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Rethinking The Theory Of Transnational Migration: Critical Community In Transnational Transference

Amir Akiva SEGAL

Abstract. This paper revisits the theory of transnational migration with a particular focus on transnational transference. The goal is to elucidate the mechanisms behind transnational transference. This is done by a segment within these communities that is involved in the transfer of values, ideas, or perceptions. The paper proposes the concept of ‘Critical Community,’ as introduced by Thomas Rochon and further developed by Sean Chabot, as a framework to bridge existing gaps in understanding transnational transference. By revisiting foundational studies and applying the ‘Critical Community’ concept to recent research, this paper provides a perspective on how migrants undertake transnational activities. The application of this concept provides valuable insights for future scholars seeking to investigate the dynamics of transnational transfer and its varying levels of engagement within migrant groups.

Keywords: migration, critical community, transnational transference, political influence

Introduction

This paper rethinks transnational migration theory, with a specific focus on the mechanisms of transnational transfer. I wish to suggest the concept of ‘critical community’ as an explanation for the ‘how’ of transnational transfer and to demonstrate that this concept can provide an answer to a long-standing lacuna in transnational theory. The concept of ‘Critical Community,’ initially introduced by Thomas Rochon (1998), was later used by Sean Chabot in two papers and was recently introduced and further developed in three recent publications. “Critical community” is a group of people who engage in the transference of ideas. Chabot applied this concept to political and protest groups, showing how one group’s ideas can influence another across different countries and cultures (Chabot & Duyvendak, 2002; Chabot, 2004). For Chabot, the critical community is what enables the “Transnational diffusion between protest groups” (Chabot, 2004, p. 19).

In three recent papers, this concept has reappeared to describe the political influence of Jewish migrants from the United States to Israel on the Israeli political discussion (Segal & Greenspan, 2024) and to show the way baseball was introduced to Israel by a critical community of Jewish migrants from the United States (Segal, 2023). In these two papers, the ‘critical community’ serves as a basis for transnational transfer, and philanthropy is the other aspect that enables this transfer. In yet another paper, the critical community in discussion is of Soviet Union Jews in Berlin during the 1920s and how they were cultural agents of the Soviet culture and political influence (Zhuravel Segal, 2024)

This paper aims to extend the application of 'critical community' beyond political and protest groups, proposing it as a valuable framework for understanding the mechanisms and variations in transnational engagement. By examining recent and past studies, this paper seeks to elucidate the 'how' of transnational transference and highlight the differential ways and extents of migrant engagement.

Transnational Migration And Transference

The concept of transnational migration has attracted significant scholarly attention since Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Christina Blanc-Szanton's landmark publication (Glick et al., 1992). Introduced as a new paradigm for the study of migration, transnational migration has been viewed as an outcome of technological and political developments (Castles, De Haas, and Miller, 2020; Clavin, 2005; Glick Schiller, 2009, 2018a, 2018b; Portes et al., 1996, 1999, 2001, 2017; Smith & Guarnizo, 1998).

When the concept was first introduced, transnational migration was considered a new type of migration (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton, 1992, 1994; Portes et al., 2017). Glick Schiller et al. (1992, p. 1) described it as follows:

We call this experience "transnationalism" to emphasize the emergence of a social process in which migrants establish social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders. Migrants are considered transnational when they develop and maintain multiple relationships—familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political—across borders.

The concept of transnationalism was first introduced in the early 20th century, but gained significance in academic discussions of migration only in the 1990s. During the 1960s and 1970s, this concept was usually used to describe corporations with branches in more than one country. Later, it was applied to institutions located in more than one country (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc, 1995; Vertovec, 2003, 2009; Clavin, 2005).

Since the first prominent papers on transnational migration (Glick Schiller et al., 1992, 1994), it is clear that the transnational connections and relations are not being engaged by all members of the transmigrant community – or diaspora. That was later shown in multiple studies, including a study of the transmigrant communities from Columbia, El-Salvador and the Dominican Republic in United States and showed that only few are involved in the transnational activities, and even fewer in the political transnational activity – yet some are involved sometimes or in ad-hock events (Guarnizo, Portes & Haller, 2003); a study of the transnational identity and activity of Jewish youth in Ukraine (Golbert, 2001); a study of the Dominican transmigrants in the United States showed that only few were involved in many of the transnational activities (Itzigsohn, Cabral, Medina & Vazquez, 1999); a study of transmigrants business enterprises showed a diversity in the ways and extents of transnational connection (Portes & Martinez, 2019); A study of opposition groups acting in the Sri-Lankan and Turkish diasporas showed that only some of the diaspora communities were active, and even them in various degrees of activity (Adamson, 2019). This suggests that many have noted that the migrant community does not engage homogeneously in transnational connections, activities, and transfers – some are more engaged. In contrast, others are not engaged at all. This understanding is so broad and deep among transnational theory scholars that in a review paper about transnational migration and engagement it was said that from a transmigrant community only small part are involved in these activities (Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt, 2017) and a paper reviewing the way to study transnational relations it

was recommended to study, and to interview, only the few that are engaged in the transnational connection (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

Another question remains: how does transnational transfer actually happen? To explore this, we draw on the concept of a critical community (Chabot, 2004), which originates from the field of social movement studies. In analyzing political and protest groups, the concept of 'Transnational Diffusion' describes how one political or protest group influences another from a different country or culture (Chabot & Duyvendak, 2002; Chabot, 2004). Chabot (2004) explained the transnational spread of ideas between the Gandhian non-violent movement in India and the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. in the United States. He stated that a critical community forms when "members make the adoption of foreign protest methods possible by employing them to develop new oppositional discourses or organize collective action campaigns" (Chabot, 2004, p.23).

Critical Community

To understand transnational transfer, it is beneficial to explore the concept of 'Critical Community.' This concept, introduced by Thomas Rochon (1998), describes a small group of individuals who influence and disseminate new ideas across societies. Rochon argued that these communities are vital in developing and spreading new ideas through social movements.

This concept was suggested by Thomas Rochon (1998) when Rochon tried to explain how values are created and then transferred between societies. He claims that this is done by "small communities of critical thinkers play in developing new ideas and inspiring their dissemination through larger social movements." That "have developed a sensitivity to some problem, an analysis of the sources of the problem, and a prescription for what should be done about the problem" (Rochon, 1998, p.22).

Later, this concept was used by Sean Chabot in the study of political and protest groups. The concept of transnational diffusion refers to the influence of one political or protest group on another group from a different country and culture (Chabot & Duyvendak, 2002; Chabot, 2004). In his research concerning the transnational diffusion between Gandhi's independence movement in India and the civil rights movement in the United States, Chabot (2004, p.23) observed that members of critical communities "make the adoption of foreign protest methods possible by employing them to develop new oppositional discourses or organize collective action campaigns." These protest groups are often interconnected, sometimes through members who have lived in both countries, and sometimes through shared ideologies and values. The members of the critical community in the destination country reframe the ideas of the protest group in the country of influence.

In the case of the connection between Gandhi's movement in India and the civil rights movement in the United States, the critical community consisted of African American activists who were part of Martin Luther King Jr.'s circle and had learned about Gandhi's teachings during their time in India. These connections led to King visiting India in 1959, learning about Gandhi's concept of nonviolent direct action and applying it to the American civil rights movement. This case of transnational diffusion was facilitated by the critical community of African American scholars active in the American civil rights movement, who traveled to India to learn from the Gandhian movement (Chabot & Duyvendak, 2002; Chabot, 2004).

Chabot further explained the importance of what he called “dialogue” in spreading ideas and action repertoires among social movements (Chabot, 2010). Dialogue is a cyclical process where a group first gains “awareness” of an idea, and then the idea (or activity) is moved and “translated” from one movement to another in a different location. The movement that adopts these ideas and activities then “experiments” with them until they are eventually spread and integrated.

The idea of a "critical community" was also adopted by Edward Goetz (2005) as he tried to explain the emergence of "Growth Management" as a concept of the "Smart Growth Movement" and used the concept of critical community by Rochon to explain the creation of the values, but mostly to policy demands of this movement. Therefore, it involves the creation and dissemination of ideas, as well as fostering this movement.

Recent studies, such as those by Segal (2023) and Segal & Greenspan (2024), have applied the concept of ‘Critical Community’ to various transnational contexts. For example, the introduction of baseball in Israel by American Jewish migrants and the influence of American conservatism on Israeli politics both show how ‘Critical Community’ helps facilitate transnational transfer. These studies demonstrate that the concept of a ‘Critical Community’ can explain the transfer of not only political ideas but also cultural practices.

As shown in a paper about baseball in Israel (Segal, 2023), baseball was introduced to Israel due to the efforts of a group of Jewish migrants from the United States, who received support and collaboration from members of the American Jewish community. Therefore, this example can be seen as a case of transnational cultural diffusion driven by a key community — mainly members of the American Jewish community, most of whom migrated to Israel.

Another recent study that demonstrates the importance of the concept ‘critical community’ (Segal & Greenspan, 2024) focuses on how the establishment organizations that were facilitated by the actions of Jewish migrants from the United States and Israelis who spent years in the United States, together with funding from American Jewish philanthropists associated with American conservatism. Therefore, this study supports the role of a “critical community” in building these organizations and the transnational transfer of conservative ideas from the United States to Israel. The organizations that were studied in that research provide a place for people who desire this kind of ideological home, many of them Jewish migrants from the United States. Ideas from American conservatism have a significant influence on them. This critical community enables and promotes philanthropic support to these organizations, thus facilitating the transfer of conservative ideas from the United States to Israel. It also enacts what Chabot called "dialogue" (Chabot, 2010) as the new acquisition of conservative ideas is translated to Israel.

That study demonstrated how American Jewry serves as a critical community for the political transfer of American conservatism to Israel, so much so that people born in Israel are becoming supporters of this ideology. Some American Jews, as part of the Jewish diaspora, are engaged in the attempt to influence Israel by promoting Israeli conservatism derived from American conservatism.

The last example of the use of the concept ‘critical community’ came in a historical study of Soviet Union Jews in Berlin during the 1920s and how they were agents of the Soviet culture and political influence that was, as it seems, part of the Soviet Union's attempts at cultural diplomacy (Zhuravel Segal, 2024). This recent paper has two important contributions to the development of the concept ‘critical community’. First, it is a historical study – not part of a

sociological or social science publication – in this regard. Second, and more importantly, it demonstrates an example of a critical community supported by a government to enhance its diplomatic endeavors, thereby extending the concept beyond the activities of individuals in protest groups and expanding the circumstances in which this concept is applicable.

This indicates that the concept of a “critical community” can be applied beyond cases in which a political or protest group is affected by another group from a different country and culture, as described in previous studies (Chabot & Duyvendak, 2002; Chabot, 2004), and beyond being a small group of scholars (Rochon, 1998). This may explain the “how” of transnational transference. This concept may be beneficial in cases of transnational transfer where the transfer is conducted by a small group of people who convey values, beliefs, political ideas, cultural aspects, work methods, and other aspects. Therefore, it seems the concept of ‘critical community’ might be able to address the lacuna in the transnational transference theory.

Looking Back At Possible Critical Communities

The notion that transnational connections and transnational transfers are not undertaken by all members of the diaspora or the migrant community is not new. Alejandro Portes and others have noted that only a small portion of transmigrants are engaged in transnational activities, such as business entrepreneurship or political activity (Portes, 2003; Portes & Landolt, 2017; Guarnizo, Portes, & Haller, 2003). However, Portes (2003) claims that this limited group has a highly influential connection with the country of origin. This conclusion was later confirmed in a study on immigrants' enterprises and the ways and extent to which different migrants are engaged in them (Portes & Martinez, 2019).

This notion is returned to several other papers. A paper about the Dominican diaspora in the United States indicated that there are different ways and extents of engaging in transnational activity by entrepreneurs, political activists, civil society organizations, etc. (Itzigsohn, Dore Cabral, Hernandez Medina, and Vazquez, 1999), and same was shown in a paper about the Mexican transmigrants in the United States (Weber, 1999). A paper about migrants from the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Haiti showed various transnational activities, done to different extents by these migrants (Itzigsohn, 2000). This aspect was also shown in a paper about musicians collaborating to create together “World music” (Glick Schiller & Meinhof, 2011).

Peggy Levitt's (1998, 2001) concept of Social Remittances offers one of the earliest systematic accounts of how ideas, practices, and identities circulate across borders through migrant networks. Levitt emphasizes everyday actors—families, congregations, and neighborhood associations—as transmitters of “normative structures, systems of practice, and social capital.” In contrast, the “Critical Community” functions at a higher level of intentionality and organization. It is not merely a byproduct of kinship networks but rather a self-conscious group engaged in ideological, political, or cultural translation. In this sense, while social remittances capture the content of what travels, critical communities explain the agency and structure that make such travel effective.

Another conceptual neighbor is Epistemic Communities (Haas, 1992), defined as networks of professionals who share a standard set of causal beliefs and normative commitments, shaping international policy outcomes. Both epistemic and critical communities revolve around the transmission of ideas and the pursuit of normative change. However, the latter are not limited to professional expertise; they may include activists, migrants, philanthropists, or cultural mediators

whose influence stems from their positionality between societies rather than from institutional authority. Hence, “Critical Community” broadens the epistemic community framework to encompass social, cultural, and diasporic forms of knowledge exchange.

Similarly, Transnational Advocacy Networks (Keck & Sikkink, 1998) describe actors who mobilize around principled ideas to influence state behavior. However, advocacy networks presuppose formalized organization and a clear political purpose, whereas critical communities may act informally and disseminate ideas through cultural, philanthropic, or artistic channels. For example, as shown in the baseball case (Segal, 2023), cultural diffusion can precede and even enable later political or ideological mobilization. Thus, “Critical Community” captures the formative, often pre-political phase of transnational connection.

By bridging these frameworks, the “Critical Community” contributes a missing layer to transnational theory: an analytical focus on the mediating collectivity that operates between individuals and institutions, as well as between informal cultural transfer and formal political activism. In this sense, it fills the long-standing lacuna in the “how” of transnational transference.

Historical and contemporary diasporas offer numerous examples of groups that can be retrospectively understood as critical communities. Examining these cases extends the explanatory reach of the concept beyond its original sociocultural and Jewish contexts.

One early example can be found in the Irish-American diaspora during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Irish migrants in the United States were not only financial supporters of Irish nationalism but also transmitted republican and labor-organizing ideals back to Ireland (McCaffrey, 1976; O’Day, 1999). Small circles of journalists, clergy, and activists—often moving back and forth between New York and Dublin—functioned as a critical community that reframed Irish independence within the context of American democratic discourse. Their transnational networks fostered both the cultural mythos and the institutional models of the later Irish Free State.

A second case involves the Cuban exile community in Miami after 1959. Although the Cuban diaspora is vast and heterogeneous, a small elite of intellectuals, business owners, and media figures constituted a distinct critical community promoting neoliberal and anti-communist values (Eckstein, 2009). Through philanthropic foundations, think tanks, and cultural media, they facilitated the circulation of ideological and economic models that reshaped U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba while also preparing alternative cultural imaginaries for a “future Cuba.” This case highlights how critical communities can influence not only the original society but also international discourses surrounding it.

A third illustrative example comes from the Iranian student diaspora in Europe and North America during the 1960s and 1970s. Organizations such as the Confederation of Iranian Students operated as transnational hubs of intellectual exchange (Afary, 1991). Members who studied abroad absorbed global leftist and anti-colonial ideas, translating them into the idioms of Iranian political opposition. Many returned after the 1979 revolution, bridging the global New Left with local revolutionary discourse. The Iranian case illustrates how education, exile, and activism intersect to form a critical community whose transnational position catalyzes political transformation.

Together, these examples demonstrate that the analytical utility of “Critical Community” extends well beyond its initial empirical base. Whether through philanthropy, activism, or cultural innovation, small groups situated between societies consistently mediate transnational transfers of value, ideology, and practice.

Therefore, the concept of 'critical community' can be valuable for more than political or protest movements, and for more than "a small community of scholars." This concept can resolve a lacuna in the literature of transnational theory. This concept can help us understand the "how" of transnational transfer and differentiate between groups within migrant societies.

Methodological Extension: Researching Critical Communities

While conceptually robust, the study of critical communities remains methodologically underdeveloped. To advance this field, future research could explore several complementary directions.

First, operationalizing the concept requires identifying empirical markers of a critical community. These may include: (a) sustained cross-border communication and travel; (b) shared interpretive frameworks or normative commitments; (c) a dual orientation toward both origin and destination societies; and (d) observable acts of translation, adaptation, or reframing of ideas. Network analysis could reveal the relational architecture of these communities, while discourse analysis could unpack the narratives that sustain them.

Second, ethnographic and historical approaches could trace how critical communities evolve. Archival research may uncover the transnational biographies of individuals who function as "bridge figures" (cf. Levitt, 2001), while multi-sited ethnography could observe how such communities operate in practice. Combining qualitative and quantitative network mapping would allow scholars to link subjective meaning-making with structural connectivity.

Third, attention should be paid to the interaction among multiple critical communities. Within a single diaspora, several such communities may coexist—religious, cultural, political—each promoting different visions of transnational belonging. Comparative studies could examine whether these communities compete, cooperate, or remain mutually isolated. The interplay among them might illuminate the internal heterogeneity of transnational engagement.

Ultimately, future research should investigate the contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of critical communities. These include the political openness of the destination society, the presence of supportive institutions (such as media or philanthropy), and the degree of receptivity in the original society. One working hypothesis could be that the more institutionalized a critical community becomes (through formal organizations, educational institutions, or foundations), the more durable its transnational influence will be. Conversely, loosely organized communities may act more flexibly but have shorter temporal impact.

By developing such methodological tools, scholars can move from identifying critical communities descriptively to analyzing their mechanisms systematically. This would not only enrich transnational theory but also connect it with broader discussions in social movement research, diaspora studies, and global sociology.

Conclusion and Discussion

This paper examines the potential for rethinking the theory of transnational transfer and migration. By focusing on an explanation of the "how" of transnational transfer, I suggest using the concept of a "critical community." The concept of a 'Critical Community' can explain not only the more active members of a migrant society but also the way various values, ideas, perceptions, or cultural aspects, which might not only differ from each other but also conflict with one another.

This paper argues for the rethinking of transnational migration theory by focusing on the concept of 'Critical Community.' This concept clarifies how transnational transfer operates and how different values, ideas, or cultural aspects may be involved. The cases of baseball and conservatism in Israel illustrate how critical communities can facilitate the transnational diffusion of ideas.

I argue that the introduction of both baseball and conservatism to Israel, as discussed in the relevant papers, has been a process of transnational diffusion prompted by a critical community. Looking back at papers dealing with transnational connections and transference, as well as transmigrants, the concept of 'critical community' can explain the group of migrants who are more actively engaged in transnational activities, as these papers explicitly mention. Hence, this concept helps explain how the relevant transnational transfer is accomplished.

Therefore, 'Critical Community' can be a valuable concept for transnational theory. As shown in recent papers, as well as older papers on transnational migration, the Critical Community can explain the differentiation of migrant societies, as well as understand the "how" of transnational transfer.

Future studies can address some of the ways that critical communities enable the transnational transfer. One aspect can be the way values, ideas, or cultural aspects manifest in the society of the destination. Chabot (2010) suggested that transnational diffusion happens by a process of "dialogue." Dialogue is a cyclical process whereby a group first develops "awareness" of an idea. Subsequently, the idea is dislocated and "translated" from one place to another in a different place. The movement that absorbs these ideas and activities then "experiments" with them till eventually they are diffused and integrated. This concept was introduced in a paper that did not even mention the concept of 'critical community'; yet 'dialogue' is a concept that can contribute to the ways a critical community works. In one of the recent papers that used the concept of 'critical community,' the concept of 'dialogue' was also used to understand the way American conservatism is transferred to Israel and the way this ideology is being "translated" to Israel – by using a combination of American ideas and work methods with Israeli work methods (Segal & Greenspan, 2024).

Other aspects to be elaborated in the future are to understand better how the size of the critical community, along with its characteristics and the context of its operation (the context of both societies), impacts the way the critical community works. That is, with the way the critical community is part of a group or a society of migrants, and perhaps the interactions, if any, between critical communities.

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