

The Transnationalized Social Question: Migration and Social Inequalities

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Abstract

The social question is back. Yet today's social question is not primarily between labor and capital, as it was in the nineteenth century and throughout much of the twentieth. The contemporary social question is located at the interstices between the global South and the global North. It finds its expression in movements of people, seeking a better life or fleeing unsustainable social, political, economic, and ecological conditions. It is transnationalized because migrants and their significant others entertain ties across the borders of national states in transnational social spaces; because of the cross-border diffusion of norms; and because there are implications of migration for social inequalities within national states. In earlier periods class differences dominated political conflicts, and while class has always been crisscrossed by manifold heterogeneities, not least of all cultural ones around ethnicity, religion, and language; it is these latter heterogeneities that have sharpened over the past decades.

INTRODUCTION: MIGRATION AS THE TRANSNATIONALIZED SOCIAL QUESTION

On a global scale, distress and social instability today are reminiscent of the living conditions that prevailed through a large part of the nineteenth century in Europe. At that time the social question was the central subject of volatile political conflicts between the ruling classes and working-class movements. From the late nineteenth century onward, the social question was nationalized in the welfare states of the global North which sought a class compromise via redistribution of goods, whereas social protection beyond the national welfare state is found mostly in soft law in the form of social standards (Faist, 2009). We now may be on the verge of a new social conflict, again on a transnational scale, but characterized more than ever by manifold boundaries—such as those between capital and labor, North

Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences.
Robert A. Scott and Marlis Buchmann (General Editors) with Stephen Kosslyn (Consulting Editor).
© 2018 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. ISBN 978-1-118-90077-2.

and South, developed and underdeveloped or developing countries, or those in favor of increased globalization against those advocating national solutions.

The contemporary social question is located at the interstices between the global South and the global North and also revolves around cultural heterogeneities. A proliferation of political groupings and NGOs rally across national borders in support of various campaigns such as environmental concerns, human rights, and women's issues, Christian, Hindu, or Islamic fundamentalism, migration, and food sovereignty, but also resistance to growing cultural diversity and increasing mobility of goods, services, and persons across the borders of national states. The nexus of South–North migration and cultural conflicts is no coincidence, as cross-border migration from South to North not only raises economic issues, such as productivity and labor market segmentation (Schierup, Munck, Likić-Brborić, & Neergaard, 2015) but also has been part of the constitution of cultural conflicts around “us” versus “them.” Migration thus has been one of the central fields in which the solution of the old social question in the frame of the national welfare state has been called into question, hence the term “transnationalized social question.” One of the core questions for the social sciences, therefore, is: How is cross-border migration constituted as the social question of our times? This general question can be specified into various sub-questions to be addressed in this essay: Has there been a move from political voice to territorial exit from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century? What kinds of social inequalities are created in the migratory process and how? How does social protection across borders ameliorate and reproduce inequalities? How have immigration states in Europe shifted migration control to the countries of origin and transit through externalization? How are class and cultural conflicts constituted in the processes of postmigration in immigration and emigration states? Do we need to expand the social question to a socio-natural question to understand the nexus between environmental destruction and migration in the current geological period provisionally called the *Anthropocene*? In answering these questions we need to uncover the social mechanisms driving the (re)production of social inequalities.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

The social question then and now: From voice to exit? With respect to global income inequalities, class in the Marxian sense accounted for more than half of the variance in the late nineteenth century, and location (country) for a minor fraction only. The situation has almost reversed more than a hundred years later when most of the variance was explained by location and no longer by class (Milanovic, 2016; cf. Bourguignon & Morrisson,

2002). Therefore, the question arises whether exit in the form of cross-border migration has replaced voice in the form of political mobilization as a dominant strategy to deal with the unequal distribution of life chances. At the very least, exit in the form of migration is a significant strategy on the microscale in addition to collective strategies such as welfare states and global redistribution on the macro level (Korzeniewicz & Moran, 2009). Four differences between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries can be discerned. First, national welfare states developed in response to political struggles around the old social question between capital and labor. Whereas economic exchange for increased productivity and overall wealth may favor open borders, the political logic of the welfare state requires social closure toward noncitizens (Freeman, 1986). This is so because open borders would pit migrants against natives in competition for valuable goods, such as employment, housing, and education. Moreover, such conflicts over the distribution of goods are usually complemented by a second line of conflict around cultural differences, between the idea of national homogeneity, on the one hand, and claims toward cultural pluralism and autonomy on the part of migrants and other minorities on the other hand. Second, we have seen the gradual emergence of sophisticated state migration control, making it possible not only to guard national borders but extend external borders into regions of transit and origin (externalization and remote control), and internal borders within immigration states. Third, there has been an ever-growing political relevance of cultural heterogeneities going beyond class. In Europe, this general trend is particularly visible in the politicization of differences such as religion (“we” vs the Muslims). Fourth, whereas in the nineteenth century socialist and anarchist theories guided social movements, such as the labor movement in the northwest of Europe, the situation is much more pluralistic nowadays. Today, there is no identifiably coherent theory around the social question which would be able to mobilize politically around a plural set of heterogeneities.

Overall, the transnationalization of cross-border flows and the concomitant process of increasing cultural diversity have challenged the welfare state—which rests on nationally bounded solidarity and reciprocity and class compromise. In the contemporary period, the recognition of gender, ethnicity, religion, and related heterogeneities cannot be meaningfully regulated by the classical welfare state, not least because social transformation has resulted in shifting the risks for life chances from groups to individuals (Beck, 1992). It is the regulatory and not the redistributive welfare state which is active in the field of heterogeneities. Ironically, the European Union (EU) may contribute even further to this development since ambitious issues of thick understandings of equality and solidarity take a back seat while thin conceptions dominate the discussions on social policy (Münch, 2012).

The nexus of cross-border migration and social inequalities raises two major issues. The first concerns how social inequalities affect opportunities for cross-border migration for different socioeconomic groups. The second issue is, conversely, how the outcomes of migration affect social inequalities in life chances in the countries of emigration and the countries of immigration. Available research suggests that cross-border migration constitutes a path to upward social mobility for migrants, and—at the same time—that such processes tend to reinforce inequalities on a deeper level (Faist, 2016). The term “durable inequalities” (Tilly, 1998) refers to unequal power relations and inequalities derived from categorizations of heterogeneities along gender, ethnicity, religion, caste, and class, none of which is fundamentally transformed in emigration and immigration regions and in transnational social spaces. In addition, new inequalities emerge, such as those arising as a consequence of the growth of subcontracting in labor markets of destination regions. As a consequence, cross-border migration reflects the importance of location and of membership as an important proxy for life chances.

Migration, social protection, and the (re)production of inequalities: examining social protection in the context of migration is particularly important because it links the disparate, fragmented social spaces of unequal life chances and social protection across the world. The organization of social protection across borders includes the assemblages of social protection, encompassing programmes by the state and civil society organizations, but also social protection in kinship groups. It also concerns the issue of how to conceptualize social protection with respect to human rights. Essential to an understanding of the current status of cross-border social protection is the exploration of the elements of global governance and existing transnational social standards in the realm of migration. On the national level, as Marshall (1992 [1949]) pointed out long ago, social rights and, above all, social citizenship are important for legitimizing social inequalities arising out of capitalist markets. For transnational social spaces, there is no similar normative reference frame. The International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions 97 and 143 and other social and human rights conventions suffer from their nonbinding character. Thus, it does not make sense to speak of transnational (social) citizenship—except in the sense of overlapping national citizenships, namely dual citizenship, in which case citizens are, in principle, able to access (quasi-)full rights in both countries. Nor is it meaningful to speak of global or world citizenship in an institutional sense although such a concept may guide mobilization favoring cross-border norms. World citizenship is simply nonexistent de facto or de jure because, apart from exceptions such as claims to compensation for land loss in the case of development projects like dam-building, only soft law and social standards in international conventions pertain, and these

cannot be claimed successfully on a regular basis by migrants themselves. Transnationalized social protection and concomitant social inequalities are addressed on various levels, with national states as well as international organizations or local municipalities playing a role—in addition to the other dimensions of social organization, namely market, community, and family. Global criteria and norms, such as international conventions, and a global horizon of thinking as a cognitive schema, serve as reference points for agents who strive for political change in this area (Cabrera, 2011) by pointing, for example, to a growing public awareness across the globe concerning transnational exchange, interdependence, and dependencies (Furia, 2005).

While cross-border social protection strategies can substantially improve the livelihoods of individuals or families and the opportunities for social protection, for example, through remittances for the education or healthcare of other family members, fundamental inequalities between the regions of origin and the target regions but also within origin groups tend to persist. Institutionally embedded forms of public social protection in the regions of origin are often exposed to additional pressures, for instance, through the exit of skilled workers. New inequalities arise in the course of cross-border migration, for example, between households in the regions of origin that receive remittances and those that do not, or in the gender-specific division of labor in the immigration regions, where the emancipation of women in the immigration countries results in women from peripheral countries taking over the vacant positions for care work in the household (Nakano Glen, 1992). Also, existing social protection systems in the countries of origin may be disrupted by remittances and demographic decline.

Research has yielded the insight that migrants engage in comparative social positioning between countries of origin and destination, between migrant groups, and within their own groups (Faist, Bilecen, Barglowski, & Sienkiewicz, 2015). The subjective significance and attribution of social inequalities are worth examining in detail because the transnationalized social question is conceivable only against the background of social inequalities that are deemed to be normatively unjustifiable. From an empirical point of view, the criteria for the assessment of inequalities are usually oriented to norms that are relational and allow comparisons with categories of people who are, in social terms, not too far removed from each other. Also, sometimes comparisons of selected elements of social security systems, such as healthcare or old age pensions, become relevant. The interesting question is what categories of people and which norms are considered relevant by the participating actors in the respective labor and social protection organizations and political arenas. In a transnational perspective, inequalities can be regarded as borderless: While state borders, and

especially the legal and political boundaries of membership and affiliation, are constitutive of a person's opportunities in life, the social, cultural, and economic boundaries are not necessarily congruent with the daily realities of cross-border workers.

Externalization and internalization of social inequalities in cross-border migration: understanding the politics of inequalities around migration necessitates an analysis of the transnational architecture of migration control. The transnationalized social question finds its mirror image in immigration and emigration contexts. In the global North, it is the welfare state that promises protection from unfettered global economic competition in the immigration states, and the developmental (national) state in the global South often serves as a functional equivalent. On the part of immigration countries, migration control assumes a high priority, characterized by externalization through remote control and securitization in areas of origin and transit. On the side of emigration countries, the migration–development nexus takes center stage. Both the migration–control nexus and the migration–development nexus have increasingly merged into a development–migration–control nexus: resources for development cooperation are connected by the donors to the willingness of the receivers to cooperate on matters of migration control (Gaibazzi, Dünnewald, & Bellagamba, 2016). The control part of the nexus has resulted in externalization as well as internalization, that is, the securitization of control not only as a form of outsourcing and thus remote control but also control within national states. Borders have moved both outward and inward. Detection, detention, and deportation are among the most visible control practices in many immigration states nowadays. In general, immigration regulations and asylum procedures (e.g., for refugees who have a subsidiary status and therefore have to return to countries of origin upon the cessation of violence) have made family reunification increasingly difficult.

In the end, externalization and internalization are inextricably connected. Since much of border politics and policies by states can be seen as a response to threatened identities and security, one may ask about the function of borders beyond controlling migrants. Border walls and externalization efforts may be a clue that state control is one of the most visible areas of transnationalization in which national states and supranational entities such as the EU can show competence by directly addressing the volume of transactions across borders. Such policies primarily fulfill a role of symbolic bordering, by providing a reassuring image of security to a population whose job opportunities have partly migrated elsewhere or whose welfare states have been transformed and sometimes even removed from democratic ownership. There is no reliable empirical evidence that migrants constitute competitors to jobs or—overall—a burden on welfare states in the global

North (Kuş, 2018). The externalization and internationalization of border control may be more about the consequences of societal transformation than about migrants per se.

The politics of social inequalities in immigration states: politics around migration and inequalities runs along two major lines, economic divisions, and cultural ones. With respect to economic divisions, they lie between market liberalization in the competition state and the de-commodification of labor as part of the welfare paradox: Economic openness toward capital transfer is in tension with political closure toward migrants. It is the dichotomy of the competition state versus the welfare state. In the cultural realm, the contention occurs over the rights revolution versus the myth of national-cultural homogeneity. It finds expression in the liberal paradox, the extension of human rights to migrants who reside in welfare states against the efforts to control borders and cultural boundaries. Threat perceptions often lead to a securitization of migration. It is a juxtaposition of the multicultural state and the rule of law on the one hand and the democratic-national state on the other hand. Economic divisions along class lines structure the politicization of cultural heterogeneities.

Market liberalization, securitization, and the rights revolution have formed a triad that constitutes the main pillars of the dynamics of the politics of (in)equalities and integration. In sum, market liberalization serves as a basis for class distinctions among migrants, or at least reinforces them, while securitization culturalizes them. Over the past few decades, the grounds for the legitimization of inequalities have shifted. Ascriptive traits have been complemented by the alleged cultural dispositions of immigrants and the conviction that immigrants as individuals are responsible for their own fate. Such categorizations start by distinguishing legitimate refugees from nonlegitimate forced migrants. Another important trope is the alleged illiberal predispositions of migrants and their inadaptability to modernity. Bringing together market liberalization and culturalized securitization, the current results could be read as Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic* reloaded: Politics and policies seem to reward specific types of migrants, exclude the low- and nonperformers in the market and the traditionalists, and reward those who perform well and espouse liberal attitudes. In brief, it is a process of categorizing migrants into useful or dispensable (Faist, 2018, Chapter 8).

These processes have not simply led to a displacement of class by status politics. After all, class politics is also built along cultural boundaries, such as working-class culture or bourgeois culture. Nonetheless, the heterogeneities that are politicized in the contemporary period have somewhat shifted: cultural heterogeneities now stand at the forefront of debate and contention. What can be observed is a trend toward both a de-politicized

and a politicized development of heterogeneities in European public spheres. As to trends toward de-politicization, multicultural group rights, in particular, have been contentious and criticized as divisive. Over time, multicultural language has been replaced by a semantic of diversity or even super-diversity in market-liberal thinking and a semantic of threat in nationalist-populist rhetoric. Given this background, it is possible that market liberalization has also contributed to the decline of a rights-based approach and the rise of a resource-based approach. With specific regard to culture, we have seen a shift in policies from group rights to individual resources, which can be tapped by enterprises. Diversity, at least in the private sector, mobilizes the private resources of minority individuals and looks for their most efficient allocation for profit- and rent-seeking. It is somewhat different in the public sector, especially in the realm of policing but also in the education and health sectors, in which service providers seek more efficient ways of serving the public. In general, what we find is a seminal shift from a rights-based to a resource-based approach in dealing with cultural difference. Incidentally, this can be observed in the transnational realm as well. For example, the World Bank has for years propagated a resource-based approach to link migration to development in casting migrants as development agents of their countries of origin through financial remittances.

While a partial de-politicization of cultural heterogeneities through diversity management may help to achieve partial equalities in organizations, multicultural policies are inextricably linked to national projects. After all, such policies are meant to foster national integration and the social integration of immigrants as minorities into national life. From all we know, migration, migrants, and these policies are therefore likely to remain the chief target of securitizing and xenophobic efforts. While the rhetorical criticism of multiculturalism is ever mounting, existing multicultural policies are not reversed to the same extent. Quite to the contrary, the political struggle is ongoing.

The politics of social inequalities in emigration states: processes in immigration countries, mostly those in the OECD world, have a mirror image in countries of emigration. Through structural adjustment programmes, market fundamentalism and liberalism have also been implemented in most of these countries. Partly driven by the failure of market liberalization to garner sustained growth in quite a few countries, brain drain and brawn drain—the exit of professionals, skilled workers, and others—have evolved as formidable challenges to emigration states. New development agents have been constituted, as migration and development entered the agendas of international and supranational organizations and national states in the global North. A visible sign is the role of diasporas who have turned to development issues

after the Cold War. Attention to the issues of brain drain, brain gain, or brain circulation, and the role of diasporas in development has been heightened by EU programmes, such as the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM), which connect cooperation in the realm of control of migration and asylum in exchange for development aid. It is within such policy initiatives that the asymmetries in the power to shape migration policies between emigration and immigration states become blatantly visible. While the mobility of high-skilled migrants has been given prominent space in discourses around migration and development, migrants on other skill levels have been given short shrift and have entered the picture mostly as objects of control and burdens to welfare states in immigration states.

In order to understand how emigration states deal with emigration, return migration, remittances, and diaspora formation, we start from the notion of the developmental state. Yet, beginning in the 1980s, international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have cherished and strengthened market mechanisms, civil society actors, and the local state. It is thus the transformation of the national development state through a more important role played by the triad market–civil society–local state which helps to elucidate the politics around emigration. With regard to cultural issues, the notion of diaspora reigns paramount. On the one hand, it is diaspora formation that characterizes emigration politics. On the other hand, the diaspora is sometimes or quite often involved in home-country politics, and sometimes seen as a competitor or threat to nation-building and the consolidation of political power. And securitization becomes relevant because emigration has acted as a safety valve for authoritarian regimes to get rid of their political opposition.

Only by placing the discussion in the wider context of the migration–development–control nexus is it possible to understand the new importance of diaspora and transnational communities with respect to the transnationalized social question. The policy prominence of the role of migration for economic development since the early 2000s was fed by the portrayal of migrants as development agents thanks to their resources—financial remittances. The claims that migration is one of the central keys to remove structural constraints to economic growth, improve social well-being, and foster stronger democracy were overblown, to say the least.

With respect to civil society, the term diaspora has experienced a renaissance. Diaspora organizations certainly are influenced by and often skillfully employ global meta-norms and slogans such as “a nation for each people,” democracy, human rights, and gender equality—and remain embedded in local discourses (Baser, 2015). The political-economic and the security considerations also turned out to be relevant over time because the issues surrounding migration have become heavily culturalized. The change in the

function of diasporas, from a tool of the superpowers in the Cold War to development agents, and the change of policies of emigration countries to woo emigrants abroad rekindled the ethnonational and sometimes religious character of diaspora. In a way, the culturalized version of emigration in diaspora has been a mirror image of neo-nationalist and nativist currents in immigration countries.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Exit through cross-border migration is one of several ways in which people have adapted to both the slow-onset and fast-onset environmental destruction of human habitat in the Anthropocene. Like the threat of nuclear war, the destruction of ecological foundations underlies life chances. Thus this destruction preempts and precedes all other aspects of the transnationalized social question. So far, two generations of scholarship have discussed the climate change–migration debate in a rather narrow framework, without considering in full that climate change is mainly an add-on to environmental destruction (Sassen, 2014). The first generation dealt with the vulnerability of specific groups such as the poor, women, and children; the second with resilience, which supposedly helps to adapt to climate change. These perspectives have occluded the finding that climate change is part of a wider process of environmental destruction which indeed has varied impacts on different categories of people with respect to social inequalities (McLeman, Schade, & Faist, 2016). The first generation of scholarship on climate change and migration, by using a mechanistic approach to nature, seriously underestimated the adaptive capacities of humans in the face of seminal ecological changes. The second generation of scholarship focused on a particular kind of agency. The main protagonist has been the resilient migrant who engages in successful adaptation to climate change. This newer generation has propagated a mostly market–liberal version of mobility—a mobile and docile migrant who acts in an anticipatory and preventative manner, implying reduced responsibility of the state.

Climate change, or environmental destruction more generally, is intricately related to globe-spanning political-economic inequalities which cause, drive, and increase the destruction of human habitat. Each year of insufficient action brings humankind closer to the limits of sustainability. The forerunner of the latter is already visible in the increasing number of people who choose to leave dead land or are compelled by force to do so. Taking a combined nature-culture lens, the question is how migration in the wake of climate change leaves intact deeper structures of social inequalities and reinforces exclusionary mechanisms. Also of interest is how norm entrepreneurs have

drawn attention to the dire fate of many migrants who engage in or are even forced into climate-induced mobility—thus constituting the transnationalized socio-natural question.

With respect to changing perceptions of climate change, migration can be placed in the context of general social transformations. Some analysts speak of a “metabolic rift” (Foster, 1999). This term refers to ecological crisis tendencies under capitalism. Marx (1962 [1867], p. 192) theorized a rupture in the metabolic interaction between nature and culture, which derives from the mode of capitalist production and the growing rupture between urban and rural regions. Marx held this rift to be irreconcilable with any kind of sustainability. In the meantime, however, we have learned that while capitalism has remained a pervasive force it is “local at all points” (Latour, 1993, p. 117). Conflicts over mitigation of and adaptation to climate change have occurred over the past years, far away from spectacular world gatherings. It has neither been (global) climate governance nor (local) adaptation but rather climate conflicts that have been propelling some progress in addressing rampant carbonization. What needs to be determined in future research is the combination of responses to climate change which encompasses both exit and voice. It is well worth remembering that the urgent questions raised by environmental degradation, given the tens of millions of people displaced each year in their home countries, is not a scenario of the future but describes the present. For example, there is evidence suggesting a link between global warming and a greater risk of civil violence in much of sub-Saharan Africa, possibly tied to variations in the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) (cf. Burke, Shanker, Dykema, & Lobell, 2009, pp. 20670–20672; Hsiang, Meng, & Crane, 2011).

CONCLUSION

Given the high political relevance of the transnationalized social question, including the socio-natural question, it is important to ask how social scientists might intervene in public debates on social inequalities reaching across borders. Academic and public debates often raise the question whether and in what ways social scientific research may form a basis for rational political decisions. While social science research indeed has implications for public policies, the main proposition here is that such a question is ultimately misleading. While social scientists serve as scientific experts, advocates of certain political and policy positions, or public intellectuals, and thus offer crucial information for describing and understanding social inequalities and social protection, one of the most important public functions of social scientists is to offer concepts and interpretations that can guide political debates in the public sphere.

Seen in this way, the social sciences have a dual role (Lynd, 1939). On the one hand, all the social sciences are engaged with scientific specializations, also across disciplines, to be able to treat topics in a systematic and methodical way. On the other hand, it is necessary to connect these specialized knowledge(s) with larger issues concerning the common good. It is therefore of utmost importance to devote more attention to connecting specialized knowledge to questions of what constitutes common goods. Such an approach could help reinvigorate the vital link between insight into the actual, aided by systematic research, and imagination of the possible. Structures of society are made and imagined rather than just existing: the social world is a created world. The task is to explain the ascendance of the present arrangements and underlying assumptions in a way that dissociates explaining processes and outcomes from vindicating their necessity. This goal is most assuredly a first element of any ambition to advance the public role of social science in addressing the transnationalized social question. In the current context, this means that the shape-shifting of the social question from class-dominated political conflicts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to a more complex assemblage of heterogeneities, including social class, is traced systematically in order to explore venues of possible change.

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