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Rethinking Transnationalism Through Hometown Transnationalism

Thomas Lacroix*

ARTICLE

Transnational studies are a newcomer in the landscape of migration studies. They are now regarded as the third pillar of migration studies, next to the study of integration in the receiving countries and of migration and development in the sending countries. This strand of research addresses the various forms of practices and socialities that migrants maintain across national borders. As a political geographer, I am primarily interested in the intersection between transnational practices, power relations and state policies. How can we characterise migrants' transnational space-time compared to state territoriality? To what extent do state policies shape or constrain the transnational engagements of migrants? Are the material (people, goods and money) and immaterial (ideas, norms and symbols) flows induced by migrant transnationalism a chance for or challenge to state sovereignty? These are the kinds of questions I have sought to address in my work.

This paper draws on a comparative research focusing on Indian and North African immigrants in Europe and their hometown organisations (HTOs). Collective remittances can be defined as collective projects of development undertaken by groups of migrants for the benefit of their place of origin (electrification, health centres, schools, but also religious buildings or town hall refurbishment, etc.). Collective remittances are an often-mentioned example of transnational practices. The purpose is to understand hometown organisations and their transnational engagements. By HTO, I refer to groups of immigrants from the same village and clustering in the place of arrival. It is a very widespread form of organising all around the world among internal and international migrants. And since the mid-nineties one observes a surge of development endeavours undertaken by these groups. The key question that has driven my work is: why have hometown groups all around the world with no link between each other been increasingly committed to homeland development since the nineties? And this question is for me a starting point to understand the structural mechanisms of transnationalism and transnational engagement. Its ambition is both empirical (the explanation of a phenomenon) and theoretical (providing a framework of understanding transnationalism).

This paper is broken down into four parts. The first briefly presents transnational studies, their origins and current problems. The second provides an overview of transnational practices in the Mediterranean and, more specifically, of Moroccans and Algerians in France. The third focuses on Moroccan hometown transnationalism and its determinants. The fourth part

expands on the Moroccan example and presents some generalisable results regarding hometown transnationalism at large.

1. The Transnational Turn of Migration Studies

The focus on cross-border circulation and practices of migrants is nothing new, but it gained momentum from the seventies onward. Pioneering research focused on:

- The “circulation migratoire” (Simon, 1979 & Tarrius, 1996)
- The transnational approach in international relations (Nye & Keohane, 1972)
- Diaspora studies (Sheffer, 1986)

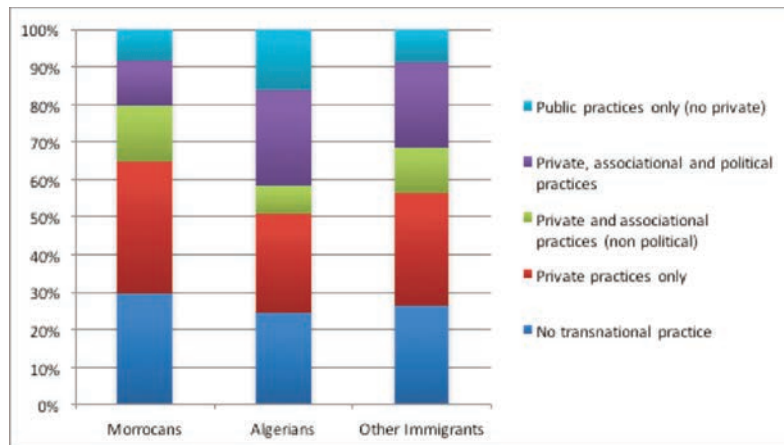
It became a central paradigm of migration studies (some say the third pillar of migration studies with “migration and development” and “integration”) in the nineties with Linda Basch et al. (1994), Alejandro Portes et al. (1999), Steve Vertovec (1999) and Peggy Levitt (2001), etc. Early studies focused on the functioning of transnational communities. Research has widened to a large range of issues such as transnational politics (voting, lobbying, etc.), religious movements, transnational families, cultural identities, etc.

Current Issues in Transnational Studies:

- *The definition of transnationalism and transnational practices.* There are various definitions of transnationalism. The most widespread is the one given by Basch et al. that it is “a phenomenon through which migrants sustain multi-stranded social relations with one or more countries” (Basch et al. 1994: 7). But not all transnational practices entail the crossing of a border (the reading of a newspaper from the sending country, long-distance calls) and, conversely, not all cross-border mobility (such as tourism) is transnationalism. This issue is not settled and poses a lot of difficulties. There is a debate among scholars about whether transnationalism is a widespread or a rare phenomenon among migrants. This debate mostly pertains to a problem of definition. Shall we adopt a restrictive or a loose definition of transnational practices?
- *Is transnationalism a novelty?* Is transnationalism a product of contemporary globalisation? In fact, historians have shown that new technologies are not a necessary condition for maintaining long-distance ties.
- *An obstacle to integration?* This is an old debate: are transnational ties adverse to integration? Recent research tends to show that there is a transnational hump: they increase with integration in the first years of settlement and then tend to decrease over time.
- *Transnationalism against the state?* There is a debate between those who think that transnationalism is a symptom of the demise of state sovereignty in contemporary globalisation and their contenders who think that states fully support directly and indirectly the activities of transnational actors. Some even talk about the nationalisation of transnationalism (Greenfield, 2016), a growing importance of transnational networks supporting nationalist causes.

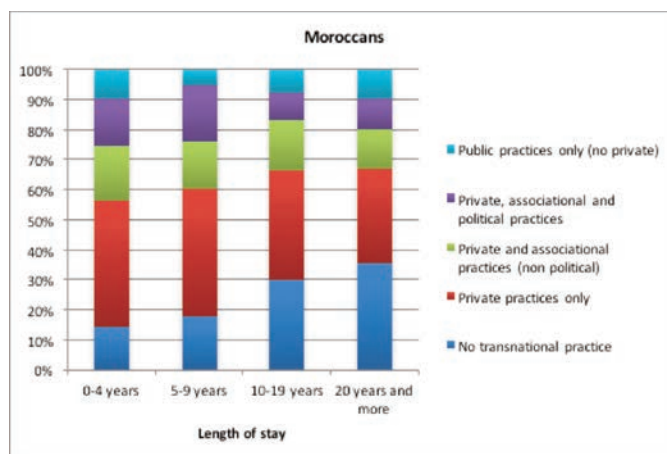
- *Transnationalism as an epistemology challenging methodological nationalism.* The state has been the framework through which social phenomena have always been studied. “Methodological nationalism” tends to obscure the reality of socialities that expand beyond borders. We need a new conceptual and methodological framework to address the new scales of the social.

2. Transnational Practices in the Mediterranean

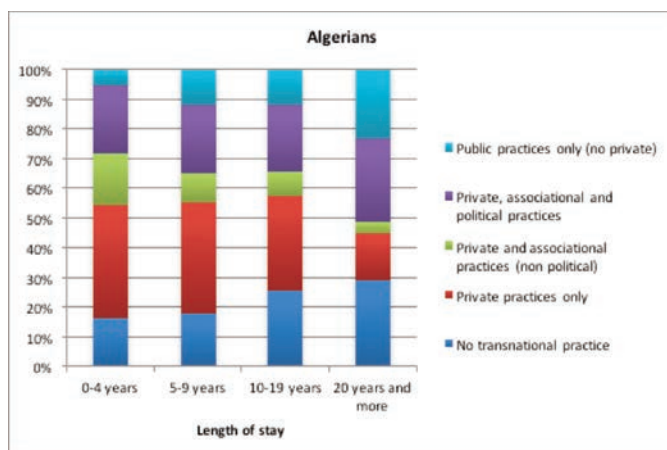


Source: Trajectoires et Origines, INED

The survey “Trajectoires et Origines” (INED) provides information about the transnational practices of immigrants in France. The survey was carried out in 2008 (see website for details). These two groups are the two largest immigrant groups in France. It shows the distinct forms of engagement despite relatively similar migration history and integration patterns in the French society. Here I distinguish between political transnationalism (external voting, interest in homeland politics), associational transnationalism (participation in transnational associations) and private transnationalism (in the family sphere, such as remittances or contacts with relatives).



Source: Trajectoires et Origines, INED



Source: Trajectoires et Origines, INED

The data shows one major difference and one common trend. On the one hand, Algerians are much more engaged in political activities than their Moroccan counterparts. Conversely, Moroccans tend to privilege family and associative transnationalism. On the other hand, public (i.e. associative and political) transnationalism tends to resist over time compared to private transnationalism.

There are two explanations for this. The first one is linked to the demographic structures of both groups. Algerian immigration started in the early 20th century and peaked in the sixties. Moroccan immigration is mostly a post-war affair and peaked in the seventies and eighties. Therefore, Algerian first generation immigrants are, on average, older than the Moroccans. With time, relatives died or have cut off linkages.

The second one is linked with the attitudes of Morocco and Algeria vis-à-vis their expatriates. The Algerian state sees Algerians abroad as a political resource (this dates back from the decolonisation war period) and emigrants were granted the right to vote as early as the mid-sixties. Conversely, due to rentier economy based on the gas industry, Algeria is not in want of foreign currency and does not encourage money transfers of migrants (the Algerian dinar is not convertible). Morocco shows the opposite attitude. The state historically sees emigrants as a stronghold for political opposition and has not, so far, implemented the right to vote (despite strong pressures from civil society). But emigration has always been a key economic resource. The state strongly encourages remittances, and more recently collective remittances through various banking systems and co-funding schemes.

These observations highlight two key drivers of transnational engagements: the social linkages on the one hand and the political framework on the other. This nuances the assumption that transnationalism is averse to state policies and sovereignty. Along with social dynamics that escape state intervention, we see that states nevertheless keep on playing a key role in the shaping of transnational connections.

3. Collective Remittances among Moroccans

Collective remittances are a widespread phenomenon observed all around the world. In the Moroccan case, hometown groups are mostly to be found among a Berber group from the Anti and High Atlas Mountains called the Chleuhs. 60% of Moroccan HTOs are linked to this area. Ait Abdallah is located in the province of Tata, on the southern edge of the Anti-Atlas Mountains. The *Douar* is the traditional headquarter of a Berber tribe holding the same name. This tribe is itself part of the wider tribal federation of the *Ahougga*, one of the two main federations among the Chleuhs. This is important insofar as HTOs are a legacy of tribal forms of solidarities. Their mobilisation is based on a customary set of norms called the *Tiwizi*, which regulates the collective duties of villagers. Its economy is based on date tree and goat farming, but internal (Agadir, Rabat, Casablanca) and international (France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy) migrations remain the main source of income. The first outflows to France started in the early 1950s. But emigration in this area started between the two world wars. This is the oldest emigration area to France. Labour recruitment for collieries favoured emigration to Northern France. In the early 2000s, around 900 persons were living outside the village, including 250 abroad (out of a population of 1200). The vast majority of them are settled in the Paris area and, to a lesser extent, in Northern France. Other groups of migrants and their descendants reside near Brussels and Amsterdam.

The first collective initiatives began in the late 1970s. Wells were dug thanks to a contribution launched by Netherlands-based immigrants. In the wake of this operation, a collective fund was created. In the 1980s, the fund served to renovate religious buildings (the mosque, the cemetery) and agricultural equipment (refurbishment of the collective well and irrigation channels). Contributions were made on a voluntary basis and money was transferred to Morocco by a trusted Hadj. This first generation of collective remittances were occasional, "informal" and solicited by village authorities. There were no external partners. In 1994, the villagers received support from two North American NGOs to build a water tower. The two funding bodies required that the villagers create a registered village association called *Afous* to represent the village community. This formalisation effort of development activities is linked to a mutation of the management of local development by Moroccan activities.

This first initiative occurred against the backdrop of a transformation of the governance of local development. This transformation took place between 1984 and 1992 within the context of structural adjustment programmes. This governance includes two ingredients: asymmetric decentralisation that delegates to local authorities the responsibilities for local development but with no additional financial means AND the liberalisation of associational life. The aim of this policy is to encourage the voluntary sector (NGOs, village organisations and migrants) to take charge of development activities and, in parallel, the establishment of a new diasporic policy with dedicated institutions.

Once the project was completed, villagers and expatriates decided to build on this first experience to carry out their own development projects. The association received public authority support through a government co-funding scheme to bring electricity to the village. It was then decided to found a sister organisation in France to collect and manage the contribution of expatriates. *Afous-France* was therefore created in 1998. In addition to the support immigrants gave to their

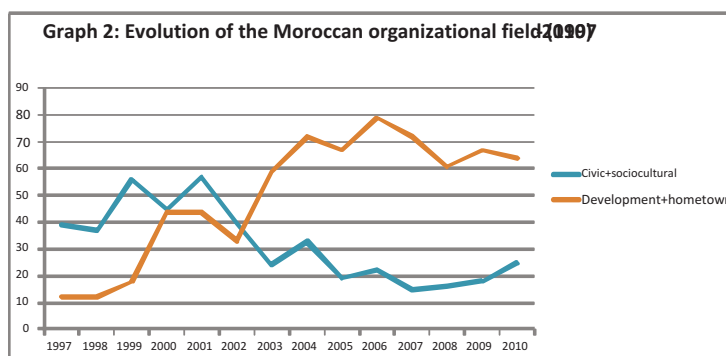
families to cover the expenses of electrification (amounting to 40 dirham per month over seven years), Afous-France collected 100,000 dirhams to fund the electrification of distant houses not covered by the Office National d'Electricité. The organisation thus replaced the collective fund created in the 1970s.

The Moroccan government set up three co-funding schemes in the mid-nineties: for electricity, water and roads. Once again, they are part of this neoliberal governance of local development: the programmes received large funding from the World Bank.

Additional projects were carried out in the following years (a classroom, the planting of 300 ornamental trees in 1998, and various social and cultural events). In 2003, a new organisation, "Aït Abdallah-Europe", was registered in the Netherlands to manage the contribution of Netherlands- and Belgium-based hometowners. In 2003, it built up a public library with the financial support of the French Foreign Ministry (Coopération Maroc Programme) and the technical support of another migrant NGO, Immigration Développement Démocratie. During the nineties, in France, larger migrant NGOs were created. Their role is to bridge these small groups with national and international funding bodies. IDD is one of them. It was created in 1998 by activists of the ATMF, a large working class Moroccan organisation. The largest one is called "Migrations et Développement", which is based in Marseilles and achieved 300 projects mostly in the Taroudannt province. These organisations have also benefited from the implementation of co-development policies and decentralised cooperation. The latter can be regarded as a movement of liberalisation of international cooperation, which echoes the reform of development governance in southern countries.

We now have a two-level associational field with small collectives of migrants at the bottom and a range of larger NGOs and federative structures. This structuration of the associational field compensates for the weaker financial capacities of Moroccan migrants with a well-organised associational web, which is itself a legacy of a strong working class movement dating back to the sixties.

The graph illustrates the transnationalisation of Moroccan associational activities in France with a growing number of transnational-oriented associations (orange line) and a smaller number of hostland-oriented associations (blue line).



Source: Journal officiel des associations

4. Beyond the Moroccan Case: Hometown Transnationalism in a Comparative Perspective

In my work, I have attempted to obtain generalisable results through a comparative work between Moroccans, Algerians and Indian hometown organisations.

Comparison shows that the surge of collective remittances is the product of a combination between identity dynamics within long-standing immigrant groups and structural transformations at play in sending and receiving countries:

- Associational structures: the existence of an associational elite, formed within a strong migrant working class movement since the sixties, is key. They bring both a collective mobilisation capacity and the possibility to establish connections with funding bodies. In the Algerian case, the decade of civil war has deeply fragmented the Algerian civil society and it makes it difficult for them to build up a cohesive and efficient associational field. As a consequence, there is a weaker compensation mechanism than in the Moroccan case.
- Cultural structures: they bring a conceptual toolbox that enables migrants to make sense of their engagement. It grounds their engagement in a legitimate moral background. And, at the same time, it enables them to embed their practice in a temporal collective trajectory, to reinvent a tradition for contemporary needs.
- Political structures: the new governance of local development is essential to understand the emergence of HTOs as development actors. It is worth noting that neoliberal adjustment reforms were much stronger in Morocco and India, thereby leaving a much smaller space for Algerian HTOs to intervene.
- Diasporic and co-development policies appear as potentially important but not determining factors. In the Indian case, HTO members have a far greater internal funding capacity. They collect money within their diasporic networks and thereby remain poorly connected with funding bodies. There is a co-funding policy in Punjab, which is a failure. Between 2004 and 2010, the state of Punjab gave 2.9 million dollars through this scheme. In contrast, a survey in 300 villages of Punjab showed that at least 296 million dollars have been sent by migrants to fund collective projects. Punjabi collective remittances are massive, with the construction of schools and large hospitals. In the Algerian case, they are exposed to the same funding possibilities offered by co-development policies in France but are not in a position to rely on them the same way Moroccans do because of the fragmentation of their associational field. So my point is that policies directly targeting collective remittances are of less importance compared with structural adjustment policies in sending countries.

Concluding Remarks: Rethinking the State/Transnationalism Relation

In this paper, I have pointed towards possible answers to current debates in transnational studies. I would like, in this conclusion, to briefly focus on the relation between states and immigrant transnationalism.

Transnationalism has for a long time been perceived as a symptom of the demise of state sovereignty in the context of globalisation and still is. But closer scrutiny shows that transnationalism is neither a product of our times, nor maintains univocal interactions with state institutions. We have seen that HTOs challenge local authorities but are part of a new governance of local development initiated by central state policies.

So transnationalism is neither a product of the state nor a subversive force against state sovereignty. The transnational arena in which migrants evolve is a composite field of actors: migrants, non-migrants, civil society actors, international organisations, local authorities and representatives of ministries, etc., coexist around development practices.

So far, academic literature has focused on transnational groups of migrants and their practices. We now have to move on and incorporate a broader range of actors who are not necessarily migrants themselves.

Similarly, we apply methodological transnationalism to the state itself and take into account the transnational extensions of state activities. Territorial sovereignty is not the sole tool for states to establish their power over a given space and population.

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