

## BOOK REVIEWS

STEVEN VERTOVEC. *Transnationalism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2009. Pp. 205. ISBN: 978-0-415-43298-6 (hardback); ISBN: 978-0-415-43299-3 (paperback).

In an endeavor to grasp the realities of people living in an era dominated by phenomena described as globalization, researchers from various academic backgrounds seem to find comfort in applying the concept of transnationalism to their studies. In particular, transnationalism has become a key concept used in migration studies, thanks to the anthropological works of academics like Glick Schiller et al. (1992). Steven Vertovec, who is a trained anthropologist himself, currently working as the director of the Max-Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen, Germany, takes up the challenge to provide an overview on the various topics that have been studied in relation to migrant *Transnationalism*. This compact book, which is divided into an introduction followed by five chapters organized around specific topics and a conclusion, provides an excellent initiation to the key ideas of transnationalism for students and due to its comprehensiveness and its multi-disciplinary approach, this book is also an inspiring source for academics who are already established in this field of studies.

In the introduction Vertovec offers a detailed overview of academic discussions surrounding the concept of transnationalism. To bring some clarification to this concept, he starts by making a differentiation between ‘inter-national’ and ‘transnational’ activities. According to his definition the former refers to interactions between national governments, which would include amongst others formal agreements and diplomatic relations, while the latter describes a “sustained and ongoing exchange among non-state actors based across borders” (p. 3; cf. Portes 2001a cited in Vertovec 2009: 29). Vertovec emphasizes throughout his book (see for example pp. 29, 147) the importance of being clear and specific about the usage of concepts such as transnationalism and diaspora. Otherwise, academics run the risk of stepping into conceptual “muddy water” (p. 136), in which a concept like transnationalism, for instance, can lose its heuristic value for highlighting limited and distinct social processes (Portes 2003: 876).

But the theory of transnationalism has also been criticized by scholars who consider it an overused conceptual framework, which in addition implies an approach that strengthens the model of the nation state, rather than moving beyond it (p. 17). While such criticism does not erode the concept’s general usefulness, it helps to reflect on the unpolished aspects surrounding the theory of transnationalism, according to Vertovec. One way of refining transnational theory and simultaneously grasping the heterogeneity of transnational activities that vary across immigrant communities (Portes 2003: 879) would be to focus on the modes, levels, extents and impacts of transnationalism; to categorize the transnational migrants themselves (return migrants, retirement migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and so on); and to concentrate on the degrees of mobility relating to transnational practices and orientation (p. 18–19).

In chapter two, Vertovec focuses on the elaboration of some theoretical approaches and sociological concepts, like ‘social networks’ and ‘social capital’, for example, which he considers helpful for the analysis and understanding of migrant transnationalism. In the

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five subsequent chapters he then goes on to examine how transnationalism effects people's thinking and acting, and how such processes can cause 'significant transformations' of structures within the socio-cultural, political, economic and religious spheres (p. 24). The migration process and a transnational lifestyle can alter, for example, culturally constructed gender roles and structures. Thus, several studies seem to suggest that migration can improve the social status of women, who as a consequence of migration gain "access to employment and a certain degree of control over income and material resources" (p. 65). In the religious sphere, women seem to take on a more significant role in community associations than they used to before migration (p. 139). Often transnational lifestyles also turn people into true cosmopolitans, who are able to "switch codes" (Roger Ballard 1994 cited p. 73) according to context, thus managing the multiplicity of meanings they encounter in their lives. As Vertovec points out in chapter four, migrating people have also influenced the political sphere and caused nation states to rethink their policy of dual citizenship and citizenship rights in general. Furthermore, transnationalism engages with emerging economic transformations through the sending of remittances, for example.

*Transnationalism* belongs to a Routledge series called *Key Ideas*, which intends to provide critically written books dealing with a variety of topics that are central in the realm of social science. And indeed, Vertovec is successful in communicating to his audience in a lively manner the key ideas surrounding the concept of transnationalism. Echoing Vertovec, however, this book could have benefited from an even more precise definition of the concept of transnationalism as understood and used by the author. In this context, a clear explanation by the author of why and how he distinguishes between *migrant* transnationalism and other forms would have been useful.

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LAURA HIRVI  
UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ  
laura.j.hirvi@jyu.fi