Global Villagers: The Rise of Transnational Communities

ALEJANDRO PORTES  DECEMBER 13, 2001

A new breed of immigrant community is breaking down national borders and confounding traditional notions of citizenship.

When the residents of Ticuani, a small farming community in the Mixteca region of Mexico, wanted a clean water supply, they turned to a private civic group, the Ticuani Potable Water Committee. As it had many times before, the committee delivered: It quickly raised $50,000, mostly in $100 donations, to purchase and install new tubing to bring clean water to Ticuani.

This story, reported by the sociologist Robert C. Smith, might seem to be an unremarkable tale of civic cooperation. The water committee, however, wasn’t in Ticuani or even in Mexico. It was in Brooklyn, New York. Nor was this just a case of immigrants sending money back home; thanks to modern telecommunications and air travel, the committee was directly involved. After learning that the tubes had arrived, the committee members flew from JFK Airport on a Friday, conferred with contractors and authorities over the weekend, and returned in time for work Monday morning. The water project marked the twentieth anniversary of the committee’s first transnational public project and for this occasion the committee unveiled its new seal, to be used in all future correspondence and public events. The seal says, “Por el Progreso de Ticuani: Los Ausentes Siempre Presentes Ticuani y New York,” which means, “For the Progress of Ticuani: the Absent Ones, Always Present.”

The Ticuani-Brooklyn network is an example of a phenomenon of growing importance—communities that span national borders. A by-product of improved communications, better transportation, and free trade laws, transnational communities are in a sense labor’s analog to the multinational corporation. Unlike their corporate siblings, however; their assets consist chiefly of shared information, trust, and contacts. As the members of these communities travel back and forth, they carry cultural and political currents in both directions. Their emergence complicates our understanding not only of global trade but also of immigration and national identity.

NEITHER HERE NOR THERE

Transnational communities create a variety of new economic relationships across national borders. In the Dominican Republic, for example, entrepreneurs who have spent time in the United States operate hundreds of small and medium-size factories, commercial ventures, and financial agencies. In a study of 113 such firms in the late 1980s, Luis Guarnizo and I found that approximately half survive thanks to periodic investments by family and friends who remained in the U.S. The men and women who operate these firms in the Dominican Republic are not “return immigrants” in the traditional sense of the term. Instead, they make use of their time abroad to build a base of property, bank accounts, and business contacts and then travel back and forth to take advantage of economic opportunities in both countries.

These Dominican entrepreneurs frequently travel abroad to find new immigrant investors, often with the help of Dominican-owned financial and real estate agencies in New York City. They also rely on global contacts for sales. Proprietors of small garment firms, for example, regularly travel to Puerto Rico, Miami, and New York to sell their wares and on their return fill their empty suitcases with supplies such as garment designs, fabrics, and needles. To the untrained eye, these travellers may appear as common migrants visiting and bearing gifts for their relatives back home, when they are actually engaged in trade.

We expect immigrants to come to the United States, make a living, and send money to relatives back home, but in transnational communities the money often flows in the other direction. For example, a study of Chinese immigrants in the New York area, conducted by sociologists Christopher Smith and Min Zhou, shows how Chinese immigrants troll for capital abroad in such places as Hong Kong and Taiwan to finance new banks in the Flushing area of Queens in New York City. These banks have made possible a surge in home buying by New York’s Chinese immigrants, who often are unable to obtain credit from mainstream institutions. Although small by conventional standards, these banks have proliferated, and they now serve simultaneously the economic interests of the immigrant community.
As money and goods flow through transnational communities, so do cultural influences and even politics. Consider the indigenous Otavalan community in the highlands of Ecuador, which over the last 25 years has spawned a transnational community that reaches into the major cities of Europe and North America, where the Otavalans market their colorful clothing wares. Otavalans abroad do not make their living from wage labor or even local self-employment but from the sale of goods brought from Ecuador. They maintain constant communication with home to replenish supplies, monitor their telares or garment shops, and buy land. They have even discovered the commercial value of their folklore, and groups of performers have fanned through the streets of cities in Europe and the United States.

Sociologist David Kyle reports that after years of traveling abroad, the Otavalans have brought home a wealth of novelties, and many have taken European or North American wives. In the streets of Otavalo, it is not uncommon to meet these white women attired in traditional indigenous garb. The transnational community has shaken up the Otavalan social hierarchy. The sale of colorful ponchos and other woolens accompanied by the plaintive notes of the quena (flute) have been so profitable that Otavalo’s native entrepreneurs and returned migrants comprise much of the town’s economic elite.

Ethnic enclaves in the United States are no less vulnerable to the social aftershocks of the transnational metamorphosis. Sociologist Timothy Fong reports that Chinese newcomers have transformed the city of Monterey Park, California, into the “first suburban Chinatown.” Originally, many Taiwanese and Hong Kong entrepreneurs established businesses in the area less for immediate profit than as a hedge against political instability and the threat of a communist takeover. Opening a new business in the United States helps in obtaining permanent resident permits.) But many of these entrepreneurs have brought their families along to live in Monterey Park, while they continue to commute across the Pacific to conduct business. The profitable activities of these “astronauts,” as they are dubbed in Chinese because of their frequent air travel, have helped Monterey Park’s Chinese ascend swiftly from marginal status to the city’s business class.

In their most advanced forms, transnational networks have evolved into political communities. Alerted by the initiatives of immigrant entrepreneurs, political parties and even governments have established offices abroad to canvass immigrants for financial and electoral support. Not to be outdone, many immigrant groups organize political committees to lobby the home government or, as in the case of the Mexican community studied by Smith, influence the local municipality. To provide yet another example, Colombian and Dominican immigrants in New York City organized during the 1970s and 1980s to demand the right to vote in elections in their respective countries and obtain the support from their home governments to combat negative images of their communities in the United States.

The result of this process is the transformation of the original pioneering economic ventures into transnational communities that include an increasing number of people who lead dual lives. Members are at least bilingual, move easily between different cultures, frequently maintain homes in two countries, and pursue economic, political, and cultural interests that require a simultaneous presence in both.

THE SOURCES OF TRANSNATIONALISM

What gave rise to these transnational communities? For the most part, it is the social and economic forces unleashed by contemporary capitalism—many of the same ones, in fact, that allow corporations to move manufacturing plants from one country to another.

If today’s U.S.-bound immigrants faced the same economic and technological conditions as their European predecessors at the turn of the century, there would be no transnational communities. At that time, a relative abundance of industrial jobs spawned stable working-class ethnic communities. Most Poles and Italians in the United States became workers, not entrepreneurs, because the industrial job opportunities made this an attractive option. There were rags-to-riches stories, but it typically took more than one generation to go beyond working for wages. By contrast, today’s uncertain, poorly paid service-sector jobs encourage immigrants to seek an alternative autonomous path. Just as migration abroad became the norm in certain regions of the Third World
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Regardless of the position one takes, attempting to suppress emerging transnational communities will be taking in the next century. This view is grounded in the belief that the past holds the most appropriate model for the future. But "society" and "community" are not static and the path of change has been already blazed by the increasing globalization of the American economy. In this context, transnationality and its political counterpart, dual citizenship, may not be a sign of imminent civic breakdown but the vanguard of the direction that new notions of community and society will be taking in the next century.

Regardless of one’s position, in the past, today participation in transnational enterprises is turning into "the thing to do" among some groups of immigrants. Earlier in the twentieth century, the expense and difficulty of long-distance communication and travel simply made it impossible to lead a dual existence in two countries. Polish peasants couldn't just hop a plane—or make a phone call, for that matter—to check out how things were going at home over the weekend. Now, such communication is possible, and many use it to cope with the whims of the global marketplace.

Transnational communities do not, of course, thwart the operations of large corporations. As more common people become involved in transnational activities, however, they subvert one of the premises of globalization, namely that labor stays put and that its reference point for wages and working conditions remains local. Immigrant workers who become transnational entrepreneurs convey information about labor conditions and novel economic opportunities. The growth of sociopolitical and economic ties across borders also affords immigrant workers some protection from cultural isolation and inferior legal status in the First World. Flows of capital from newly industrialized countries of Asia to North American cities facilitate home and business ownership in the immigrant community.

The significance of transnationalization is already apparent in smaller countries that export labor. In the peripheral nations of the Caribbean Basin as well as those Asian countries with long ties to the United States—such as Taiwan, South Korea, and the Philippines—the twin processes of corporate globalization and immigrant transnationalization have remolded entire economies. Virtually every family has a relative abroad, and the back-and-forth movement of people, information, and investment has become integral to family strategies for upward mobility. Consumption patterns and lifestyles are shaped as much by the global media as by the activities of former immigrants who have become transnational entrepreneurs. Even governments get into the act by seeking, as in the case of President Aristide of Haiti, to tap the immigrant community for capital investments and political contributions.

**MELTDOWN OR MELTING POT?**

The rise of transnational activities of all kinds—economic, social, and political—adds an interesting twist to the debate about immigration policy. Restrictionists have long argued that immigrants take jobs away from American workers. However, many of these are jobs that not even immigrants want, let alone natives. In the process of avoiding these jobs by mobilizing their social networks, immigrants can manage to create new sources of employment, not only for themselves but for later immigrants as well. The Cuban enclave economy of South Florida furnishes a good example. A large proportion of the Cuban-owned businesses in the area are in the import-export trade and other transnational sectors. They enabled their owners to bypass the low-wage labor market and have also been a major source of employment for more recent arrivals. In my study of the 1980 Mariel exodus from Cuba, I found, for example, that after six years in the United States, close to half of these refugees were either working for themselves or in firms owned by their co-nationals.

Cultural conservatives also seek to restrict immigration because of the damage it presumably does to American values and cultural patterns. But transnational entrepreneurs epitomize the very values commonly associated with success and achievement in America. Not coincidentally, the cities that have taken the lead in adapting to the process of globalization—New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco—are also cities of high immigration. Miami, not New Orleans, became the center of U.S.-Latin American trade largely because of the linkages to the region its large immigrant population built.

More complicated is the question of how transnational communities transform our notion of citizenship. At a time when so much of the American public is disengaged from civic life—apparently to the detriment of the political system—what does it mean to have so many citizens who are, in a very real sense, neither here nor there? The answer pivots on how narrowly one wishes to construe the concept of civic community. From one perspective, these solitary groups of foreigners, concerned with their own economic and social ends, and generally indifferent to the broader issues in American society, represent a direct threat to its integration. This view is grounded in the belief that the past holds the most appropriate model for the future. But "society" and "community" are not static and the path of change has been already blazed by the increasing globalization of the American economy. In this context, transnationality and its political counterpart, dual citizenship, may not be a sign of imminent civic breakdown but the vanguard of the direction that new notions of community and society will be taking in the next century.

Regardless of the position one takes, attempting to suppress emerging transnational communities, whether in the name of citizenship or a state-centric...
social order, is probably futile. The existing global social networks are too strong, the growth of distance-shrinking technology too fast. Even advanced countries have not been able to control immigrant populations, so how could they hope to tame their economic and social initiatives?

This is what the American labor movement learned to its chagrin when it threw its weight behind anti-immigrant measures during the 1970s. Such measures did not arrest the flow, but instead alienated immigrant workers from union organizing drives to the benefit of employers. As political scientist Leah Haus shows, one union after another shifted away from this stance in the 1980s and 1990s, involving themselves in immigrant communities and adopting their goals. By becoming increasingly "transnationalized" themselves, unions increased their chances for survival through building ties to the fastest-growing segment of the labor force in low-wage industries and neutralizing employers’ divide-and-rule tactics.

Fast-paced social change is full of surprises, not all of them pleasant. But the attempt to turn back the clock in the name of a more familiar and secure social order often ends up producing even worse, unintended consequences. The rise of transnational communities represents the most novel facet of contemporary immigration to the United States and, as such, is full of uncertainties. It is also full of energy and promise. Its development will be worth monitoring in the years to come.