A civilizational perspective on the research of transnational formations: a methodological proposal
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A Methodological Proposal

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CENTER ON MIGRATION, CITIZENSHIP AND DEVELOPMENT

2007

Amelina, Anna: A Civilizational Perspective on the Research of Transnational Formations: A Methodological Proposal, Bielefeld: COMCAD, 2007

(Working Papers – Center on Migration, Citizenship and Development; 18)

I.

The concept of new transnational spaces (Faist 2004, Pries 1996) is closely connected to the criticism of methodological nationalism (Glick Schiller/Wimmer 2003). The questioning of the container-model of the nation-state as a dominated access to research on international mobility and migration has not only changed the scientific practices but also raised several new questions. One of the new criticisms refers to an internal inconsistency of the transnational paradigm: how is it possible to criticize the traditional 'container-orientated' model of research and, at the same time, to use terms and definitions directly referring to this?

This paper deals with this criticism in two ways. First, it suggests to take a closer look at the contemporary theoretical description of the global social context in order to find additional theoretical arguments which allow to specify the transnational perspective (II). Thus, it's necessary to examine to which extent it is useful to work with the theoretical idea of intercivilizational encounters (III). Second, from my point of view, the usage of this theoretical argument does not only have a theoretical but also a methodological impact. Because of this, methodological and methodical thesis are the central topic of this paper. In order to follow the criticism of methodological nationalism, I argue that two methodological research techniques - the *cross-cultural version of the hermeneutic sociology of knowledge* (IV) and *the multi-sited fieldwork* strategy (V) – are useful instruments for opening up new research ways on transnational formations and transnational practices.

II.

How is a transnational approach positioned in regard to the current approaches describing the global social context? In order to answer this question one has to differentiate between two ways of describing globalization processes. While one group of concepts assumes, roughly speaking, the homogenization of social structures und cultural forms in the global context - although the arguments vary from one theoretical position to another (Giddens 1990, Luhmann 1998, Meyer 2005) - the second group of approaches stresses the idea of a heterogenization of social and cultural structures (Robertson 1995, Eisenstadt 2000, Wimmer 2005).

The first group of theories describes the current social context as globalized or in terms of the world society, whose global internal structure is congruent to its self-interpretation, as

uniqueness. Such a globalized society constructs its own global horizon of meanings. From this perspective transnational formations (such as transnational kinship groups, circuits and communities) can only be analyzed with reference to their impact on processes of homogenization, which are understood as an expansion of so-called functional systems, of western institutions or of world culture. Especially the role of transnational economic organizations and of INGO's seems to be important for this approach.

Because the second group of theories, and especially the civilizational approach (Eisenstadt 2000, 2006, Arnason 2005), stresses the contingent but also the historical and socio-cultural character of social forms, they assume a plural and ambiguous structuring of a global context. This context reproduces divergent social forms, which cannot be reduced to each other, and can therefore be characterized by the plurality of political, economical and cultural patterns. As a consequence such a context constructs a 'horizon of horizons' and, according to that, more than one world image (Merleau-Ponty cit. accordingly to Arnason 2005: 206).

With reference to this approach transnational formations (such as transnational kinship groups, circuits and communities) can be seen as specific forms of social life which (under specific conditions) refer to more than only one civilizational context. From this point of view they are characterized by dynamics we can also describe in terms of intercivilizational encounters as processes of a diffusion of social models which take place in two directions (III). Therefore, the impacts of such transnational practices are to be seen in connection with processes of heterogenization of social structures in/of the global context. To analyze transnational formations using terms of intercivilizational encounters would allow to specify their role in the global social context that should not necessary be defined as society.

III.

Before I start to describe the notion of intercivilizational encounters and connect this idea with the transnational approach, I would like to mention a few words about the civilizational perspective on the global context. The sociologically adapted civilizational approach offers two diagnoses of globalization. The first position formulated by Shmuel Eisenstadt supposes that the current global context is characterized by one civilizational pattern. To put it more precisely, modernity is a civilizational pattern with global reach. In reference to the idea of the

Axial Age[1] Eisenstadt describes different ways and forms of modernity which are preconditioned by earlier civilizational formations. The civilizational pattern of modernity is characterized by reflexivity and orientation towards meta-norms, such as freedom and equality, but because of earlier civilizational preconditions modernity transforms into varied and contradictive forms in different world regions (Eisenstadt 2001). To sum up, Eisenstadt stresses the institutional and cultural divergences arisen by varied adaptation ways of modernity and rejects the description of a global context as homogeneous.

The second view on the global context was formulated by Paul Arnason who describes the global context as an "incomplete civilizational constellation which remains open to more or less formative influences of older ones, as well as encounters between them." (Arnason 2005: 290). Arnason defines specific configurations between economic, political and cultural structures as civilizational complexes[2]. This definition includes both "different configurations within each field, as well as different overall combinations of them" (ibid: 199). From a phenomenological perspective (according to Merleau-Ponty 1962) he pointes out the power of multi-layered structures of meaning and, therefore, describes civilizational patterns as both: an "alternative overall articulations of the world" and "different combinations of more circumscribed universes of meaning" (ibid: 205)[3]. According to Arnason modernity can be seen as a distinctive civilizational pattern which indeed tends to overlap other civilizational complexes[4], but such adaptation processes have a contradictive nature and cannot be seen as finished until today. As examples for civilizational complexes Arnason mentions the so called Islamicate civilizations, the civilizational complexes of Sovjet type, the Japanese civilization, the Western and the Byzantic Christendom, the Ethiopian Empire, the Christian Caucasia and the Pan-Indic Civilization.

The second diagnoses of the global notion of civilizational patterns emphasises the crucial role of intercivilizational encounters in the present context. Originally this concept was developed by Benjamin Nelson (1981) and than sociologically adapted by Paul Arnason (2005:

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[1] According to the idea of Carl Jaspers (1949) the Axial Time is the time period between 800 und 200 B.C., when different civilizations developed the imagination of a difference between the transcendent and immanent world versions.

[2] Arnason emphasizes that this three spheres cannot be reduced to functional subsystems of society. He defines political, economical and cultural fields as specific 'ways of world making'. The spheres have to be analyzed as "specific ways of appropriating, experiencing, and interpreting the world." (Arnason 2005: 199).

[3] In contrast to Arnason the civilizational formations defined by Eisenstadt refer primarily to world religions.

[4] This argumentation was also developed in Arnason's research on Japanese (2002) and Soviet (1993) civilizational patterns.

287-296). Although Nelson's theory remained unfinished, his core idea can be useful for a sociological analysis of transnational formations. This idea refers to the question, how the internal structures of civilizations (which he characterizes by specific forms of consciousness) can be influenced by external forces. In dealing with this question of the "mutually formative relations between civilizational complexes" he points out the role of intercivilizational encounters (Arnason 2005: 287).

The encounter processes are to be understood as "highly asymmetric, but not wholly unilateral: the receiving side always retained some capacity to autonomous responses." (ibid: 288). From this point of view processes of irreversible cultural assimilation are not relevant for our research interest. While Nelson's theory is focused on descriptions of different types of civilizational consciousness, Arnason suggests to focus the analysis of intercivilizational encounters on the institutional level: "If civilizations are to be analyzed as interconnected constellations of meaning, power and wealth, the same applies to the processes that unfold across civilazational boundaries." (ibid: 288)[5]. According to this thesis we can define intercivilizational encounters as institutional processes of diffusion and adaptation of specific civilizational models and techniques, whereas the changing effects can be observed on both sides. In other words, we can define them as processes of diffusion which produce an impact on the institutional level in two directions. It is therefore consequent to differentiate between economical, political and cultural encounters.

This division can be supported with some examples. Firstly, it is obvious that cross-cultural trade-networks were important for both, the formation of specific civilizational complexes, if we remember Braudel's idea of 'trade diasporas', whose practices had a core importance for the invention of capitalism (Arnason 2005: 289), and for stimulating encounters between civilizational configurations. Secondly, political encounters had a crucial impact on the evolution of civilization patterns. In this context the role of "imperial power structures" has to be stressed, which allow the spreading of different political forms among civilizational boundaries. In addition to this thesis "the category of political encounters should be defined so as to include the transmission of complex models or specific techniques of state formation from one civilizational context to another." (ibid: 291). Such encounters not only contain the cases of adaptation but also of neglection and development of "counter-projects" to models in ob-

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[5] Two points are important for this argumentation. Firstly, this concept does not contain all forms of intercivilizational contacts. Secondly, the tendency to prefer intercivilizational contacts is an important trait of civilizational patterns. Consequently, the "closure" cannot be seen as central characteristic of civilizational patterns (Arnason 2005: 288).

servation. Not only the models of state formation but also the forms of international relations and political ideologies are part of a repertoire which is available in current political encounters. Finally the specific role of cultural encounters has to be examined. Arnason suggests the differentiation between religious and non-religious forms of cultural encounters of civilizations. While the first case refers to the spread of world religions, such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and others, the non-religions encounters refer to secular cultural trends like Hellenism. Arnason (2005: 292-293) emphasises that cultural encounters cannot be understood as linear transfer processes of meaning patterns. Instead they encourage cultural reinterpretations of own meaning patterns of the respective civilizations and lead to the development of cultural counter-projects.

The theoretical figure of intercivilizational encounters may inspire transnational research in three ways (Tambiah 2000):

First of all, we can refer to the core idea of the civilizational approach, which understands civilizational patterns as specific configurations of political, economical and cultural structures, in order to specify contexts which, as a rule, are called 'sending' and 'receiving' 'regions'. Without using the term civilizational pattern (which obviously refers to formations of a long durée) we can take the idea of different societal configurations seriously and define such configurations as contexts which cannot be reduced to each other. On the one hand such a definition of 'context' is not equal to nation-states (formerly understood as society). On the other hand, this term refers to the pluralistic perspective on societal structuring in a global context. Such an understanding of contexts, which can be seen as points of reference for transnational practices, stresses the historical and socio-cultural aspects of sociality. Therefore, transnational practices are still embedded in different socio-cultural configurations: the generalization of them has to be used carefully.

Secondly, I would like to make a reference to the idea of intercivilizational encounters. It seems to be important to understand transnational practices, similarly to this idea, as practices of the diffusion of models and techniques etc. which have an impact on more than one socio-cultural context. Although transnational practices have a less institutionalized character, one can suppose that the theoretical differentiation between political, economical and cultural forms of transnational formations can be useful. For instance, In case of economical transnational practices we can observe diffusion of specific business models. In case of political transnational practices we can see diffusion of political participation forms of transmigrants. But also diffusion of political standards and topics – in cases of influence on home-

land politics through migrants remittances. In case of cultural transnational practices it's necessary to distinguish between religious and non-religious aspects. For instances, we can observe changing of religious landscapes in host contexts but also the re-interpretation of religious orientations as a result of transnational encounters. Non-religious practices can be observed for instance in cases of diffusion of gender role models in different contexts.

Using the idea of intercivilizational encounters makes it necessary to stress two additional aspects. On the one hand, this perspective does not aim to analyze cases of assimilation because they do not have an impact on both sides of international interconnections. On the other hand, transnational linkages create, without doubt, new social contexts which change their 'original' socio-cultural worlds slowly and sometimes imperceptibly.

Thirdly, the suggestion to understand different socio-cultural contexts as directed towards specific meaning patterns, according to civilizational approach, enables to understand transnational formations as entities which refer to more than only one horizon of meaning. If we take the idea of the plurality of socio-cultural contexts (which are not equal to nation-states) seriously, we have to ask how plural (or multiple) meaning patterns are reproduced through transnational practices and how they change under transnational conditions.

IV.

The idea of intercivilizational encounters can inspire the research on transnational formations which therefore can be understood as less institutionalized spheres referring to the plurality of socio-cultural contexts. According to Paul Arnason (2005) who understands civilizations as specific configurations of power, wealth and meaning, we have to pay more attention to the idea that each civilizational pattern (or each civilization) projects its own specific horizon of meaning. It produces specific meaning patterns (or codes) which more or less regulate the institutional levels of the respective civilization. This idea motivates to ask (both with and without reference to the civilization approach), if transnational formations, especially their long-lasting variants, can be seen as entities which have access to more than only one universe of meaning. If we take this notion seriously we have to suppose that different meaning patterns, which guide transnational practices, can be observed in our empirical work.

The question which methodological techniques can be helpful for an observation of pluralistic meaning patterns has to be discussed in the present paper. This paper suggests a methodological strategy which includes two steps. First of all, it deals with the *cross-cultural version of the hermeneutic sociology of knowledge*. Secondly, such strategy can use *the multi-sited fieldwork* technique. In the following both methodological accesses have to be described.

Step one: Combining the hermeneutic sociology of knowledge with cultural studies

The cross-cultural access to the *hermeneutic sociology of knowledge* has to be assigned to interpretative research methodologies. The core task of interpretative research is known as the reconstruction of social meanings. Such an approach includes "the interpretative understanding of interpretations" (Soeffner 2004: 95). Consequently, the understanding is a prerequisite of sociological research and uses practices of understanding as a way of analysis. Moreover, interpretative sociology is based on the questioning of meaning construction in every day practices: How can we observe our reality without understanding the ways of our observations?

The repertoire of methods of interpretative sociology contains, apart from biographical method, the method of objective hermeneutics and social scientific hermeneutics. While the objective hermeneutics (Overmann 1983, 1986) aim to disclose latent meaning structures which affect individual actions, the hermeneutic sociology of knowledge (Hitzler/Honer 1997) aims to reconstruct different forms and patterns of reality constructions:

> It is therefore interested in the understanding of understanding itself, in procedures, 'rules', 'patterns', implicit premises, modes of meaning and understanding that are communicated as part of socializing processes of adaptation, instruction, and the passing on the traditions. (…) Social scientific understanding has as its goal the discovery of the constitutive conditions of 'reality' and the demystification of social constructs. (Soeffner 2004: 95ff.).

In comparison to objective hermeneutics the last method is characterised by a self-reflexive turn, because it presumes the self-control of an interpretative work. The proposed methodology prefers the latter research technique, but it aims to spread the methodological procedure of *hermeneutic sociology of knowledge* to the analysis manner of cultural studies (Hall 1973, Fiske 1994). In order to develop this synthesis I'm going to describe the general principles of both research approaches.

First of all, I'm going to focus on the *hermeneutic sociology of knowledge* which aims to reconstruct the interpretive patterns of social practices. These models can be understood as

frameworks which guide the processes of understanding or interpretation in the respective social contexts. Therefore, the term *interpretive pattern* refers to the typical meaning of a respective social interaction or communication; it aims to combine different aspects of meaning into specific patterns. Such interpretive frames are used in direct social practices. They can be observed in linguistic and non-linguistic expressions (Soeffner 2004).

The sociological analyses of interpretive models are usually based on so called sequence analysis. The sequence analysis begins with the selection of "text passages" which are important for the research question[6]. Afterwards the selection of separate sentences can be started. With reference to each sentence, mostly different and comprehensive interpretative hypotheses have to be developed. The appropriation of the hypothesis has to be controlled on each of the following sentence. The hypotheses can be rejected if they are not reasonable or marked as proved if they are congruent with the text structure. Afterwards this technique is applied to the whole passage and than to the entire text. Finally the proved interpretive hypotheses have to be connected to one interpretive model and described in the research records. It also has to be added that such analyses are carried out by a group of researchers because the group interaction allows a more or less valid exclusion of unsuitable interpretive variants. In this context the term 'suitable' refers to the interpretive model which reconstructs the text passage in the most appropriate way, in comparison to other formulated interpretive versions. The extensive development of different interpretive versions aims to exclude own prejudices from the analytical process. Apart from these, additional conditions of self-reflection have to be considered during the analysis. On the one hand the researcher has to get an inner distance to his/her own cultural and historical background. And on the other hand the background of the respective 'life-world' has to be precisely described in the research records.

While the *hermeneutic sociology of knowledge* is interested in the reconstruction of a singular interpretive model, the *cultural studies* approach stresses the openness of text construction and instability of language. This approach (e.g. Hoggart 1957, Hall 1973 and Williams 1958, 1961), developed at the University of Birmingham, can be characterized by three core principles. First of all it is primarily interested in questions of ideological power, whereas ideology is understood as settings of meanings, such as categories, narratives or ideological linguistic frames, in other words, all forms of meaning interpretation of reality (Hall 1982).

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[6] One should not forget that different sorts of social practices can be seen as a text. They can also be collected as interview, participated observation, but also can be found in documents and bureaucratic files.

Secondly, the interest in ideological questions is connected the research on media communications. In this context the central assumption refers to the idea of an active audience. From this point of view the process of media communications cannot be described as a linear transfer of constant meanings, similar to the vision of the "stimulus-response"-model, because the audience is understood as differentiated and active instead of homogenous. This approach pays more attention to both levels of media communication: to the production processes of media texts (encoding) and to the interpretation processes of them (decoding) (see Fig. 1). Thirdly, the idea of the complexity of media texts formulated by Barthes (1979), Eco (1972) and Vološinov (1975) is crucial for an understanding of the structure of media communication. On the basis of these principles the so called encoding-decoding-model of media communication was developed (Winter 2001).

Figure: The Encoding-Decoding-Model according to Stuart Hall (1973)
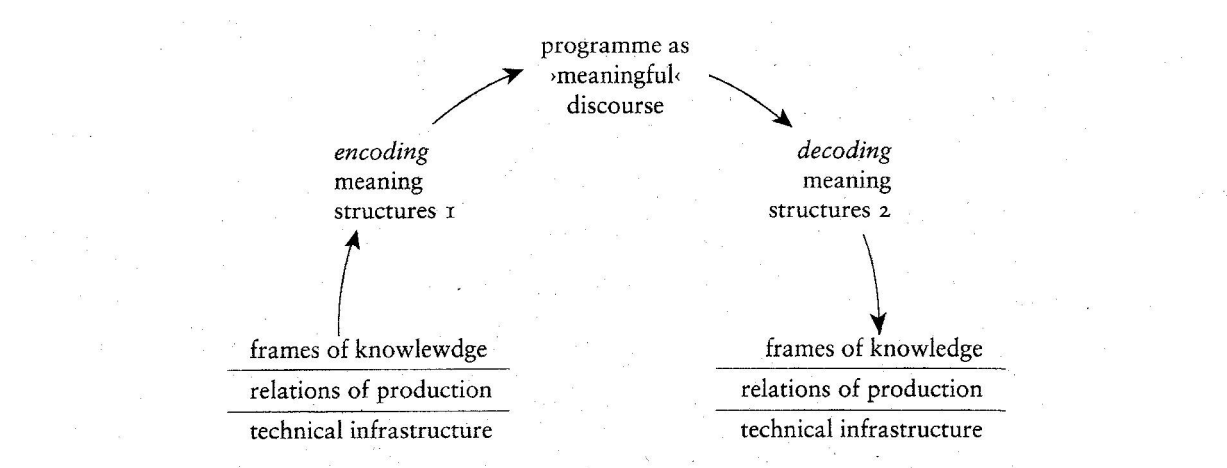
To which extent can the core assumptions of cultural studies be useful for the proposed research methodology on transnational practices? Before giving a detailed analysis several aspects referring to the encoding-decoding model have to be added. As mentioned before Hall questions the idea of the overall power of ideological patterns. He argues that the members of an audience are included in the negotiation processes of text meanings. To put it more precisely, not the dominant meanings (which accordingly to Hall are always encoded in texts) determine the cultural settings of the audience, but their socio-cultural experiences. Different ways of decoding are also possible because (media-)texts are characterized by polysemy. This argumentation suggests that text meanings are proposed but not imposed. In

this context Hall emphasizes the relative openness of texts in relation to the difference be-tween the terms *denotation,* and *connotation.* While the first refers to the literal meaning of signs, the latter refers to the their associative meaning.

Additionally, Hall stresses that the possibility of different decoding ways is not only ba-sed on communicative but also on societal preconditions. He characterizes the contem-porary society as predominated by social class conflicts. Consequently he argues that multiple specific ways of decoding are corresponding to the internal class structure of society. According to the idea of the differentiation between dominant, subordinate and radical value settings developed by Parkin (1972), Hall distinguishes between three ty-pes of decoding: 1) the dominant-hegemonic, 2) the negotiated and 3) the oppositional position. In the following, it is necessary to mention a few words of explanation for this typology.

(ad 1) The case of a dominant-*hegemonic position* is characterised by transferring a domi-nant 'hegemonic' text code from the encoding-sphere to the decoding-sphere without any changes of text interpretation.

(ad 2) In the case of a *negotiated reading position* audience members generally accept the 'hegemonic' interpretation of the text but additionally use their own social experiences for the construction of the text meaning. This audience interpretation of the text is, to some extent, based on deviation but, in general, is an affirmative understanding of the proposed meaning patterns.

(ad 3) If the audience is able to understand the 'hegemonic' pattern of a text but always rejects it, we can speak of the *oppositional* way of decoding. The fact that the dominant meaning of a message is declined, presupposes an alternative setting of text-interpretation.

Several decades later John Fiske (1994) successfully developed the ideas of Stuart Hall further. According to the idea of instability of language structures (which is well-known as the *semiotic excess*), he questions the thesis of dominant 'hegemonic' codes which according to Hall are always included in texts. He also argues that instead if searching for these 'preferred meanings' one has to focus on the analysis of 'preferred readings'. In other words, settings which organize the processes of interpretation can primarily be found on the side of decod-ing, not on the side of encoding.

Which advantages does the theoretical basis of cultural studies offer us if we translate it to methodological assumptions which can be used together with *the hermeneutic sociology of*

knowledge? First of all, the core principle of this approach refers, similar to the social scientific hermeneutics, to the question of construction and reconstruction of meaning. Secondly, it defines meaning construction (applied to an object of media communications) as an active process of negotiation of meanings. Moreover, the manner of meaning construction correlates with the internal structure of society[7]. Thirdly, the polysemy of meaning has a crucial influence on the process of meaning construction. Social practices, understood as social texts, can, therefore, be interpreted in varied ways. Finally the cultural studies approach formulates general suggestions how to reconstruct such diverse ways of meaning interpretation. While the encoding-decoding-model suggests a typology of reading positions (in other words: plurality of interpretive models), the access of John Fiske points out that interpretive settings can primarily be found by focusing on the interpretation process itself.

To sum up, the research of *cultural studies* opens up the observation ways of the plurality of interpretive models. In contrast to that *the hermeneutic sociology of knowledge* allows observing only the singularity of them. According the original interest in observing the plurality of meaning constructions in context of transnational practices it seems to be obvious to bring both methodological ways together in an appropriate way. It can be suggested to use the whole procedure of the hermeneutic sociology of knowledge (sequence analysis, developing of hypotheses etc.), described above, with one change: According to the idea of polysemy the procedure cannot be finished with the formulation of one but several interpretive models. In order to use such a way of research, it is necessarily to reorganize the research work into cross-cultural scientific teams (the sequence analysis in the hermeneutic sociology of knowledge occurs also in scientific teams but without a consideration of cultural diversity). It has to be mentioned that the term "cross-cultural" refers to ways scientists are socialized and not to their national or ethnic status. To sum up, the probability of an observation of multiple interpretative models in social texts is higher if the scientific research groups are characterized by a cultural diverse background.

V.

Step two: the use of multi-sited research

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[7] In case of my research object it's to suppose, that ways of meaning construction correlate with civilizational patterns.

The popularity of multi-sited research in sociological analysis is a recent trend. This methodological access was originally developed within anthropological research and was created out of the discussion about "crisis of interpretation" (Clifford and Marcus 1986). The core of this dispute refers to the difficulties to find plausible reasons for the research on small and traditionally rooted groups in a contemporary globalized world under transformation. Consequently, the problems of a suitable construction of a research field were discussed. The difficulties cannot be neglected because the fieldwork constitutes a major part of anthropological research (Nadai and Maeder 2005). In this context the strategy of selecting plural localities for research work became one of the suitable solutions of anthropological field construction. This method is well-known as multi-sited research (Marcus 1995).

The multi-sited research method changes the core procedure of anthropological research deeply. First of all, multi-sited research supposes that ethnography should not focus on the description of face-to-face interactions of small groups in one locality because such interactions are situated in a 'global' 'emergent' context. Consequently, it aims to observe social and cultural practices that are produced and situated in different locations. Secondly, this method reduces the role of traditional fieldwork in anthropological research. The classical anthropological fieldwork takes it for granted that the researcher has to stay in the respective field for two or more years in order to 'dip' into the culture they are interested in. But applying this procedure to fieldwork in plural localities would take an impossible number of years or even decades. The limitations of fieldwork which consequently arise can be solved by splitting up the research attention: while, for instance, the research activities in the first location can be comprehensive, the research work on the second or third 'site' can be restricted. Thus, such limitations depend on the research question. The third change of anthropology refers to the "loss of subaltern" (ibid.). While the classical anthropology was interested in detailed descriptions of life-worlds of 'subaltern subjects', the multi-sited research shifts the anthropological interest in new directions. This research strategy argues that the social construction of 'subaltern subjects' is on the move and multiple observation angels are necessary for an examination of new social and cultural practices. Because 'subaltern subjects' are involved in a complex and interconnected net of social structures, it is questionable to analyze them exclusively in the context of their subordinated situation: Today nobody can solely be seen as 'subaltern'.

To sum up, multi-sited research has to be distinguished from classical anthropological comparison. While the second research way "operates on the linear spatial plane" and focuses on "homogeneously conceived conceptual units (people, communities, localities)", the first research technique supposes "fractured, discontinuous plane of movements" and aims "to

posit the logic of relationship, translation and association" among different localities. Furthermore, it constructs a "mobile and multiple situated research object" (Marcus 1995: 102). While traditional comparisons are more interested in a detailed observation of similar processes in different localities, multi-sited research is concerned with different questions or practices which can only be connected to the entire figure on the basis of multiply located research.

Marcus (1995) stresses that the multiple locations can be constructed with reference to different modes of observation. First, one can research on the circulation of *metaphors* and analyze their effects in different discourses (Martin 1994):

> This mode of constructing multi-sited research is thus especially potent for suturing locations of cultural production that had not been obviously connected, and consequently, for creating empirically argued new envisioning of social landscape. (Marcus 1995)

Second, the focus on the *circulation of stories* or *of plots* allows the construction of multi-sited fields. This technique suggests separating the locations or 'sites' of fieldwork according to sequences of the respective narrative. Especially the research which is interested in different forms of collective memory can use this technique for analyzing the processes of social memory construction (Boyarin 1994). Third, the multiple fields can also be constructed in reference to *biographical narrative*. The focus on life history helps to find new surprising locations of research (Fischer 1991). This technique is very similar to the research focused on stories or narratives mentioned above. A fourth possibility to create multiple fields is given by the reference to *conflict*. Conflicts touch different institutional fields of a globalized society, therefore, it seems useful to organize the fieldwork in different (institutional) locations and, afterwards, to observe the relationships between different spheres in the context of the respective conflict (Sarat and Kaerns 1993).

Although the above mentioned research techniques can also be useful for transnational research, the focus on the *circulation of people* is the preferable research practice in this context. The multi-sited observation of people's mobility is especially focused on diaspora studies (Gupta and Ferguson 1999). To put it more precisely, the 'following' of people trajectories in different places and locations does not only allow an anthropological but also a sociological observation of the fragmentised and fluent transnational practices, which are able to connect different localities and create new contexts.

VI.

The criticism of methodological nationalism offers new possibilities of research on transnational formations. It is obvious that boundaries of nation states are not equal to societal boundaries. This perspective draws a new picture of the global social context:

> The Third World is in the First World, and the First World in the Third; the North is in the South, and the South is in the North; the centre is in the periphery, and periphery is in the center. (Hannerz, 1996: 12, ibid. Tambiah 2000:190)

However, it can also be criticised that the transnational approach uses terms rooted in the old container model of the nation state. One way of dealing with this legitimate criticism (described in the proposed paper) is to recognize the idea of intercivilizional encounters as useful for transnational research. Although civilizational theories, which are more interested in long-lasting civilizational developments, have another reach as the transnational approach, they can inspire transnational thought in two ways.

On the one hand civilizational approach emphasizes the involvement of transnational formations in more than only one societal context. These configurations "cannot be grasped by a general theory of modernity at large or encompassed by blanket terms such as hybridization, eclecticism, creolization, deterritorialization, and so on. Such terms tell us something but not enough." (Tambiah 2000:189). In contrast to this, the civilizational approach is able to grasp the plural character of transnational practices which are directed towards plural or multiple patterns of meaning. If we understand transnational processes as a diffusion which has an impact on two (or more) contexts we can stress their transformative potential with reference to their original societal backgrounds.

On the other hand the reference to the civilizational idea of plural meaning patters offers new perspectives for the methodological dispute. The core of this idea refers to the cross-cultural version of social scientific hermeneutics which, at least, have to be able to consider the plurality of meaning models for research on transnational formations. Such a strategy, which includes the classical thought of cultural studies, can be combined with the multi-sited research strategy. The latter makes it possible to guide our fieldwork in different socio-cultural contexts.

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