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THOMAS LACROIX

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WORKING PAPER SERIES

From Economic to Social Remittances:
an International Overview

The Transnational Studies Initiative is a Weatherhead Center
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The Communicative Dimension of Migrant Remittances and its Political Implications¹

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The scholarship usually distinguishes between individual and group-oriented remittances on the one hand, between social and economic remittances on the other. A communicational approach to transnational engagement opens the possibility to unravel these categorizations and sheds a new light on the symbolic dimension of material transfers. This paper unfolds a conceptual framework of migrants' transnational engagements. It combines three elements: a concept of social agent apprehended in its plurality of roles and social embedding; the Habermas theory of communicative action accounting for the communicative dimension of transnational engagements; a concept of social institution explaining the role of migrant organizations in framing transnational activities. In this perspective, remittances appear as a communicational act through which migrants express their identity of migrant embedded on a plurality of social contexts. Remittances, be they monetary, investments or material gift are ambivalent behaviors: they simultaneously are an expression of allegiance and of emancipation. This ambivalence of transnational ties, it is argued, is the product of the fundamental ambivalence of migration act itself.

INTRODUCTION

Originally, Peggy Levitt coined the term “social” remittances to raise attention towards the array of transfers that were taking place in the transnational realm at a time when the scholarship was almost exclusively focusing on remittances in their economic sense (Levitt 1999). However, nowadays, migration scholars have picked up this concept to draw a sharp distinction between economic

¹ The author would like to thank Céline Cantat for her help on the manuscript and Ilka Vari-Lavoisier for her dedication and energy. Corresponding author: thomas.lacroix@univ-poitiers.fr or Thomas Lacroix, Migrinter, MSHS, 5 rue Théodore Lefebvre, TSA 86073 POITIERS CEDEX 9, France.

transfers on the one hand and the “rest” on the other. In doing so, the literature tends to reify a dubious epistemological line that separates the “economic” and the “social”. In this paper, my aim is to cast a critical eye on two commonly used distinctions: between social and economic remittances on the one hand, and between material and immaterial transfers on the other. For this purpose, I present a theoretical framework within which it is possible to think economic transfers as well as any other form of remittances, whether material or not, as symbolically meaningful social constructs. Empirically, it dwells upon a 15-year experience of research on individual and collective remittances in villages of North Africa (Souss Valley, Kabylia) and North India (Punjab) (Lacroix 2013; Lacroix 2005).

I see remittances as communicative actions through which migrants express who they think they are beyond the contradictory nature of their condition (Habermas 1984). In this paper, I want to show how ambivalence (Smelser 1998) is built into remittances (whether collective or individual) in particular, and into transnationalism in general. Remittances simultaneously express allegiance to the place of departure and emancipation, success and a familiarity with modern lifestyle. Seen from the point of view of village communities and elite, remittances represent both conservative and subversive forces. In fact, it is contended that remittances bear the mark of a double ambivalence, the one of the condition of the émigré-immigré who shares their life between two social spaces, and the one of the migration act itself that is both a disruptive and conservative stance. In this paper, I will present different forms of remittances, showing how each of them expresses this tension in a specific way and, beyond, how they can be seen as a step toward the politicization of the relation between migrants and their sending community. Henceforth, the theoretical framework provides a ground to think of a continuum from non-political remittances to transnational political engagement.

The first section briefly presents an overview of a structure/agency approach to immigrant transnationalism. The second section analyses the implications of this theoretical standpoint for our understanding of material remittances. Finally, I raise some considerations about the passage from non-political to political remittances.

1. A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO TRANSNATIONALISM

This theoretical framework was initially tailored to explain the development of activities among hometown organizations². It is empirically grounded in 15 years of research on Moroccans, Algerians and Punjabis in Europe. The central question of this research was to understand why some groups do engage in

2 A full presentation of this theoretical model was published in a previous article: (Lacroix 2014)

collective practices of development while others do not. To understand this, I developed a structure and agency perspective that takes into account the plurality of social contexts in which migrants are embedded. This perspective is three-pronged and relies 1) on the “plural man” theory, 2) Habermas’ theory of communicative action and 3) a reformulated concept of social institution. Henceforth, I want to argue that any form of remittances can be conceived as communicative acts through which emigrants express the multipolarity of their identity and the plurality of the social milieus in which they have been socialized. Moreover, the social institutions within and across which remittances are undertaken (families, associations, businesses, etc.) form the communicational basis that makes this exchange between migrants and non-migrants possible.

Following Habermas’ approach to social action, it is argued that human behaviors are communicative: in order to be understood and foster cooperation among social actors, they are to act in accordance with a shared understanding of the world, the so-called “lifeworld”. They conform to the way actors understand the world and themselves in the world. I propose to enrich this approach by introducing the idea that actors are plural. Social actors are socialized in a plurality of social contexts: in the family, at work, in a given religious or class context, etc. Actors are bearer of a bundle of identities reflecting this diversity of social embedding, each of them associated with a range of roles and expectations that may, at times, be at odds with each other. Actors’ agency is to be understood against this background: emergence, defined as the appearance of innovative behaviors, stems from the necessity for actors to cope with the contradictory expectations that they face. Any emergent act is polyvalent. It bears the mark of the multiple layers of socialization of those who undertake them. But when the structural contradictions in which people are embedded build up, action becomes loaded with ambivalence: an emergent behavior is a way out of structural impasses, but it subverts former social equilibriums.

I see in the ontological plurality of social actors the origin of ambivalence. This somehow relates to Neil Smelser’s understanding of ambivalence as rooted in the oedipal relations that people weave with their parents (Smelser 1998, 5–6). This developmental phase can indeed be seen as a founding moment insofar as it is part of the autonomization process of the social actor, the one that leads children of their parents to become parents of their children. It introduces children into the intrinsic un-resolvability of the human condition, to the necessity AND the impossibility to be parent and child, and later to endorse the array of social roles that characterize full-fledged social beings.

Another thread links this habermassian theoretical framework with Smelser’s theory: they both can be read as critiques of interest-driven rationality. For Smelser, ego-centered rationality is hampered by the ambivalent perception that we have of things and prospects, as illustrated by one’s impossibility to make a clear-cut distinction between what is right or wrong when decisions to be taken

simultaneously imply good and bad outcomes. For Habermas, rationality cannot solely be defined as an individual calculation that puts means and ends in the balance. “Instrumental rationality”, as he calls it, fails to explain interpersonal and collective collaborations. On the contrary, if rationality were purely instrumental, it would ultimately be a centrifugal force impeding group-making. The German philosopher opposes communicative approach to rationality arguing that for an action to be rational, it is necessary to be deemed as such by an external observer on the ground of a common understanding of the world. Both theories imply that an act cannot be rational in absolute terms, and that rationality is always relative to a moral framework in which it is embedded. Acting implies for the actor to be always already inscribed into a collective frame. Communicative rationality stands upon a triptych: the actor, observers and the world, as opposed to the diptych means/ends supposed by ego-centered rationality. For Habermas, observers are not passive. If acting is communicational, observers are recipient of a message, a stand taken by the actor upon his being and the way they perceive the world beyond their multiplicity of embedding. A reciprocal relationship stands at the core of communicational action: on the one hand, one needs an external observer to acknowledge or question the rationality of one’s action. On the other, through their action, people challenge, seek to transform or reproduce existing modes of behaviors. This reciprocal process fosters cooperation, convergence of behaviors or, on the contrary, marginalizes divergent behaviors.

In summary, this approach debunks two impasses of interest-driven rationality: because it is backed upon a socially (re)constructed understanding of the world, acting is possible beyond the impossibility to discriminate between what is good and what is bad; because it needs the intervention of external observers, acting is never cut off from cooperation and convergence mechanisms. This explains the importance granted in this model to the collective dimension of decision-making and therefore, the central role played by social institutions. As mentioned above, social institutions such as families, enterprises or associations are of central importance in this process insofar as they produce a regime of behaviors, social roles, etc., but also because they are a forum in which actors debate, negotiate and invent new forms of behaving, in accordance with their respective array of socializations. In other words, social institutions are the crucible of emergent acts, but also the social tool through which they converge to be adopted by a collective of people. As will be shown below, three social institutions are key to understand the communicative dimension of remittances in rural areas: transnational families, hometown organizations and the village community.

2. AMBIVALENT MIGRATION, AMBIVALENT TRANSNATIONALISM

The migration act, that is to say the decision to leave for a foreign country and its enforcement, is to be understood as an emergent and communicative act. My

research focused on emigrants coming from a rural background. In this context, emigration is marked by three identity levels, each of them referring to a range of expectations. 1) Migration is an individual act through which actors assert their capacity to become full-fledged and autonomous social beings outside of the compound of their sending community. 2) It is a family act through which actors are mandated to provide a supplementary income. 3) And finally, it is a “community” act that participates in the wider process of reproduction of community structures. Migrants are expected to keep on pledging allegiance to the political community. In my case-study, this primarily refers to the village’s political elite, but it could be argued that migration also engages migrants as citizens of their sending nation and that the same expectation of allegiance is observed between expatriates and their sending state.

Migrants simultaneously are individuals, family members and community members. Their departure is associated with three kinds of expectations: success, money and allegiance. But these three levels of meaning of the migration act may be at odds with each other. Migration appears to be at the same time an act of individual emancipation and of collective reproduction. In that sense, migration is a deeply ambivalent act. The problem is particularly sensitive at the community level: how to make sure that the individual autonomy and different forms of capitals accumulated by emigrants do not challenge political and social hierarchies? How to preserve the illusion of legitimacy if the place where the becoming of a capable social being is possible is abroad? Seen from the perspective of the sending community, migration is good (it can be reproductive resource) and bad (but it is also a subversive impulse) at the same time.

The ontological plurality of the social subject explains the fundamental ambivalence of emergent behaviors (in our case, the migration act) and the potentially contradictory set of expectations they imply. This model also explains the pre-political nature of migration, as these tensions, as they build up, can produce political stakes in the public sphere. Remittances, it is argued, whether material or social, can be seen as the locus of politicization of the relationship between migrants and non-migrants.

3. REMITTANCES: A COMMUNICATIONAL MEDIUM BETWEEN MIGRANTS AND NON-MIGRANTS

The intrinsic ambivalence of the migration act pervades representations, ties and practices. The representations that imbue the space of arrival illustrate this. The space of immigration is generally seen as, if not an Eldorado, at least as a space where “things are possible”, where people can enhance their economic or social capacities. But the immigration space is simultaneously perceived as a space of moral corruption and impurity, a space where people become egoistic, infected by foreign local values and oblivious of their kin (Carling 2008).

This ambivalence pervades all forms of material remittances. They all are a proof of allegiance to the family and to the community and a proof of personal success. I contend that different forms of remittances express this tension differently and, henceforth, that their level of politicization, or said differently, their place on the “pre-political to the overtly political” scale, differs.

Monetary remittances are a first instance of ambivalent transfer. The scholarship has amply documented the conspicuous use of migration monies made by both migrants and beneficiaries. But a strong social pressure surrounds the act of remitting and those who fail to do so are stigmatized as selfish and oblivious of their duty. Among West Africans, they are called “postcard migrants” because they only send postcards to their family back home. There is no altruism in the act of remitting: it is a duty that migrants are expected to fulfill. Arguably, it is the least politicized form of remittances insofar as it gives full leeway to the recipients to use it as they want to. There is no predetermined use of money, it is a pure “potentiality” (Simmel 1987). And monetary transfers are the first form of transfer undertaken by emigrants. They start remitting in the early days of their migration, when they have the possibility to do so.

The building of a house is the second most widespread form of remittances. Once again, the three levels of expectations are clearly legible in this form of investment. Houses primarily benefit the family living in the village and, because they are built in the place of origin, they are a proof of attachment to the village community. Moreover, migrants’ houses are known worldwide as conspicuous display of personal success and enrichment. But contrary to monetary remittances, houses already incorporate aspects imported from the place of settlement. Beyond their villageness, migrants thereby assert the bipolarity of their life experience and identity. The migrant’s houses in the place of arrival and of departure juxtapose similar elements taken from their different life experiences: cooking traditional dishes in modern kitchens, audio-video devices in living rooms furnished with culturally marked furniture or ornament (the Arabic living-room is a case in point). The analogous set-up in both accommodations produces a sense of continuity in their spatially and socially disrupted lives. Houses are generally bought after a few years spent abroad, the time for migrants to muster the necessary financial resources. The house bears the symbolic mark of these years of contact with the foreign lands.

Another form of material transfer is productive investments. They concern a smaller proportion of migrants who have most of the time spent a longer period (roughly a decade) abroad. Like the house, it can also be seen as a sign of community belonging insofar as the project is carried out in the area of origin. The family may also benefit from the project. But productive investments are primarily geared towards private interests and may challenge existing social order. Examples of conflicts spurred by such projects are manifold. In the Senegal River valley, a migrant was killed in a fight opposing investors and a group of villagers around a project of irrigation. The project coordinator was

born out of a slave caste family. In the oases of the Todgha valley, southern Morocco, migrants using motor-pumps on individual plots bypass the traditional system of water distribution that favors the village elite. But these pumps have also aggravated problems of drought in the lower valley and participated in the spread of plant disease. In the Atlas Mountains, a hotel project in a touristic village was stopped due to family rivalries. By and large, the passage from public to private interest and the question of profit distribution explain the difficulty for hometown organizations to engage in productive investments. These examples illustrate the infra-political underpinnings of economic investments in villages of origin.

Collective remittances are undertaken by migrant NGOs or hometown organizations that are directly in relation with community organizations representing the village. In that sense, this form of remittances engages migrants as members of the village community. Their personal interest and their family attachment appear only in the background of their commitment. And yet, collective remittances, I have shown elsewhere (Lacroix 2005), are a privileged way for migrants to give exposure to their bipolar identity and explain their living condition in the place of arrival to the village community. In doing so, migrants become themselves vectors of development. The political dimension of this form of transfer turns out to be paradoxical. In order to gather support of the largest segment of the population and of the migrants living abroad, hometown groups undertake highly consensual projects: religious buildings, public infrastructure projects, etc. As observed among West African, Indian or North African groups, they sometimes avoid dealing with the municipality in order not to appear as supporting any local political clan, and prefer to team up with local village associations. The political sensitivity of their engagement in public matters urges these groups to appear as apolitical.

CONCLUSION: FROM MATERIAL TO POLITICAL REMITTANCES

The above section shows that any form of remittances, because they can be seen as communicative acts that engage actors towards their political community, are endowed with a political potency. The above review of the different forms of remittances shows that, over time, their form evolves along with the formation of a multipolar migrant identity. They each represent a different way for migrants of expressing their changing condition. Political remittances imply a collective mobilization and thereby, the formation of a collective identity that transcend local belongings. I argue that the exchanges that occur in the private or village sphere pave the way for the formation of this collective identity. Collective remittances, even if they are not a prerequisite condition to the formation of transnational movements, can be seen as a crucial step. They reveal the specificity of transnational mobilizations, which can be seen as a form of expression of a multilayered political identity.

But two questions arise from here: when do remittances become a political matter? When do migrants choose to engage in overtly transnational politics? At this stage, I can only formulate hypotheses that should be confronted to the larger literature on political mobilization. These two questions are different. The first one deals with individual practices (remittances) that are politicized by national authorities when the latter qualifies the act of remitting as a civic duty. This is implicit, for example, in the definition of the “African diaspora” formulated by the African Union, namely: people of African origin living outside of the continent and showing interest in the development of this land. This is also illustrated by various campaigns and public discourses encouraging migrants to send money home. Public authorities thereby use remittances as a political object to draw a moral line between “good” and “bad” migrants.

The second question refers to the issue of transnational political mobilizations. A lot remains to be done regarding the conditions under which such mobilizations occur, which forms they endorse and what makes them special compared to non-transnational mobilizations. Indeed, the category “homeland-oriented politics”, widely used in the literature, is a generic term for a large array of movements: some are spurred by homeland authorities or parties to gather political and financial support, others are spontaneous and seek to promote the rights of expatriates (pension portability, right to vote, etc.) and a third form includes those that seek to change the political situation from abroad (anti-corruption campaigns, etc.). The issue of preliminary conditions addresses the form of collective organizations that pre-exist transnational social movements. In this case, it is interesting to see how organizational capacities can be re-oriented from national to transnational aims: the movements in favor of the independence of Punjab in the eighties in the US and in the UK cannot be explained if one does not take into account the previous decades of mobilization in working-class and civil right organizations. More recently, there has been an obvious link between the growing activism of hometown organizations among Mexicans and Moroccans abroad and the campaigns claiming the right to vote in homeland national elections. And this “hostland” organizational basis has been imbued by the legacy of the collective structures that facilitated the coming and early-days settlement of migrants and refugees. Arguably, transnational mobilizations are shaped by the entire migration process. This leads us to the specificity of transnational movements. Indeed, transnational mobilizations bear the mark of the migration history of the group. But this migration history must be grasped in each of its dynamics, whether private or public, family or associative, in sending or arrival areas... This entanglement is what characterizes transnational mobilizations. We cannot understand the failure of the “no remittances” campaign among Cubans in Miami if we do not take into account that members of political organizations have also supported their family in Cuba. We cannot understand the surge of collective remittances supported by Indian, Mexican, Malian or Moroccan unionists if we overlook the fact that they have also obeyed to community injunctions by funding religious shrines or

customary schools in their village of origin for several decades. Similarly, we will not understand the demonstrations of Sikhs in London or New York in favor of the independence of Punjab if we only look at their arrival-country-oriented activism. The polyphony of transnational politics reflects the identity multipolarity of transmigrants.

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