

Transnational Urbanism Revisited

Michael Peter Smith

This article revisits the research optic proposed in Transnational Urbanism to take stock of the field. Social relations ‘from the middle’ are conceived in two distinct ways in the field. Transnationalism ‘from in-between’ refers to actors who mediate between transnational actors ‘from above’ and ‘from below’. ‘Middling transnationalism’ refers to the transnational practices of middle-class social actors. Both are useful and potentially complementary. Research on transnational urbanism is aware of the socially situated subjectivity of human agents while also providing a way to study spatially distanced social relations. Research has begun to attend to the emplacement of mobile subjects and the embodiment of their everyday practices and mobilities. Future studies need to attend to the power-knowledge venues by which states, institutional channels and other actors broker mobile subjects’ cross-border interconnectivity.

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Researchers on transnationalism seek to analyse the social organisation and consequences of the complex interconnectivity of cross-border networks in multiple fields of social practice. These range from the social construction of transmigrant networks, to the politics of transnational social movements, the proselytising activities of organised religions, the economic connections of commodity chains and criminal syndicates, and now, sadly, the machinations of transnational terrorist networks. This complex interconnectivity is multidimensional, encompassing social, economic and political relations as well as cultural and interpersonal networks and technological linkages.

Given the emphasis in transnational studies on the empirical practices of transnational social networks as both a medium and an outcome of human agency, some have sought to position transnationalism research as an agency-oriented

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successor to the now-tired nostrums of the globalisation discourse. But this take on the structure–agency dialectic must be carefully framed if we are to avoid constructing yet another rigid binary between transnational cultural agency or translocal political practices and global economic (re)structuring. Just as there is no unitary canonical discourse in transnational studies, there is not a single globalisation discourse. The discourses are multiple, sometimes overlapping and sometimes competing. As Leslie Sklair (2001) has argued in *The Transnational Capitalist Class*, there are global agents as well as global structures. And even a cursory review of the leading journal of ‘transnational affairs’, *Global Networks*, amply demonstrates that global as well as transnational (or more precisely, translocal) networks can be collective agents of transnational projects. The difference is one of scale and scope rather than character. Furthermore, the burgeoning literature on the globalisation of culture and the renewed attention to global religions and their consequences clearly show that globalisation and transnationalism are both multidimensional social processes (Appadurai 1991; Loshitzky 1996; Mandaville 2001; Van der Veer 2001).

Beyond Global Flows: Emplacing the Mobile Subject

If both globalisation and transnationalism can be characterised as multidimensional discourses about complex connectivity and network forms of social organisation, what then differentiates the two? One way to address this question is to view the discourse on transnational urbanism and many dimensions of the globalisation discourse itself (which may be called ‘second-wave’ globalisation discourses) as sharing in a common critique of ‘first-wave’ modes of thinking about globalisation. Many early proponents of neo-liberal globalisation as well as some of its harshest critics tended to define globalisation as an inexorable structural-economic transformation, operating outside of thought and human practice, behind people’s backs, so to speak, to change the world in which we live, for better or worse.

Those who welcomed this purported structural transformation saw it as a harbinger of global modernity—a blueprint for the spread of economic prosperity and liberal democracy across borders to the far corners of the globe. ‘First-wave’ critics offered an inverted view of this utopian projection—a demonic image of globalisation in which ‘global capitalism’ as the single determining driving force in the world today, ultimately destroys local communities, fosters ‘global consumerism’ through media manipulation, and penetrates the very inner lives of ordinary people. In both these views ordinary people tend to be reduced to isolated units of consciousness rather than treated, as they should be, as socially and spatially *situated* subjects—i.e. as members of families; participants in religious or locality-based networks; occupants of classed, gendered and racialised bodies; located in particular nationalist projects, state formations and border crossings. It is from these historically specific social locations that people act back upon structural economic conditions and thus, in the oft-used phrase, make their own history.

When writing *Transnational Urbanism* (2001) my interest was to understand the actions and effects of socially and spatially situated subjects. This prompted me to question certain elements of the first-wave globalisation discourse. In so doing, I focused upon the following themes: 1) the political-economic agency, ideological production, and material limitations of the neo-liberal variant of globalisation; 2) the local, national, translocal and transnational cultural fields that mediate global restructuring and reprocess global consumerism; 3) the politics of cross-border counter-movements against economic globalisation and neo-liberal states; and 4) the continuing significance of the nation-state as a repository of language, national cultures and state-centred projects, a mediator of transnational migration and global networks through public policies, and a maker of political alliances and regulatory frameworks seeking to govern global trade, investment and production.

While recognising these wider contexts, I chose the optic of *transnational urbanism* to focus our understanding of transnational interconnectivity because it captured a sense of *distanciated yet situated* possibilities for constituting and reconstituting social relations. The study of transnational urbanism thus underlines the socio-spatial processes by which social actors and their networks forge the *translocal* connections and create the translocalities that increasingly sustain new modes of being-in-the-world. I further argued that transnational urbanism was an appropriate optic for envisioning many emergent transnational practices even though some of the particular practices discussed in my book became 'localised' at one pole of a translocality—for instance in Mexican villages, Chinese factory towns, and even in the countryside. As I stated in *Transnational Urbanism* (2001: 5), this is because:

transnational social actors are materially connected to socio-economic opportunities, political structures, or cultural practices found in cities at some point in their transnational communication circuit, e.g. transnational cities as sources of migrant employment, the means to deploy remittances, the acquisition of cultural and physical capital, consumption practices, political organising networks, or life style images; or [because] ... they maintain transnational connections by using advanced means of communication and travel, which because of their simultaneity, indirectly implicate transnational actors in an orbit of cosmopolitan ideas, images, technologies, and socio-cultural practices that have historically been associated with the culture of cities.

In *Transnational Urbanism* I also sought to show the usefulness of agency-oriented yet translocalised urban research. I cautioned, however, that researchers should not approach the question of translocal agency with rose-coloured glasses, as has sometimes been done in cultural studies discourses on transnational hybridity. This is because in forming their own sense of agency people are always already-positioned subjects, occupying multiple social locations and subject to the inner tensions and conflicts derived from their multi-positionality. As Meagan Morris (1993: 39) has noted, 'there is something tinny about theories of "agency" ... that enunciatively erase a sense of the messiness of living and acting in the mediated world of today'. In sum, this concern with the historically mediated context in which transnational

practices take place is important because it forces us to think about the *emplacement* of mobile subjects. It guards against the macro-analytic view of transnational mobility as occurring in a hyper-mobile 'space of flows'.

Historicising Transnational Practices

Attending to and specifying the historical context in which transnational practices take place is important methodologically for several reasons. First, it guards against a de-contextual ethnographic inscription of 'transnational communities' as timeless cultural wholes detached from the often contested historical and geographical contexts of their emergence. Celebratory images of 'transnational communities' as transgressive, post-national, alternatives to global capitalism and the nation-state may serve to mark the radical credentials of their purveyors. Yet such romantic yearnings for a new revolutionary subject tend to obscure the ongoing power relations underpinning the formation and reproduction of states, capitals, national and transnational identities. Likewise, as already suggested, the unbridled celebration of the 'hybridity' of transnational subjects serves to erase the fact that no matter how much spatial mobility or border crossing may characterise transnational actors' household, community and place-making practices, the actors are still classed, raced and gendered bodies in motion in specific historical contexts, within certain political formations and spaces (for a pointed critique of the use of hybridity in transnational studies, see Mitchell 1997).

Historicising the practices of transnational urbanism is an important step forward for a second reason. It helps us to differentiate between what is new about contemporary transnationalism and earlier instances of transnational migration, cross-border political or religious movements, trade diasporas, and the like. In a recent epistemological essay in *Global Networks*, Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2002) skilfully trace the connections between nation-state building, transnational migration, and their study in the social sciences. They show how the discourses on immigration, the degree of transnational migration, and the character of transnational practices have shifted over time through four distinct phases of nation-state building from 1870 to the present time. They pay close attention to the relationship between transnationalism and the historical development of increased barriers to migration; the closure of relatively open citizenship regimes; the transition from civic to national conceptions of 'the people'; the rise of new regimes of border policing; and the migratory effects of hot and cold wars—which are all key dimensions of 'nation building' especially since the end of World War I. In so doing, they remove the blinkers of various types of 'methodological nationalism' that have limited awareness of how 'transnational' the modern world has always been. They convincingly demonstrate how historically inaccurate it is to regard transnationalism as a recent offspring of the current round of neo-liberal globalisation rather than a constant feature of modern life.

Transnationalism 'Then' vs 'Now'

Having said this, it is still worth keeping in mind some salient differences between 'then' and 'now'. First, the scope and complexity of transnational relations appear to be more extensive now than in past historical periods. Greater access to the means of maintaining contact across space is widespread geographically (i.e. is transnationalised) and also is spread widely across national social-class structures. One result of this diffusion of mobility is that there is now a vastly more complicated pattern of migration and (un/re)settlement of migrants, transmigrants, immigrants and refugees across nation-states than ever before. Contemporary transnational migration is highly differentiated by class, gender, generation, region, religion, and political and economic circumstance of migration within the same migrating 'nationality', even within a single transnational city.

This complex differentiation has significant consequences on the ground. For starters, it blurs the boundaries of previously hegemonic binaries like 'first' vs 'third' world. It adds class, gender and ideological differentiation to our conceptualisation of 'immigrant enclaves'. It vastly complicates the ethnographic inscription of 'migration narratives', and forces us to pay attention to the intra-ethnic dimension of urban ethnic politics throughout the world (to say nothing of their translocal dimensions). To illustrate concretely, on the basis of 'nationality' alone in major US 'receiving' cities, the scope of transnational migration has spread from around two dozen nationalities in 1920 to over 150 today in cities like New York and Los Angeles. When differences of gender, class, generation, region, religion and political/ideological orientations within groups are added to this mix, the processes of 'transnational place-making' are remarkably complex and frequently contested.

Moving beyond the place-making practices of migration networks to consider other forms of transnational urbanism—e.g. the translocal dynamics of long-distance nationalism; the multi-local emplacement and effects of transnational social or religious movements; or the socio-spatial organisation and impacts of transnational entrepreneurialism—the complexity of contemporary transnational urbanism is nothing short of astounding, even within a single field site. My discussion in *Transnational Urbanism* of the making of places like Koreatown in Los Angeles and Chinatown in New York (Smith 2001: 91–7, 119–22) sought to reveal some of this complexity and to advance a useful research strategy, namely, comparing different transnational networks from the same country of origin in a single transnational city. Other researchers relying on large survey research teams are now usefully extending transnational field-work comparatively and historically by comparing the practices of transmigrant networks across transnational cities over time (see, for example, Guarnizo *et al.* 2003; Portes *et al.* 2002).

Another question flows from thinking about transnational urbanism 'then' and 'now'. Is the much-heralded *simultaneity* of transnational lives 'here' and 'there' an important difference between transnationalism 'then' and 'now'? If so, what effects does this have? In the field of cultural studies the simultaneity of communication

flows and the speed and frequency of global travel have been deemed to be highly salient to those who live transnational lives. Co-presence in more than one spatial location (place/country/locality) is viewed as occurring in the postmodern 'now' rather than, as in earlier times, in sequenced stages of time (before/after), space (sending/receiving), and place (here/there). In part the expectation of simultaneity is due to the widespread (though still unequal) availability of and access to advanced means of communication and transport, ranging from affordable air travel to inexpensive phone cards.

While it is certainly plausible that simultaneity marks an important difference between older and newer modes of transnationalism, just what difference it makes in the lived experience of translocal subjects is an empirical question. Case studies of contemporary transnational urbanism are still temporally sequenced forms of narrative story-telling. Can stories otherwise be told? Do instantaneous communication by telephone and e-mail, and more frequent back and forth movements across space and place trans-locally, make a difference in the everyday lives of transnational migrants? If so, what differences do they make and for whom do they matter—those subject to mobility, the 'stayers' connected to or affected by translocal mobility, or all together? Does the experience of simultaneity produce disorientation or flexible subjectivity, and, if so, for whom does it produce either? Put more precisely, for which socially situated subjects does it have what effects, where? Considered systemically, does simultaneity promote 'transnational culture' or rather does it foster the reproduction of multiple localisms? What power relations mediate the politics of simultaneity?

A third potentially salient difference between 'then' and 'now' concerns the presence of social actors and roles mediating or brokering the process of transnational interconnectivity. Has this brokerage been a constant feature of transnational ties in the modern world or has something changed in the current epoch of mass-mediated interconnectivity? My answer to this question is mixed. While marriage brokers across borders have a very long history, the practice of supplying mail-order brides through Internet match-making services is a new variation on this old theme. Likewise, human smugglers (coyotes) and courier services to facilitate remittances have been around for a long time but globally organised human smuggling syndicates (Kyle and Koslowski 2001) and transnational banks channelling remittances through automated teller machine (ATM) services are of more recent vintage. What Louisa Schein (1998) has called the 'transnational cultural broker' has been an important element of urban racial and ethnic formation for a very long time. So too has been the role of political actors from putatively 'sending' states in promoting translocal and transnational connections among 'their' migrant population to (re)capture remittances and loyalties (see the historical studies cited in Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002: 315). Yet certain forms of ethno-cultural brokerage such as the rise of indigenous media, ethno-cultural video businesses, and cultural/ethnic tourism are new variations on an old theme. As these examples suggest, whether old or new, the identification of key historical actors and their roles

in facilitating or brokering migrant transnationalism and the tracing out of their genesis and effects are worthy future research enterprises in the emergent field of transnational urbanism.

When we think of 'then' and 'now' over time we necessarily think about temporal continuities and discontinuities. We think in terms of periodising experiences that can be located 'in the middle' of current moments and earlier historical periods. Thus, for instance, some traditional migration studies have positioned the migrant generation temporally as a kind of 'lost generation' caught 'in the middle' between the requirements, opportunities and constraints of their 'old culture' and the 'new' cultural experiences of their children, a presumably qualitatively different 'second generation'.

Some of the most heated debates in the field of transnational migration studies have occurred over the question of the intergenerational continuity of the transnational practices of those currently living transnational lives and creating transnational networks of social capital (see Guarnizo and Smith 1998: 16–17; Levitt and Waters 2002). These debates centre on whether households or sending communities are the appropriate unit of analysis. Whichever of these units of analysis is chosen, the question of the social reproduction of translocal ties is likely to be resolved empirically over time. Whatever the empirical answer, theoretically there is no way to avoid thinking about the dynamics of reproduction and change in patterns of transnational urbanism 'in the middle term' as well as 'the short run' and the 'long run'.

Transnationalism From 'The Middle'

In the penultimate part of this essay I wish to address an important difference between two distinct ways that researchers have conceptualised social relations from 'the middle' in transnational studies. These are the view of transnationalism as a power relation 'from in-between' as discussed in *Transnational Urbanism* (Smith 2001) and 'The locations of transnationalism' (Guarnizo and Smith 1998) and 'middling transnationalism' as the class or status position of transnational migrants in their places of origin, as conceptualised by David Conradson and Alan Latham in this special issue.

The former is a relational term referring to the mediation of social relations of power-domination-accommodation-resistance between transnational actors 'from above' and 'from below'. An example of transnationalism as a mediated power relation may be drawn from my own recent empirical research. In my paper 'Transnationalism, the state, and the extraterritorial citizen' (Smith 2003), I analyse the politically mediating role played by regional sending-state officials from Guanajuato, Mexico ('from in-between') seeking to channel remittances provided by local migrant groups in California ('from below') into state-sponsored economic development projects located in the migrants' communities of origin but designed

by the elites of a Mexican political party ('from above') to win votes and develop their state.

In contrast, 'middling transnationalism' focuses on the transnational practices of social actors occupying more or less middle class or status positions in the national class structures of their countries of origin, like skilled workers or working holiday-makers who spend extended periods abroad living transnational everyday lives. In my view both of these approaches are useful and potentially complementary ways of moving the study of transnational urbanism forward, adding greater nuance, differentiation and complexity to the picture. Yet they are different ways forward and that difference must be explicitly theorised if they are to be used as complementary research strategies.

One of the key themes deployed in my earlier work on 'The locations of transnationalism' (Guarnizo and Smith 1998) was the relational quality of transnational social action. In that essay Luis Guarnizo and I cautioned that in investigating the 'above' and the 'below' of transnational action, one must guard against the common mistake of equating 'above' exclusively with global structures or agents and below exclusively with 'local' social fields or actors. Categorising transnational action as coming 'from above' or 'from below' aims to capture the dynamics of power relations in the transnational arena. By definition, these categories are contextual and relational rather than essential or immutable (see Smith 2001: 110–13). Thus, for example, the Hmong cultural brokers studied by Louisa Schein (1998) can be envisaged as acting 'from below' *vis-à-vis* the United States and Chinese states whose borders they transgress, while simultaneously acting 'from above' *vis-à-vis* the ethnic Miao objects of their tourist gaze, and also 'from in-between' in terms of the power relations they broker between Hmong social networks in the US and, respectively, US and Chinese state structures and policies. To think about transnational cities as spaces pregnant with these sorts of power relations—i.e. social relations of domination-accommodation-resistance (see Smith 2001: 127–42)—the crucial role played by power brokers from 'in-between' must be kept carefully in mind.

In focusing our attention upon 'middling transnationalism' Conradson and Latham, in their editorial introduction to this themed issue, call for greater attention to the 'everyday' practices and mobilities of transnational urbanism. They usefully theorise 'middling transnationalism' in terms of the everyday practices of transnational friendship and nationality-based networks of people of 'middling' social and economic status in their countries of origin. They argue that too much attention in transnational studies has heretofore been paid to the power of transnational technical and managerial elites or to the village-based social networks forged by economically marginal social strata to generate transnational social capital. Methodologically, they advocate careful qualitative studies of the everyday resources and strategies through which 'middling' transnational actors create and maintain networks of association both transnationally and within the cities in which they currently are living. The substantive studies which follow ably demonstrate the fruitfulness of this methodological turn to the everyday.

Some of the studies of everyday transnational urbanism assembled in this special issue also underline the importance of mediated power relations, relations fraught with the discourses and practices of diverse power brokers other than the transmigrants themselves. This suggests that researchers of transnational urbanism, when inscribing everyday contemporary ethnographies of transmigrants (whether elite, middling or marginal), need to develop historically contextualised research strategies for investigating the role played by power brokers (whether political, religious, cultural or economic agents) in shaping the social spaces in which transmigrants operate.

The Politics of Translocality

Earlier studies of transnational business and village-based networks (see, for instance, the studies in Pries 2001; Smith and Guarnizo 1998) have shown that transmigration (even from the same country) is formed by heterogeneous rather than unitary social networks, possessing distinct personal and social resources, having differential human and social capital, migrating under disparate circumstances, and expressing significant local, regional, political, cultural and religious differences. This differentiation, in turn, results in disparate rates of access to opportunities in the 'receiving' cities that are grounded sites of the translocal interconnectivity constituting transnational urbanism. This, in part, explains why not all migrants are able to maintain active translocal ties and why the practices of those who do maintain them differ.

In this same vein, the local sites of translocal practices—whether cities, suburbs, or communities of origin—are not mere empty containers of translocal articulations. The local sites of translocal processes matter. Different 'sending' and 'receiving' localities offer migrants dissimilar contexts of exit and reception, and thus dissimilar political and economic opportunities and constraints. It is these opportunities and constraints *and* what transmigrants do with them that will (and should) occupy the field of transnational urban studies in the decades ahead.

In this essay I have sought to revisit the research optic I first proposed in *Transnational Urbanism* (2001) and to take stock of the work that has been done in this genre since then. In so doing, I reiterated our need to carefully frame the stories we tell about the everyday agents of transnational urbanism. This is because people are unavoidably socially- and spatially-situated subjects, both in terms of the political-economic circumstances of their transnational mobility and the classed, gendered and racialised formations through which their bodies move.

By examining research done in the name of transnational urbanism I have concluded that this research optic has allowed us to remain aware of this social situatedness while also providing an empirical way forward in studying the constitution of distanced social relations. I think that much progress has been made by grounding the discourse of the 'transnational' in the place-making practices of the 'translocal'. As this special issue clearly shows, research on transnational

urbanism is well advanced in attending to the emplacement of mobile subjects and the embodiment of their everyday practices and mobilities. In future studies of transnational urbanism we need to devote equal attention to the effects of the power-knowledge venues by which states, institutional channels and other powerful actors broker or otherwise affect our mobile subjects' translocal interconnectivity.

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