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How Can Migration Theory Do Better?



A discussion with Peggy Levitt about the importance of decompartmentalizing Migration Studies and of engaging in interdisciplinary conversations to better understand human mobility and diversifying societies.

The ways we are in the world have changed. The world is highly global and interdependent. Many people are internal or international migrants who embrace multiple affinities and memberships. Peggy Levitt argues that migration theory needs to move away from its emphasis on integration, inclusion and the nation-state to a more transnational, interdisciplinary approach that is better suited to capture current dynamics.

Josepha Milazzo: How has academic research about migration changed over the past decade? Is more migration research being done today than in 2005 / 1995?

Peggy Levitt: In my opinion, it has not changed enough. Many early debates are simply being repeated, such as those about the migration and development nexus, or about integration and inclusion. We continue to use the same boxes for our analysis (e.g. the nation, ethnicity, or religion) even though they blind us to things that are hiding in plain sight.

We are living through difficult times. There is a lot of fear about migration and about demographic change. There is rising inequality,

nationalism, and xenophobia; the welfare state is shrinking and there is increased job instability. Many people can move and settle but many cannot—leading to conditions of permanent impermanence. Others move but do not want to settle or become citizens. Migration theory needs to take these different types of mobility, possibilities for citizenship and membership, and the new institutional arrangements that arise in response, into account.

But we often still ask “yes” or “no” questions when we should really be looking at “under what conditions”, “for whom”, or “with what costs and benefits”. Social life is really complex. Thus, integration issues still have to be considered. But we need to think carefully about the different modalities of human mobility and about what the implications are for the possibilities and desirability of national citizenship and for various forms of incorporation, participation, representation and protection.

We need to move away from the assumption that everyone identifies nationally or ethnically or that they locate themselves automatically within closed nation-state containers. We speak a lot about the problems of “methodological nationalism”, but we could also speak about the danger of “methodological ethnicism” which is the assumption that ethnicity or ancestry are the primary axis around which people organize their lives. Donald Trump notwithstanding, more and more people will continue to maintain multiple identifies and attachments to places. We have to think more critically about how the embedded assumptions in our categories of analysis influence what we see and what is rendered invisible about economic, racial, class, and gender hierarchies. We have to pay attention to how where and when we start the story, colors how it evolves and ends.

But we are not working in a vacuum. Funders, universities, and governments want migration scholars to work on integration because it is “the question of the day”. So the way knowledge is produced, the way academic careers are rewarded, and the way the next generation of scholars is being trained repeats many of the old mistakes. Despite the rise of social media, there is still too little room to ask new questions, using new words, and reaching new audiences. What is more, even when we develop powerful theories and answers in the Global North, they do not, by any means, automatically map on to other parts of the world.

JM: What is a transnational approach in migration research and why is it important using it?

PL: The word “transnational” is an adjective, an approach: when one has a question, one has to ask about the space and time that are the most appropriate to ask and answer that question and not assume what they are *a priori*. You may find your answer within the nation-state or you may find that the very local processes you are interested in are actually strongly influenced by things happening very far away.

There is a lot of discussion about transnational scholarship being passé or that now everything under the sun is transnational. This is too easy. Scholars need to be more careful, to do their homework, and track how this research has evolved and changed rather than launching knee-jerk critiques based on out-of-date thinking. One direction I find particularly promising is Yasemin Soysal’s idea of transnationalizing. This is the process of extending national phenomena across borders, and the implications of this for what has been considered “national” (identities, membership, educational systems, culture, etc.). And this is not driven by migration alone. The nation is transformed both by the movement of people and by the diffusion and stretching of models, frameworks, structures, institutions, and epistemologies across space. Research must help unpack the iterative relationship between what we think of as the national and the transnational and to see how they are mutually intertwined, in tension, complementary, and more or less inclusive as a result of the multiple sites and scales where this is worked out.

JM: What should be changed in regards to academic research about migration?

PL: There are already improvements—the fact that scholars around the world can read open access journals means that more people from more places can participate in the conversation. The fact that English speakers are being pushed to read and publish in non-English language journals and that the number of training grants and scholarships for students from the Global South are increasing are all good things.

But there is still much work to be done. Ensuring that more children and grandchildren of immigrants get a university education is key. That is not to mention diversifying the professoriate and the university administration. The need to synthesize what we have learned from the many wonderful but isolated case studies into a broader theoretical frame is another priority. We also need to be careful not to have the answer to our questions before we do our research. Many of us are strongly motivated by our political commitments but that does not give us permission to become politicians rather than researchers.

Finally, it is difficult to leave the comfort of our disciplinary networks, where we are well known and admired. Our rewards and recognition are tied to performing in a certain way to a certain community. But to really ask innovative questions and to really cross disciplinary boundaries, you have to go beyond what you usually read and who you usually talk to. It can feel like starting in kindergarten when you have been at the front of the class for many years. But I am convinced that to study the complex world in which we live, we need new methods, new words, and new ways of collaborating and analyzing that need to be taken on their own terms. They can complement rather than compete with existing models. Otherwise, I am afraid that we will continue to conduct business as usual.

JM: What research about migration are you working on now, and what do you find most interesting about it so far?

PL: I am working on transnational social protection as a way to respond to the growing number of the permanent impermanent people by understanding how the rights and responsibilities of citizenship are fulfilled and claimed across borders. I think that conversation needs to identify new institutional arrangements in the health, education, senior care, pension, and labor sectors and to find out who wins and who loses when health care or education, for example, are organized transnationally (another reason we need an interdisciplinary approach).

I am also actively integrating culture into my work because I believe it produces the building blocks with which we imagine and (re)create the nation and the world. My last book, *Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display* (University of California Press, 2015) looked at the extent to which museums across the globe are reshaping our understanding of the nation and its place. I am now working on a new project entitled, *Move Over, Mona Lisa. Move Over, Jane Eyre* which looks at the social, political, and economic conditions and institutions that allow artists and writers from what have been culturally peripheral regions to gain greater global prominence in the English speaking Global North. In Lebanon, Argentina, and South Korea, I am using interviews, participant observation, and document reviews to ask what factors expand the global literary and artistic canons and how they vary across regions, time, and genre. In what ways are the art and literary worlds rethinking categories such as canons, literacy, and national culture that might lead to greater cultural inclusiveness?



Peggy Levitt is Chair of the sociology department and the Luella LaMer Slaner Professor in Latin American Studies at Wellesley College and co-Director of Harvard University's Transnational Studies Initiative. Her earlier books include *Religion on the Edge* (Oxford University Press, 2012), *God Needs No Passport* (New Press, 2007), *The Transnational Studies Reader* (Routledge, 2007), *The Changing Face of Home* (Russell Sage, 2002) and *The Transnational Villagers* (UC Press, 2001).