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Foreign Detachment: The Making and Unmaking of Cross-Border Ties

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## **Foreign Detachment: The Making and Unmaking of Cross-Border Ties**

**Abstract:** The people opting for life in another state are not just immigrants, but also emigrants, retaining ties to people and places left behind. In moving to another country, the migrants pull one society onto the territory of another state, creating a zone of intersocietal convergence, linking “here” and “there.” Still of the sending state, even though no longer in it, the immigrants transplant the home country society onto receiving state ground. In settling down and acquiring competencies that the new environment values and rewards, the migrants gain ever greater capacity to help out relatives and communities left behind. Emigration states, in turn, extend their influence across boundaries to protect nationals and retain their loyalty abroad. Time, however, proves corrosive, as the paradox of international migration kicks in. The migrants find that their own lives, just like the resources that lured them to a foreign land, get confined to the territory on which they have converged. Physical distance yields social separation; the new society proves transformative, making the migrants increasingly different from the people left behind; an increasingly large share of the core familial network changes location, leading the center of social gravity to shift from “there” to “here.” With time, intersocietal divergence becomes the dominant trend, as most immigrants and immigrant offspring become progressively dis-connected, reorienting concerns and commitments to the place where they actually live. Starting out as strangers, the migrants eventually find themselves not just in but also of the receiving state, leaving them estranged from the places where their journey started and the people who remain there.

**Keywords:** emigrant/immigrant, intersocietal convergence, receiving state, emigration state, society, transformative, separation, intersocietal divergence.

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## Foreign Detachment: The Making and Unmaking of Cross-Border Ties

On July 4, 1984, the *Wall Street Journal* called for a laissez-faire immigration policy, allowing labor to flow as freely as goods. Saluting immigrants, the editors asked whether anyone would “want to ‘control the borders’ at the moral expense of a 2,000-mile Berlin Wall with minefields, dogs and machine-gun towers?” Answering no, they proposed a constitutional amendment: “There shall be open borders.”

The *Journal* has kept beating that drum, reflecting the views of American business, which generally believes that the more immigrants, the better. Most Americans, however, see the matter differently. For the last decade or more, Republicans have been striving to heighten the already high barriers at the U.S.-Mexico border, while pushing to reduce rights and entitlements for immigrants living on U.S. soil. Not wanting to appear soft, Democrats have played along, with deportations reaching an all-time high under a president eager for Latino votes.

Similar challenges appear elsewhere. After 1945, Western Europe looked for workers abroad, only later to learn it had instead received people. Struggling to integrate the guestworkers’ children and grandchildren, the Europeans are now striving to tap into global flows of high skilled labor while simultaneously keeping unwanted, low-skilled newcomers off the old continent.

How to respond to international migration is not a dilemma for the residents of the rich countries alone. Bad as things are at the U.S.-Mexico border, the Mexico-Guatemala border is a circle closer to hell; for decades a country of *emigration*, and then a country of *transit migration* (by Central Americans), Mexico is now becoming a country of *immigration*, creating a furor that even gringos can understand. Further afield, migration to South Africa from Zimbabwe and Angola has triggered xenophobic violence, adding to the burdens of the post-apartheid transition.

Notwithstanding the obstacles put in their place, the people from abroad continue to move, crossing borders to find a place where life can be better. They do so for good reason: since migration involves changing a poorer for a richer place, migration is good for the migrants. In fact, the poorer the migrants’ point of origin, the more they gain from migration. On average, migrants from the poorest to the OECD countries experience a 15-fold increase in income, a 16-fold decrease in child mortality, and roughly a doubling of child enrollment, changes so great as to be unlikely the product of the processes “selecting” people for migration in the first place. By crossing boundaries the migrants achieve what the

natives of the rich countries enjoy, not out of merit, but by the luck of birth in a wealthy place. As development economist Lant Pritchett notes in his provocatively titled *Let Their People Come*, how one fares increasingly depends on where one lives, not what one does – ample reason for people in the developing world to use migration as a strategy for moving ahead.

Migration isn't only good for the migrants: it does good things for kin and communities left behind. Moving to rich countries, the migrants consume at higher rates, gaining access to everyday comforts that the people of the developed world take for granted, all the while saving money that they send home, at a volume greatly exceeding the level of official aid and often comprising more than 10 percent of GDP in many developing countries.

While migration helps the migrants, it does little, if any, damage to the people amongst whom they settle. Increased migration has modest impact on destination country per capita income; if so, the effect is slightly positive. Migrant workers are most likely to compete with prior migrants, making aggregate labor market effects small or nil.

And yet the people of the receiving countries want migration to stop. The reasons are multiple, but ultimately, they are all informed by a single view of the world. In that optic, people, state, and society are one and the same thing. We, let's call them the United Statesians are the people both of the United States and *in* the United States. U.S. society is found "here," where we live; similarly, the borders of U.S. society extend to the territorial boundary, but not one inch further. "They," the foreigners, live "there," in foreign places. "We" and "they", "here" and "there," shall forever remain distinct.

This view claims to represent the world both as it is and as it should be. Perhaps, the world should be one where we, and only we, live here, and they, and only they, live there. Yet whatever one thinks about how the world *should* be, reality persistently takes a different form.

And so what social scientists and men and women in the street take for granted isn't really what they should expect. Rather, networks of goods, ideas, and most importantly people regularly and normally spill across territorial lines. Consequently, international migration means cross-border connections, now the subject of a burgeoning, ever more lively scholarly literature. For most scholars, the concept of transnationalism provides the prism for understanding the ways in which international migration brings here and there together. In a sense, the fascination with transnationalism has been a scholarly boon, pushing researchers to shift their intellectual stance. Instead of standing with one's back at the borders, looking at the "immigrants" and the ways in which they become like the people among

whom they now live, the transnational perspective has refocused attention on the connections between places of origin and destination and the factors that make distant places so often interlaced.

But to move further, one needs other tools, those that I have tried to provide in my forthcoming book, *The Cross-border connection: immigrants, emigrants, and their homelands* (Harvard University Press, 2014), and which I briefly summarize in this paper:

Every immigrant is an emigrant, every alien a citizen, every foreigner a national. Those dualities lie at the heart of the migration process, leaving migrants caught in a dialectic of constant tension. In searching for the good life – often in opposition to the preferences of both receiving and sending states – international migrants also pull one society onto the territory of another, generating *intersocietal convergence*. In propelling them onto a different environment, that very same search changes the migrants in fundamental ways, gradually producing *intersocietal divergence*. But the passage from one stage to another does not entail a process of linearly declining home country ties, since in the short- to medium-term settlement actually increases the migrants' capacity to engage with the people and communities left behind.

Cross-border ties typically spring from the connected survival strategies pursued by both migrants and their closest relatives at home. *Emigration* is often undertaken without the goal of *immigration*: rather, relocating to a developed society takes place so that emigrants can gain the access to the resources that can only be found there. In turn, those gains get channeled back home in order to stabilize, secure, and improve the options of the kin network remaining in place. Relocation to a richer state yields the potential for enjoying the fruits of its wealth. However, the emigrants are also *foreigners* not knowing the ropes and *aliens* lacking the full protections granted citizens, and therefore encounter risks and uncertainties of myriad sorts. So when trouble strikes the emigrants turn to the stay-at-homes for help. As assistance from the latter is often the condition of exit, the emigrants' dependency on the stay-at-homes gives the former all the more reason to attend to the needs of the latter. These intertwined survival strategies yield continuing exchanges of money, support, information, and ideas; as migrant populations grow those exchanges broaden and deepen, producing an infrastructure that facilitates and reinforces these bi-directional flows.

Reinforcing the strength of those connections is the fact that family migration is often a multi-stage process. Sometimes, entire nuclear families move in one fell swoop; often, however, departures proceed one by one, with the household head leaving first, only later to be followed by spouse and children. Alternatively, a young, unmarried person moves abroad and then, whether formally or

informally, later sponsors the movement of the person who will then become his or her spouse. Rarely does every significant other change place of residence: obligations to ageing parents at home can keep remittances, letters, phone calls, and visits flowing well after roots in the host country have become deeply established.

Thus, while no longer *in* the society of origin but still *of* it, the migrants find themselves in a *zone of intersocietal convergence*, a conceptual space in which home and host societies overlap. The very logic of the migrants' project then steadily pushes them inwards, away from the outer edge of the zone of intersocietal convergence where they began. From the start, the immigrants encounter a *foreign* environment, which has to be *learned*. That imperative yields immediate behavioral changes, involving small, almost imperceptible, virtually costless steps, each one of which makes the next advance a bit easier. Over time, as the strange becomes familiar, one steers one's way through the formerly foreign world without thought, using newly acquired skills to demonstrate competence in ways that bring recognition and reward and yield exposure to an entirely different mix of people than those known before leaving home.

Transitioning from the outer towards the inner bounds of the zone of intersocietal convergence transforms the migrants, making them less like the people left behind and more like the people among whom they have settled, changes that in turn yield paradoxical consequences. As the migrants gain greater control over their new environment, learning how to manage it and capture more of the resources found around them, their potential for making a difference back home grows. With greater stability, migrants can also invest in maintaining the connection, whether by traveling home with greater frequency or engaging in activities oriented to the hometown community or even national polity. For much the same reasons, the migrants trigger the attention of home states, which reach out across boundaries to nationals abroad, seeking to gain their share over the human and financial resources generated by the migrants' move to another country.

However, greater capacity also transforms the relationships crossing boundaries. Over time, the initial, rough equilibrium between the flows emanating from new and old homes falters, as advantage shifts to the migrants. Consequently, the migrants gain leverage, with resulting power asymmetries affecting their interactions with the stay-at-homes. That greater leverage lets them engage in community matters from afar, as exemplified by the role of hometown associations in promoting community development in the place from which the migrants come. Leverage also facilitates the migrants' emergence as political actors with the capacity to both help and harm home state interests, giving

sending states further incentive to expand their geographic scope, thereby gaining the infrastructural capacity need to connect with and influence citizens abroad.

Thus, *intersocietal convergence* gradually gives way to *intersocietal divergence*. As the balance in the duality between *emigrant* and *immigrant* shifts from the former to the latter, the migrants find themselves not simply *in* the society of reception, but increasingly *of* it as well. Residence in a rich country yields qualitative as well as quantitative changes, turning the migrants, if not into new people, then people very different from those who left home. Identity, as the dictionary defines it, means the condition of being the same. But sameness ends once the migrants leave kin, hometown friends, and compatriots behind, which is why their identity is rapidly in flux. Migration engenders a change in the interior of the person, one both entailing and resulting from practical adaptations to a different social structure. As a result, the migrants develop a new set of wants, needs, and expectations that are no longer fully compatible with the ways of life and modes of behavior back home. Those changing orientations generate conflict in the cross-border relationship.

Moreover, the locus of the migrant's key connections also tends to shift over time. Regardless of the motivation leading any one family or individual to leave home, the core familial network almost always moves gradually, erratically, and incompletely: some significant other is usually to be found at home. As the sojourn abroad persists, the social center of gravity tends to cross the border, at which point the motivation to keep up cross-border ties falters. The needs of life in the place where the migrant actually lives soak up an increasing share of disposable income, reducing the resources available to remaining relatives at home, even as those ties become increasingly fraught.

Because physical *re-location* yields *dis-location* managing those relationships becomes all the more difficult. No longer in their proper, accustomed place, the migrants find that distance can be compressed, but can only be shrunk so far. Technology, geography, the exigencies of daily life and the very global inequalities that motivate migration all conspire to prevent the migrant from being "here" and "there" at the same time. The same global inequalities that propel migrations from poor to rich countries deprive the stay-at-homes of the technology most likely to facilitate long-distance contact. By contrast, the migrants gain from the surrounding technologically advanced environment, but often without fully benefiting from its potential. As for those fully up-to-date on the technology front, there is no way to erase the effects of having changed longitudes: even if free and of the highest quality, no telephony will put Vancouver and Manila on the same time zone. Things are easier if relocation keeps one in the same time zone – as with Mexican immigrants in Texas communicating with relatives in

Guadalajara, or Moroccans in Paris talking to relatives in Tangiers. However, even those best situated, whether in terms of geography, technology, or both, cannot fully escape the liabilities of contacts that take place via long distance.

Unlike face to face communication, communications separated by space have a discontinuous, erratic, removed character not found when people are interacting in place, all the more important since migration loads the content of communication with hard to handle matters. Emails or texts can be sent at any time, but these media communicate information, not the emotions required to maintain close relationships. Moreover, communicating about the resources flowing plentifully from points of destination to points of origin – in particular, finances, whether funds to be sent or money that was spent – is inherently difficult, which is why conflict so often results. Unlike a face to face encounter, where meaning is conveyed by gesture not word and where messages can be received and sent at the very same time, the phone often proves inadequate for the task. In the requests for remittances, the migrant, unwilling to tell her family just how hard things are abroad, hears an endless set of demands; in the reluctance to send more money, the relatives at home hear a familiar voice grow foreign and cold. Absence of physical presence also strikes at the connection that migrants *and* stay-at-homes hold in common: separation means that the two no longer share the same experiences, above all, the home that they once held in common. For the migrants the place of origin is likely to be fixed, stuck in time; by contrast, those still on the ground know that it is changing, responding both to shifts in the immediate environment, as well as signals from the migrants.

Distance impinges with particular force on the selective group of emigrants who seek engagement, not just with the core members of their familial network, but with the broader community from which they departed. Wanting to do something good, the emigrants activists find that doing so proves problematic, in part, because the complexities of cross-border coordination are daunting, especially for hard-working immigrants with limited technical skills, trying to be cross-border citizens in their limited spare time. Cross-border activists may often claim that “the absent are always present,” but delivering on that promise typically exceeds the emigrants’ capacity. Instead, these efforts at homeland oriented civic activity demonstrate how different the migrants are from the communities and people to which they are still attached and how often cross-border civic coordination founders on the shoals of dispersion, distance, and disconnection.

Thus, movement across the zone of intersocietal convergence both strengthens *and* weakens the linkages that cross borders. As hostland ties grow increasingly dense and in-place connections



extend to hostland nationals and other persons *outside* the zone of intersocietal convergence, *intersocietal divergence* becomes the prevailing pattern. But as international migration has an inherently political dimension, the facts that foreigners are also home country nationals and aliens are also home country citizens affect the motivation to keep up cross-border ties and the means by which they are pursued.

*In* the receiving state, but not *of* it, the migrants confront a mixture of resources and vulnerabilities, benefiting from the wealth and freedom of the new environment, but never fully free from the risk of rejection or the more devastating threat of ejection. *Of* the sending state, but not *in* it, the migrants' cross-border activities and engagements promote a deterritorialized vision of a national community extending across state boundaries.

Living on *foreign* ground, the emigrants' claim to *membership* in the national community in the place where they no longer live is contested. The expatriate can easily slip into the *ex-patriot*, in which case exit may be seen not as departure, but rather as desertion and hence disloyalty, sentiments that are widely shared. Further vulnerability lies in the *immigrants'* presence on the *foreign* grounds where they actually reside. The claim to identity with the stay-at-homes may ring true to some, but definitely not all, as those with in-person contact can readily detect the ways in which the *immigrants* -- have become *unlike* those who have stayed behind.

For developing states servicing the needs of citizens abroad entails allocating resources from those who chose to stay to those who chose to exit; however the latter are too connected to the homeland to be ignored; moreover, a failure to respond to the *immigrants'* problems feeds back in the form of political difficulties back home. Building up the external state infrastructure to meet emigrants' needs has the advantage of reinforcing loyalties while also reinforcing an activity in which state and emigrant interests converge: namely, the sending of remittances. However, states can only do so much for people who reside on the territory of another state, whose nationals already regard foreign-origin residents possessing persistent foreign loyalties with suspicion.

International migration inherently produces *intersocietal* convergence without necessarily producing a corresponding *inter-polity* convergence. In leaving the home state, emigrants retain citizenship, but *not* all citizenship rights. Crossing the territorial boundary usually takes the emigrants outside the home polity, which then proves off-bounds to those no longer living on home grounds. To be sure, residence abroad hardly precludes political activity oriented toward the home state, in part,

because the wealth accessible in the developed world is a source of political capital that the migrants can use to influence conditions in the country where they no longer live. No less important are the consequences that result from moving into a different political jurisdiction, as crossing political boundaries also lets the emigrants escape the home state's coercive power. Wherever territorial presence is a source of *civic* rights, emigrants gain the capacity to organize, protest, raise funds and lobby, even if destination society citizenship and full political rights remain out of reach. When combined, the freedoms and economic resources made possible by emigration have the potential to pack a powerful punch, forcing home state officials to listen to and sometimes accommodate people they would have despised had the emigrants not been able to leave home.

However, homeland politics leaves the mass of rank and file largely indifferent. To begin with, emigration is a form of voting with one's feet: *against* the state of origin and *for* the state of destination. Post-migration political involvement offers few incentives, especially for the many migrants who never engaged before departing. The key impediments derive from the extraterritorial context itself, which lacks a political infrastructure capable of connecting migrants to the homeland polity quite in contrast to the situation in the new environment, where on-site opportunities for participation are broadly on offer, even for those lacking full legal status.

Nonetheless, some fraction of the emigrants – usually small, but often too big to be ignored – wants full citizenship rights and therefore tries to pull the home country polity across boundaries so that it extends to the foreign territories where the departed nationals can be found. As indicated by the growing number of countries that allow for some form of expatriate voting, cross-territorial polity extension is increasingly common, albeit to a limited degree. For the most part, that phenomenon involves the politics of recognition, not the politics of redistribution, as home states have limited capacity to respond to the number one concerns of their citizens abroad – which have to do with matters of immigration *not* emigration. For that reason, the extension of voting rights often entails little more than a costly exercise in symbols, proving of little interest to the rank and file immigrants pursuing their search for a better life.

*Home country polity extension* only entails *inter-polity convergence* when full citizenship rights for *emigrants* are coupled with full citizenship rights for *immigrants* – an outcome that requires immigrants to traverse the internal, formal boundary of receiving state citizenship. However, only certain classes of legally present persons can apply and even they have to meet certain preconditions. Even for those eligible, citizenship often proves hard to acquire, entailing expenditure of effort and savings, with

unpredictable outcome, and reward of uncertain value. Since citizenship is tied to national identity, the acquisition of a new citizenship is a matter of the heart, not just the brain, which is why abandoning one's nationality and replacing it with another may seem like an act of betrayal, in which one turns one's back on one's family as well one's country. Hence, the emotive pull of home country citizenship may add to the material and cognitive costs imposed by receiving country citizenship requirements, with the result that the transition from emigrant to immigrant may nonetheless leave substantial numbers without receiving society citizenship.

While democratic states vary in the degree to which they facilitate or impede naturalization, they all provide a door through which long-term foreign residents can become citizens of the country where they actually reside. The combination of host country citizenship *acquisition* and home country citizenship *retention* yields a convergence of polities paralleling the convergence of societies that results from the extension of social networks across boundaries. While sending states are not particularly keen on the polity's cross-territorial extension, they see virtue in the acquisition of host country citizenship, which by furthering immigrant integration into the destination society increases emigrants' capacity to transmit resources back home, whether remittances, ideas, or innovations and allows the immigrants to speak out for home country interests in ways not possible when still standing outside the polity. Hence, sending states increasingly offer emigrants the option of dual citizenship, as the right to retain home country citizenship removes the stigma of disloyalty and thus relaxes the inner emotional constraint impeding immigrants from becoming nationals of the place where they live..

The civic rights accorded by democratic societies technically allow any emigrant to pursue homeland politics on alien soil, but only with the acquisition of receiving society citizenship does the door open wide. In that pursuit, *emigrant* activists frequently take the path of *immigrant* politics, as mobilizing resources in the destination country is best done with the political skills required by that environment. To exercise influence, homeland activists inevitably engage with mainstream political figures, in the process gaining the skills and building the host society political network needed to so with success. Learning how to play the political game facilitates entry into the receiving state polity, which in turn yields greater influence; thus activists initially motivated by homeland concerns often move deeper into hostland politics, whose rewards are also hard to ignore.

Thus, in the end, the very same decisions that produce inter-societal *convergence* eventually yield inter-societal *divergence*. Even though the *emigrants* insist that they still belong to the "we" of the society of origin, those who remain behind are rarely of the same opinion; in their view, rather, at heart these

are *immigrants* who are no longer like "us" but rather like the foreign people among whom they live. In fact, the stay behinds are not entirely mistaken, since the longer the *emigrants* stay abroad and the more deeply they implant their roots in new soil, the more different they become from those who never left home, which lends a foreign character to the demands directed towards the community of origin. The nationals of the society of reception are willing to tolerate the immigrants' foreign attachments, but only up to a point; the more insistently and visibly the immigrant engage abroad, the more they threaten their acceptance among nationals who see the immigrants as coming from "there" and consequently are not perceived as belonging to "us".

Thus, scholarship needs to understand the factors that promote *and* supplant cross-border involvements. That goal requires a departure, both from the views of the globalists who see immigrants living in two worlds as well as those of unselfconscious nationalists, standing with their backs at the borders. For the most part, the migrants are actually in between, *in* the country of immigration but *of* the country of emigration, *foreigners* where they reside, but *immigrants* whenever they return home. Even if many migrants, and even more so, their descendants drift away from any homeland attachment, that origin remains meaningful to some, and sufficiently so to entail investment of energy and time. But engagement with the homeland is ultimately shaped by migration and habituation to the expectations and rhythms of a physically separate, economically richer, culturally distinctive place. Consequently, the interactions between migrants and their descendants, on the one hand, and homeland leaders and everyday people, on the other, fall subject to tensions that coincide with territorial divides.