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Diversity and similarity beyond ethnicity: migrants' material practices

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Abstract: Ethnicity paradigm in migration research – looking at migrants as 'members' of ethnic communities and 'bearers' of ethnic identities – hinders the understanding of diversity and similarity beyond ethnicity. This article promotes ethnographic research that treats the importance of ethnicity as an empirical question, while focusing on migrants' material practices. It proposes a shift of interest from material representations of social relations to the very materiality of objects in transnational contexts of migration, and to what people actually do in order to maintain vital connections that constitute transnational social fields. Those connections are often dependent on objects that migrants bring along, send, receive, and use.

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Diversity and similarity beyond ethnicity: migrants' material practices

Maja Povrzanović Frykman¹

'Raznolikosti i sličnosti mimo etničkih pripadnosti: materijalne prakse migranata'. Etnička paradigma u istraživanju migracija – interes za migrante kao 'članove' etničkih zajednica i 'nositelje' etničkih identiteta – otežava razumijevanje raznolikosti i sličnosti mimo etničkih pripadnosti. Ovaj se članak zalaže za etnografsko istraživanje koje značaj etniciteta tretira kao empirijsko pitanje, dok su u fokusu materijalne prakse migranata. Predlaže preusmjerenje interesa za predmete kao reprezentaciju društvenih odnosa prema samoj materijalnosti predmeta u transnacionalnim migracijskim kontekstima. Više pažnje valja posvetiti onome što ljudi čine da bi održali veze kojima su konstituirani transnacionalni društveni prostori. Te veze često ovise o predmetima koje migranti nose, šalju, primaju i koriste.

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The importance of ethnographic insights

Scholars have been very good at defining culture as historical process, and identities as identifications – never fixed, but situated in lived experience, malleable, and open to reinterpretations. However, it seems to be difficult to discuss diversity without at the same time reinscribing 'culture talk'². In public realms saturated with discourses on essentialised cultural threats, there is a need to popularize knowledge that explicitly works against identity-enhancing politics promoting culture as the source of difference. This paper pursues the conviction that commonalities, connections, overlaps and transgressions that occur in the realms of everyday life should be lifted out and displayed.

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² See Taylor et al. 2008.

Within the vast field of multidisciplinary research on issues connected to international migration, detailed answers are needed, on the uses and the meanings of places, events, acts and artefacts. Ethnographic methods are unsurpassed for the ability to reach and represent the individual level of experience and the dynamics of sense-making – cultural practices as lived, changed and invented in everyday life. In order to see faces behind categories, understand people behind statistical data, and follow the motivations of actors involved in “migration orders”³, ethnographic insights are crucial. They can contribute to a closer understanding of difference, but also lift out similarities between people and enhance appreciation of the human concerns shared beyond any kind of borders. They can challenge discourses on cultural difference as the reason for non-integration, and the uncritical ways of using the concepts of ethnicity and community in migration research. Ethnographic insights can also challenge the analytical stance which presupposes the existence of groups of people who actually may have something in common only at the ascription level. If forced upon what we can see in the field, the ‘ethnic lens’, i.e. ethnicity paradigms that concern boundary formation, and the cultural contents of (homogenised) group identities, may limit the understanding of people’s own social priorities and identifications.⁴ Ethnographic insights can instead ground the relevant questions of how, why, where and for whom groups are constituted as significant, and what practices this implies⁵.

This can be illustrated by a situation in which a wife in an ‘interethnic’ marriage got irritated by her Swedish husband presenting a dish that she prepared for the guests as ‘ethnic’. Since she was an immigrant, he was positioning her into the realm of belonging defined by ethnicity. For her, the recipe was not ‘ethnic’ but her mother’s. If it referred to any identity, it was her identity as a daughter – heir of her mother’s know-how. She resisted the subsuming of a particular practice under the notion of ethnicity and prioritised other, more personalised types of heritage and distinction⁶.

Another example concerns a party following the yearly festival of Croatian culture in Sweden in the late 1990s. After the festival programme was finished, the cellar of the Malmö premises rented for the occasion was turned into a disco with a popular singer from Croatia starting a live performance, and attracting crowds of merry visitors who were singing along and eagerly dancing. The contrast to the earlier speech acts constructing the ‘community of Croats in Sweden’ and the

³ See Rogers 2004.

⁴ In a recent critique of migration scholars’ reliance on the ethnic group as a unit of analysis, Nina Glick Schiller (2008) argues the importance of approaching migration studies by examining non-ethnic forms of incorporation and transnational connection.

⁵ See Turner 2000

⁶ *Ethnicity* “refers to the sense of difference and the image presented to the outsider and may be either repressed or elaborated” (Okely 1996: 60), while *ethnic identity* rests on group self-ascription in theory and in practice. In this article, *ethnicity* is equated with *ethnic affiliation*.

representational use of national symbols on the stage was prominent. Notwithstanding the fact that the lyrics sung along were in Croatian, and that many of those present knew one another, this was first and foremost a group of people sharing the happy event of dancing in an overcrowded, darkened space, and having a lot of fun. Yet, some half an hour after the start, I happened to hear, in the midst of the very loud music, the nervous exclamations exchanged between two men from the organising committee: 'We forgot the flag! We forgot the flag!!!' I doubt that anyone else noticed its absence, but the organisers felt responsible to introduce the Croatian flag at the rim of the small stage where the singer was performing, and thus redefine a space of transnationally embedded festivity as a space of transnationally confirmed national belonging.

From discourses of belonging to practices of transnational incorporation

This paper is based on my long-term ethnographic research among the Croats from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina who came to Sweden in search for work in the 1960s and 1970s, and in search for refuge in 1990s⁷. It made me realize that subjective differences between people who share ethnic affiliation, and the diversity of their cultural, social and political concerns, urge a reconsideration of ethnicity as an assumed explanatory ground in the analysis of their lives. Even if similarities may be established between migrants who share ethnic affiliation, they appear as superficial in comparison to the manifold subjectively more important differences between them based on education, class, workplace, and, in the case of my research, the reasons for migrating and the length of life in Sweden.

It is true that not only researchers but migrants, too, often engage in discourses in which ethnicity and national origin loom large – either of “good immigrants” within the multicultural institutions, or of, e.g., “good Croats” within the homeland politics encompassing diasporas. Yet, I observed the many gaps and mismatches between people’s narrations about their belonging to the country of origin and the manifold practical ways in which they firmly situated their lives in Sweden. Discourse of belonging was often detached from the practices of belonging. At the same time, I observed that many of those practices could not be encompassed by another discourse – that which conceptualises Sweden as the frame of immigrants’ integration. It was obvious that some of these people’s social, cultural and political concerns and priorities could not be

⁷ See Povrzanović Frykman 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2004a, 2004b.

understood within the framework of integration into the society of residence. The framework had to be expanded, and defined as transnational⁸.

Not all migrants engage in practices that transgress national borders, but many do so in a variety of active and passive ways, with changed intensity, at different ages and at diverse moments of their migration history. In general, migrants tend to be embedded in *transnational social fields* that span activities and institutions in different countries, and include both migrants and people who stayed behind⁹. Any attempt to understand the matters of diversity and similarity concerning contemporary migrants should take into consideration the possible importance of their transnational incorporations.

Whatever people do is sustained by or inscribed in a particular materiality. What follows here is a sketch of a research project that focuses on material practices. In order to give those practices an equal chance in our constructions of the research fields concerning migrants, more attention should be devoted to what people do in the places of their everyday life, in the places in other countries they keep returning to, and on the journeys in between them. More specifically, I propose that empirical interest should be directed to objects that migrants acquire and use in different locations of their lives. These connections are facilitated by objects, and engage traffic of objects that migrants carry along, send, receive, use, or struggle with.

Along with the discourses of identity and belonging, practices and lived experiences involving objects through which migrants accomplish incorporation in different locations, can and should motivate research. This paper proposes a shift of focus from material representations of social relations, to the very materiality of objects in transnational contexts of migration. The presumption is that insights into people's material practices may uncover more similarities than differences between people often regarded as very different due to their ethnic affiliations.

A young woman from Zagreb described her moving to London as remaining traumatic as long as she and her English partner lived in improvised, unsettled conditions (Jernej 2008). It became 'normal' as soon as they got a stable address, and the possibility of organising a home of their own. It would be utterly wrong to theorise her former frustration as a consequence of moving out of the national territory of her native state. It was not caused by the trauma of being 'transplanted from homeland', but by the need for a material realm in which she could act freely and furnish it according to her own needs and taste. This said, her ethnicity and class background, national passport and profession are irrelevant. Not even the fact that she was a voluntary migrant is

⁸ See Glick Schiller et al. 1995.

⁹ Transnational social fields have been defined as pluri-local frames of reference that structure everyday practices, social positions and identities, and simultaneously exist above and beyond the social contexts of national societies (Pries 2001). They are made out of social and symbolic ties between places, networks and positions established and sustained by sets of practices (Faist 2000).

relevant here; the way she presented her trauma is very similar to the stories I heard from refugee-migrants to Sweden. This example elucidates the fact that certain material conditions are necessary for *making* a home. In the analysis proposed here, 'home' is an empirical, experiential category. That is also why the establishment of a new home in London did not preclude the simultaneous retaining of a home in Zagreb.

Migrants and objects: a research proposal

The phenomenon of enormous quantities of objects transported in overloaded cars, buses, ships and planes that connect labour and refugee migrants' homes in different countries has not yet been systematically studied – either in Sweden or internationally¹⁰. Objects made or acquired in different locations that have significance for the migrants who carry, select, keep, adapt, cherish and use them, appear as one of the vital aspects of transnational social fields. They either want or are 'obliged' to transport a variety of objects between their countries of residence and origin; objects that have been purchased or received as presents, are industrially manufactured or home-made, and are of emotional or of practical value. They might keep them (just allowing them to be physically present) or display them in their households; they may also use them on daily basis or on special occasions. Also, there are material preconditions for keeping in touch: one either needs a telephone, a cheap satellite phone card, or a computer with an internet connection. One has to have a car reliable for covering some 3000 kilometres in both directions or find out about public transportation best suited in terms of timing and costs¹¹. When such everyday matters are in focus, one may presume that the condition of being a transnational migrant involves similarities beyond ethnicity, for a cluster of material practices that are not related to people's ethnic affiliation.

Examples are common, of food being smuggled across borders, clothes serving as presents or technical devices travelling between the 'here' of residence and the 'there' of origin. However, the examples of refrigerators shipped between Italy and Marocco, home-made tomato paste flown from Australia to Britain, olive oil, marmalade and cakes criss-crossing Europe in car boots, or shoes in need of repair being regularly transported between Sweden and Bosnia by bus, suggest the width and complexity of motivations for the material practices that plead for ethnographic

¹⁰ Research into migrants' transnational connections and practices is becoming established in Sweden (e.g., Hannerz 2001; Olsson et al. 2007), but the role of objects in the creation and maintenance of migrants' transnational social fields has so far not been highlighted. Internationally it has been an interest of a few ethnologists and anthropologists, but seldom assigned a central position in research (see, e.g. van der Horst 2006; Salih 2003; Werbner 2000).

¹¹ See Povrzanović Frykman 2008.

descriptions and interpretations that outline relationships and processes embedded in transnational practices¹². Who carries which objects, where, to whom and why? How are they received and used in different locations and how do they affect people's agency? Do they affect local relations and hierarchies? How do they contribute to the place-making, the (re)creation of places? Can they replace personal presence? What is it, in a toy that a migrant mother sent to a child left behind, that cannot be contained in a phone-call?

A common way of reasoning about migrants and objects is that objects signal a person's identity and aid memory. In contrast, I propose an interest in how objects constitute the world experienced by migrants in terms of its materiality. Here, objects do not only 'express', 'symbolise', 'reflect' or 'reify' social relations, they also *make* them. They are "enactments of strategies, and actively participate in the making and holding together social relations"¹³. It is the experiential ground – grossly defined by the materiality of the world around us – that brings things, social relations and identities together. Rather than ideas and discourses of identity, belonging and integration, the suggestion here is that *practices and lived experiences* involving objects significantly contribute to the constitution of transnational social fields. The meanings of objects intertwine with the ways in which they are used as well as the ways in which they embody people's inclusions in different transnational locations and contribute to the (re)production of social ties; ties that are seen here as "folded into the materiality of things"¹⁴.

The main objective is thus to produce *ethnographically founded knowledge of the roles of objects in the creation and maintenance of migrants' transnational social fields*. With its focus on objects used in everyday life, the project sketched in this paper differs significantly from the studies that prioritise a discursive formation of identities. By looking at material practices in the realm of transnational social fields, it aims to contribute to the epistemological balance of ethnological understanding of people's identities as equally importantly positioned in material and discursive terms and equally importantly defined by practices and representations.

The focus proposed here is the materiality of objects as 'things to hold on to' that generate a sense of continuity between different locations and appear as central to the practices through which transnational social fields are maintained. If people take things 'home' (in both directions), they not only do it because they want to or 'have' to, but first and foremost because they *can*. Even if their materiality often generates sweat (when carried) and extra costs (when sent), they activate transnational ways of being in a taken-for-granted manner. Even if objects oblige people

¹² See Povrzanović Frykman 2007.

¹³ See Pels et al. 2002: 11.

¹⁴ See Pels et al. 2002: 17.

to cope with border regimes and physical distances, they nonetheless help them to deny and overcome the segregation between different locations in the relevant social fields.

An academic couple with children, who were moving back and forth relatively often not only between countries, but between continents, had a single domestic object moving with them: a kitchen table. The surprising part is that the table was wonderfully big and shockingly heavy, made of solid oak. Spending large amounts of money on having the table transported was, of course, not a rational choice but an answer to the need for continuity. As a material constant in their temporary homes furnished by others, it was a minimal, but solid point of departure towards new incorporations in the new surroundings.

Living in London and visiting parental home in Istanbul some three times a year, the person who shared this information said that she is habitually bringing shoes to the same repair shop in Istanbul that has for years been used also by her parents. The London prices are not the reason for this practice; she is doing it "without even thinking about it" – it is "so normal". There is no trace here, of identity-producing ways of belonging. This practice is pure habit, exemplifying the experiential continuity of transnational fields. The shoes used in one location get repaired in another, to return to the first one – a continuity of circular movement is established, and so is the continuity of this person's presence in her Istanbul neighbourhood, where she attends to everyday matters in spite of living (also) in London.

A possibility of understanding the *experiential continuity* of transnational social fields opens if the dichotomising 'versus' in pairs of opposites like 'here vs. there', 'new vs. old', 'host vs. home' is deconstructed. Migrants' experiences of being in transnational social fields are rendered more comprehensible if these analytical concepts are connected with 'and', rather than juxtaposed by 'versus'. Here, objects are the material aspect of this 'and'. If objects are the centre of attention (and they very often are for the actual migrants and their homeland-bound counterparts) they can reveal how this experiential continuity is emotionally and practically contained in their materiality. This is the case for souvenirs and practical objects alike, for family albums and food products, religious symbols and everyday garments. In this project, however, primary attention is given to objects that lack representative and ethnic identity-consolidating potential. By being used, or merely present, such objects bestow and ensure a multi-scalar continuity of practices and places.

Methodological considerations

Methodologically, this approach opens up for accounting for both differences and similarities between migrants of different class and ethnic origin as well as between migrants and non-migrants. In the exploratory ethnographic research such as the one proposed here, descriptive

concepts are grounded in people's everyday material practices and the insights obtained during fieldwork produce further hypotheses to be tested. These hypotheses may relate to issues of ethnicity, but they may equally importantly relate to issues of gender, generation, class and geographical location in transnational social fields, and thus aim at more refined comparisons. Based on extensive micro-studies allowing the researcher to focus on individuals' strategies of creation and maintenance of transnational social fields, these comparisons do not presume that people are 'members' or 'representatives' of any groups or communities¹⁵.

In the frames of the proposed project, ethnographic material will be produced on the basis of participant observations, interviews, informal conversations and visual documentation in public places (such as clubs, places of work, schools, urban areas and public transportation) as well as in people's homes – in Sweden, in the countries of origin of the migrants included in the study, and on route between different locations via their different modes of travel. The established methodology of following relevant tracks in multiple field sites (Marcus 1995) will be used in order to follow the objects on their routes between different locations in different nation-states, to observe them in the contexts in which they are used or kept, and to talk to their owners about them.

The choice of migrants to be included in this research will reflect different ethnic affiliations and different kinds of border regimes and economic standards concerning their respective countries of origin: EU (Slovenia), EU-to-be (Croatia), and non-EU (Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia). Further, they will be chosen in relation to a variety of educational backgrounds and their different socio-economic positions in Sweden. Their counterparts in the countries of origin will also be included in the project, since transnational social fields encompass people both 'here' and 'there', those who migrated and those who stayed behind.

Additionally, for exploratory comparative purposes, people coming from several other countries and continents, now living in Sweden, will also be included. Among them, *university teachers* will be conceptualised as a special group encompassing people of different generations with transnational relations in the countries of their own or their parents' origin. This comparative attempt will seek to explore the relative importance of socio-economic position in relation to the presumably less pronounced importance of ethnicity.

Finally, *non-migrant Swedes involved in transnational connections* will be included in this research, due to the fact that some of their family members live permanently abroad. This comparison is a pronounced methodological novelty, since research on migrants in Sweden does not usually seek to discern similarities between people regarded as minority and majority populations.

¹⁵ See Povrzanović Frykman 2004a.

Conclusion

The project presented in this paper attempts to produce ethnographically founded knowledge about migrants as people whose everyday lives encompass locations in different nation-states, and not about migrants as bearers of ethnic identities. By treating the importance of ethnicity as an empirical question, and not as an assumed explanatory ground, this project takes a decisive step beyond the ethnicity paradigm in migration research. It seeks to add to a research-based understanding of the diversity and similarity of migrants' positions, practices and identities, which may be hindered by a sole focus on their ethnicity. Promoting such an understanding is important in the wider socio-political context of Sweden as a country of immigration.

Objects do not only constitute people's material worlds, but also, via their transnational routes, destabilise the notions of 'rooted' cultures and localised communities to which they 'belong'. Following these routes can contribute to a rethinking and reformulation of the concept of society as being equated with the borders of a single nation-state – a theoretical priority in studies of transnational migration. Popular dissemination of the project's results could help promote new perspectives that are both welcome and necessary in conjunction with the political impact and policy-implications of studies of migration. Considering the persistent trends of 'othering' (im)migrants as trespassers of the 'normality' of living in one's 'own' country, it is important to orient research towards similarities between the native 'us' and the (im)migrant 'others'. The 'strangeness' of 'living in two countries' can be demystified through thick descriptions of practices motivated by people's close social contacts.

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