



## Immigrants and Transnational Citizenship

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**Reviewed:** Alejandro Portes and Patricia Fernández-Kelly (eds.), *The State and the Grassroots: Immigrant Transnational Organizations in Four Continents*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2015.

*In spite of the loud fear-mongering about immigration and borders in the US and Europe, sociologists have found that immigrants' civic organizing in their host countries makes them increasingly important actors in changing their home countries' economy, politics, and culture. Fernando Aquino reviews an important collection of research edited by Alejandro Portes and Patricia Fernández-Kelly.*

In 1992, as a new reporter for *Listin USA*, a branch of *Listin Diario*, a major Dominican daily, I was in the room when the Dominican national poet, Don Pedro Mir, said that the future of the Dominican Republic was in New York. It would be hard to understate the strangeness, at the time, of Mir's statement: I had just arrived a year before that and knew that the Dominican diaspora or "Dominicanyorks," as they were called, did not have a very good reputation in the Dominican Republic.

However, Mir foresaw that immigrants were being exposed to a different civic experience, a new kind of citizenship in which expatriates give birth to a new dynamic among themselves, the states hosting them, and the states they left behind. This new civic experience is challenging receiving countries to make policy and political arrangements to incorporate and influence a new form of transnational citizenry composed of immigrants and their organizations (e.g. Hochschild *et al.* 2013).

In *The State and the Grassroots: Immigrant Transnational Organizations in Four Continents*, editors Alejandro Portes and Patricia Fernández-Kelly have organized an insightful collection of scholarly work on the formation and transformational impacts of grassroots organizations within receiving countries and immigrants' countries of origin. The collection focuses on a new form of civic entity that is transforming the ways in which states look at, and interact with, those who decide to cross frontiers while maintaining civic and political identities linked to their countries of origin. Following a framework initially developed by Princeton's Comparative Immigrant Organizations Project (CIOP) and the International Network for Research on Immigrant Organizations and Development, the 10 chapters concentrate on grassroots organizations, representing 18 nationalities, established in the United States, France, Belgium and Spain, but impacting countries across four continents.

The case studies illustrate how immigrant transnationalism cuts across cultures, with impacts ranging from remittances, philanthropy and entrepreneurial drive to sociopolitical influence. It argues that these phenomena have realigned the relationship of countries like China, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, India, Mexico, Morocco, Congo, Ghana and Suriname to their respective

diasporas. The book discusses how states of origin have been adjusting to a new form of civic engagement on the part of immigrants initially perceived as “absent citizens”; these groups have organized themselves and had an enormous impact on both sending and receiving countries’ economies, politics, and culture. “As a form of ‘globalization from below,’ the grassroots activities of immigrants and their organizations could not but attract the attention of powerful institutions, in particular governments” (p. 14).

The book makes clear that it is no longer plausible to concentrate on the individual or the individual family to describe the impact that immigrants are having across societies. The relevance of the stereotyped “defector” or “life-line impact on families left behind” narratives has diminished to make way for a new discussion centering on collective contributions and demands that immigrants and their organizations are making in both sending and receiving countries. Although the book focuses on the impact at the grassroots level, it also reveals that the states, both original and host, have not remained passive. In fact, one important contribution of this collection is the way it illuminates that states, still displaying the traditional functions of accumulation, legitimation and control, are working to accommodate a new dynamic, and a “new economics” imposed by a new breed of people who are claiming rights and investing financially and socially across frontiers. The varied case studies examine not only how immigrant interest groups have formed, and to what ends they have exerted pressure, but how states have engaged in new policies and politics to address the new transnational dynamics created by these immigrants.

For example, Natasha Iskander’s chapter, “Partners in organizing: engagement between migrants and the state in the production of Mexican hometown associations,” discusses how, working in partnership with the hometown associations created by Mexican immigrants in the United States, the Mexican government created the Three-for-One ( $3 \times 1$ ) program in 2008 to match each dollar invested by immigrants in development projects at the local and state levels in Mexico. The program is a typical example of how states are trying to maintain control over populations that are attached to their original countries in ways not bound by territory. According to the guidelines outlined by the Mexican government, “any group of migrants interested in participating in the  $3 \times 1$  program must formally register with the consular authorities and secure a *toma de nota*, a document that certifies their existence and their compliance with certain minimal requirements established by the federal government” (p. 119). Even the authoritarian Chinese government, which has seen and treated emigrants as defectors, has developed policies to facilitate the civic incorporation of that country’s diaspora through state agencies (*qiao-ban*), and at the level of the Communist Party (*qiao-lian*). As outlined in a chapter by Min Zhou and Rennie Lee, this serves not only to facilitate and control contributions, but also to monitor and foster cultural, civic and political exchanges.

The collection expands the common understanding of emigration’s benefits to the home state beyond cash influx or population relief. It shows the efforts by states to keep up with the new transnational reality. Some countries have enacted dual citizenship, allowing immigrants to vote in the elections of their nations of origin. In addition, states have engaged in clientelistic and corporatist enterprises, even creating mostly symbolic “consulting” boards, and other bureaucratic mechanisms, to actively incorporate transnational grassroots immigrant activity. Some are even attached to their respective consulates, as in the case of the Dominican Republic, which has a very politically dynamic diaspora. In this way, the book places the emphasis on the sending states and societies, and how they react to new organizational forces. The main protagonists of the story, however, are the immigrants who simultaneously organize both in home and receiving states.

This new reality represents the organizational achievements of immigrants themselves, a point highlighted by Portes in the introduction. He writes that the individualistic focus has “persisted both in critical accounts of the role of migration that regarded the departure of migrants as another symptom of underdevelopment, and in optimistic ones that focused on the role of migrant remittances as an almost miraculous solution to local poverty and national underdevelopment” (p. 2). Remittances, and their impact, have played a significant role in the debate about how immigrants continue to influence their native countries, and for obvious reasons. According to a

study by Manuel Orozco (2017), family remittances from the United States and Europe to Latin America and the Caribbean surpassed US\$70 billion in 2016, registering 8% growth over the previous year. This infusion of cash to underdeveloped countries plays a balancing role by ameliorating the effects of high levels of poverty and unemployment. Yet, as several articles in the book explore, it is also related to new arrangements in the relationship between immigrant groups and the states within which the remittances are having the impact. It is also related to the theoretical discussion of how immigration is impacting not only the material, but the social capital of sending and receiving countries. One example, of many in the book, is presented in Thomas Lacroix and Antoine Dumont's chapter, "Moroccans in France: their organizations and activities back home." According to the authors, Moroccans organize in groups dedicated to transnational development and hometown organizations aimed at sending money and support not just to individual families, but to towns for communal efforts (p. 214). This shows that remittances are not just a stop-gap measure for poverty, but actually used to develop home countries at the level of local government. With this important contribution, the book expands our understanding of why home states accept and adapt quickly to interventions by emigrants that could easily be seen as undermining state authority.

Nevertheless, the book makes clear that the impact of remittances is not clear-cut; their influence has sparked skepticism in some intellectual circles about the heavy cultural and human capital price countries pay in exchange for the influx of emigrants' money. One example of this is the so-called Declaration of Cuernavaca, a manifesto emanating from a 2005 forum in Cuernavaca, Mexico, of academics and experts discussing the impact of massive emigration on underdeveloped sending countries. According to the manifesto, despite the benefits to immediate families, the long-term impact of remittance was not a positive one; regional depopulation and "brain drain" had lasting negative effects on countries and let states off the hook for finding ways of improving its citizens' quality of life without forcing them to emigrate. The Cuernavaca notion, however, no longer holds much influence. Iskander's chapter, as well as a chapter by Rina Agarwala ("Tapping the Indian diaspora for Indian development"), illustrates how the "new economics" of immigration, with an emphasis on remittances and projects spearheaded by migrants in their origin countries, are helping the *overall* economies of those countries. As Portes writes, "Family remittances, like technological transfers and business investments, are all ways of creating a return flow of resources to the benefit of individuals and countries left behind. To put it differently, while permanent out-migration may depopulate sending areas and weaken their production structures, various forms of cyclical outflows, marked by monetary and information transfers followed by eventual return of migrants themselves, can have positive developmental effects" (p. 7).

Again, by focusing on the sending states, the book does not necessarily give a full picture of the resistance in the host states. There is no doubt that the new transnational challenges that immigrants have created, which initially inspired resentment in their original countries, have also generated enormous tension in the host states. The backlash against immigration is felt not just in the United States, but across Europe, where right-wing and neo-fascist parties have ridden anti-immigrant sentiment to new heights of influence, especially since the 2008 financial crisis. And yet, as Randolph S. Bourne wrote more than a century ago in an essay, "Trans-national America," immigrants' refusal to subordinate their cultures of origin, while upsetting to nativists, has a paradoxical effect. "Assimilation, in other words, instead of washing out the memories of Europe, made them more and more intensely real. Just as these clusters became more and more objectively American, so did they become more and more German or Scandinavian or Bohemian or Polish" (Bourne 1916). This book suggests something similar, though through a more detailed organizational lens. As Portes writes, "Results of the successive phases of the CIOP study indicate that the conflict between transnational activism and incorporation into the American political system is largely illusory. In practice, both processes tend to occur simultaneously and reinforce each other, as when experiences and skills acquired in one realm are transferred into the other" (p. 13).

*The State and the Grassroots: Immigrant Transnational Organizations in Four Continents* is a revealing and useful book for understanding the new transnational civic space created by immigrant communities. As Patricia Fernández-Kelly writes in the conclusion, “Immigrants adjust to new conditions, organizations address other questions, including the search for standing, and even prominence, in the adopted nation” (p. 292), and, while doing that, they are also having a significant impact on the fabric of the societies they left behind and the states that control them. As Pedro Mir envisioned 25 years ago, it seems that the futures of countries with large diasporas are inevitably linked to the people who are making investments and claiming rights beyond their own frontiers.

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