

Welcome to the Club?: A response to *The Cross - Border Connection* by Roger Waldinger

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(Received 16 April 2015; accepted 22 May 2015)

Roger Waldinger's provocative book on migrants' cross-border lives corroborates many insights already established by transnational migration scholarship. He makes a compelling case for the need to understand migration not just as assimilation – neo, segmented, or otherwise – but also as about how people continue to be simultaneously involved in their homelands, the countries where they settle, and other salient places. I am glad that Waldinger has lent his voice to correct the unproductive divide between immigration and emigration scholarship. But the 'new' path he charts forward to right what he sees as wrong with current scholarship is, at times, so selectively formulated and argued that it undercuts its effectiveness.

Keywords: transnational migration; globalization; immigration; emigration; cross-border ties; Politics

Roger Waldinger has written a thoughtful, provocative book in response to the transnational turn in migration studies. While scholars working with this perspective have a lot to contribute, says Waldinger, 'the results are disappointing' (5). He promises to lead us out of the wilderness and set the record straight.

On the one hand, I am tempted to welcome Waldinger to the club. So many of his insights corroborate what scholars of transnational migration have been saying for a long time. He makes a compelling case for the need to understand migration not just as assimilation – neo, segmented, or otherwise – but also as about how people continue to be simultaneously involved in their homelands, the countries where they settle, and other salient places, although these practices and affinities naturally ebb, flow and change direction over time. I am glad that Waldinger has lent his voice to correct the unproductive divide that separates scholars of immigration and emigration. On the other hand, instead of embracing his membership, and contributing constructively to ongoing debates based on reading them accurately, he opts instead to chart a 'new' path that is, at times, so selectively formulated and argued that it undercuts its effectiveness.

There are actually two goals driving Waldinger's narrative. The first is a fruitful one. He argues that transnational migration scholarship comes up short because it has sidestepped 'the challenge of understanding the sources and types of variations in the connections that migration almost always produces' (6). We need to explain why ties and engagements persist, attenuate, or fade away. I agree. We need more research, both quantitative and qualitative, that carefully examines how, why and where

transnational practices remain strong over time and for whom – what patterns emerge, what classes of people stand out, and what kinds of governance structures encourage or dampen transnational livelihoods. It is not that all people, everywhere, lead transnational lives. It is that we need a transnational optic to carefully study who does, when, and with what consequences.

Another goal of this book, however, is to prove that transnational attachments will ultimately wither, that the forces stacked against them are too strong and systematic that emigrants will almost always become immigrants and eventually turn their attentions and loyalties to the countries where they reside. This position, while claiming to be based on a broad read of the data, is actually based on a very narrow one. While citing a wide variety of comparative historical sources, Waldinger draws largely on the US, if not US–Mexican experience, to make broad, general arguments. Because he is primarily interested in transnational politics and the development activities of home town associations, he sidesteps whole strands of research. He writes about a specific class of labour migrants and pays little attention to variations in economic status, gender, or race and ethnicity. We are told that the analysis is, in part, based on fieldwork (5), but we do not learn much about where, with whom, or how often this fieldwork took place. And, finally, this book is based on the idea that social science is about coming up with one right answer or theory rather than several nuanced, context-specific, historically contingent ones. If Waldinger had framed his book as an interrogation into the challenges and ultimate future of transnational politics and development, based primarily on the US–Latin American experience, it would have been a welcome contribution. If he had then explained if, when and why these connections persist or weaken and what that tells us about other migration experiences, as he does convincingly at points in the text, his book would have been even more welcome. But because he sets his bar much higher, and claims to be doing what many have already done, his book must be judged on its own terms.

Waldinger's book begins with an intellectual history of transnationalism. His critiques of much of the early scholarship ring true – that it seemed to find transnational attachments everywhere, that it claimed to be describing something new, and that it was often about bi-national, localized relations between a sending and receiving community. These are weaknesses that characterize the early periods of many emerging perspectives. He agrees, however, that there is a period when people are both immigrants and emigrants:

Still *of* the sending state, even though no longer *in* it, the immigrants transplant the home country society onto the receiving-state ground. In the process, the *alien* territory becomes a *familiar* environment, yielding the infrastructure needed to keep up here–there connections and providing the means by which migrants can sustain identities as *home* community members while living on *foreign* soil [emphasis original] (6).

To capture this, he proposes the idea of *intersocietal convergence*, linking 'here' and 'there'. But all is not right in Oz. Over time, Waldinger says, communication and contact decline. What the emigrant wants for his or her homeland is different than what the non-migrant wants. Eventually, the 'center of social gravity' shifts such that the costs of maintaining cross-border connections become too high. This pushes the

migrant to move from being ‘not just *in* the receiving state but *of* it’ and causes intersocietal *convergence* to give way to intersocietal *divergence*.

I wonder why we need new words to capture the dynamics or tensions that others have already described and what the additional analytical purchase is. Whether they write about transnational social spaces, networks, or social fields, the fact that migrants and non-migrants are simultaneously embedded in multi-sited and multilayered social spaces that transcend national borders is long established. So is the understanding that their relations often involve deep conflict that increases over time (De Haas 2009; Glick Schiller 2010; Glick Schiller and Faist 2010; Lacroix 2010; Levitt 2012). Researchers have already, as Waldinger says he is doing, ‘put the cross-border dimension front and center, an endeavor that helps define international migration as a distinctive field of study, one encompassing but going beyond *immigration* and *assimilation*, as those words are conventionally defined [emphasis original]’ (106). The breadth, depth and durability of these social fields are empirical questions.

In fact, transnational migration scholarship is all about what Waldinger sets out to do. It calls into question long-standing ways of talking about, studying and evaluating the organization of social life. When it is done well, it does not take as given the boundaries or relevant scales of experience of the individuals, groups, spaces, or places that concern us. It does not assume that they are static, contained or rooted, but always considers the possibility of fluidity, connection and movement, no matter how difficult inequalities, power and securitization make this for some individuals and groups compared to others.

This is exactly what Waldinger urges:

Common sense as well as much social science tells us that state, society, people, and population normally converge. In this frame, humans are sedentary by nature, not mobile. Hence, in a normal world, people will stay in place: “they,” the foreigners, live “there” on foreign grounds; “we,” the nationals, reside “here,” on native soil. But the world rarely conforms to this particularly model of normality ... population movements across territorial boundaries are an inherent part of the reality, to be expected regardless of what nationals and governments, whether in sending or receiving states, would prefer. (126)

As many have already written and Waldinger corroborates, ‘connectivity is part and parcel of the migration experience itself: what flows across borders – information, resources, and support – provides ample motivation for family members separated by space to maintain strong social ties’ (39). Therefore, processes of incorporation, enduring homeland, or other involvements, whether they involve families, religion, economics, or politics, can occur at the same time and reciprocally inform each other. It is not enough to just look at how people continue to be involved in their homelands (as is so often the case). It is about how they simultaneously become part of the places where they settle and stay connected to a range of other places, and how multiple scales of social experience shape and are shaped by these connections at the same time.

So far, so good. But because this book is primarily concerned with transnational politics and development, it misrepresents the nature of transnational social fields and

migrants' and non-migrants' embeddedness within them. It leaves out large parts of the debate that contradict its argument. Ultimately, it ignores its own advice, failing in the same way that it accuses others of having failed by 'looking for a one-size-fits-all approach', and not achieving the 'better goal' of 'explaining variations across the different forms of cross-border involvement – whether occurring in political, economic, or cultural spheres' (25). Let me mention just a few examples.

Waldinger argues that over time, migrants' and non-migrants' views will diverge, grow too conflict-ridden, and that the costs of maintaining these ties will outweigh their benefits. Receiving states, and the native-born members within them who are suspicious of immigrants with too many foreign loyalties, will pressure emigrants to become immigrants. This clearly happens. However, political choices are not made in a vacuum. Political actors are also family members, religious believers and workers. Cultural repertoires, economic resources and the political institutions and ideologies circulating throughout the sites and scales of transnational social fields shape their actions. Understanding shifts in orientations and allegiances within transnational social fields must take into account these multiple sites, types and scales of belonging and how they take shape at particular historical economic and political moments. To put it very simply, the world is not the same now as it was before 9/11 when much of the early transnational migration scholarship was written. Ties between Mexicans in Mexico and the USA, as well as the character of Mexican migration itself, have evolved very differently than ties between Moroccans in Morocco, the Netherlands, Germany and France.

This is, in part, because individuals embrace different ways of being and belonging in transnational social fields, and they do not always go together. In fact, these ebb and flow over time, in response to elections, terrorist attacks, climactic disasters, global economic crises, the hardening of borders and life cycle events, underscoring the need for a longitudinal, context-specific perspective. At the same time that some migrants' ties are on the wane, others are on the rise. And even if many migrants ultimately shift their centre of gravity to a receiving country, it does not discount the impact of their activities in the short-, medium-, or even long-term.

Moreover, individuals become part of transnational social fields through a variety of pathways, and different interests and aspirations motivate their desire to remain active within them. This book, like many others, assumes that ethnicity and nationality are the principal organizing identities behind these choices (Glick Schiller, Caglar, and Guldbrandsen 2006). But as Waldinger writes: 'immigrants are also emigrants, aliens are also citizens, foreigners are also nationals, non-members are also members, the political excluded are also political participants' (107). They are also workers and professionals, members of religious congregations, sports fans, hobby enthusiasts, and supporters of political or social movements, positions that also inspire and orient their simultaneous connections.

The pull of family obligations and responsibilities is particularly strong. There is a large, well-developed body of literature about this that this book largely ignores (Dreby 2010; Mazzucato 2011; Baldassar and Merla 2014). There is also a vibrant conversation about transnational religious life that shows convincingly how religious affinities motivate cross-border living (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2002; Tweed 2006; Levitt

2007; Vásquez 2008). And there are also stark class differences in people's ability to move and access social capital and resources that Waldinger fails to take into account.

But, according to Waldinger, diminishing communication and contact and the tensions that arise between migrants and non-migrants will ultimately cause homeland involvements to weaken. 'Nothing fully replaces in-person contact' (63), he writes. Again, a claim with some truth, which he demonstrates convincingly for some US–Latin American migration circuits. But there are two fundamental problems with this argument. The first is that Waldinger reads the data to support his position. Citing the Latin American Public Opinion Project, for example, he writes that:

contact is as *likely to be frequent* as occasional or nonexistent: hemisphere-wide, the proportion reporting that contact occurs twice a week or more (37 per cent) is just marginally higher than the proportion reporting that contact rarely or never takes place (34 per cent) [emphasis original] (69).

Clearly, for him, the glass is half empty, but for other analysts it will be half full. Moreover, to continue with the metaphor, he takes the ingredients in the liquid as given, rather than considering that the recipe might be missing something. The contacts sustained by elite migrants, for instance, who use Skype or Facebook, are not captured in these accounts. My point is not to dispute that there are many cases in which contact diminishes over time. It is to heed Waldinger's own call to move away from false dichotomies and to identify trends and patterns across groups, places and time that will lead to a more balanced analysis.

The second problem is that Waldinger equates the existence of inherent tensions within transnational social fields as proof of their pending demise. Because home town associations are ridden with tensions, inequalities and conflicts of interests (which sounds pretty much like politics in general to me), they do more harm than good and they will ultimately die out. Many scholars have charted how asymmetries in power, and the different rates and rhythms at which ideas and resources travel within transnational social fields, produce disjunctures or an 'ossification effect' (Smith 2006; Carling 2008). There can be, as Waldinger notes, a 'mismatch between emigrant preference and stay-at-home need' (171), self-selective mobilization by class and gender that waxes and wanes, and heightened regional and national inequality because localities vary considerably in their ability to organize development across borders. But research also shows the many ways that families and organizations negotiate these tensions so that they are tenable, despite unequal power, resources and opportunities. While some migrants leave with little political experience and are therefore unlikely to mobilize once they arrive in a country of settlement, others come with lots of experience under their belt and regroup easily. In fact, in some cases, individuals, associations and states need to stay connected as a sort of insurance against a possible need to return and a guarantee that remittance transfers will continue.

Moreover, other actors and scales of governance influence migrants' shifting centre of gravity. Transnational social fields encompass co-nationals, co-religionists and other 'co's' wherever they settle. Local, municipal, state, regional, national and global governance structures are potentially at work within them. While institutions of global

governance and sub-national actors sometimes make an appearance in Waldinger's argument (e.g. the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations), their role in encouraging or thwarting enduring ties is largely overlooked.

Finally, the learning, skill acquisition and state–society partnerships that occur in the process of home town association project implementation or political participation can be just as valuable as the outcomes. Waldinger underestimates the power of the migrating ideas and practices that circulate along with people. They can shift the ideological backdrop and the cultural and political toolkit in ways that may endure far longer than migrants' cross-border practices. I wish then, once again, that Waldinger had followed his own advice and helped us understand under what conditions these organizations and projects function successfully and why, as authors such as Pries (2008), Kapur (2010), Iskander and Lowe (2011), Bilgili and Weyel (2011), Lafleur (2011), Lyons and Mandaville (2011), Collyer (2014), Eckstein and Najam (2013) and Lamba-Nieves (2014) have done.

The false dichotomies that frame Waldinger's questions weaken his answers. We have returned once again to whether the glass is half empty or half full, whether we are looking for yes or no answers or historically specific, contextually grounded ones, and if whether something ultimately 'dies', its importance or lasting effects should be dismissed.

Clearly, for some individuals and groups, under certain political economic conditions, power inequalities and conflicts of interests will make homeland attachments ultimately disappear. Other people were never very interested in their homelands to begin with. But for others, mutual interdependence, new institutional arrangements, and influxes of new generations of actors will result in more enduring cross-border involvements. These will vary by gender, class and country of origin. They will involve economic, political, religious and sociocultural ways of being and belonging. They will ebb and flow with the geopolitical moment, in ways we cannot predict. The current conjuncture, in which borders are tightening, good jobs are harder to come by, and terrorism is on the rise, heightens the kind of assimilatory pressures in which Waldinger places so much stock. But I would not want to bet on where we will be in fifty years from now.

Waldinger concludes that while 'knowing that migration builds circuits through which people, resources, ideas, and influence subsequently cross borders is a good place to start', to move further 'one needs other tools' (175), which he has provided. Many researchers have already produced useful tools, and the new ones that Waldinger offers are based on a misreading of the old ones. He still sees migrants and non-migrants as embedded in separate, discrete spaces that, since physically separate, are therefore socially, culturally, religiously and politically detached. His tools, developed primarily in response to the political and community development activities carried out by Latin American migrants to the USA, leave out large parts of the world and many types and classes of people. Waldinger is right about one thing, however – that immigration scholars need to broaden their optic. If he is able to convince them, which transnational migration scholars have long tried to do, I will congratulate him warmly.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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