised as

commonplace in transnational studies. On the other hand, transnational *social* or *societal spaces*² could also be conceptualised in a narrow sense. By this, they could be understood as nation states and national societies spanning interaction frameworks in the dimensions of (1) intensive and stable social practices, (2) systems of symbols, and (3) artefacts. Used in this more specific sense of transnational spaces, these could be considered as a relatively novel topic recently discussed since the last quarter of the 20th century. The development of these transnational social spaces was pushed by innovative and cheap international communication technologies, such as the telephone, fax-machine, Internet and airplane transportation (as a mass medium rather than an elite mobility system).

But where exactly do different types of transnational social spaces actually exist? Does transnational migration make up a large proportion of all international migration? Are there a lot of transnational families as a result of transnational migration relations? Do transnational business companies play an important or at least a considerable role when compared with multinational, global or focal companies? Until now, there is little knowledge about the real magnitude of transnational organisations and of the spread of transnational societal units in general. It therefore remains an important issue to measure, more precisely, the range of distribution and occurrence of such transnational societal units of analysis as compared to other societal units of analysis.³

A third challenge pointed out by transnationalism studies is to analyse the *internal structures and processes* of such transnational societal units as well as the *interrelation between transnational and non-transnational types of societal units of analysis*. This is crucial to avoid suggesting the existence of the same structures and processes in transnational societal units as in other societal units of analysis, or – the other way round - to ascribe structures and processes to transnational units completely different from non-transnational units. This leads to questions such as: What are the similarities between the internal structures (namely the distribution of assets, interests, values and power) and the dynamics (namely the mechanisms of coordination between the different and distant units of the transnational spaces) of transnational societal spaces as compared with other types of societal spaces? Are the dimen-

² The terms *social spaces* and *societal spaces* are used in this paper with a synonymous meaning and just for a literal variety and change; they will be defined more explicitly in the second section of this paper. In a strict sense, 'societal' is the more comprehensive term, including social, economic, cultural, ethnic etc. aspects or dimensions. In earlier publications (e.g. Pries 1999 and 2001) I used only the term 'social space', but in its extensive meaning of societal space. In order to underline its broad and sociological scope it is interchanged here with the more precise but linguistically more 'unwieldy' term *societal space*.

³ For the use of terms like international, transnational, multinational, supranational, etc. see Pries 2005 and 2007.

sions and dynamics of social differentiation and integration the same in transnational social spaces as in other types of social spaces? For instance, do gender aspects of social differences or religion - as an integral aspect of social life - vary systematically in transnational societal units (transnational families, for example) as compared to their dynamics in national societies? As underlined by several scholars (Faist 2000 and 2007; Koopmans/Statham 2001; Al-Ali 2002; Al-Ali/Koser 2002; Olwig 2003), there is a need to examine both agents and structures.

Apart of the lack of insights into transnational societal units, there is also little knowledge about the systematic relation between them and other types of societal units. How do transnational families influence locally bound families? Under what conditions are transnational migrant organisations a challenge and/or an opportunity for national social integration? Is the multitude and nature of transnational societal units influenced by local, national or regional fields of power? Under which circumstances does an assimilationist approach of nation states on migrants' national society integration encourage or prevent the emergence of transnational migrant organisations? Until now, there has been little empirically based and systematic knowledge on these relations between transnational societal spaces and other types of societal spaces, that could be interpreted as part of what Khagram/Levitt (2007) calls "theoretical transnationalism".

As a fourth *desideratum* of current transnationalism studies, there still remains the need for developing an adequate methodology and satisfactory methods for transnational research. Scholars, such as George Marcus (1995), defined some excellent general rules for transnationalism studies, such as the famous 'followings' (follow the people, follow the thing/commodity chain, follow the metaphors, follow the plot/story/allegory, follow the life/biography, follow the conflict). This is definitely an important step towards adequate methods, but, in the light of the aforementioned points, these rules do not resolve the problem of how to identify transnational societal units and how to distinguish them from simple transnational relations. The qualitative methods adopted primarily from the fields of anthropology, ethnography and sociology (holistic approach, participatory fieldwork, the 'following-strategy', open interviews, etc.), and developed by scholars such as Michael Kearney (1995 and with Carole Nagengast 1989), George Marcus (1995), Karen Olwig (2003), Federico Besserer 2004, Fernando Herrera (2001) and Peggy Levitt (2001b), represent important advances in tracing goods and people in order to identify and analyse transnational social relations. Levitt et al. (2003) argue for a dimensional focus on different aspects (economic, political, socio-cultural and religious dimensions) of transnational social life as a heuristic strategy.

In addition to these steps and in addition to taking the aforementioned first challenge - the definition of appropriate units of analysis for transnational societal phenomena - into account seriously, there arises a need for, not only new methods, but also a general development in methodology as such. In traditional social sciences the units of analysis could be taken for granted for no reason, but always had to be constructed theoretically. Within the framework of methodological nationalism (Wimmer/Glick Schiller 2002), the corresponding spatial units of reference were traditionally considered as 'naturally given' by the local, national and global geographic level. Differentiating absolutist and relativist concepts of space (Pries 1999), however, leads to fundamental revisions of the relation between the units of analysis and the spatial units of reference – the latter cannot be taken for granted as coherent and contiguous geographical 'containers', but have to be considered as pluri-local and constructed by social practices, symbols and artefacts: "The local, regional, national, and global are not automatic, taken-for-granted social arenas, but rather categories that must be investigated as constructed and contested social facts" (Khagram/Levitt 2005: 26). In qualitative terms, this raises new methodological problems, because the units of analysis and the units of reference appear definitely as what they are (and always have been): inextricably entangled. Some aspects of this fourth challenge will be treated explicitly in the next section of this paper.

Strengthening the conceptual fundament for transnational research

Based on the aforementioned challenges and *desiderata* of transnational studies, four proposals will be made in this section. First, differentiation criteria between units of analysis, units of reference and units of measurement will be proposed in order to make the characteristics of transnational studies, as opposed to cross-national comparison and world system or global studies, more distinct. Second, apart from the well-known problem of constructing appropriate units of analysis in social sciences, transnational studies must pay special attention to the challenge of finding the adequate (socio-spatial) units of reference. Third, the definition of a specific and narrowly bound concept of the terms 'transnational' and 'transnationalism' must be addressed to avoid using these terms as 'catch-all categories'. Finally, the understanding of social or societal spaces has to be made more explicit so as not to replace traditional concepts such as 'community' or 'society' by another vague term.

One crucial problem in the social sciences in general is the search for an adequate definition of 'units of analysis'. In transnationalism studies this problem becomes even more obvious and virulent because often used traditional concepts of 'container units of analysis' (like the national society or nation state based social classes) will not work. Sanjeev Khagram and

Peggy Levitt (2007) discuss the problem of finding clear definitions of 'borders' or 'boundaries', which are required or presupposed in order to look at transnational phenomena and units of analysis that are crossing or transgressing these borders and boundaries. Nina Glick Schiller and Ayşe Çağlar (2007) question the notion of ethnic groups as adequate units of analysis for transnational studies and proposes, instead, individual migrants, networks and social fields (the latter as 'networks of networks').

Looking for adequate units of analysis or units of reference for transnational studies, one possibility is to question units traditionally 'taken for granted' to relativise their boundaries, or to underscore their permeability. A second possibility - that will be developed in the following section - is to reflect upon the relations between units of analysis, units of reference and units of measurement more explicitly. This seems to be an essential endeavour in further developing the conceptual framework of the specific nature of transnational studies *in a narrow sense*. Transnational studies *in a broader sense* could be understood as all research focusing on border crossing and pluri-local objects of study. But in a programmatic way, the term 'transnational studies' will be developed here in a narrow and specific understanding of transnational societal spaces as units of reference. We define 'units of analysis' as the theoretical-analytical entities about which a scientific statement is made. In an investigation entitled "The fragmented identities of rural-urban Mexican migrants in Mexico-City during the 1990s", the fragmented identities would represent the units of analysis – whatever the operationalisation of the theoretical-analytical concept of fragmented identities would look like. In this example, the term "rural-urban Mexican migrants" would indicate the *units of measurement* as those entities to which the data collection would be related. Finally, the expression "in Mexico-City during the 1990s" would point to the spatial-temporal unit of reference that relates to the scientific statements.⁴

Differentiation between units of analysis, units of reference and units of measurement is useful for distinguishing systematically between different types of international research, namely international comparison, world system or global studies and transnational studies (see Table 1 with non-exhaustive examples for units of analysis and units of measurement). In the traditional case of international or cross-national comparison, the units of reference are the given or taken for granted nation states or national societies. The units of analysis could range from social classes to rituals, from social institutions to organizations, or from concepts

⁴ For a similar distinction see Friedrichs 1978.

of labour to religious orientations and practices. Ultimately, the units of measurement could be individuals, households, for-profit/non-profit organisations, movies, newspapers, certain products, special ceremonies (like weddings), and so on.

Table 1: Types of international studies

	Cross-national Comparison	World System Research	Transnational Studies
Units of reference	nation states, national societies, boundary fixed containers	macro regions, world system, entire globe	border crossing, pluri-local, societal spaces
Units of analysis	social classes, values, institutions, identity	centre-periphery structures of social classes, values	biographies, families, organisations, institutions, identity
Units of measurement	individuals, households, rituals, texts, practices	flows of goods and information, organisations	individuals, households, rituals, flows of goods

Whereas, in the case of cross-national comparison, the national societies are taken as the ‘quasi natural’ units of reference, in macro-regional, global or **world system studies** the unit of reference is extended so as to include a greater region (like Europe, the Asia-Pacific-rim or Latin America) or the world as a whole. In this case, the units of analysis could be the same as in the case of the cross-national comparison, now focusing, for instance, on a longitudinal perspective on changes in time. An example could be a study about ‘Shifts in courtly life in Medieval Europe from the 14th to the 17th century’ (given the fact that nation states and national societies in the modern sense did not exist at that time in the open-boundary macro-region of Europe). As an alternative to diachronic cuts through macro-regions or the entire globe, with the same units of analysis as those used in cross-national studies, there is also the possibility of creating socio-spatial (configurations of) units of analysis, such as the centre-periphery figure, and combining these with the aforementioned units of analysis. The work of Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) is a good example of the embedding of the social class category not in ‘national containers’ but in centre-periphery circles. The units of measurement could be the same as those in cross-national comparisons, but often flows of goods and information, or the spread and structure of economic and other organisations, are the focus of world system studies.

In the case of cross-national research, methodological nationalism is prevalent and obvious, but for traditional regional and world system studies the globe as a whole is divided into concentric circles and geographic spaces that are mutually exclusive with midpoints of repulsion. In both cases - cross-national comparison and world system studies - the time-space related units of reference are basically rooted in absolutist concepts of space and in the 'double binding' and mutual exclusiveness of geographic space and social space: (1) in one geographic-spatial unit (like the territory of a nation state) there is place for just one social-spatial unit (like a national society); and, (2) each social-spatial unit needs just one geographic-spatial unit. In social sciences in general, the units of reference have long been conceptualised as contiguous and (related to the social spaces *inside* this geographic unit) relatively homogenous geographic units (as compared to the socio-spatial differences *between* various geographic units).

During the 1990s scholars such as Saskia Sassen (1991) began to question this classical model, arguing that, for instance, global cities could combine the very centre and the real periphery in just one geographic place. At the same time the units of analysis and the units of reference became more complex, as they could be divided among different geographic places or plots in completely dissimilar socio-cultural regions, as in the case of international for-profit and non-profit organisations. In this way, the relation between social spaces and geographical spaces became more complex. In **transnational studies** the units of measurement could be quite the same as in cross-national research – even if, empirically, the analysis of *flows* of social practices, flows of symbols and flows of artefacts are more frequently observed. The units of analysis in transnational studies are most frequently biographies, families, organisations, institutions and identities. The units of reference, by definition, are considered as pluri-local and geographically dispersed, distributed and non-contiguous, but socially more or less homogeneous and coherent societal units.

But how could these transnational societal spaces, such as border crossing and pluri-local units of reference, be defined and identified? This is an epistemologically challenging question. In the case of cross-national research, the units of reference are taken for granted as nation states and national societies. These are defined by referring to one social unit within one geographical unit, as could be confirmed in practically all dictionaries or encyclopedias of Sociology. To cite an example: in the Harper Collins Dictionary of Sociology (Jary/Jary 1991: 467) the term 'Society' is defined as, "1. the totality of human relationships. 2. any self-perpetuating human grouping occupying a relatively bounded territory, having its own more or less distinctive CULTURE and INSTITUTIONS, for example, a particular people such as the Nuer or a long- or well-established NATION-STATE, such as the United States or Britain"

(capital letters retained from the original). Shmuel Eisenstadt (2004:25) refers to this dominant view and argues: “many of sociology’s basic images refer to *Gemeinschaft* und *Gesellschaft*. And *Gemeinschaft* is the nation-state. When people talk about the *Gemeinschaft*, the image of the *Gemeinschaft* they have, unless it is a tribe, is the nation state. Other types of *Gemeinschaften* have not really been studied except esoteric *kleine Gemeinschaften*. So what is difficult for sociologists is to free themselves of the implicit assumption that any society means nation state.”

While sociologists were used to having to construct their units of analysis by theoretical-analytical reasoning, they generally took the units of reference as given. This is no longer the ‘natural’ or adequate approach. Peter Mandaville, citing James Clifford and George Marcus, points to this problem as the crucial issue of social sciences:

‘There is no longer any place overview (mountaintop) from which to map human ways of life...Mountains are in constant motion. So are islands: for one cannot occupy, unambiguously, a bounded cultural world from which to journey out and analyze other cultures. Human ways of life increasingly influence, dominate, parody, translate, and subvert one another. Cultural analysis is always enmeshed in global movements of difference and power. How [then]... can ethnography – at home or abroad – define its object of study in ways that permit detailed, local, contextual analysis and simultaneously the portrayal of global implicating forces?’ [...] I take this to be the central problem of the social sciences at the present time. (Mandaville 2001: 29)

The problem of how to define the units of analysis, reference and measurement (called altogether “object of study” here) is exactly one of the most challenging questions for transnational studies. In the case of world-system studies the unit of reference is just expanded to the maximum (in the geographical sense of the globe and/or in the theoretical sense of Wallerstein’s functionally integrated system, or of Luhmann’s “possible reach of communication”). For transnational studies, this way of treating the relations between societal and geographic spaces is not adequate. A first step in dealing with this problem is – as proposed above – to distinguish explicitly between units of reference, units of analysis and units of measurement, and to reflect on the theoretical-analytical construction of the units of reference in the case of transnational studies. A second step is to reflect on how to construct adequate units of reference for analysing transnational societal spaces. Recalling the fundamental epistemological considerations of John Stuart Mill (1860[1843]) about the scientific methods of comparison, these transnational units of reference should comply with the following conditions. First, the similarities of relevant variables or characteristics *within* the transnational unit of reference should be considerable in comparison to the similarities in other (local, national, regional or global) units of reference. In order to identify a transnational societal space in the context of labour migration, the similarities in money spending and household economies of those units of measurement (e.g. individuals, households), possibly ascribed to

this transnational space, should be greater than the common features of money spending and household economies at a local or national level. Second, the differences *between* the transnational societal unit of reference and the local, national, regional or global units of reference are considerable in comparison to the differences between the local, national or regional units of reference. Concerning the example of transnational labour migration, money spending and household economies in transnational societal spaces should differ significantly from the corresponding patterns in local, national or regional units of reference.

Third, strengthening the conceptual foundation for transnational studies concerns the differentiation between transnational and other types of international relations and characteristics. In order to develop a specific and empirically useful approach on transnationalism, generally societal spaces are considered transnational only if they differ from other types of international and transnational relations and conform with the following criteria: the distribution of resources, culture, interests and power is polycentric and not monocentric; and, the relations and coordination between the different nations spanning local subunits are strong, dense and durable. This sets transnational societal spaces apart from, for instance, simple multinational societal spaces in which the distribution is polycentric but coordination is only weak, and from monocentric societal spaces where coordination mechanisms could be strong but distribution is centre-periphery-like rather than homogeneous (Pries 2005). In this sense, the proposed concept of transnational societal space is narrower than the rather unspecific terms ‘transnational network’ or ‘transnational field’, as used by Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2007).

Using these defining criteria it is possible, for instance, to distinguish a transnational migration family from a simple emigration/immigration, return migration or Diaspora migration family. In the *immigration/emigration* case, the ongoing coordination mechanisms for resources (like sending remittances) for culture (such as making transnational phone calls once a week or sending letters), for interests (like going to school or having a stable working career) and for power relations (such as the competency to decide over who goes where and when), become more and more centred in the society of arrival. In the case of *return migrants* all these aspects are strongly centred and focused on the society of departure. In contrast, actual *transnational migration* and the corresponding transnational societal spaces span more or less homogeneously and without a clear centre or point of reference between different locales, countries or regions. Gipsy families, and clans and organisations like Attac or McKinnsey, could come near to this ideal type. But many durable and dense border crossing societal spaces are not transnational but come close to a type of *Diaspora migration*. In this case, the border-spanning activities are “anchored” in an imagined and/or in a physically existing ‘promised land’.

Fourth, an element in strengthening the transnationalism studies approach refers to the concept of social, respectively, societal spaces itself. If 'society' and 'community' are problematic or misleading terms – as mentioned above by Shmuel Eisenstadt – for representing the only or unquestioned social units in times of global changes, the concept of *societal spaces* could be a promising approach for qualifying transnational societal units.

Three ideal types of (transnational) social spaces

Social spaces, understood and perceived as human life relations, generally comprise three different dimensions, analogous to the x, y and z axes of social life. Firstly, social spaces always contain the *social practice* dimension as the active examination and working by actors with other people, with nature and with oneself. All three relations (human-nature, human-human and ego-self) are constitutive and indispensable for any form of human life-practice. By definition, these relations imply an expansion in space and time and refer to the active and intervening side of human life entanglements. Work (in the form of hunting, constructing dwellings, sowing and reaping corn, baking bread, building machines, preparing food, etc.) has been the most important social practice in the human-nature relation for millions of years, but it also always encompassed the human-human and the ego-self relation. In the transition to the knowledge and information society, work increasingly takes on an intermediary role between human-nature, human-human and ego-self relations. Additionally, however, informing, recounting, loving, representing and thinking have all been genuine parts of social practice since humans' anthropogenesis from the ape and encompass all three human life relations.

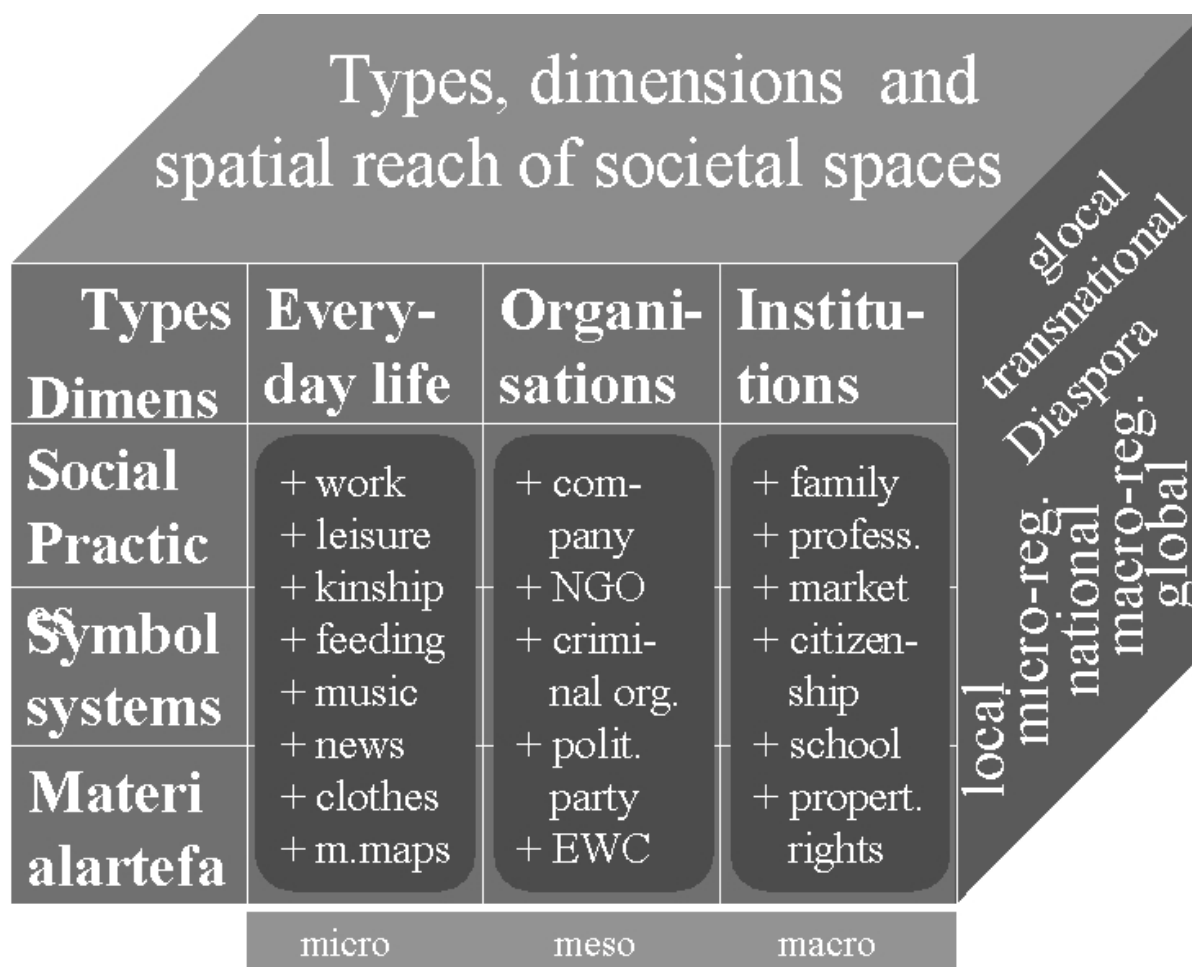
Secondly, social spaces always include the dimension describing the presence and effectiveness of symbol systems, i.e. of complex frameworks of significant symbols. In this sense, symbols are not simply to be understood as sensory inputs, just as, for example, certain light-waves are registered on the retina as signs for the colour red or green, or as the temperature of a fluid or object is registered by the skin as a sign of warmth or cold. Rather, a symbol is a complex sign for and in a context. It represents a mode of giving sense to social practice and of structuring social practice by meaningful behaviour. A symbol is primarily conditioned not by a 'natural situation' but rather by culture. Significant symbols evoke the same connotation in differing agents living within the same cultural context. For example, in north-western European social spaces, a wedding ring represents a very complex context of an enduring (and up until the 20th century) heterosexual relationship based upon mutual affection and free will, approved by religious institutions and by the state. The relative impor-

tance of certain symbol systems (e.g. characters, movies, funeral rituals) can vary tremendously. Language is a very complex, universal and indeed constitutive symbol system in human social spaces.

Finally, the third dimension, which encompasses all social practices, comprises the production and use of artefacts. This includes all objectified results stemming from human action - especially human work. As objects formed by humans, artefacts are also always the result of the active human-nature relation. However, the two other human acquirement relations – the human-human and the ego-self relation – cannot be separated. Crafting a spear for hunting, forging a ring and preparing a meal are results of and aimed at all three human life relations. Certain social theories are almost completely blind regarding the importance of artefacts from human beings' social world and social spaces. For example, in Luhmann's system theory artefacts are not ascribed the deserved systematic consideration when compared with social practices and symbol systems. It should therefore be stressed that the two other dimensions of social spaces – social practices and symbol systems – cannot be understood without making systematic reference to artefacts.

In distinguishing social practices, symbols and artefacts as the three constitutive *dimensions* of dense and durable societal spaces with 'relations of entanglement' (Verflechtungsbeziehungen in terms of Norbert Elias), at least three *ideal types* of societal spaces could be identified as relevant for transnational studies: everyday life, organisations and institutions (c.f. graphic 1).

Graphic 1: Relation between dimensions, types and spatial reach of societal spaces



When developing his concept of *everyday life*, Alfred Schütz differentiated between two ideal types of the social: the *social environment* (*soziale Umwelt*) and the *social co-world* (*soziale Mitwelt*) of human beings. According to Schütz, social environment denotes the immediately perceived world as a simultaneity of space, time and the co-presence of a ‘you’-perspective. It is a world in which “I focus upon the conscious experiences of others by my own vivid and open awareness” (Schütz 1993: 202). The social environment is therefore oriented towards the alter ego, towards my fellow humans. Alfred Schütz distinguishes between the social environment and the social co-world as follows: “Beyond this social environment which connects me to the community in time and space, further social spheres exist. Some, I currently experience because they were formerly my environment and I can (at least in principle) always make them my environment. Others which were never part of my environment and of which I could therefore have no experience, represent possible experiences. Let us call these social regions the social co-world” (ibid.: 202).

Schütz constantly stresses the importance of the simultaneity of space and time for the social environment: “The spatial and temporal immediacy is fundamental for the environmental situation” (ibid.: 228). In my opinion, this is where, at the beginning of the 21st century, fundamentally new developments arise. Modern transport and communication infrastructures available to broad population groups today makes “conscious experiences of others by my own vivid and open awareness” possible even across long geo-spatial distances. Thus, social environments can span across several spaces pluri-locally and transnationally more easily than, for example, a century ago. The term ‘more easily’ is meant to imply that pluri-local and boundary-transgressing social spaces have already existed to a certain extent – as in the form of the millennia-old church and monastery tradition and the even older Jewish Diaspora (cp. e.g. Smith 1997).

Apart from everyday life on a micro-level, *organisations* represent a second ideal type of societal spaces. They may be defined as relatively durable interaction-frameworks (of people) with membership rules (who belongs and who doesn’t belong to the organisation), deliberately established structures and processes of division of labour (who has to do what), rules and rituals of behaviour (what is accepted and expected behaviour and what is not), power (who says what is to be done and who reports to whom) and planned and variable goals and ends. Whilst organisations as ideal typical societal spaces are situated on a meso-level, societal *institutions* represent the macro-level of societal spaces. They can be understood as inherited frameworks of routines, rules, norms and mutual expectations, which structure specific areas of human life and offer action programmes, identities, integration and stability for relatively expansive interaction-networks (e.g. societies, communities, ethnicities, organisations etc. Examples: heterosexual matrimony, professions, 15th birthday festivity).

Transnational organisations as the micro-macro-link

Meanwhile most transnational studies concentrate *either* on the micro-level of everyday life *or* on the macro-level of social institutions, the meso-level of transnational organisations lacks the attention it deserves. Because the study of organisations could be the micro-macro-link in transnationalism studies. During the last twenty years or so, transnational studies developed strongly in anthropology and sociology, but also in other scientific disciplines such as economics, political science and history. But until now, only in the field of economics was the meso-level unit of analysis of organisations addressed systematically. Most social scientists, especially anthropologists and sociologists, focused either on the micro-level (i.e. on individuals, households and their social networks) or on the macro-level (i.e. on social institu-

tions, governance or migration systems). In organisation studies - as well as in economics and management or economic sociology - a long tradition of theoretical and empirical research about international (that is, border crossing in a general sense) organisations exists. This branch of research first concentrated on profit-organisations, but, following the massive emergence of non-profit and non-governmental social movements and organisations in the international arena during the last twenty years or so, a broad variety of literature on all types of international and transnational organisations has emerged.

One general aspect that transnational studies could adopt from these organisation studies is the differentiation between ideal types of international organisations, according to their structure of resource distribution and coordination mechanisms. Organisations with internationally decentralised resources (e.g. investments, employment, production facilities, research and development) and weak coordination features (control and communication direction and intensity, e.g. of a 'centre' over 'peripheral' sites) are usually referred to as *multinational organisations*. Organisations with centralised resources and strong coordination are generally referred to as *global organisations*. Organisations with decentralised resources and strong coordination patterns are frequently called *international or focal organisations*.

In this framework, *transnational organisations* are characterised by their decentralised resources and, at the same time and opposite to focal organisations, intense coordination. Therefore, transnational organisations could be understood as highly decentralised and border-crossing pluri-locally distributed and, at the same time, intensely coordinated, stable and dense cooperation frameworks with membership rules, deliberately established and variable structures, as well as more or less explicit goals and intentions. Since approximately fifteen years ago, transnational organisations have become more and more of an issue in organisational research. This is due, on the one hand, to increasingly complex and internationally spanned production and value chains of goods and services and, on the other hand, to the emergence of important transnationally active non-profit organisations with more or less decentralised resource structures and, at the same time, effective and strong coordination patterns (such as Greenpeace, Attac and Oxfam). International for-profit and non-profit organisations are all confronted with the challenge to "square the circle": On the one hand, optimal decentralisation and adaptation to local conditions are necessary, while on the other hand, optimal generalisation of knowledge and resources is also a requirement (Keck/Sikkink 1998; Doz et al. 2001).

In the same way the concept of transnational organisations is used at a meso-level in organisation studies in the narrow sense of a specific type of international organisations, the term 'transnational' should be used in a more specific manner for the micro-level of everyday life

and for the macro-level of social institutions as well. By this way, transnationalism and transnational studies could gain a lot from the organisational research approach on transnational organisations as a micro-macro link. Between the micro-level research topics such as everyday life, identity, migrant families and mobility on the one hand, and units of analysis such as border crossing transnational migration systems or governance structures, societal institutions that structure transnationality, citizenship and value chains on the other hand, lies the perspective of meso-level units of analysis such as (transnational) organisations. Broadening the focus towards transnational organisations could integrate other scientific disciplines, such as economics, organisation research or sociology of organisations. At the same time, the organisational perspective invites interdisciplinary research between historians, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, economists, political scientists, lawyers and others.

Developing the organisational perspective in transnational studies could definitely help to cope with the challenges that the study of transnationalism faces. In organisational research a long tradition of differentiating between transnational and other types of international organisations such as multinational, global or focal exists. For the field of transnational studies, this tradition facilitates a precise and narrow concept of transnationalism and transnationality, thus avoiding the argument that transnationalism converts into just a new fashion and catch-all term, replacing global and globalisation. The organisational approach is also helpful in reflecting on the relation between geographic and societal space more explicitly. As long as all types of international organisations are societal units distributed over different geographic locales, the problem of reflecting on the interrelations between the social and the spatial is inevitable. Another advantage of concentrating on organisations is based on their 'operationality'. Organisations are defined by more or less explicit structures and boundaries, as indicated by the membership criteria. This makes it easier to define who belongs to an organisation and who does not. At the same time, there is a long tradition of developing and testing the instruments in order to characterise and measure the structures of organisations (e.g. Scott 2003). Ultimately, the organisational research tradition allows for comparisons of for-profit and non-profit organisations, thus integrating different streams of transnational studies, such as economic or sociological analysis of corporate business and for-profit organisations on the one hand, and anthropological, sociological or political analysis of non-profit organisations on the other hand.

The variety of spatial reach of societal spaces

After having delimited the dimensions and the ideal types of societal spaces it is necessary to distinguish transnational societal spaces from other types of societal spaces. Normally, societal spaces are thought and conceptualised in terms of uni-local geographical extensions, as shown above taking the example of the concepts of community and society. Following this concept and the corresponding absolutist understanding of space, societal spaces could be delimited – onion rings like – to a local level (e.g. a city), a micro-regional level (e.g. Bavaria, the Yucatan peninsular or the Mississippi delta), a national level (of states, nations and/or societies), or could be extended to a macro-regional level (e.g. of the European Union, North America, the Maghreb or Soth-East Asia) and a global level (of world society or mankind). Besides these five types of coherent and uni-local spatial extensions there are three types of pluri-local geographical extensions of societal spaces that are based on a relativist meaning of space.

The first pluri-local spanning of societal spaces could be the *glocal societal space*. It is an outcome of social practices, symbols and artefacts concentrated on the dialectics between global and local everyday life, organisations or institutions. Global tendencies and processes are related to and interconnected with local concentrations of power, technology, knowledge, money and other resources and occurrences. Also, the tendency to sweep away some borders often goes hand in hand with the drawing of new borders. To perceive globalization solely as a process aimed at gradually reducing the significance of geographic space and boundaries one would ignore the mounting efforts to establish new mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion at various territorial levels, or to deny the locally tangible effects of globalization processes.⁵ For instance, global warming not only has dramatic local effects, it has its origins in locally bounded causes (such as the energy consumption patterns of some OECD countries). The same is true for the global diffusion of fashions and nutrition habits, for the corresponding decline of isolated local economies, and for the increase in so-called 'diseases of civilization'. Similarly, the expansion of locally concentrated software economies, like the one in Bangalore, India, is the result of a more or less globalized market for special software services (and the very fact that it is located in a time zone that is just half a day removed from the USA). In sum, glocalization strengthens or produces pluri-local societal

⁵ Theoretically there are more than three ideal types of pluri-local societal spaces, e.g. the societal space spanning between the global and the national level. But in scientific literature and in social practice the aforementioned three types are the most important.

spaces in which globalized/delocalized phenomena and processes are intertwined with the localized concentration of preconditions and/or effects of such phenomena and processes. Glocal societal spaces involve two geographic levels as sites of interaction: the 'global' and the 'local.'

The second type of pluri-local societal space configurations is the Diaspora. Diasporas in this specific sense are multi-sited, dense and durable societal spaces with an identifiable (even if only imagined) centre. Though the term is used in many different ways, the common idea is the existence of a shared societal space which spreads over different geographic spaces and boundaries of regions or nations, and which is constituted mainly in reference to a common 'motherland' or clearly identifiable centre. The most important historical type of a diasporic societal space is the Jewish experience of dispersion and persecution over many places and nations, in which references to and images of a common homeland provided the nexus (Cohen 1997). In a more general sense, the dense and durable societal spaces created by diplomatic corps or politically persecuted refugees with their 'homelands' could also be considered as diasporas, insofar as people in the 'peripheries' (embassies, settlements etc.) are driven by religious or political reasons to maintain strong loyalty to the sending centre.

Some scholars distinguish different meanings of the term Diaspora. Steve Vertovec sets apart Diaspora as a social form from Diaspora as a type of consciousness and Diaspora as a mode of cultural production and he defines a Diaspora as "practically any population which is considered 'deterritorialized' or 'transnational' – that is, whose cultural origins are said to have arisen in a land other than that in which they currently reside, and whose social, economic and political networks cross borders of nation-states or, indeed, span the globe" (Vertovec 2000: 141). As discussed above, the notion that social spaces become 'deterritorialized' is highly questionable. Therefore, in terms of the proposal developed in this paper, Diasporas are not and could not be de-territorialized, but anchored in different localities spread over different countries or regions. But they also differ from transnational societal spaces as could be demonstrated in the following.

Transnational societal spaces are the outcome of the strengthening of pluri-local and border-crossing social relations and fields. As societal spaces they span above and between the traditional national container spaces and the figure of concentric circles of local, micro-regional, national, macro-regional and global phenomena are played out. This phenomenon presupposes a relativist concept of societal-geographic space, rather than an absolutist one. Thus, transnational societal spaces can be understood as pluri-local frames of reference which structure everyday practices, social positions, biographical employment projects, and

human identities, and which span locales above, between and beyond the contexts of national container societies without having a clear and identifiable centre of reference.

Transnationalisation as a process consists of relations and interactions that in some cases strengthen for a while and then dilute again, but it also could lead to the emergence of relatively stable and durable transnational societal spaces. According to their level of institutionalization, fixedness or strength, and according to general sociological understanding, three types of such societal spaces could be distinguished: (1) habitual and accountable patterns of action and behaviour in transnational everyday life; (2) transnational organizations as stable and dense loci of cooperation and interaction with rules of membership, given structures and processes, and stated goals and purposes; or (3) transnational institutions as complex frameworks of routines, rules and norms, which structure significant terrains of life.

Differentiating three dimensions and three ideal types of societal spaces as well as seven different geographical-spatial levels and reach of societal spaces could appear as a too ambitious endeavour. But developing transnationalism as a specific research program has to cope with two contradictory challenges. On the one side, transnational phenomena have to be ranked into a system of *societal* durability and denseness, of internal structuration and external differentiation in order to not classify every transnational phenomena as new, as socially important and/or as scientifically relevant. On the other side, transnational phenomena have to be distinguished from other societal phenomena in terms of their *geographic-spatial* configuration. Not coping with the first challenge would lead to find transnationalism at anytime and everywhere, even and especially in pre-national era. Not answering to the second task at stake would end up in an opaque notion of the world as a network of networks of networks ... of every spatial levels one would like to look at. In summary, a lot of theoretical and empirical research still has to be done to explore the promising field of transnationalism and transnationality in the narrow sense of the terms.

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