



TRUST IN TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS

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A curiously overlooked dimension of globalisation concerns the motivations explaining why millions of people engage in, and invest into, the increased connectedness which is taken as a premise and a starting-point for much of the academic literature in the field. I would like to argue that trust and reciprocity, on the one hand, and humiliation and marginalisation on the other, are in fact central aspects of transnational processes, which contribute to explaining some of their dynamics and resultant patterns. Keeping such webs of commitment alive can be hard work, but millions are prepared to pay the price.

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WHY SOME THINGS STAY THE SAME

Let me put it like this: while, as a student in the mid-1980s, I was planning my first fieldwork in Mauritius, recognising the ethnic plurality of its population and the mixed character of settlements, I imagined Mauritians to have a profoundly reflexive, negotiable and ambivalent attitude to cultural practices and ethnic identity. Being confronted with a bewildering array of options, epitomised in the everyday lives of their neighbours, I expected them to treat group identification with ironic distance. This did not turn out to be the case. In fact, the majority of Mauritians took their own notions and conventions for granted, more or less ignoring what their neighbours were up to. Moreover, the social universe inhabited by most Mauritians was much simpler than an assessment of the actual ethnic diversity of the island would lead one to expect. Categories were lumped and taxonomies were simplified, and group identification was usually taken for granted. This may indirectly remind us of the often forgotten fact that cosmopolitan societies do not necessarily create cosmopolitans; that globalisation does not create global people.

Yet many millions of people are transnational in the sense that they maintain important ties of obligations across vast distances. However, upon close examination of these transnational ties, it often turns out that they resemble the old ties in the sense that they build on similar commonalities and obligations. Of course, in the absence of continuous face-to-face relationships, it can be hard work to keep the networks

operative and the obligations effective, yet this work is carried out, and its functions. Consider the diaspora Somali hawala system of remittances. Money, in the form of legal tender, is sluiced from the diasporic Somali via a network of travelling middlemen, ending up among clansmen in Somalia itself. This kind of transaction would have been impossible unless the moral community, and the sanctions upholding it, remained intact in the diasporic situation.

THE STANDARD DISCOURSE ON GLOBALISATION

Certain frameworks and concepts dominate the social science literature on globalisation. In a representative introductory book about globalisation, written by the sociologist Malcolm Waters (2001), the chapters have been given titles like “A world of difference”, “Open spaces”, “States of flux”, “Clashing civilizations” and “Globalizing cultures”, each of them encapsulating a recurrent theme in the academic globalisation discourse. These are some of the most common ones.

The concept of the network. Established as a staple in studies of globalisation by two of the most prominent theorists in the field (Castells 1996 and Hannerz 1996), the concept of the network implies that stable hierarchies and structures are giving way to nodal, multcentred and fluid systems, and that this change takes place in numerous fields of interaction. In Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* (2000), a book which famously argues the disappearance of territorial powers to the benefit of an jellyfish-like, omnipresent force that they call “empire”, the influence from Deleuze and Guattari’s contrasting of rhizomes and treelike structures (rhizomes et racines) in *Mille plateaux* (1980) is crucial, and Hardt and Negri’s description of the world of global capitalism is also reminiscent of Castells’ account of global networks based on the “space of flows” rather than the “space of places”.

The glocal. Although the term itself is relatively uncommon, glocalisation (Robertson 1994) is a standard theme in nearly all anthropological writing about globalisation as well as most of the sociological and geographical literature. The argument goes like this: in real life, there exists no abstract, huge, global level of affairs on the one hand and local, lived realities on the other. The local level is in fact infused with influences from outside, be it culinary novelties or structural adjustment programmes; but these “influences”, on their part, have no autonomous existence outside their tangible manifestations.

Reflexivity and fluidity. Bauman’s (2000) term “liquid modernity” sums up this theoretical focus, which emphasises the uncertainty, risk and negotiability associated with phenomena as distinct as personal identification, economies and world climate in the “global era”. That identities are not fixed and given once and for all is not exactly news to anthropologists, but it is widely held that the current “post-traditional” (Giddens 1991) era is characterised by an unprecedented breadth of

individual repertoires, forcing people to choose between alternatives and to define themselves in ways which were not necessary in earlier, less unstable and more clearly delineated social formations. Ambivalence and fundamentalism in the politics of identity are seen to stem simultaneously from this fundamental uncertainty.

Rights issues. While it has become unfashionable to defend cultural relativism as an ethical stance, opinion remains divided as to the legitimacy of group rights and, more generally, the relationship between group and individual in the contemporary world. Since the very existence of groups cannot be taken for granted, the individual is often foregrounded. The debates may concern intellectual property rights, cultural and linguistic rights, as well as multicultural dilemmas such as the conflict between individualist agency and arranged marriages in North Atlantic societies.

The globalisation discourse tends to privilege flows over structures, rhizomes over roots, reflexivity over doxa, individual over group, flexibility over fixity, rights over duties, and freedom over security in its bid to highlight globalisation as something qualitatively new (notwithstanding a few dissenting voices like Friedman 1994). While this kind of exercise is often necessary, it tends to become one-sided. Although many anthropologists talk disparagingly about the jargon of “globalbabble” or “globalitarism” (Trouillot 2001), they tend to react against reductionist generalisations by reinserting the uniqueness of the local, sometimes analysing it as identity politics, sometimes not.

A shift of perspective is needed. There is something qualitatively new about the compass, speed and reach of current transnational networks, but it is not primarily their “glocal” character that needs attention presently –this is currently being taken care of authoritatively and well by hundreds, possibly thousands of researchers worldwide. The other central perspectives hinted at above, far from being irrelevant, nevertheless fail to address the question of what it is that gets transnational networks started and what keeps them going. A networked world needs an energy source, and large-scale business interests do not explain the intensity of interpersonal networks which are not driven by profits in a conventional sense.

Slavoj Žižek (2003) has recently shown how Deleuze and Guattari could be interpreted, unjustly, as a kind of organic intellectuals for the new ruling class, surprisingly accusing Hardt and Negri (the “radical chic” Deleuzians) of doing exactly this. Be this as it may, there is an almost uncanny convergence in terminology and perspectives between the neoliberal defences of global capitalism and “new work”, and mainstream academic analyses of globalisation (as recognised, a tad apologetically, by Trouillot 2001). This does not mean that the latter are “wrong”, but that there is more, or more accurately less, to globalisation than meets the eye.

Statements about fluidity and flux may be accurate at a macro level, but they tend to be less relevant at the level of experience. Durkheimian-type moral communities continue to thrive –and they are in fact, I will argue, necessary for transnational connections to be at all possible. As Melhuus (2003) says in an analysis of legal aspects of sperm donation, “the issue of commodification and the efforts to restrict the influence of the market, represent an important nexus of contestation”. In other words, the moral aspects of exchange are rarely far away.

THE REALITY OF NETWORKS

Rather than merely looking at networks in an abstract way, I suggest that we look at the subjective motivations that keep them alive. The amount of work invested into networks, chiefly to keep them going, is tremendous in the informational or network society. Think of yourself as a student, professional or scholar. Responding to e-mails, sending and receiving SMS messages, or talking on the phone to people in conversations where the main objective consists in reminding them of your existence, is likely to take up a major proportion of your precious time. The vulnerability of moral communities based on trust and reciprocity thereby made tangible, is chronic. This does not mean that they “no longer exist” or “no longer exist in the West”, but that keeping them operative requires continuous effort when society is complex (i.e. does not consist of a single moral community) and especially so when one’s personal network is partly transnational. In this sense, Giddens is right in claiming that our era is post-traditional. Tradition no longer recommends itself –it must be defended actively; similarly, communities of trust and commitment no longer perpetuate themselves through convention, but must be guarded and nurtured. Yet they remain powerful attractors –the first place to look for ordering instances in a world of teeming movement.

The vision of the individual as a hybrid, moving, unstable entity engaging in networks of variable duration, dominant in the anthropological globalisation discourse, is limiting and exaggerated. Moral commitments in relationships, cultural conservatism and coercive pressures to conform remain extremely powerful everywhere. However, they no longer encompass all of society. This is why life on the New York streets is so unsafe; the reason is not that individuals are not full members of moral communities based on trust and reciprocity, but that the people they are likely to encounter in dark alleys belong to other moral communities – they are outside of the intermediate circle of balanced reciprocity in Marshall Sahlins’ famous diagramme depicting moral distance in tribal societies (Sahlins 1972), they belong to the realm of negative reciprocity. Viewed from the bird’s eye view of the macrosociologist, contemporary societies must appear profoundly disordered. Viewed through the magnifying glass of the ethnographer crawling on all fours, it remains faithful to the basic sociological principles set out by Mauss and his successors.

This means, among other things, that the cosmopolitan consciousness or global awareness seen by some as an implication of the increased global interconnectedness is unlikely to catch on outside certain privileged classes (to which I, and you, naturally belong). Transnational networks are interpersonal, imbued with trust and intimacy, and these qualities form the moral basis for exchange. I suggest that we now direct attention towards the webs of trust and reciprocity that create transnationalism at the micro level, and towards the situations where reciprocity fails, creating unpayable and humiliating debts of gratitude, silencing at the receiving end of unidirectional systems of exchange, exclusion from dominant circuits, and a lack of respect. When Osama bin Laden speaks about the USA or Israel, he sounds almost like a disenchanting ragamuffin from Brixton: there is hardly a word about economic domination or world imperialism in his rhetoric, but the words arrogance and disrespect recur. The implications of not being seen and respected are an underestimated affliction in the contemporary world. As Martin Buber says, you cannot become a martyr if nobody is looking.

The scarce resource is the recognition of others. The means to achieve it is reciprocal commitment, and the spirit of the transnational kula trade immortalised in Malinowski's early-20th century ethnography, magnified by global capitalism, militarism and consumerism, remains stronger than ever in the contemporary world.

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