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## Transnationalism or Assimilation?

Multiculturalists and transnationalists have combined their analyses of the recent structural effects of international migration with the criticism that the classical frame of analysis in migration research, i.e. analysing of assimilation processes, is not any more appropriate to take adequately into account recent processes of cultural pluralisation and the emergence of transnational spaces. This is mainly attributed to the understanding of society as a nationally closed container seen as one of the problematic assumptions of this approach.

Little surprisingly, this is seen very different by researchers interested in assimilation processes (and for reasons of simplification we call them from now on assimilationists) who argue that the paradigm of assimilation research is still the most adequate frame of analysis. They argue that it is still possible and useful to describe as ongoing assimilation processes even the most recent migration phenomena and the consequences linked with them. Hartmut Esser even claims that for migrants there is no serious alternative to assimilation. Access to the most important social resources has become increasingly dependent from access to and success in education and the different education systems are deeply moulded by different national traditions and languages.

Ewa Morawska has tried to take a more moderate position in this debate between assimilationists on the one hand and transnationalists and multiculturalists on the other. She has argued that all processes of migration are linked with processes of assimilation as well as with the emergence of transnational structures. In her view migration research is faced with the task of describing the various migrations and the consequences linked with them as different combinations of transnational and assimilative structures and to build typologies of these combinations.

In contrast to these positions in this paper it is argued that the debate between assimilationists and transnationalists is based on a false opposition. This is mainly due to the use of unclarified theoretical frames of analysis. The central aim is to demonstrate that the arguments of transnationalists and assimilationists can be systematically reconstructed as two different hypotheses about the structural consequences of recent international migration. If the two hypotheses are formulated within one common and coherent theoretical framework of analysis it can be shown that assimilationism and transnationalism do not necessarily refer to different research approaches but rather to two different and competitive hypotheses about the effects of international migration that, as such, are open to empirical tests.

## 1

Since the Second World War, Europe has become one of the most important immigration regions in the world. This process has been accompanied with various socio-structural changes that have recently been given much political and scientific attention. Migration research has described these changes with reference to the topic of the multicultural society and to the emergence of so-called transnational structures or spaces. "Multiculturalism", i.e. cultural pluralisation has been seen as a challenge to the efforts of cultural homogenisation typically undertaken by nation states. And the stress on transnational structures underlines the claim that migration and its effects need to be seen as part of ongoing globalisation processes.

Multiculturalists and transnationalists share the assumption that central structural elements of the nation state are affected by processes of erosion. On the one hand migration processes imply a growing cultural heterogeneity of the population living on a state territory. This kind of multiculturalism seems to challenge the established program of the nation state, i.e. the cultural homogenisation of the resident population (Leggewie 1990; Cohn-Bendit, Schmidt 1992; Bade 1996; Brochmann 2003). On the other hand transnationalism refers to the emergence of social structures that transcend state borders. These structures are seen as the result of enduring migration streams stabilised by transnational networks and organisations. This is accompanied by a change of migrant orientations: They start to orientate themselves towards transnational opportunity structures; the nation state and its classical aim of social integration loses relevance as a frame of action. But this paper does not focus on the structural consequences of cultural pluralisation, multiculturalism and transnationalism but rather on the scientific debate between what is called here transnationalists and assimilationists.

1. Transnationalists<sup>(1)</sup> have argued that migration research should replace its more or less outdated research design based on a methodological nationalism. It is argued that transnational structures render visible the constraints of the concept of a national society which is attacked as a "container concept" of society. In the eyes of transnationalists, assimilation research is therefore characterised by a limited frame of analysis still conceptualising migration and its social consequences as a problem of migrants' assimilation to the host society, its dominant groups and the cultures linked with these. But transnational migrants, it is claimed, do not any more orientate their modes of life towards this type of container society but rather to the structural contexts provided by emergent transnational spaces. These emergent structures cannot be grasped adequately by a nation state concept of society. At the centre of the argument is the claim that more and more migrants are becoming so-called transmigrants. This type of migration cannot adequately be taken into account by the classical pattern of description conceptualising migration as a one-way move from an emigration country to an immigration country. The life courses of migrants are more and more marked by their

participation in transnational social relations. They are leading not just one- or bi-directional, but multi-directional lives. The result is the emergence of pluri-local modes of life of these migrants. In the eyes of transnationalists migration is becoming a continuous process in time and space. Transmigration and the new pluri-local social spaces are not just seen as the extension of the migrants' origin communities but as an independent social structure. According to transnationalists as a result we can observe the emergence of combined "bounded-nomadic" modes of life. Under the conditions of globalisation and the diffusion of new technologies of communication and transport these new types of transmigrants are gaining more and more relevance. "This perspective on transnationalism and transmigration and the re-conceptualisation of society, community and nation state linked with it underlines the new importance of migration for the diagnosis of recent social transformations by the social sciences" (Pries 2001b, 53). Transnationalists argue that the developments identified as transnational social structures or spaces can best be grasped by research approaches which have become prominent as network analyses, theories of cumulative causation, migration systems theories and globalisation theories.

2. These rather straightforward positions have been confronted with a whole array of objections by American and European assimilationists: They claim that a theoretically reflected concept of assimilation still provides the best frame for the analyses of even the most recent immigration processes in Europe or the US. The classical concept of assimilation as developed by Milton Gordon certainly needs to be amended and re-conceptualised but this does not affect the strength of the general approach. Especially Alba and Nee (1997) and Brubaker (2001) have discussed the recent empirical results of the American immigration research. They demonstrate that these results can be interpreted without difficulties as providing evidence for ongoing assimilation processes even among the most recent migrants that immigrated only after the 1960s. They argue that the majority of these migrants is looking for labour on open labour markets and that these markets seem to be much more open than is often assumed. These very same migrants seem to be able to gain in rather short periods of time an amount of income that comes close to the level of income of the resident population. Assimilationists therefore argue against an overestimation of ethnic economies and their transnational character. Similar arguments are put forward concerning the areas of housing, education, and language. Some of the empirical results of research done in these fields are ambiguous but there are strong indicators for progressive assimilation processes which seem to be similar to those that were described for earlier immigration waves in the US. The scholars reach the conclusion: "Assimilation still matters."

The most prominent German assimilationist Hartmut Esser (2001) has put on top of this the claim that assimilation not only still matters but that there is in fact no alternative to it. He argues that successful participation in education is becoming more and more

decisive for individual competitiveness on labour markets and for any efforts to gain access to the important resources for a decent living. Since the education systems are moulded by national cultures there is no alternative for migrants to the necessity to learn the national language of the country they have entered.

3. Ewa Morawska (2002) has tried to take a more moderate position in this debate between transnationalists and assimilationists. She proposes to analyse the social consequences linked with migration as the combined result of transnational and assimilation processes. According to Morawska the relation between transnational and assimilative structures should be seen as dynamic and changeable in both directions. Jointly with historians like Bade (2000), Gerber (2000), Lucassen (2004), and others she argues that much of what is described by transnationalists as only recent developments is not quite that new and was already observed for earlier migration movements. Morawska proposes to do more comparative empirical research and to build typologies that grasp the various combinations of transnational and assimilative structures to be found among different migrant groups. The aim should be to develop theories that explain the emergence and reproduction of these different types.
4. Morawska's proposal is instructive. However in this paper we take a different perspective. We agree with multiculturalists and transnationalists to a certain extent. Indeed, processes of cultural pluralisation are one consequence of international migration. We also assume that transnationalisation processes can be observed in an empirical sense. Many migrants' modes of life may not be primarily orientated towards the frame of the nation state. Migrants are more or less continuously included in border-transcending social structures concerning family, economic, legal, political or educational relations. But these empirical observations do not imply what transnationalists like to suggest (on a rather unclear theoretical basis; s. Bommers 2003a), namely the need for completely new concepts and theories in migration research. It seems that there is rather a need for a theoretical framework that allows us to systematise the arguments put forward by the opponents and to clarify the systematic relation between them. Referring to the empirical observations just mentioned it has been argued against classical migration research that its frame of explanation is too narrow and still too much guided by the traditional (and seemingly somewhat outdated) problems of integration and cultural assimilation. The frame of reference for assimilation are reference groups and the national society. Assimilationists have refused this critique by referring to empirical results of research which seem to support their position. Morawska's effort to mediate between the two positions perpetuates however the conceptual opposition between assimilation to the social structures of the host society on the one hand and the emergence of transnational structures on the other. Another option would be to deconstruct the seeming conceptual oppositions and to recombine them theoretically in a different way.

In order to do this we replace a concept that understands society as

a big collective/ collectivity by a concept of modern world society, i.e. a society that is functionally differentiated in different realms (like the economy, politics, law, science, education, health etc.) and modern organisations (Luhmann 1997). The chances of individuals to participate and to get access to social resources are mediated by these differentiated social systems. We assume that cultural pluralisation processes as well as national closure or transnational opening are contextually dependent on the structural development of social systems. And we are interested in the implications of this classical mainstream sociological perspective - present in the work of Marx, Weber, Durkheim but also Parsons, Habermas and Luhmann, understanding modern society as differentiated society - for an understanding of the debate between transnationalists and assimilationists.

## 2

Multiculturalists have always exaggerated. And transnationalists have followed up this exaggeration with different means. The exaggerations are the result of theory politics and distinction. In contrast to both positions we want to stress however that any migration implies assimilation.

This becomes visible if we look at the frame of analysis that is operationally used in empirical research. This should be distinguished from the self-understanding employed by researchers. One weakness of classical migration research and its mode of posing the problem of integration and assimilation was indeed the use made of the concept of groups and the concept of the national society. Social structures are basically seen as collective structures. Any social event is therefore described with reference to "groups" or to "society." Correspondingly the distinction between origin and host society is still prominent. Concerning the host society the nation state and its program of integration are still forming the implicit or explicit background. These conceptual weaknesses are criticised by transnationalists referring to globalisation and the resulting transnational social structures.

But a closer look at what assimilation researchers actually do proves that "groups" or "the society" are not at all the frame of reference for empirical research in operational terms. This would make no sense anyhow as will be pointed out in two steps. If assimilation implies a process of becoming similar we need to clarify the point of reference in relation to which that process of becoming similar takes place. Second we will have to elaborate on the various dimensions of that process.

Individuals migrate for different reasons. They may be looking for labour, education, health treatment, join their family or flee political repression or ecological decline. For all of these migrants it does not seem plausible to conceptualise the problem of assimilation with reference to groups or society. In order to work or study, to apply for asylum or to seek health treatment, individuals usually cannot address either "groups" or "the

society". Access to labour, the treatment of patients, the education of pupils or students, the taking of exams and the decision on asylum applications are not provided by groups. The same is true for society which simply cannot be addressed as such and which can therefore not be the reference point for any effort to become similar (or dissimilar). Processes of assimilation emerge inside the organisations of the important functional realms of modern society, i.e. in enterprises, hospitals, schools, universities, and administrations. They emerge when individuals start to work or try to get access to goods, education, rights, social welfare etc. Every individual that intends to work or to gain access to these provisions must fulfil the expectations that define the social preconditions for the success of these efforts. Every individual must therefore have some knowledge of what it means to work or how to behave as a patient, a client, a pupil, a student, or an applicant.

If we start from these rather simple considerations and apply them to the behaviour of different migrant categories - labour migrants, refugees, family migrants etc. - we see immediately that all migrants do assimilate when they take roles inside organisations and fulfil the bundles of social expectations linked with these roles, even if they do this to a different extent. We would not be able to understand how migrants succeed - and they obviously do - in acting inside a variety of organisations if they did not assimilate to the expectations linked with these roles. They not only do conform to these expectations, but they develop corresponding expectations' expectations.

These rather obvious necessities of assimilation cannot be avoided, even not by social networks. They may mediate and modify the indispensable necessities of assimilation. But most migrants, like in fact most other individuals, are dependent on the opportunities to get access to and to participate in organisations.

Seen in this way the fact of assimilation seems to be almost trivial. It belongs to the basic conditions of the mode of individual life in modern society. The individuals do not any more gain social belonging and social opportunities via birth or lineage. Each individual is responsible himself for finding opportunities of access to and inclusion into the social systems of society (Luhmann 1989). This includes the necessity to assimilate in a context-, i.e. system-specific manner, according to the differentiated systems of modern society and their expectations. Any individual can be included in the economy, politics, law, education, science, health or the mass media and the related organisations if they fulfil the specific preconditions for a competent participation in the respective system. Otherwise they will be excluded. In order to participate in the economy, education or the health system, individuals must have money or should be educatable or ill. They must be responsible, competent and disciplined in order to take over membership roles in organisations. In other words: individuals in modern society are expected to orientate their modes of life to the conditions of participation in the differentiated social systems and to develop corresponding competence and willingness to participate. This is to say that all individuals in modern society must assimilate.

Migrants declare their preparation for assimilation by the simple fact of migration itself. Since migration in modern society means the effort to find

access to social systems at a different geographical place by means of migration (Bommes 1999).

To stress the main point again: Assimilation refers to a general condition of existence for all individuals in modern society, i.e. the permanent expectation to control their behaviour and action according to the structural conditions of the differentiated social systems. Seen in this way the problem of migrant assimilation refers to not more (and not less) than to the conditions under which they succeed or fail to fulfil the conditions of participation in social systems.

### 3

In order to describe the conditions of participation in social systems more precisely it is useful to distinguish different dimensions of assimilation. Modifying Gordon's model (Gordon 1964) Hartmut Esser (1980) has distinguished four dimensions: cognitive, structural, social and identificational assimilation. If we understand assimilation as a process related to the expectations valid in social systems - and not groups or societies -, it is easy to identify the simple systematic of these distinctions.

Cognitive assimilation refers to the assimilation of structures on the side of the individual in order to fulfil conditions of inclusion in social systems. Individuals learn languages, skills, behavioural and situational patterns, normative knowledge, orientations towards mobility etc.

Structural assimilation refers to a more or less successful process of taking membership roles in organisations, the gain of income, the occupational and legal position as well as formal education. This form of assimilation therefore refers to the structure of migrants' empirical participation in social systems (plural!) and to social resources like income, education, rights, health, reputation etc. that are mediated by participation and which determine the social status of migrants. It is obvious that the assimilation type of migration research is centrally situated in the long tradition of the sociology of social inequality. The main assumption here is that in modern society inequality is structured social inequality. Assimilation research assumes that these structures also regulate migrants' access to those social resources that are most relevant for the range of life options that may be realised.

Social assimilation refers to migrants' social relations like friendships, marriage, clubs and other associations or social networks. Migration research focuses here on interethnic relations and assumes interdependencies between structural and social assimilation.

Identificational assimilation finally refers to the claims of belonging and identity made by migrants themselves and to the forms of identity made use of. Research usually is interested here in migrants' intentions to return or be naturalised, their ethnic belonging, language use and political orientations.

Based on these distinctions, assimilation research stresses two important points: Migrants' assimilation efforts are usually confronted with social

barriers. These barriers need to be analysed with reference to the specific systems in which they occur. They can be found in firms concerning access to work places, in schools concerning migrant children's success, in states concerning access to citizenship and rights, in families concerning access to education, friendships or interethnic relations.

In the course of its history, migration research has not always had the same understanding of assimilation. But on the whole it was generally assumed that there is a strong relation of correspondence between the different dimensions of assimilation that have been sketched before. And this is quite plausible because an individual with more cognitive preconditions is more likely to be competent to fulfil the expectations of membership roles. An individual with a secure and more or less well paid occupational position will find both: easier access to health, education, rights and politics, and more social recognition and social relations. In addition individuals who live regularly in those secure social contexts will develop corresponding cognitive structures etc.

The same holds true the other way round. It is unlikely that individuals living in a narrow ethnic milieu will acquire the cognitive structures necessary to fulfil the expectations of schools, to be occupationally successful or to get access to attractive and well paid positions in organisations. The same milieu is liable to reduce access to social networks, friendships and clubs outside of it. This in turn is why members of this milieu will hardly have feelings of belonging beyond its borders. Both, successful assimilation to the expectations of social systems, and its failure seem to have a highly self-perpetuating character.

We may call these assumptions the strict coupling hypothesis of the assimilationists. They assume a narrow or strict coupling between the different forms of assimilation (and may disagree amongst each other which form of assimilation is of primary importance).

#### 4

We will not engage in an argument with this hypothesis but rather want to show how the claims of the multiculturalists and the transnationalists relate to the strict coupling hypothesis of assimilation research. Our main points will be:

- a. Cultural plurality and assimilation do not contradict each other.
  - b. The arguments of transnationalism can be reconstructed as an effort to question the hypothesis of a strict coupling between the different forms of assimilation with reference to the empirical effects of globalisation. This central point and drift of the transnationalist argument can be rendered visible if we use the general frame of a theory of modern, i.e. differentiated society.
- a) Cultural plurality and assimilation do not contradict each other. Multiculturalism underlines processes of cultural pluralisation and describes these as major social challenges. But modern organisations and functional realms like the economy, politics, law, education or health have

already to a large extent deregulated the cultural life forms and this does not seem to cause major social turbulences (Bommes 2003b). At the same time individuals must be aware of those expectations that are valid in the realms of education, work, law, health etc. To give an example: Schools do expect a population of pupils that is multilingual and culturally as well as religiously heterogeneous. Schools do not intend to repair this heterogeneity but they expect pupils to acquire literacy, to learn the generalised language of intercourse and to develop other formal qualifications. The aim is not to create a homogeneous school population as a community (i.e. "assimilation" as the political program of the nation state of the 19th and early 20th centuries; Maas 1984, Therborn 1995) but to educate individuals in a way that they become competent to participate in social systems. Hospitals are more and more prepared to treat patients of different origin, language and culture. Firms take into account the religious orientations of their staff. Politics and nation states in (Western-) Europe no longer see cultural homogenisation as a precondition for longterm residence, settlement and naturalisation (Joppke 2001). And the law protects individuals against discrimination for religious or cultural reasons.

Against this background we may speak of a factual multiculturalism in Europe which has been confronted with amazingly little resistance by the European nation states - amazing at least if one recalls the anxieties articulated at the end of the 1980s and the beginning 1990s. At that time multiculturalism and cultural plurality as an effect of migration were seen as a challenge for the nation state and its seemingly indispensable program of cultural homogenisation of the resident population. We may think here of the prominence of Brubaker's (1992) comparison of France and Germany.

To sum up: Multiculturalism and assimilation do not contradict each other. Modern organisations in different realms can cope quite well with pluralised cultural orientations - which does not mean that individuals can cope with it just as well. They may fail in their efforts to find access and inclusion if they fail to assimilate. The main point of reference for assimilation are differentiated social systems: organisations and functional realms like the modern economy, law, politics, science, education or health but not groups of (majority) societies. Assimilation to social systems refers to a social condition that applies in a culture transcending manner - it is in any case not culturally specific.

b) On closer inspection transnationalism does not contradict the assimilation thesis either. The main thesis of transnationalism is that globalisation leads to a loose coupling of the forms of assimilation, i.e. cognitive, structural, social and identificational assimilation. The substance of the debate between transnationalists and assimilationists are two different and competing hypotheses about the consequences of international migration which can be tested empirically. The debate therefore should not primarily be taken as a debate between two theoretically completely different approaches.

The claim that transnational relations or spaces are currently expanding empirically refers to something different from what is asserted by multiculturalists: According to these assertions social systems which individuals try to find access are not constrained to the borders of nation

states. This implies that individuals lead their lives in ways that transcend state borders. This may be the case for various realms like the family, education, health, the economy or politics. To give an example: Migrants work in the host context in order to invest money, to care for the family and to engage in local or national political projects in the context of origin. Successful migrants invest money in the context of origin in order to develop a new industry as in the case of Indian IT-specialists. These transnational modes of life can be found in different social contexts and in various combinations depending on migrants' different access and control over resources. This has been shown by the research of a number of scholars (e.g. Hunger 2000; Levitt 1998, 2001; Müller-Mahn 2000; Singhanetra-Renard 1992).

On closer inspection it again becomes evident that the arguments of transnationalists do not contradict the assumption that there is no alternative to assimilation in modern society. This contradiction holds only as long as the frames of analysis are not clarified.

To state the main hypothesis again: even transnational migrants do have to assimilate - to the expectations of those social systems in which they want to participate. This means for them e.g. that they may have to find a balance between the expectations of their family in the context of origin and the conditions of achievement at the work place or in organisations of education in the immigration context.

It is important to keep this in mind since it allows us to realise what precisely is controversial between assimilationists and transnationalists. The critique concerning conventional migration research by transnationalists argues that this type of research is still too much confined to "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer, Glick-Schiller 2001). This is seen as the reason why assimilation is conceptualised based on a container concept of society and related to a concept of integration that still uses the nation state as the central frame of reference.

This argument is right and wrong at the same time. It is right since assimilationists conceptualise indeed the society as a big national collective society. It is wrong in that something very different is the actual subject of assimilationist empirical research, i.e. the connection between the different forms of assimilation (cognitive, structural, social, identificational) as they have been discussed before. Combined with this focus is a strong socio-structural hypothesis: the assumption of a strict coupling between the different forms of assimilation. Assimilationists assume a strong link between individual cognitive structures as a precondition for assimilation (indicators are education and language in particular, i.e. the existence of structures that allow the building of further structures), structural assimilation (measured by the achieved social status), social assimilation (access to non-ethnic networks) and identificational assimilation (collective, especially ethnic and national identity). The main thesis implies principally two points: 1) It can be observed that migrants enter those coupled assimilation processes (they enter education, strive for social status, change their social networks and forms of self-identification); this shows that the different forms of assimilation remain relevant for migrants. 2) It can be demonstrated that assimilation remains central for their life chances. Only then can they reach the level of life chances of the non-

migrant population. Failure to assimilate results in e.g. the emergence of segregated ethnic milieus. There may be diversification but ongoing assimilation processes are more likely and in the end unavoidable.

This implies a further thesis which is empirically interesting but hidden by the ongoing use of a national concept of society and the corresponding "methodological nationalism". The thesis can be rendered visible if we reconstruct assimilation in the way proposed above. The implied thesis is that the nation state is still a decisive frame for the structure of the relations of distribution and inequality even in a globalised world society. The connections between the different forms of assimilation remain regulated and strictly coupled because of the continuous importance of the nation state. Even under the conditions of globalisation these relations are still not loosely coupled and contingent. To put it differently: It remains unlikely that especially the structural, social and identificational forms of assimilation vary arbitrarily. Hartmut Esser has emphasised this point by arguing that the education systems are moulded by national cultures and that national languages preserve their continuous relevance.

For reasons of clarity we again underline that assimilation research is thus based on the general paradigm of inequality research implying the following core assumptions:

- The relations of distribution in modern society are structured relations, i.e. they produce structured social inequality linked with the emergence of identifiable social groups which we call classes.
- The relations of distribution are still mediated by nation states. Beneath the transcending relations of international inequality embodied in the North-South and East-West imbalance, the structures of social inequality are essentially nationally segmented and structured(2).
- Structured inequality means that the distribution of social resources like money, occupational position, education, health, rights and political influence is not likely to vary arbitrarily. Social advantages tend to cumulate where advantages can already be found, and this form of social inequality tends to be reproductive and self-perpetuating. Individuals with good chances of participation in social systems and access to social resources tend to build networks securing and safeguarding these opportunities and corresponding collective identities. At the same time they care for conditions that allow the maintenance and reproduction of individual competences for themselves and their children which, in turn, constitutes a precondition for access to social systems and social resources.
- To a large extent assimilation research means the application of the above assumptions to the field of migration research. The measurement of assimilation in the different dimensions is used as an indicator for migrants' success or failure to penetrate existing relations of distribution. Interethnic relations are an evidence of penetration of the relevant reproduction networks of social inequality by migrants.

Seen against this background it is easy to identify the antithesis of transnationalism (if we leave aside some conceptual problems and metaphors like "transnational spaces" etc.; s. Bommers 2003a). The central thesis of transnationalism is that we witness a decoupling of the different forms of assimilation. This in turn implies the more general thesis that

transnational developments are part of a general process of deconstruction of social inequality - a process that has been registered independent of migration research and the consequences of which are the subject of an ongoing sociological debate. The thesis of decoupling is based on the following empirical observations:

- The participation of more and more migrants in different social systems is distributed over several locations ("plurilocal") and regularly transcends nation state borders (it is "transnational"). It may be discussed whether these processes are enduring and stable but this would imply that the interconnections between the chances of participation in the different social systems like the family, economy, law, education, politics and health could change. In this view they tend to be less and less controlled or mediated by the established national welfare regimes, and these regimes may themselves be eroded by these changes.
- Participation in social systems is more and more mediated by transnational migrant networks. These networks organise access and inclusion. Connected with this is the assumption that social assimilation in the sense explained before loses relevance. Assimilationists assume that the enduring existence of ethnic milieus is mainly an indicator for the reproduction of structured inequality restricting migrants' social options. Transnationalists emphasise instead the potential of those networks for the mediation of social options.
- The diversification of collective identities is seen as a symptom for migrants' reorientation to the nationally decoupled and transnationally mediated forms of identificational assimilation.
- The emergence of transnational competences finally proves a change of the conditions of cognitive assimilation. These assimilation processes take place now in relation to the transnationally structured conditions of participation in social systems.

To sum up: Compared with the position of assimilationists it becomes evident that transnationalism puts forward a decoupling hypothesis. The forms of assimilation are undergoing a process of decoupling under the conditions of globalisation. Transnationalism implies that new opportunities of variation between these forms emerge. In this sense the forms of assimilation are loosely coupled in a globalised world and the nation state loses relevance for social integration, i.e. the restriction of variation between these forms of assimilation.

5

What are the consequences of this mode to reconstruct the position of assimilationists and transnationalists? It is easy to see now that transnationalism and assimilationism do not necessarily refer to different theoretical approaches. What is at issue between transnationalists and assimilationists is the strict or loose coupling of the forms of assimilation. This does not prove in itself the need for different approaches - rather the contrary. Reconstructed in the general frame of a theory of modern society

the dispute between the positions gains transparency. The substitution of theoretical concepts by metaphors like transnational spaces rather hides the substance of the dispute(3). But the blind spots that become visible by comparing the two positions with reference to the theoretical frame used in this paper are instructive.

1. The assimilationists show that transnationalists neglect the enduring mediation of chances of social participation of migrants by nationally established relations of social inequality and welfare states. The assumption of the diminishing relevance of the nation state seems to be a nearly conceptual starting point. For this reason they also fail to notice that the emergence of transnational structures may be even a consequence of the specific modes in which national welfare states treat migrants and include or exclude them politically. In this sense nation states are part of and to some extent even the precondition for the emergence of transnational structures (Koopman, Statham 2002). Transnationalism itself is still influenced by the classical claim of the nation state to be the head and centre of society. For that reason transnationalism has no theoretical concept of society anymore and tends to understand globalisation without nation states or with only a very limited version of that institution. For the same reason transnationalists seem to have serious difficulties in conceptualising the challenge of the empirical phenomena they refer to in theoretically adequate concepts, i.e.
  - a. that the consequence of the emergence of transnational structures and modes of living may be the deinstitutionalisation of the institutionalised forms of social inequality so far mediated by national welfare states and
  - b. that this precisely means a serious challenge for assimilation research. But this may be a challenge not because assimilation does not matter anymore, but because relations of assimilation may become loosely coupled as an effect of the re- or deinstitutionalisation of the relations of social inequality formerly strongly mediated by the institutions of the national welfare state. If this is the case it cannot however be conceptually derived but needs to be demonstrated by empirical research trying to answer questions like the following: What precisely are the transnational forms and constellations of migrants' participation in various social systems? In which contexts do these transnational structures emerge? What are the mechanisms of stabilisation for these structures and under which conditions do they dissolve? What kind of effects do these transnational structures have on the established relations of distribution and social inequality?
2. The transnationalists show that assimilationist approaches employ the nation state as a tacitly presupposed frame of reference not the least because of the underlying concept of national society. The mediation of the relations of social inequality and assimilation by national welfare states is rather a premise of analysis in this approach than an empirical fact that needs further analysis concerning its social and historical preconditions. As a consequence the assimilationist approach should become more open for a

discussion about the role of the nation state and the extent to which the coupling of assimilation forms may be socially contingent. This would open the field for empirical research of potentially alternative developments. The main debates of migration research would be less then concerned with the (wrong) opposition transnationalism versus assimilation but with the description and explanation of social structures in a world society which may or may not be combined with changing relations of assimilation.

## Notations

- (1) Among the numerous publications see Bauböck 1994; Glick, Schiller, Blanc-Szanton 1995; Faist 2000; Hannerz 1996; Levitt 2001; Ong 1997; Portes 1996; Pries 1997, 2001a; Vertovec 2001; a general reader is provided by Vertovec, Cohen 1999.
- (2) This can also be seen by the fact that most research on social inequality focusses on the description of nationally structured inequality. In a similar way Stichweh (1998) underlines the role of the national welfare state as a "institutionalised threshold of inequality".
- (3) The continuous repetition of these metaphors and the proclamation that this is a new theoretical approach opening up new perspectives to the various disciplines of migration research (s. recently Gogolin, Pries 2004) continues to hide the substance of this dispute.

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