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Transnational Political Spaces

Agents – Structures – Encounters

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Introduction: The Communicative Construction of Transnational Political Spaces

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Political space does not inevitably correlate with nation-state borders and territories. In a world characterized by the permanent crossing and transformation of borders and boundaries, the political, stripped of large parts of its territorial connotations, is characterized by a heterogeneity and flexibility which is related to particular spatial conditions, junctions and disjunctions. However, the transnational character of the political is not a particular phenomenon of the »global age« (Beck 2006; Albrow 1996), but can be observed throughout the existence, and in a certain sense, already before the emergence of the nation-state.

Defining political space as a sphere in which common representations and identifications are negotiated, this volume investigates the following questions: If political space is no longer perceived as always and automatically congruent with the territory of the nation-state, how are transnational spatial units of the political formed and defined? And how can they be traced and conceptualized?

Despite its rather extensive usage, which makes it resemble a catch-all phrase, the term *transnationalism* traditionally refers to phenomena and processes which cross national boundaries but are not global in scope, while at least involving one non-state actor. This definition was already contained in the basic characterization of transnational relations in world politics first developed by Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane in the early 1970s, which emphasizes that

»a transnational interaction may involve governments, but it may not only involve governments: We speak of transnational communication, transportation, finance, and travel when we refer to nongovernmental or only partially governmental interactions across state boundaries« (Nye/Keohane 1971: 332).

In short, »at least one actor« involved in transnational cross-border interactions »is not an agent of a government or of an intergovernmental organization« (Nye/Keohane 1971: 332; also Risse-Kappen 1995b: 5). Transnational relations therefore do not leave aside the governmental level, but above all do not attribute a sphere of influence to state actors separate from or even superior to interactions among non-state actors. In a nutshell, transnational relations may encompass state actors, but they necessarily include non-state actors (Pries 2007: 16).

The present volume is however not primarily about transnational relations in general, but more specifically about forms of *political* transnationalism. Following the definition by Hartmut Kaelble and others, transnationalization describes the development of social or institutional cross-border networks, whereas transnationalism comprises the »semantic construction« of common representations and identifications among larger groups of state and non-state actors beyond the nation-state (Kaelble et al. 2002: 10). The focus therefore at least partly shifts from the disintegration or de-territorialization of the nation-state by direct circulation, mobility or migration, to the level of communication, imagery and symbolic practices as well as to the role which the media play in processes of common identity-building.

A constructivist and semantic definition of political transnationalism presupposes an extended notion of what can be or become political and of which actors can act politically – beyond governments and other institutions of the state. Recent research in the history of the political, political theory and political sociology emphasizes that the political constitutes a flexible and highly contested sphere engendered by communication and interactions among various state and non-state actors (Schorn-Schütte 2006; Stollberg-Rilinger 2005; Frevert 2005: 23–24; Nassehi/Schroer 2003; Mergel 2002; Beck 1993: 204–14). By including certain social groups and excluding others, actors permanently (re-) configure the nature of the political. It is thus not politics as a fixed entity bound to nation-states and their governments »above« – as opposed to other agents »below« – which is of interest here, but the variability of political processes and their delimitations. The idea of the political as the point of convergence where collective representations are conceived, disputed and transformed facilitates the analysis of various types of cross-border exchanges on a broader social basis. By looking at groups of actors that, according to the dynamic negotiation of power relations, join in or are excluded from the production

of representations and their configurations, a more detailed impression of the political in transnational contexts becomes possible.

Science and the Nation

For quite a long time the nation-state has been the dominant or even sole frame of reference for academic disciplines dealing with political structures and processes, particularly history, political science or sociology. All three academic disciplines developed alongside the nation-state and formed a »territorial bias« (Beck 1998b: 10) which is why they thought almost exclusively in national categories. During the nineteenth and also during the largest part of the twentieth century, history used to be a medium of »writing the nation« (Conrad/Conrad 2002) by contributing to the definition of national identification and delimitations. National history and the nationalization of society were tightly interwoven developments (Patel 2004: 626). Likewise, sociological studies usually dealt with nationally defined societies and their integrating institutions, whereas political theories most often referred to the concept of an ideal or factual nation-state even when studying political processes beyond the nation-state.

Nation-states interacting with each other have been interpreted as constituting an international system. The term »international« can be traced back to the late eighteenth-century political philosopher Jeremy Bentham who was one of the first to observe and explicitly describe the growing political relevance of relations, contacts and exchanges between nation-states, which from then on were increasingly regarded as the most important actors in world affairs (Mansbach et al. 1976: 5). The discipline of International Relations (IR) – itself initially an amalgamation of different disciplines such as political science, law, history and sociology – took this general dictum as one of its basic intellectual premises: Due to their democratic and judicial legitimacy as well as their power capabilities, nation-states were conceived as the only actors worth analyzing (see, for example, Carr 2001 [1939]; Morgenthau 1954). Accordingly, international politics traditionally have been defined as political processes or phenomena emerging solely between nation-states (Kaiser 1971: 791). In such a conceptualization, nation-states touch each other on their very outsides like billiard balls, with governments as the only actors involved in international