

Boats, planes and trains: British migration, mobility and transnational experience

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Abstract

This paper discusses the paucity of scholarship on contemporary British international migration experience, and highlights why British nations are viewed as beyond detailed international migration and transnational scholarship. Resisting this closure, discussion invokes a transnational lens to explore three flows: post-war migration of British citizens to traditional destinations; British retirement migration to the Mediterranean; and British professional migration. The paper adds its voice to a growing body of work that argues for a widening of the migration agenda to include qualitative work and a transnational approach to enable British migratory experience to be fully investigated.

Keywords: British migration; mobility; emigration; transnationalism.

Introduction: the bounds of transnationalism

This paper will argue that scholarship on international flows of UK citizens (Horsfield, 2005; Salt, 2005; Millar and Salt, 2008) is usefully complemented by qualitative research, and work that sees family and social considerations as a constituent of debates around skilled labour migration (see Cooke, 2008). Further, it suggests greater understanding of outward mobility may be achieved by invoking a lens of transnationalism.¹

The last decade has seen emerge on the social science landscape this now familiar term of 'transnationalism'.

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¹ Discussion does not include home country exchanges (e.g. Findlay et al, 2004) although such literature does have some overlaps with discussions of identity that are developed here.

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Widely used to signal a concept, theory, field, or methodological development, it has been used to explore diverse migratory circumstances, producing a range of case studies. Well trodden routes of transnational research include migration from Central America to the USA (e.g. Pries, 2001); the Pacific Islands to Australia and New Zealand (e.g. Lee, 2004); and Asia to Canada, Australia and New Zealand (e.g. Ley and Kobayashi, 2005). Taking the literature as the benchmark, British nations populations are seen as irrelevant to transnational investigation irrespective of whether the focus is on communities, families, or relationships. This paper will argue that transnationalism is a lens which can potentially help to uncover recent and contemporary migratory experiences of British nations populations – so called ‘Brits abroad’ (cf. Sriskandarajah and Drew, 2006).

In using the term Brit or British I recognise *a la* A.J.P Taylor (1965, v: cited in Kumar, 2003) that whatever words I use will ‘land me in a tangle’. It is used as shorthand to indicate England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. In using such a term I am cogniscent of how the term may simply inflate English experience (see Kumar, 2003). I am interested in populations migrating from Great Britain and Northern Ireland, including those that identify as English, Scottish, Welsh, (Northern) Irish, or even primarily as British (Roth, 2006). My discussion does not preclude those whose expressed identity is as Black British or Muslim British, but I would suggest that Britishness has (largely unspoken) connotations of whiteness (Runnymede Trust – The Parekh Report, 2000).

Taking the post-war period as the broad ‘sampling frame’, why is it that British international migration, their international mobility, and enmeshment within transnational relationships have received little attention?

Possible explanations include, first, methodological difficulties with the International Passenger Survey which have prevented accurate data being compiled on the international migration of UK citizens. Beyond this, however, there is also a social explanation for the muted interest in exploring mi-

gration to the Commonwealth and USA. This is because such migration was premised on groups of English, Scottish, Welsh and (Northern) Irish assimilating within new societies, encountering similar groups and familiar political, cultural and social institutions (Roth, 2006). Arguably, a belief that there was little qualitative difference between migrants and their hosts stymied research investigation. Much literature (Smith, 1981) that explored migration to the Commonwealth focused on size of flows, the policy of receiving countries, and changes in legislation over time, but with little to say on their experiences.

Discussions around mobility through the late 1970s recognised that assumptions of source/settler were problematic and some literature gave flight to the notion of 'transients', transients and issues of return, such as Appleyard's work of the late 1960s (Appleyard et al 1988; also Findlay, 1988 on skilled return). There was some attention paid to the mobility of skilled migrants that began to suggest an emphasis beyond *homo economicus* would be worthwhile. Findlay and Gould (1989: 7) argued that skilled workers needed more attention including the impact of skilled migration on individuals, and households: "In what ways does migration affect household behaviour patterns - income levels, social networks, demographic responses and underlying attitudes to 'home' and to future 'projects'". They suggested the importance of understanding the policy ramifications of circulation and the return of British migrants (1989: 9). However, their work is an exception and their call for a widening of the research agenda went relatively unheeded.

An emergent literature adopting the framework of transnationalism also has relatively little to say about British nations population as *homo sociologicus*. Exclusion may rest on a political argument, with the political conditions identified as aiding transnationalism: the absence of liberal democracy in the country of origin, a contentious minority politics, and obstacles to integration in the new society (Faist, 2000), being absent in traditional destination countries. Using the political

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as the criteria of exclusion, absence of British from transnational literature would be understandable.

Dominant patterns of movement may contribute to the lack of visibility of British nationals moving either as family units or sojourner single migrants (see for example, Hamerton, 2004: 271). They exhibit different 'morphology' (Vertovec, 1999) compared to archetypal transnational migrants such as 'other mothers' who live separated from children or 'astronaut migrants'. There seems little that is remarkable about British experience with few British nations migrants returning children to school in Britain, and migrants not embracing the hyper-mobility of shuttling between new and old society on a continuous basis. Given British migrants are not involved in the flow of remittances for investment, property purchase, or family support, for some a prerequisite of transnational living (cf. Cohen, 2005), then establishing a case for British transnationalism would appear difficult.

What is evident however is that within the diversity of transnational literature these difficulties do not, of themselves, appear to present barriers to transnational living. Thus, Lee (2004: 235) writing of Tongan migration to Australia, suggests varying ties are activated with varying regularity, scope, and strength and that cross-border travel is not a prerequisite. Similarly Zontini (2004: 1129) notes that many Filipinos working in Barcelona do not shuttle back and forth to homelands, but chose to live transnationally 'by keeping alive the networks of communication and a sense of family identity across geographical distance'. Foner (1997) suggests that return migration should be seen as part of broader pattern of transnational connection, and Menjivar (2002) notes that definitions of transnational living are both narrow and wide (see also Itsizsohn et al, 1999; Levitt et al, 2003). In short, the transnational literature is not itself consistent, but this flexibility is not extended to all migrant groups, including those such as British populations.

Whether economic, political and social criteria present insurmountable difficulties in bringing British under the aegis of transnational analysis appears to rest, in part at least, on

the uncritical acceptance of stereotypes of British nations migration. These stereotypes may also help explain the muted anthropological and sociological interest in British migration and professional mobility. However, the assumption of settler-host homogeneity and complete assimilation into a host culture can certainly be contested in light of growing cultural nationalism in post-war Canada, Australia and New Zealand. For some, the cosy picture of assimilation is problematic and post-war migration experience lends itself to more complex, for some even Diasporic, interpretations (Constantine, 2003; Wills, 2005). Assumptions of assimilation rest on the bedrock of linguistic affinity and Westminster forms of government and administration. Beyond this, assimilation appears to ignore a range of more micro cultural considerations, including what is referred to as “kitchen-table talk” (Rogers, 2005) in terms of family and community habits, practices, ritual and folklore. The tendency to place British migrants in a frozen past occludes the diachronic realities of political and cultural change in both home and host country (Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 2004). Such closure helps ensure ‘British’, English, Scottish, Welsh and (Northern) Irish are rendered invisible within migration accounts of history and contemporary society.

Some considerations of transnationalism would, on the surface at least, appear to fit British nation migration experience. For example, privileged immigration relationships with countries such as Australia and New Zealand existed right up until the 1980s. Intense relationships between Britain and these countries exist and are continuously fostered by communicative, cultural, linguistic, and travel relations. When we refer to countries being close or sharing a history what is really being emphasised is that they share numerous interconnected family histories. Striking is the absence of systematic work exploring the relations of British individuals, families and households with traditional countries of migration.

What is notable is that some British populations *are* fixed with a transnational ‘gaze’. Transnational marriage of British

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Pakistanis to Pakistani nationals has received some attention (cf. Charsley, 2005). Olwig (2002) identifies the importance of rituals (weddings and funerals) for transnational families in a wider Commonwealth setting. Condon and Byron (1996) have discussed return to the Caribbean of older British migrants. Thus Black British become transnational research subjects, while there is little on the experience of white-British international migration, including neglect of mixed marriages, unions, and partnerships that forge transnational obligations and stretch family relationships, or issues of return or on-migration.

British nations populations, whether as English, Welsh, Scottish, (Northern) Irish or 'British', are seemingly immobilized, frozen in an image of docile assimilation. They are denied traits, habits, and practices, and as a result they appear a dull and dour bunch with no culture to speak of, and little emotion. Here the reluctance to ascribe cultural practice is synonymous with the prevalent understandings of how whiteness is normalised and reproduced. Despite the differences across home countries, it is the shared experience of whiteness that results in their being rendered invisible by accounts. For migrant stories and transnational communities to be worthy of attention it would appear they have to stand out in terms of language, habits, tradition, socio-economic status, and the result is that culture is exoticised and becomes something 'other' groups have (Kivisto, 2001).

The remainder of this article advances two points. First, there are features of British migration and mobility that we know little about. These gaps in knowledge are both statistical and ethnographic/qualitative. The International Passenger Survey and national statistics have not always provided an accurate picture of emigration, whilst any representation they do provide will always be somewhat one-dimensional without attempts to understand underlying processes and relationships. Second, I would argue that British international migration would benefit from invoking a transnational lens. The intention in the remainder of discussion is to look closer at three migratory flows and suggest how a transna-

tional lens allows the exploration of processes, strategies, experiences and decisions that are involved in lived mobility.

British post-war migration

Over 3.2 million British born (about five per cent of the total British born) now live outside their country of birth, including one million in Australia, 600,000 in Canada, 210,000 in New Zealand, and 680,000 in the United States (Bryant and Law, 2004). Other estimates put the number of British citizens living 'permanently' overseas at 5.5 million (Srisandarajah and Drew, 2006). The foreign-born population in the UK is 8.4 per cent, a useful reminder that population 'exchanges' constitute the fuller picture of British migratory experience. Numbers of migrants to Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa were high until well into the 1970s (Hatton, 2003) but experience is uncharted (exceptions are Hutchings, 1999; Hammerton, 2004; Hammerton and Thomson, 2005).

There is little understanding around how family and business and organisational relationships developed between Britain and destination countries, and the transformation of relationships with affordability of telephone, travel, and email, despite these constituting the social glue of relationships (cf. Vertovec, 2004). The experience of Christmas, public holidays, and occasions of birth, marriage and death are perceived as unimportant for groups of British migrants yet such occasions when turned upon migrant groups are routinely ritualised (cf. Huber and O'Reilly, 2004: 340).

The ways British migration stretched family relationships and how relationships continue to endure would be better understood through invoking concepts of social connection. James Hammerton rightly warns against minimizing the importance of transnational family for first generation British migrants 1945-65 (2004: 274). Although investigation of how such relationships are continuously nurtured is *de rigueur* for many transnational studies (Wolf, 2002; Schmalzbauer, 2004) it has, with very few exceptions (e.g. Hammerton, 2004), not been applied to British migrants and those left be-

hind. With rising social incomes such family relationships may develop in novel ways through the coming Century. Thus British economic and social migrants based in the United States, Australia and New Zealand may utilise later life mobility of parents (i.e. time, financial resources, and openness to long-distance travel) who visit for extended times such as birth of grandchildren. This may necessitate the purchase of second homes as parents seek to combine elements of amenity migration with family obligations to children and grandchildren.

A lens of transnational relationships may uncover experiences such as 'commuter migrants' (Hammerton, 2004) where there is easy accommodation that underpins work arrangements and extended holidays and such annual arrangements may continue for many years. Ultimate return itself may be facilitated by such ties being kept alive. Return of British migrants is not well understood (Constantine, 2003: 30; Hammerton and Thomson, 2005: 14) and emphasis is often informed by coverage of those who have remained and 'succeeded'. Studies that have examined life histories of migrants and dimensions of return and re-migration are beginning to uncover evidence of significant mobility and exchange (Hammerton and Thompson, 2005).

British migration to the Mediterranean

There has been growing attention paid to the retirement and amenity migration of older people to the Mediterranean and Western Europe, including Tuscany, rural France, Spain and the Algarve.² While moves abroad for climatic, cultural or cost of living reasons are not new developments there has been an upsurge in the last 20 years (Casado-Díaz et al, 2004; Warnes et al, 2004). The very difficulties of quantifying the British communities in Europe (O'Reilly, 2000) despite census records and numbers of UK pension paid overseas being recorded lend weight to these being beyond national containment. Such mobility is adding to the picture of long-

² As Warnes (2001) notes largest increase in pensions paid overseas 1994-9 were to those in Italy, Spain, France and the United States.

distance retirement migration and complicates a previous, relatively linear, flow of retirees moving overseas to join children (see Illés (2005) for similar insights on the need for research in the Hungarian context).

A number of studies covering British (as well as German, Swedish, and Swiss) nationals point to the typical retiree profile being couples aged in their 50s and 60s without dependent children (Gustafson, 2001; Casado-Díaz et al, 2004; Huber and O'Reilly, 2004; Illés 2005). There are a range of movement patterns including circulation and seasonal migration and many overseas retirees exhibit evidence of having lived mobile lifestyles (King et al, 2000; Huber and O'Reilly, 2004). 'Step' decisions are important in moving towards overseas retirement – movers often having previous holiday attachments to areas, choosing to buy a second home, then deciding to live part or all of the year in these residences.³ In King et al's (2000) sample of British retirees, 40 per cent initially kept property when migrating.

Attention has moved beyond how retirement migrants settle within new environments, to identify the emotional bonding that continues to occur via technology and 'many spur-of-the-moment journeys and reverse migration when a parent, child or grandchild needs their presence and support' (Casado-Díaz et al, 2004: 374). Contacts with friends and relatives continue to be important including home and holiday visits, which may include lengthy stays of over half the year (Huber and O'Reilly, 2004: 340). With such patterns it is not always clear where the centre of gravity lies for particular mobile individuals and couples.

The health and social services implications of overseas retirement are likely to be of growing interest (Casado-Díaz et al, 2004; Hardill et al, 2004). With levels of health and social care determined by national law, migration reversals may see forms of shuttling and individuals making decisions not

³ Another example of a 'step movement' is when temporary intracorporate placement overseas becomes a route to a second decision: to shift to other local companies and to reside permanently (see Findlay et al 1996: 54. for such a view on Hong Kong).

to register residency in Mediterranean countries and to therefore retain rights to National Health Services and local authority provision. We know very little about how national policy frameworks are able to accommodate such movements (see Sriskandarajah and Drew 2006; also Illés 2005).

British mobile professionals

Third, discussion focuses on populations of professionals. A great deal of scholarship has illuminated our understanding of professional migration to the UK (for example Millar and Salt, 2007). There is a literature that explores the outward mobility of UK citizens (e.g. Horsfield, 2005) but does not capture migrant experience, transience and changes over the life-course. While some mobility, such as 'sojourning' and 'permanent', is driven by individuals household preferences, there are also 'accidental tourists' (Mahroum, 2000: 25) where managers and executives from within large organisations are posted overseas. Studies frequently overlook the role of temporary workers, particularly those located towards professional and higher socio-economic groups (Roth, 2006: 7-8; Findlay et al, 1996). Britain has the highest numbers of intracorporate transfer to the United States; and one-third of all European intracorporates are British. Overall, one-fifth of all world-wide intracorporates are British (Roth, 2006). Understanding intracorporate mobility is important and work exploring individual moves around sites suggests a number of different approaches: short-term, commuting and rotation (Millar and Salt, 2008).

Research has only begun to examine trends and patterns across a range of professions and to emphasise not simply the economic but also *homo sociologicus* within such mobilities (Beaverstock, 2005; Kennedy, 2005; Scott, 2006). For example, Beaverstock's (2005) study of inter-company transfers to New York emphasises human relationships and face-to-face encounters as well as technology that sustains transnational knowledge networks. Social networks and family relationships were continuously maintained through regular use of telephone, email and internet. This research agenda could

usefully be expanded to include a range of groups such as health and social welfare professionals. Britain, for example is both losing and gaining nursing and social work staff and flows are to Australia, the United States, Canada, and Ireland. The 'carousel effect' means that some are subsequently replaced, particularly in urban metropolis, by those from corresponding developed countries prompting discussion of a so-called brain exchange, as well as the 'brain drain' of staff from developing countries. All this is what Scott (2006: 1107) calls the 'complex and messy' middle-ground, and the need is for studies that begin to unpack such developments, to investigate exchanges, and document personal and policy implications of these interactions through time. This cannot be achieved without a widening and deepening of the research agenda including both qualitative and quantitative work that is longitudinal, and focused on the personal relationships and their interplay with public policy (see also Beaverstock and Beardwell, 2000).

Conclusion

This paper has suggested that a number of British populations overseas are seen more clearly when viewed through transnational lenses. British migrant population experiences are complex and diverse and exploring such diversity may also help populate the full range of transnational social spaces: reciprocal ties within kinship systems, exchanges among business persons, and transnational communities (Faist, 2000: 194). Such research agendas will add to our knowledge of British emigration, and address what are effectively blind-spots within the wider transnational literature.

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