

WHAT IS TRANSNATIONALISM IN THE HUMAN AND SOCIAL SCIENCES?

Propositions for Comparative Inquiry

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What are the main empirical and theoretical insights that, for the purpose of comparison, can be drawn from studies on the transnationalization of the social and human sciences (SHS)?¹ The SHS may appear to represent a rather different social space from the cinematographic, literary and artistic fields that form the objects of the other articles in this issue. However, there is good reason to include them in the comparative understanding of cultural and intellectual fields.

The SHS do not merely constitute a relatively autonomous social space to which field analysis can be applied. The specific characteristic of cultural production fields – the opposition between

the poles of “large scale” and “small scale” production – is relevant for the SHS as well. The extensive, heteronomous universe of “applied” research is comparable to the pole of “large scale” production, while the production of autonomous or “fundamental” research is analogous with the logic of “small scale” production.

Transnationalism Across Scholarly Fields

Aside from comparisons with cultural production fields, the SHS should, for epistemological reasons, be compared with the scientific field as well. Transnational circulation and exchange in the SHS are homologous to similar processes in the natural sciences to the extent that they depend on unequally distributed resources which, in the broadest sense, reflect the cumulative advantages of dominant Western countries. Nevertheless, a significant difference must be considered: unlike elementary particles or mathematical structures, the objects of study in the SHS change over time and vary across borders. Inquiring into the principles of historical change and cross-cultural variation is the proper aim of SHS research, not proposing ahistorical, decontextualized, and therefore pseudo-universal models.

¹ In this brief article, I cannot provide the required references. They can be found in various publications on which the article is based. For more or less recent ones in English, see Heilbron, Sorá and Boncourt (2018) and Sapiro, Santoro and Baert (2020). The present text

elaborates the concluding section of Heilbron (2023, pp. 262-284).

This epistemological difference has, as Yves Gingras has shown, consequences for transnational relations. Significantly higher in the natural than in the social sciences, transnational exchange is lower still in the humanities. For example, transnational co-authorship, which is a powerful indicator of cross-border connections, is highest in the natural sciences and lowest in the humanities, with the social sciences occupying an intermediary position between the two.

The historical pattern of transnational circulation in the SHS suggests that the contemporary web of global connections represents a transformative change when compared with earlier historical periods. With the disintegration of the European-wide Republic of Letters and the establishment of national systems of higher learning in the early nineteenth century, cross-border connections became less salient; Latin was replaced by vernaculars, and the relatively high levels of mobility and exchange between European universities declined significantly.

It is easily forgotten, however, that the process of nation building was in many areas accompanied by the simultaneous construction of an international order shaped in great part by the proliferation of *international organizations*, governmental as well as non-governmental. In addition to older forms of mobility (correspondence, travel, migration) new ones arose, and notably through interna-

tional scholarly *associations* and *international conferences*.

Emerging in the second half of the nineteenth century, predominantly Western, international scholarly organizations increased their geographical scope following World War II. This was first due to decolonization, and then to the “globalization” that followed the collapse of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe, which coincided with new communication technologies (the world wide web and the personal computer).

Beyond the relatively limited and infrequent modes of exchange within international organizations, contemporary transnational relations are based on the presence of SHS research in virtually all countries and regions of the world. Facilitated by new information technology, increased levels of transnational communication and mobility have transformed transnational practices, from information sharing and scholarly diplomacy, to more frequent, extensive, and research-driven forms of exchange.

A Global Core-Periphery Structure

Despite their importance, new forms of transnational circulation and mobility do not constitute unrestrained “liquid” flows of ideas and people, as globalization theorists such as Zygmunt Bauman have proposed. Nor can they be properly understood as a mere function of a unified and homogeneous world system:

a capitalist “world system” according to Immanuel Wallerstein, or the culturalist “world polity” or “world society” as conceived of by John Meyer.

The globalizing SHS are more accurately understood as constituting an *emerging global field*, that is a relatively autonomous social universe with specific stakes, agents, and institutions. Without adhering to the economic premises of the world-systems approach, this globalizing space can be analytically described as a *core-periphery* structure, which is first and foremost based on the unequal distribution of both material and symbolic resources of the agents and institutions involved.

Rather than dichotomous, bibliometric and institutional indicators show that core-periphery relations consist of a *duopolistic*, Euro-American core, a variety of semi central or semi peripheral zones (in Asia and Latin America), and a host of peripheral countries. Given that the core itself is a differentiated space (rather than a homogeneous “Northern” bloc), a polycentric dynamic is a defining feature of its functioning. For example, certain French and German intellectual traditions, while belonging to the Global North, are widely perceived as offering critical alternatives to mainstream North American social science.

Given that the basic opposition in international relations between “diffusion” and “coercion” only captures two modes of cross-border transfer, the general

process of transnationalization is more adequately understood as *uneven circulation* and *asymmetrical exchange within a core-periphery power structure on a global scale*.

Dominated by the core countries, semi central or semi peripheral zones tend to function as *bridgeheads* of the core, assuring a mixture of *imposition* and *selective appropriation* of work from the center. Less frequently, they can also be locations of *hybridization* of knowledge. Under certain conditions, *peripheral centers*, as Fernanda Beigel has called them, can develop into effective *challengers* to the hegemony of the dominant forms of Western social science. In this case, *reverse flows* take place from the (semi)periphery to the core: *dependencia* versus modernization theory being a prime example.

Multi-Scale Field Analysis

Existing in multiple configurations (bilateral, trilateral, multilateral, etc.), the most significant transnational relations in the SHS are located at the transnational regional and the global level. Instead of being essentially national or predominantly transnational, the contemporary SHS form a multi-scale structure. As such, there is a need to go beyond both methodological “nationalism” and “transnationalism.” With varying degrees of autonomy and institutionalization, the different scales

should be examined both independently, and in relation to each other.

The functioning of the transnationalizing field is thus shaped not only by the internal struggle within transnational structures, but simultaneously by its relations to other levels of SHS practices. Since these distinct levels have a structure and dynamics of their own, they are irreducible to a single mechanism or an all-encompassing world systems logic, whether in terms of “diffusion” or “imposition.” A more accurate theoretical account is thus offered by *multi-scale field analysis*. This framework requires assessing the specificities of the various levels or scales, their modes of separation and interdependency, and should include the various *strategies of specialization and switching* that agents employ to deal with the multi-level structure.

Between National Anchorage and Global Hegemony

Examining transnational scales empirically, regionalization and globalization have both been quite limited in the SHS. Several indicators (co-authorship, citation patterns, prizes) show that the global presence of the SHS has so far reproduced rather than undermined transnational hierarchies. In theoretical terms, both the transnational regional and global levels of the SHS tend to be *weak fields*, as political sociologists (Didier Georgakakis, Antoine Vauchez and others) have called them. Re-

presenting a specific order with a certain degree of institutionalization, transnational SHS fields remain structurally dependent on more well-established national fields, on the one hand, and on the global hegemony of the United States, on the other.

A rough indication of their relative strength can be gained by comparing membership in professional associations. Sociological associations in France and Germany each have two to three thousand members, whereas the European association, rather than being much larger, is of similar size. On the global level the disparities are even more telling: the American Sociological Association (asa) alone is about twice the size of the International Sociological Association (isa), which is a world organization.

A comparative analysis of journals confirms the relative weakness of regional and global structures. The citation profile of SHS journals tends to be dominated by a combination of references to local and American journals. Even the most prominent journals from other countries have a minimal role. In France, for example, journals tend to refer to American and French journals, and very rarely to German, Spanish, or Italian journals. At the same time, regional (European, Latin American, Asian etc.) as well as global journals (published by international scholarly associations for example) have a low position in the citation hierarchy. The structuring prin-

ciple of relations among SHS journals is, therefore, one of *bi-nationalism*, rather than transnationalism or globalism.

As measured by references to journals, transnational relations between SHS periodicals display a structure of multiple, coexisting national universes which, at the top of the citation hierarchy, refer to themselves and to a single center – the US – but rarely to other, foreign journals. In network terms, the international domination of American journals can be visualized as occupying the center of a *star network*, or a set of relations with a single center to which all others refer, while rarely referring to each other.

The Euro-American Divide

While the international dominance of American journals seems unrivaled, regions with alternative traditions have become increasingly relevant (Europe) or appear to be emerging (Latin America, China). In specific research areas, some have successfully challenged American models. So far, however, this has occurred at the individual level and within specific research groups or traditions rather than at the institutional level: there are very few SHS journals or scholarly organizations that can compete with their American equivalents.

Shifting from the institutional structure to the level of individual scholars, an intriguing opposition appears within the Global North between American and

European scholars. Among the most cited individuals, the US is far less dominant than it is in terms of journals, funding, and scholarly associations. The most cited scholars in the SHS form a Euro-American mix, which varies significantly. Whereas in disciplines like economics and management, North American scholars are more dominant, in sociology and several other SHS European authors tend to dominate the citation hierarchy (Bourdieu, Foucault, Derrida, Habermas, etc. are the most cited SHS scholars). These Europeans are primarily book authors that are referenced in translations. The reference pattern traverses many different disciplines and subdisciplines, and the cited work in question often has a more general allure and is rarely, if ever, defined in narrow, technical terms.

The duopolistic core of the global SHS thus has a peculiar, multidimensional structure, which is obscured when treated as a homogenous Northern bloc: there seems to be a divergence between the symbolic capital of the most reputable individual scholars and what Kuhn described as the universe of professionalized “normal science.”

Accounting for Scale Interdependencies

Contrary to certain macro theories, there is no single pattern of scale interdependency. Conversely, the relationship between different scales

varies significantly by discipline and by country. A relatively high level of interdependency, transnational convergence, and global unification occurs in the natural sciences and in economics (the use of international textbooks, references to a common canon, recognized prestige of a small number of high impact, English language journals). At the opposite pole are disciplines like law, sociology, and the humanities, which have a much lower level of scale interdependency, tend to be more nationally oriented, and display more heterogeneous practices across countries (as indicated by larger variation in the disciplinary canon, for example).

The relative weight of transnational structures varies by country as well. Dominant countries tend to be more inward-looking with higher levels of self-centeredness and self-citation, whereas semi-central or semi-peripheral countries orient themselves to foreign center(s) and have higher proportions of citations to foreign scholarship. Reference and citation patterns are in this respect similar to translation ratios, which vary in the same manner.

Social science research in American universities thus focuses on the US and generalizes based on one national case, which is implicitly taken to be the most advanced and “modern” society, whereas studying “foreign” objects is outsourced to separate departments in “area studies,” which do not frequently

interact with the main social science disciplines.

In opposite cases, where the SHS at the national level are relatively weak (small and peripheral countries), transnationalization tends to lead to the imposition or importation of internationally dominant models, which risks an impoverishment of national knowledge production and a deterioration of public social science. Evaluation regimes that privilege English-language articles reinforce this tendency. In strongly internationally codified disciplines such as economics, the consequence is that in smaller and/or more peripheral countries certain topics are no longer properly researched because they appear to be of merely local or national interest. This not only leads to *knowledge deficits*; it also produces an impoverishment of the public debate and a *democratic deficit*.

In somewhat larger and/or more central countries, where the SHS are academically well established and national elites coexist with, or even predominate over internationally oriented groups, scholarly production can be protected from foreign influences. Actively resisting internationally dominant models or opposing certain of their features can lead to *counter-traditions* as well as regressive modes of isolation and *parochialism*. Regressive tendencies have in recent years gained strength, whereas truly internationalist and innovative

initiatives have great difficulty in materializing.

Within a multi-scale field framework, and unlike the assumptions of unilateral and top-down diffusion or imposition models, the social category of *intermediary agents* (gatekeepers, brokers, import-export specialists, translators, and other go-betweens) plays a critical role *between* and *within* these scales.

Assessing their significance, which is well documented in reception studies and the analysis of cultural and intellectual transfer, requires: (a) specifying their particular position in the field structure, which defines the constraints and opportunities within which they operate, and (b) assessing the specific resources, trajectories and habitus (exile, migration, membership of cosmopolitan minorities, etc.) that shape their strategies and that predispose them for mediating among different scales and/or across various fields.

Some Implications

The increased opportunities provided by the historical growth of transnational exchange produce divergences and divisions within and between disciplines. National scholarly fields tend to bifurcate into an internationally oriented elite, possessing transnational forms of academic and social capital, and a primarily national elite that, in the social sciences, is often connected to national

policy circuits. Enhanced competition between “international” and “national” research areas, teaching programs, and career structures is a widespread consequence.

Transnationalization through official international organizations tends to reinforce mainstream approaches and favors standardized research, writing conventions, and publication practices. For example, “European” journals in the SHS, which have proliferated, tend to be restricted to mainstream research. Outlets for innovative, multidisciplinary research, as they exist in several national contexts (*Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* being an example) are lacking, and seem largely absent on the transnational level.

Innovative approaches circulate less through official organizations, whether national or international, than through partly informal *networks* that are based on a shared research program and elective affinities (as Bourdieu evokes in the text published in this issue). Shaped by travel, migration, and punctual transfers, they may stabilize in institutional *niches*. The (trans)national connections and transfers that these networks sustain offer the best chances for the “new combinations” that, for Schumpeter, define innovation.

The transnationalization of the SHS theoretically requires a shift from *single-scale*, whether national or transnational, to *multi-scale* field analysis. Resisting the

alternative between a uniform and global model of the SHS and forms of parochial retreat, a multi-scale, multi-lingual, and multi-support publication system (favoring not only articles but also books for both peer and public audiences) should be pursued and promoted for scholarly as well as for civic reasons.

References

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