

MATERIAL ASPECTS OF TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL FIELDS: AN INTRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

Material Aspects of Transnational Social Fields: An Introduction

The author argues that ethnographic insights into migrants' personal relations achieved through objects, and their involvement in social networks proved through objects, can open up new avenues of understanding and contribute to the creation of new conceptual lenses in studies of migration. Conceptual and methodological issues are discussed, and the themes outlined, that connect ethnographic examples presented in the contributions to this section. Most important is the reconsideration of the migrants' presupposed collective identities. The claims to and representations of (usually ethnic) belonging may be detached from the ways in which people fashion their transnational social fields.

KEYWORDS: transnational social field, object, ethnography

IZVLEČEK

Materialni vidiki transnacionalnih družbenih polj. Uvod

Avtorica trdi, da etnografski vpogledi v osebna razmerja migrantov skozi objekte in njihovo udeležbo v družbenih mrežah, kot se kaže skozi objekte, lahko odprejo nove načine razumevanja migracij in prispevajo k ustvarjanju novih konceptualnih vidikov preučevanja le-teh. Avtorica razpravlja o konceptualnih in metodoloških problemih in oriše teme, ki povezujejo etnografske primere, ki so predstavljeni v prispevkih tega tematskega slopa. Najpomembnejša tema je premislek predpostavljenih kolektivnih identitetah imigrantov. Prisivajanja in reprezentacije (ponavadi etnične) pripadnosti so morda ločene od načinov oblikovanja lastnih transnacionalnih družbenih polj.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: transnacionalno družbeno polje, objekt, etnografija

Several contributions to this section were presented at the workshop *Belonging Embodied, Reciprocity Materialised: Migrants' Transnational Practices* moderated by Tatjana Pezdir and Maja Povrzanović Frykman at the 10th EASA Conference in Ljubljana, 26–30 August 2008. The contributors responded to a call for papers exploring the *movement of people and objects*, led by an interest in how belonging is embodied, reciprocity

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materialised and social networks re-created in different locations in the transnational social fields created by migrants. These fields – or spaces, as some authors prefer to call them – encompass the places in which migrants live their everyday lives, the places they keep returning to, and the physical and virtual journeys between them.

The theoretical intention was to avoid focusing primarily on migrants' ethnicity. While certainly not denying the reality of experiences of group belonging, it is important to turn the relevance of ethnicity into an empirical question. Some of the papers also warn against the assumption that certain practices are only characteristic of migrants in conditions of disadvantage. They shift attention from less privileged to multi-privileged migrants, with potential insights into the similarities of their practices of negotiating normality by means of objects and ways of communication in different areas of everyday life.

In their article on remitting behaviour among Arabs and Bosniaks in Slovenia, Maja Lamberger Khatib and Tatjana Pezdir address motivations, patterns and types of remittances, which can be defined as a set of gifts in different forms. They prove that ethnographic insights into lived experiences, motivations and concerns, with regard to particular social networks, might not only reveal differences, but also significant similarities between migrants of varying class and ethnic background.

Marta Rosales offers ethnographic insights into domestic spaces of Goan Catholic Brahmin families living in Portugal. She sees the analysis of their domestic consumption practices as a path leading towards an understanding of their migration experiences, past and present status-achieving strategies and policies of belonging.

Presenting the dynamics of Poland-to-Finland mobility by following the trajectories of one family and its multiple relations in both countries, Anna Matyska empirically indicates a simultaneity of transnational and integration processes. She traces inclusions into multiple national formations in the migrants' lived experience, with special attention to objects.

Lucija Katulić describes female diplomats' life-styles that incorporate continuous practices of transnational movement of both people and material objects. Practices through which women in diplomacy try to accomplish inclusion in social networks at different locations are defined as a personal creation of transnational space. Special attention is devoted to the material objects they bring to the country they are assigned to in order to maintain their private everyday normality in a new location.

Emanuel Valentin focuses on an example of ritualised reciprocity among people in a different socio-economic position, namely Sicilian labour-migrants in Germany. He shows how belonging is embodied through ephemeral ritual objects charged with notions of local identity, and how these practices bear the potential of serving as cultural reserve for the dispersed community.

The expansion of relatively cheap travel options and the enormous quantities of objects – mostly intended for everyday use – transported in overloaded cars, buses, ships and planes, beg for ethnographic descriptions and interpretations that outline relationships and processes embedded in transnational practices. The focus here is on practices through which migrants accomplish inclusion in different locations and in different networks. What

do they do, send or carry in order to stay connected – to be accepted, remembered, needed or appreciated? Which objects do they consider crucial to the maintenance of their private everyday normality in different locations of attachment? To what extent is involvement in personal relations and social networks achieved or proved through objects, and to what degree does this require physical presence and personal travel? What might the impact, meaning and importance be of “the unmediated experience of actual travel – involving the conduct of face-to-face interactions and a physical contact with familiar places, people, and culture” (Lomsky-Feder and Rapoport 2000: 34)? What are the modes of mutuality and reciprocity? How is the objects’ criss-crossing of transnational social spaces received, used and given meaning in different locations?

Regardless of their different characters, objects can be interpreted as material expressions of belonging, as expressions of status or of family history, as expressions of social and cultural difference. Depending on their kind and purpose, their use, or simple presence, can establish a place of remembrance or pride, mourning or celebration, privacy or symbolic communion, or economic connection with others (see Povrzanović Frykman 2007). Objects are involved in multifaceted quests and attempts to belong. Displacements of people may bring about replacements of objects. Negotiation of meaning often entails communication through objects. Status-gaining strategies often revolve around the material and symbolic values of objects.

These issues are placed in the context of theories concerning the semantic fields of diaspora and transnational social fields (see e.g. Faist 2000; Glick Schiller et al. 1995; Kivisto 2001; Portes et al. 1999; Smith and Guarnizo 1998; Vertovec and Cohen 1997). Yet, the standard interest in symbolic spaces and collective images of ethnic and national belonging is broadened in this section, due to the fieldwork-based perception of the need to also focus on what migrants *do* in practical terms, and not only on what they tell us about.

On the other hand, anthropologists engaged in studies of material culture have offered a respectable body of theoretically advanced work concerning objectification, social memory, consumption of commodities and issues of identity and subjectivity (see Appadurai 1986; Buchli, 2004; Geismar and Horst 2004; Miller 1998a, 1998b, 2001, 2005; Warnier 2001). However, even in the vivid and currently developing field of interdisciplinary interest in material culture (best represented in the *Journal of Material Culture*), material practices concerning migrants, or more specifically, contributing to the making of their transnational social fields, have so far only rarely been in focus (see van der Horst 2006, Salih 2003, Werbner 2000).

Although obvious to the anthropologists and ethnologists contributing to this section, the importance of ethnography should be re-asserted within the vast field of multidisciplinary research on international migration. The ethnographic approach is unsurpassed in its ability to observe practices, discern people’s priorities and represent the individual level of experience while explaining the dynamics of networking or community-making. Indeed, all the contributions to this section are based on recent or ongoing fieldwork.

CONCEPTS AND PARADIGMS

Some concepts and paradigms that have marked studies of migration and migrants' identity formation have delimited potential understandings of the issues mentioned above. Thus, if we conceptualise migrants as people who move from one state in order to organise their lives in another, we cannot be primarily interested in their transnational practices. That is to say, if their everyday practices are discussed, those enacted out of the country of immigration remain invisible. If we conceptualise migrants as 'members of ethnic groups', research is directed towards ethnic markers and the symbolic use of objects, not towards objects of everyday use in which nothing 'ethnic' can be discerned. If we define transnational social fields as consisting of combinations of social and symbolic ties and only look for the convertibility of various sorts of capital, membership of the homeland's political party is of obvious relevance, but not, e.g., the modes of transporting objects across borders.

It is my firm belief that ethnographic insights into migrants' personal relations achieved through objects, and their involvement in social networks proved through objects, can open up new avenues of understanding and contribute to the creation of new conceptual lenses in studies of migration. Ethnographic research into the interplay of sociality and materiality in transnational contexts can provide a solid foundation for the critical reconsideration of certain paradigms.

The reconsideration of migrants' presupposed collective identities is most important. In line with the warning against "locating ethnographic subjects in the comfortable familiarity of bounded ethnic categories of community and belonging" (Amit 2007: 56), collective identities must be assessed empirically. As stressed by Marta Rosales in this section, it is not possible to think of 'Goans from Mozambique' as a unified homogenous community. It is more probable that 'homogeneous communities' are found in terms of communities of practice and never in terms of communities of origin or ethnic affiliation.

Further, there is a "need to distinguish between patterns of connection on the ground and the conditions that produce ideologies of community" (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004: 1006). Such a distinction is critical to the development of methodologies for empirically studying transnational lives. In this respect, claims to and representations of belonging can be detached from the ways in which people actively – here, through objects and domestic practices – fashion their transnational social fields.

Thus, analytical separation of ethnic belonging and people's motives for engaging in some transnational practices may disrupt the rigid understandings that determine people's behaviour due to their ethnicity. Writing about the Goan Catholic elite in Mozambique, Marta Rosales presents a complicated history of pro-colonial inclinations and subtle denials of discrimination in coping with quests for identity. Lucija Katulić points to the role of objects in negotiating personal and gendered identities in the case of female Croatian diplomats. Presenting the example of Sicilian labour migrants' enactment of a patron-saint celebration in Germany, Emanuel Valentin uncovers layers of meaning underlying the standard interpretation of devotional objects as material realization of migrants' at-

tachment to their ethnic groups and countries of origin. Anna Matyska's study of Polish migrants in Finland also confirms that only ethnographic research can show what the notion of *process* means in terms of grassroots agency and identify the role of particular objects' changed circumstances both 'here' and 'there'. Only ethnographic research e.g. can establish when a food item is brought from one place to another because of its unique taste, favourable price, or 'ethnic' nature, when it is simply enabling the normality of consumption, and when it is acquiring representative functions.

Finally, with regard to the statement 'objects flow between the *sending* and the *receiving country*', the articles in this section display the *differentia specifica* of ethnographic methods – that is, their ability to take concrete people with their concrete agendas into consideration. Notwithstanding the patterns of economic and other accumulated effects of people's and institutions' practices at different scales, it is not countries that send things to one another in the realms discussed in this section, but *individuals and grassroots institutions*.

METHODOLOGY

All the papers in this section attempt to contribute to the understanding of the experiences of living simultaneously within and beyond the boundaries of a nation-state. It might be well-established among anthropologists, but in the interdisciplinary field of migration studies, it is not (yet) taken for granted that both 'here' and 'there' are equally relevant research sites. The reasons for this are manifold, and sometimes practical and financial in nature. However, the main underlying reason is what Nina Glick Schiller (2008) criticises as the methodological nationalism of mainstream social science – an ideological orientation that approaches the study of social and historical processes as if they were contained within the borders of individual nation-states.

The articles in this section counteract such a methodological position. They all show that transnational social fields also include people who never migrated themselves but stayed behind in the places "left" by the migrants. Even if the reciprocity of their relations is asymmetrical, 'here' and 'there' exert mutual influences. If research interest is devoted to material aspects of simultaneity of daily activities, routines and institutions incorporated in locations in different countries, it is obvious that people, places and things both 'here' and 'there' must be taken into equally careful consideration. Anna Matyska, for example, points to the changed material circumstances, and the normalisation thereof, in the contexts of emigration. She also shows the vivid traffic of people and objects that, indeed, confirms the continuity of transnational social fields as they are cast and carved by migrants, by their counterparts who stayed behind in Poland, and by their Finnish friends.

'Following the objects' is not a methodological goal per se, but an attempt to investigate new angles in the understanding of migrant lives. Although multi-sited research is seen as an ideal, the impact of transnational relations can be observed by asking individuals about the transnational aspects of their lives, and those they are connected to, in

a single setting (see Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004: 1012). The point is that we must ask about both ‘here’ and ‘there’. Longitudinal studies are necessary, however, which is why participant observation and ethnographic interviewing are particularly appropriate. Also, as “transnational practices ebb and flow in response to particular incidents or crises” (ibid.), or liminal situations in the form of rituals, “a one-time snapshot misses the many ways in which migrants periodically engage with their home countries” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004: 1011). Again, while this is obvious to anthropologists and ethnologists, it is far from being a dominant methodological requirement in the multidisciplinary field of migration studies.

REMITTANCES AND GUILT

It is also important to consider what is meant by objects ‘flowing’ between countries. Ethnographers of transnational practices know that physically demanding and time-consuming hard work is needed to necessitate this. Sweat, and tough decisions imposed by the logistics and costs of transporting objects, should not be forgotten.

In this context, reading about the burdens imposed by the demands and obligations with regard to remittances, as taken up by Maja Lamberger Khatib and Tatjana Pezdir, is elucidative. Their comparative analysis of the significance of remittances in the formation of social networks among Arabs and Bosniaks in Slovenia supports the need to refine the very notion of remittances. The classical anthropological theme of gift-giving and gift-receiving may be reinvigorated by category-transgressing examples of migrants’ practices. Money, indeed, can be analysed as an object (see Povrzanović Frykman 2008: 158). In this context it is not an impersonal, alienated and alienating means of exchange that disrupts direct human relations. On the contrary, it feeds into – and helps to maintain – the web of social and emotional links, albeit seldom unproblematically.

Kathy Burrell’s (2008) remark that objects of private use sent to those who stayed behind can function ‘almost like remittances’, can be developed into an analytical category. Potential humiliating hierarchies can be re-confirmed in the process otherwise seen as positive by all the actors involved.

The idea of “paying back the debt” is well-known to anthropologists and ethnologists doing research in diasporic contexts. It is both the expectation of others, and a kind of internalised rule, that migrants are supposed to give back to their – or their parents’ – country of origin, through personal relations or institutional involvement. This raises the importance of research directed towards e.g., Western-European right-wing discourses of abnormality of living elsewhere (*immigrants – go home!*), as well as understanding why similar discourses are so present in the countries of emigration (*emigrants are still ‘our people’; they will never cease to be a part of our – national – ‘community’!*).

Although the latter discourse variant serves inclusion and not exclusion, it is simply the other side of the same coin. It, too, normalises the model of belonging to a national space encompassed by state borders, and prioritises a model according to which people

are born into a belonging. Those who actively decide against it, or simply neglect it, are supposed to feel guilty.

THE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SPHERES

Much of the literature on globalisation, “while producing wide-ranging claims about the nature of a ‘global transnational elite’, is marked by comparative lack of substantive empirical data” (Fechter 2007: 34). Lucija Katulić provides a gender-sensitive analysis of some material practices of such privileged migrants, namely, practices of making *own* places by means of objects. Her article raises the question of the relation between geographical mobility and domestic fixity, and of home as an important location of identity negotiation. Everydayness “loses its appearance of innocence and stability, when the routine homemaking practices become more intentional, when the ‘everyday’ becomes not so every day and the ‘mundane’ takes on a new significance” (Kurotani 2007: 28).

Affective qualities of places cannot be separated from the concrete materialities of houses, rooms, kitchen tables and all the objects that make places familiar and one’s ‘own’. This is why it is also extremely important to do site research in places and situations *other* than migrants’ public representations of their group identity. Individual practices in the private spheres of homes – both in the places of immigration and in the places of emigration – are equally important as public behaviour at festivities or religious events, where group belonging is enacted and represented. In this regard, Emanuel Valentin, Anna Matyska and Marta Rosales provide examples worth pursuing in a comparative perspective, guided by the question of interplay between private strategies of *practicing* belonging on one hand and public strategies of *representing* it on the other. In anthropological and ethnological research, home is typically recognised as the ethnographic site in which to examine the connection between the domestic space and larger social and economic systems. Several articles in this section demonstrate the benefits of engaging deeply with home as an ethnographic site.

Finally, I would like to point to the ethnographic insight presented by Valentin, which focuses on what objects *do to people* or what they *enable them to do*. Unlike the examples of objects that can or should only be bought in the country of emigration, Valentin offers a telling example of how the very materiality of an object can be more important than the place in which it is produced. When the devotional breads needed for the annual feast did not arrive from Mirabella in Italy, they were made, to everyone’s satisfaction, in Sindelfingen, Germany. Even the Sicilians’ protector saint was pleased, because Sindelfingen – included in a transnational social field – was also ‘his’ town.

CONCLUSION

Identities are constituted through practices and are, to a great extent, dependent on material conditions. Along with ideas and discourses of belonging and integration,

practices and lived experiences involving objects, through which migrants accomplish incorporation in different locations and in different networks, can motivate research.

With regard to the field of migration studies, the contributions to this section draw attention to the benefits of ethnographic research that focuses on objects that constitute people's material worlds, yet via their transnational routes destabilise the commonsensical notions of 'rooted' cultures and localised communities to which they 'belong'.

Following these routes can offer insights into the construction of boundaries that have very little to do with the legal inclusions and exclusions in a certain territory and contribute to the rethinking and reformulating of the concept of society as equated with the borders of a single nation-state – a theoretical priority of the studies of transnational migration.

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POVZETEK

MATERIALNI VIDIKI TRANSNACIONALNIH DRUŽBENIH POLJ. UVOD

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Uvod začrta teme, ki jih izpostavijo avtorji prispevkov v tematskem sklopu *Transnacionalne prakse migrantov. Potovanje ljudi in predmetov*, predstavi osrednje konceptualne in metodološke probleme in poveže etnografske primere, ki jih podrobneje obdelujejo avtorji prispevkov.

Vsi prispevki tega tematskega sklopa so usmerjeni v širjenje razumevanja izkušenj bivanja istočasno znotraj in onkraj meja nacionalnih držav. Članki pokažejo, da transnacionalna družbena polja vključujejo tudi ljudi, ki se nikoli niso selili, ampak so ostali v krajih, ki so jih migranti »zapustili«. Tudi če je recipročnost njihovih odnosov asimetrična, imajo »tukaj« in »tam« vzajemne vplive. Če je namen raziskave posvečen materialnim vidikom simultanosti vsakodnevnih dejavnosti, rutin in institucij, ki so vgrajene v lokacije v različnih državah, je jasno, da je potrebno z enako skrbjo v premislek vzeti tudi ljudi, kraje in stvari tako »tukaj« kot »tam«.

S teoretičnega stališča je najpomembnejši premislek o predpostavljenih kolektivnih identitetah imigrantov. Prisivajanja in reprezentacije (ponavadi etnične) pripadnosti so morda ločene od načinov, kako ljudje oblikujejo svoja transnacionalna družbena polja. Ločnica med transnacionalnimi praksami in ideologijami pripadnosti je ključna pri razvijanju metodologij v empiričnem preučevanju transnacionalnih življenj. V tem smislu so prisvajanja in reprezentacije pripadnosti lahko ločene od načinov, na katere ljudje aktivno – skozi objekte in prakse doma – oblikujejo svoja transnacionalna družbena polja.

Čustvenih kvalitete krajev ni mogoče ločevati od konkretnih materialnosti hiš, sob, kuhinjskih miz in vseh drugih objektov, ki naredijo kraje za domače in kot da pripadajo nekomu. Zato je izjemno pomembno opraviti raziskavo lokacije v krajih in situacijah, ki niso nujno povezani z javnimi reprezentacijami skupinske identitete migrantov. »Tukaj« in »tam« sta lahko razumljena tudi v kontekstu zasebnih in javnih sfer v krajih imigracije in emigracije.

Identitete se izgrajujejo skozi prakse in so v veliki meri odvisne od materialnih pogojev. Poleg idej in diskurzov pripadnosti in integracije so motivacija za raziskave, ki so predstavljene v tem tematskem sklopu, prakse in življenjske izkušnje, ki vključujejo objekte, skozi katere migranti dosežejo vključitev v različne lokacije in družbene mreže.