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The Notion of “Social Networks” in Migration

SUMMARY

What it means to focus on the notion of “social network” from a migration point of view? By exploring this question, the authors describe the conceptual framework of this concept. Developed in the field of urban anthropology, with a scientific approach of the social combining “relation” and “situation”, the notion of network continued its career in the field of the sociology of the migrations. By introducing elements of complexity into the analysis, this notion made it possible to break with an approach based on the “communitarist” approach of the migrant groups.

KEY WORDS: migration, social network, social theory

“... if network is to be developed as an analytical tool and as a method whereby sociological explanation is achieved then it must be used in conjunction with a theory and not viewed as a theory in itself”, B. Kapferer, “Social networks and conjugal role”, in: Jeremy Boissevain and Clyde Mitchell (eds), *Network analysis: studies in human interactions*, Hague: Mouton, 1973, p. 108.

Having been frequently addressed in the field of the sociology of migrations since the late 1970s, the notion of “network” has become a key word in the language used in numerous researchers’ works on new migratory forms and, more particularly, on the migrants’ production modes, the so-called ethnic economy. After twenty years of research, the notion of “network” remains described as a “vague set of approaches” (Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994) and comes closer to a metaphorical use than an analytical one. This article explores the notion of social network and its use in the works concerning the migrants’ modes of organization. This is an attempt at understanding its contributions – but also its limits.

1. The origins of the notion of "social networks"

Theoretically, the promotion of the notion of network in the 1950s was due to English anthropologists who could not find a satisfactory theory explaining social aspects in the structural-functional programme. The criticism mainly concerned the fact that individuals can not be only considered as "status holders". Firth (1954), by the way, differentiated between social structures and social organizations, the latter coming within processes where the actions and relations operate with a view to meeting objectives. The use of the phrase "social network" was attributed to Barnes (1954), who, in a study on a Norwegian fisherman's village, tried to give an account of the friendly and familiar relations that the inhabitants had partly built. The social structure observed then can be described as "patterns" of inter-personal relations built up within areas of activity rather than in terms of the roles and status of the group members. Bott (1957) applied this concept to the study of the conjugal roles in families from London. She showed that in an urban context, the relations between friends, relatives and neighbours make up intermediate and organized structures between the individuals and the institutions. She introduced the concepts of "close-knit network" and "loose-knit network" thus showing that the closer the network gets, the more it puts normative pressure on its members. However, it is only from the 1960s that researchers have given a new field of application to the concept of "social network" from studies on acculturation and change phenomena in relation to urbanization in Africa. Epstein (1969) showed that the social structure of the city of Ndola could be described from a complex series of links within a chain of numerous two-element interactions. In order to do that, he concentrated on systematically gathering data on the meetings of his informant. His analysis highlighted how new norms emerged in urban areas and how they disseminated from effective networks set up by individuals with a high level of prestige. Mitchell (1969) presented a synthesis of research on the networks and showed both the theoretical and methodological implications.¹ In all the works produced at that time, the notion of network was presented as an abstract category, a representation of the social aspect and of social relations rather than a model of relations (Fortin, 2002). This framework allows one to explore practices such as the opening-up of the labour market, the forms of sociability, etc. and the types of links that are privileged in the analysis: total or partial personal network, sub-group such as the neighbourhood, the occupational environment,² etc...

However, the contribution of the anthropologists' work allowed going beyond the simple collection of empirical data and facilitated the design of an approach to social

¹ There are four morphological criteria: the anchoring point (this is the specific individual whose behaviour the observer wishes to interpret); accessibility (the number of steps required to contact a specific person from a given starting point); density (defined as the measure in which the possible links between people really exist); the scope (referring to the number of the subject's direct contacts). The interaction criteria refer to the features of the interaction itself: its content, direction, duration, intensity and frequency.

² Another trend was developed, different from the anthropological approach, and adopted a methodological approach which placed the social network analysis at the level of the quantifiable and verifiable theoretical model. We underline that the formalization of the networks was largely criticized with the classical argument that it ignores the dynamics of social relations.

aspects combining "the relation" and "the situation".³ The contribution of this idea of social network was underlined by Hannerz (1980: 175) as well as by Rogers and Vertovec (1995: 20), who showed how it opened up an area for a social theory directed by practice, thus superseding the analyses based on an *a priori* acceptance of community solidarity.

From this point of view, the understanding of a social fact is in line with both a macro and micro social context: social relations are the result of interactions between individuals structured according to broader contexts (political, economic and social).

2. Network and immigrants' social integration

Created within the scope of urban anthropology, the notion of network pursued its career in the field of the sociology of migrations. In France, the latter proved particularly useful in the study of the creation and the development of immigrant social networks in an urban environment, while placing importance on the system of interactions between differing agents and communities (Katuszewski and Ogien, 1978; Andezian and Streiff-Fenart, 1981). In a research project on the creation and development of immigrant social networks, Katuszewski and Ogien tried to provide the word "network" with a theoretical status "to then draw a set of alternative assumptions to those produced from culture-oriented positions". Their attempt at substituting an analysis in terms of "social networks" for the culture-oriented approach that was prominent in the 1970s was a pioneer venture insofar as it raised a number of questions, which lay at the centre of the problems in subsequent years, i.e. the question of integration.

As a reaction to the approaches in terms of "micro-societies" of immigrants or of the "neo-culture" that developed at that time, the authors had recourse to the concept of "total network", which is not a simple descriptive word qualifying some aspects of migrations within a system of concepts stemming from culture-oriented theories (acculturation, cultural contact, deculturation etc...), but rather the development of a typical ideal of sociation. Its definition is not based on the determination of the criteria of belonging to a community made up of members who consider themselves (or are considered) as a "we" opposed to other "we", likely to have a common objective and exerting a strict social control, all of the members knowing each other or recognizing each other according to "distinguishing features", but considers "the network as an open chain of informal interactions without a central authority, the individuals in contact not necessarily knowing all the other individuals they are in connection with" (Katuszewski and Ogien, 1978: 15).

This type of method then allows one to "substitute the analyses tending to separate closed units, the connections of which they then try to study, for a point of view giving analytical priority to the situations of interaction" (Katuszewski and Ogien, 1978: 163). Boyd's works (1989) sealed this approach to the network, which compensated for

³ Mitchell brought out three levels in the social aspect: the study subject (relations, events, the behaviours studied), the interpretation from the actors, and the context in which the fact studied is placed as researchers build upon it (Fortin, 2002).

the drawbacks of functionalist (based on the analysis of micro-economic processes) and structuralist approaches (based on macro-economic processes). The analysis of situations allowed the authors to show that "the collapse of the too clear limits between agents of separate communities" and the emphasis put on the system of interactions permitted an account to be given of a set of daily behaviours that could not be considered if the analysis relied on a rigid pattern matching "the dominants and the dominated", the holders of "different cultures" or "the integrated and excluded". The objective of this study was also to show, as serious progress at that time, that the actors were not individuals divided between two worlds and that it was necessary to understand the manipulation spaces that the categorization of these "worlds" granted to them. For Boyd, this approach was an opportunity to provide for a pioneer contribution by introducing the question of gender in the social analysis of networks.

Other researchers (Rex, Joly and Wilpert, 1987; Campani, 1988) tried to limit the definition of the network and to differentiate between informal and formal networks. Informal networks cannot directly be apprehended and do not mean any voluntary membership. In this way they are almost synonymous with a "natural community": "They 'go without saying' in the minds of their members and thus do not need to be explained and all the more so instituted. Because they are based on family, biological or spiritual ties or on village relations (age, gender groups...) within a local society. These networks are thus included by values that can not be denied and leaving them is like withdrawing *ipso facto* from the community" (Catani and Palidda, 1987: 7). Conversely, formal networks such as the associations, for example, are characterized by an "organized aspect" that founds them through regulations or judicial-administrative texts. But if the formal networks are open to volunteer members, the fact remains that for the associations based on the origins, the informal networks provide the *structure of these association processes*, even if the life of the first ones does not completely correspond to that of the second ones. It was in this sense that G. Campani used the word "network-community" to give an account of the dual process consisting in using existing legislation in the case of migratory movements (1901 law) to organize informal networks that the immigrants have maintained. Catani and Palidda noted that the result of this approach was twofold: "on the one hand a certain cohesion is maintained at least in one part of the migratory movement, the one that promotes these very important aggregations, for example, for the education of the youth and on the other hand we come closer, even if unconsciously we do not really wish it, to the forms of aggregation promoted by the society of residence" (Catani and Palidda, 1987: 9).

In terms of theory, the problems of formal networks (or association networks) will be raised regarding the issue of integration *versus* identity and it is this paradigm that is behind the analysis. In its radical version, integration is designed as a process that allows a society to integrate a new element without compromising its structure, on the one hand, and as a process of transformation of the immigrants into a cultural standardization, on the other. In this way, using the network brings in both restrictive identity and social dimensions interpreted as an obstacle and an alienation of the individuals (of women, above all) and the debate will talk here about identity networks interpreted as maintenance of solidarity or social cohesion among immigrant groups, pre-

sented as a place of resistance against standardization. Or again, the authors will promote the idea that the networks considered as intermediate structures between individual migrants and the wider social context are moments of integration (as was promoted by some researchers from the Chicago school).

3. Networks and mobility

The phenomenon of globalization involves a set of economic, social, cultural and demographic processes transcending the nation-states. Then follows a new conceptualization of the notion of network notably informed by transnational migrations, and the modes of communication and economic exchanges on a global scale. The mobility of manpower permits bridges to be established between countries supplying and receiving this manpower and the migratory movements and the channels are one of those bridges. For Portes (1995), these networks do not necessarily obey the laws of the national or global economic market and, to some extent, work autonomously. Then, in the field of sociological research, the debate underlines a growing interest in the study of networks in relation to an approach to migratory movements retaining macro and micro dynamics (the individual context) as decisive elements. The networks are granted a role structuring the mobility of migrants beyond the national economic contexts.

When A. Tarrus, for example, described the transnational phenomenon, he mentioned a mobile population that was fully in line with modernity. "While in many ways the exchanges and movements intensify, distances are reduced and bridges between places are built, how can we ignore the modernity of those who move best, who bring the social link up to date when the nations offer the norm, the rule, the controls..." (Tarrus, 1995: 16). While he studied the economic space of North Africans in Marseilles he highlighted a movement territory where various economic exchanges were translated into the construction of open networks, that is to say both local and international, diachronic and synchronic networks where individuals with various origins and status mixed, thus breaking with an approach in terms of "ethnic economic niche". Peraldi (2001) was on the same line when he described the various commercial systems (Marseilles, Istanbul) as frames of activities that make up a labyrinth of social networks that appear as relational arrangements ("the weak links"). Listening to the authors of this approach of the social network as a product of a trading activity, their analyses distanced them from a strictly structural reading of the social network as soon as they insisted more on the informal systems based on confidence, communication, commitment etc. The research was rather dealing with an interaction of the trading exchange and with the co-construction of a trading social link, which acts as a system. In this way they concurred with the partisans of an economic sociology of immigration paving the way to a mass of possible "patterns" in migratory situations in which the social networks play a major role.

4. Networks and territories

With the previous approach, it was clearly shown that the notion of social network as an analytical tool or as a frame of migrants' experiences permitted a break with a sub-

stantialist approach to migrants' groups considered as "closed communities", that it introduced complexity notably in the economic problems and, finally, that it allowed questioning of the collective dynamics of the migrants, the producers of social and economic initiatives. But the analysis remains limited as regards the understanding of the processes of construction of the networks.

The hardened notion of network places groups or populations in a situation of social and cultural exteriority, outside the national field, and appears as a threat. The "ethnic" network becomes a sober category, which, despite changes in belonging among individuals,⁴ is established as a global and limited category (Islamist networks...). This representation of the notion became reinforced by the multiplication of analyses in terms of transnational communities, the networks of which being the tools for a disintegration of (national) territories. Despite numerous analyses from a social geography viewpoint underlining the recourse to the notion of network, not as the antithesis of the territory but rather more as "a new way of thinking free from the throes of the categorizing thought" (Chivallon, 1999: 132), the tension between settling and moving remains visible.

To solve this tension one should maybe make two suggestions. Firstly, one has to recall that geographical mobility, the fruit of market forces, led to taking into account the notion of the migrants' network as an opposing force to the deconstruction of family structures engendered by industrialization at the beginning of the 20th century (Choldin, 1973). The observation of the content of these reticular organizations in migration as "the transmission of information, the accommodation for the first weeks, the advance for travel expenses, the job-seeking aid" provide as many analytical elements permitting understanding of these "territories of mobility" (Faret, 2003) without, for all that, building at the same time community or ethnic frontiers within them. It is more a question of observing the social capital that these migrating systems can produce as the means of defying as much as strengthening the social frontiers of migrating groups (Sanders, 2002). This position then places the notion in a twofold reading grid, where the homogeneity-heterogeneity and horizontality-verticality pairs must be explored.

Seeking to go beyond the homogenizing category of the ethnic, community network etc. endlessly remains the prime objective. The notion yet gains in quality of analysis when its purpose is the deconstruction of the visible uniformity of these social formations. If the quest for these differences allows confirmation, while relying on the "idea of transversality", that "the social or spatial limit is easily crossed and surmountable" (Chivallon, 1999), it also provides an opportunity to think about the establishment of rules and norms within the networks. The pattern of an unavoidable expansion of the network is, of course, at the heart of the matter since this analysis makes the establishment of limits visible. This verticality of the network, very often forgotten or only addressed in the case of the so-called informal networks, remains a dimension yet to be explored.

⁴ Cf. the research developed by F. Barth.

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POJAM »DRUŠTVENA MREŽA« U MIGRACIJI

SAŽETAK

Što znači baviti se pojmom »društvena mreža«, koji je relativno nov, s migracijskoga gledišta? Kao odgovor na to pitanje autori u radu opisuju konceptijski okvir tog pojma. Razvivši se na području urbane antropologije, unutar koje se znanstveni pristup društvenome povezuje s pojmovima »odnosa« i »situacije«, pojam mreže nastavio se razvijati unutar sociologije migracija. Uvođenje elemenata kompleksnosti u analizu omogućilo je da se napusti pristup »zajedničarstva« migracijskih skupina.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: migracija, društvena mreža, društvena teorija

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LA NOTION DE « RÉSEAUX SOCIAUX » EN MIGRATION

RÉSUMÉ

Que représente la notion de « réseau » social, relativement récente, dans une perspective migratoire ? Les auteurs décrivent ici le cadre conceptuel de cette notion. Partie de l'anthropologie urbaine, où s'est élaborée une approche du social combinant « relation » et « situation », la notion de réseau a poursuivi sa carrière dans le champ de la sociologie des migrations. En introduisant de la complexité dans l'analyse, elle a notamment permis de rompre avec une approche « communautariste » des groupes de migrants.

MOTS CLÉS : migration, réseau social, théorie sociale