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New Approaches to Migration: Transnational Communities and the Transformation of Home

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The literature on transnational migration has so far mainly emerged in the context of labour migration to the United States. The question arises if, and in how far, existing theories and models revolving around transnationalism can be applied to different historical, cultural and political contexts, such as migration within or to Europe, for example. The attempt to apply, critically examine and challenge existing notions about transnational migration constituted an underlying goal in the first annual conference of the ESRC Transnational Communities Programme. A specific focus on the relationship between ‘migrant/refugee communities’ and ‘home’ created the framework in which to analyse the meaning and significance of transnational practices and fields.

A focus on ‘transnational communities’ has been widely heralded as an important new approach to international migration. More traditional approaches have tended to conceive international migrants as exceptions to the norm. Attention has been divided broadly between the process of migration – emphasizing the importance of geographical movement across international borders, and the product of migration – emphasizing the impacts of migrants on societies in which they settle. In contrast, the transnational communities approach conceives of international migrants not as anomalies, but rather as representative of an increasingly globalized world. It has refocused attention on the utilization by international migrants of modes of telecommunication and transport; their pooling of resources and successful exploitation of global markets, and their association with new social forms, political challenges and cultural resources generated by linkages across several geographical locations.

The transnational communities conference was hosted by the Sussex Centre for Migration Research, at the University of Sussex, between 21-22 September. It was attended by about 50 participants from an international audience, 16 of whom presented papers. The conference was opened by Professor Robin Cohen (University of Warwick), who located the conference theme in the context of a century of migration studies. The keynote speaker was Professor Michael Smith (University of California, Davis), who provided a critical overview of the relations between globalization and transnational urbanism, paying particular attention to the ways in which transnational networks and circuits of social interaction intersect in particular places and in particular times. Smith stressed the need to rethink the binary of local stasis vs. global dynamics, thereby developing the notion of the ‘trans-local’ as a viable alternative.

The remaining papers covered a wide range of disciplines (anthropology, geography, international relations, sociology and political science), as well as case studies from various geographical areas, i.e. Turkish and Kurdish refugees in Germany, Moroccan migrant women in Italy, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Sudanese refugees in Cairo, Eritrean refugees in Germany and the UK, and Bosnian refugees in the Netherlands and the UK.

The various papers were organized according to three broad themes:

- ‘Transnational communities and the meaning of “home”’, which explored the way that the concept of home is reproduced or transformed within the context of emerging transnational practices;
- ‘The implications of transforming homes for transnational communities’ examined the extent to which transformations in the country of origin, i. e. war, economic crises, peace, can impact upon the formation, maintenance and even decline of transnational communities; and
- ‘Transnational communities and the transformation of home’ explored the capacities of migrant and refugee communities in influencing or effecting transformations in their countries of origin.

The role of Islam in forging and maintaining transnational networks and ties was highlighted in several conference papers. Nina-Clara Tiesler (Department for Religious Studies, University of Hannover, Germany) explored theological conceptions of ‘home’ among elite European Muslims, thereby shedding light on the cognitive relationship between European Muslims and the ‘Islamic world’. Other papers were more sociological and anthropological in approach and gave evidence to the ways in which the sense of being a Muslim does not only transcend national boundaries but could also give birth to transnational affiliations. This became particularly apparent in Ruba Salih’s paper

about Moroccan migrant women in Italy and Nadjé Al-Ali’s paper about Bosnian refugees in the UK and the Netherlands (both University of Sussex, Brighton, UK).

Overall, the conference provided new and interesting material derived from in-depth case studies and provided a timely contribution to debates on transnational migration by scholars working outside of North America. Many papers challenged the common perception that transnational practices are counter-hegemonic in nature and also took issue with an oversimplified political economic approach. Furthermore, the role of the state in shaping, creating and hindering transnational ties became apparent in different case studies. ◆

An edited collection of many of the papers presented is currently being prepared for publication.

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