The transnationalized social question

Interview with Thomas Faist

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Título   A questão social transnational

Thomas Faist (PhD, New School for Social Research) é professor de Sociologia Transnacional, Migrações e Desenvolvimento na Universidade de Bielefeld na Alemanha. Dirige o Centro sobre Migração, Cidadania e Desenvolvimento (COMCAD). Thomas Faist tem contribuído para os debates sobre cidadania, transnacionalismo, migração e política social em curso na Europa e fora dela. É autor e co-autor de numerosos livros, incluindo *The Transnationalized Social Question: Migration and the Politics of Social Inequalities in the Twenty-First Century* (2019), *Disentangling Migration and Climate Change* (2016), *Transnational Migration* (2013), assim como *Citizenship: Discourse, Theory and Transnational Prospects* (2007), e *Dual Citizenship in Europe* (2007). Thomas Faist é membro da North Rhine-Westphalian Academy of Sciences, Humanities and the Arts.

Observatório da Emigração (ahead OEm) – We would like to know a little bit more how you gain interest in the subject of migrations, did it started while you were studying? Did it come later during your research work? Could you tell us a little more about it?

Thomas Faist (ahead TF) – My interest in migration slowly evolved over the years. As a teenager I was curious as regards the experiences of some of my cousins who had migrated to South Africa which then was still an Apartheid state. Much later, while spending time in Memphis, Tennessee, and working on the Civil Rights Movement, I became interested in solidaristic counter-movements against racist exclusion. One of the main cases which caught my interest was the 1968 strike of African-American sanitation workers in the course of which Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered. This work during which I also assembled an audio-visual show on civil rights for the Memphis public schools spurred my curiosity in the intersections of migration connected to group differences along the lines of class, race & ethnicity – a theme I took up again in my dissertation when studying school-to-work transition among minorities in the US and Germany.

OEm – Your lecture with the Emigration Observatory focuses on the transnationalized social question, essentially on issues of migration and inequality policies. In this context you speak of a transnational social question, what can we imagine by this and what consequences does this have for the evaluation of inequalities?

TF – The idea of the social question came up across Europe in response to the fundamental societal transformations brought about by the Industrial Revolution, which entailed challenges to not simply the economic realm, but to the political, cultural and social order. Capitalist industrialization resulted in unprecedented levels of prosperity for the privileged and at the same time generated heightened levels of inequality for the workers. The social question was understood to refer to unsustainable social inequalities which needed to be removed. In this context the social question referred to manifold social problems, such as poverty, unemployment or crime. In a nutshell, the social question is the following: how do societies deal with the multitude of social problems brought about by unrestrained capitalism, which, when left unaddressed, causes ethically unacceptable levels of human suffering due to inequality? The contemporary social question is located at the interstices between the global South and the global North. It finds its expression in movements of people, seeking a better life or fleeing unsustainable social, political, economic, and ecological conditions. It is transnationalized because migrants and their significant others entertain ties across the borders of national states in transnational social spaces; because of the cross-border diffusion of norms such as human rights; and because there are implications of migration for social inequalities within national states. And, as in the nineteenth century, political conflicts arise, constituting the social question as a public concern. In earlier periods class differences dominated conflicts. While class

has always been criss-crossed by manifold differences between groups, not least of all cultural ones around ethnicity, religion, and language, it is these latter heterogeneities that have sharpened in situations of immigration and emigration over the past decades.

OEm – What role do marketisation, securitisation and developmentalism play in the process of understanding the issue of the transnational social question?

TF – Analytically, it is still useful to distinguish between emigration and immigration states although practically all states are both. In immigration states, politics around migration and inequalities runs along two major lines: economic and cultural divisions. Economic divisions refer to market liberalization viz. marketization on the one hand and the de-commodification of labour as part of the welfare paradox on the other hand: economic openness towards capital transfer is in tension with political closure towards migrants. This is the opposition of the competition state vs. the welfare state. In the cultural realm, the contention relates to a clash between cultural rights based on the human rights revolution on the one hand and the myth of national-cultural homogeneity on the other hand. It finds expression in the liberal paradox: the extension of human rights to migrants who reside in welfare states vs. the efforts to control borders and cultural boundaries. Threat perceptions often lead to a securitisation of migration, a juxtaposition of the multicultural state and the democratic-national state. Economic divisions along class lines structure the politicization of cultural heterogeneities. For example, social integration of high skilled migrants is often regarded as a non-issue while cultural differences of lower-class migrants are thematised. In emigration states, dichotomies in political debates still revolve around the notion of development and conflicting notions of developmentalism as an ideology and set of policies to further social progress. In order to understand how emigration states deal with emigration, return migration, remittances, and diaspora formation, my analysis departs from the notion of the developmental state. However, since the 1980s, international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have cherished and strengthened market mechanisms, civil society actors, and the local state, so politics around emigration helps to elucidate the juxtaposition of the national development state vs. the market–civil society–local state compact. The national development state is the functional equivalent to the national welfare state, and the market state is the equivalent of the competition state. With regard to both economic and cultural issues, the notion of diaspora reigns paramount. On the one hand, emigration states often foster ties to their diaspora abroad. On the other hand, the diaspora is sometimes seen by emigration states as a competitor or threat to nation-building and the consolidation of political power.

OEm – From what I've been reading you argue that a dominant theory on the transnational social question is lacking, that nowadays, no theory represents what socialism represented for the social question in the 19th and 20th Century. What role do you imagine for ideologies and political narratives in contemporary European politics in shaping the future of European integration?

TF – Political narratives connected to ideologies play a pivotal role in advancing the discussion on the transnationalized social question in Europe because they help us to grapple with the future of the welfare state in the global North and its equivalent in the global South, the developmental state. There is an urgent need not only to analyze the expansion of individualistic conceptions of society and the challenges to solidarity. There is also a push to think anew what we mean by social order and equality by bringing in not only class or identity but a whole range of differences between groups. The contemporary pluralisation of theories helps us to think of the (re)production of inequalities in more complex and adequate ways. In the classic version of the social question in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, this agent clearly was a (social) class – the proletariat, in opposition to the bourgeoisie. Nowadays, even in postmodern approaches, the concern with inequalities but also with capitalism and democracy has not disappeared. Nevertheless, in order to be useful for tackling the contemporary social question which includes many group differences, one has to decouple class from the previously assumed sovereignty of allegedly objective economic interests. Yet this needs to be done without dissolving it into identity politics or reducing it into a concoction of language. In order to defend the European project and to include a stronger social dimension, we need to avoid both a single-minded focus on identity politics and policies which usually end up in us *vs.* other politics and a backward-oriented politics on class to the detriment of other heterogeneities.

OEm – And how can a movement like Brexit compromise the work of integration that has been created within the EU? Given that much of the exit campaign focused on the issue of migration and mobility.

TF – Brexit is one of the deleterious results of neoliberalism fused with populist ideology and dreams of past and future grandeur. One of the roots of Brexit is neoliberal ideology that did not seek to free the market from the state, but rather uses states in designing institutions to inoculate markets from unwelcome regulating politics. A consequence has been the production of extreme levels of inequality in countries such as the US and the UK. In conjunction with these socio-economic developments, populism has channeled dissatisfaction around inequalities onto a neoliberal cum authoritarian path by ever more restrictive rules as regards cross-border mobility – not of all migrants but of those unwanted and unwelcome, among them many refugees. Migrants and refugees have once again, as so often in the history of the social question, become connected to migration as a meta-issue – migration as a catch-all "explana-

tion" for all sorts of social problems, ranging from unemployment to poverty. This is a deplorable state of affairs because contemporary inequality has acquired a heightened transnational character, so too must remedies also operate beyond the borders of national states, preferably in a multilateral or even supranational manner.

OEm – Another issue that has dominated European political debates in the past years concerns migration within the EU and in particular the problem of transnational welfare among Member States. How do you evaluate such problem? What role should be assigned to European and national institutions?

TF – There is a clearly stratified order between various types of migrants with respect to legally sanctioned access to social rights and services. At the top tier are those migrants who are now sedentary. This is so because it usually takes a while to get full residence and employment rights for EU citizens in other member states. The tier below is composed also of EU citizens in other countries but those who could be called circular migrants. Often, the rules regulating the transfer of social security contributions are complex. In short, this setup favours one-time migration, not repeat migration across the borders of EU member states. In the third tier we find non-EU citizens, that is, extracommunitari who, as a rule, do not enjoy freedom of movement within the EU and have limited access to labour markets. Politically, this freedom has been rejected by critics to mean the free movement of unemployment and poverty. Given this hierarchy of (non-)citizen access to social rights and services in the EU, it is essential to look at the underlying causes for conflicts over transnational social rights. Where social protection and migration are concerned, there is at present no prospect of harmonization of status between third-country citizens and EU citizens, because national welfare states are not prepared to relinquish control over their employment markets and social protection systems to supranational institutions. This is easily illustrated by the example of freedom of movement for workers. Brazilians of Portuguese descent may adopt the citizenship of their ancestors; they then have the option of settling not only in Portugal, but in any other EU member state. Survey evidence on naturalization processes in, for example, Italy finds that better opportunities for moving to other countries was the second most chosen reason for wanting to obtain Italian citizenship. In these and similar cases, other member states have no control over the mobility of workers according to citizenship. What constitutes an employee, for example, is increasingly defined and determined by the EU Commission. Yet member states do have the ability to exercise control over individuals from third states, however. In this way, they use migration control and sometimes also naturalization policies vis-à-vis third-country nationals to regulate their respective labour markets and, hence, working conditions, wage costs and (social) citizenship. Access to national citizenship thus becomes an indirect instrument for controlling labour markets and access to social rights as regards third-country citizens.

OEm – In the chapter "Inclusion, exclusion, and citizenship: European practices" of the book *Europe: No Migrant's Land?* **(2016), you discuss the greatest difficulty, at European level, in obtaining citizenship in several EU Member States, this after a short period of simplification of the process. With the increase in speeches from the extreme right all over Europe and the large migratory flow (including refugees and asylum seekers) that has hit the European continent due to the humanitarian crisis in Syria, several North African countries, etc., do you think that we may be facing a possible hardening of the policies of access to obtain citizenship? Or do you think that these speeches will only have an influence on entry policies and the restriction of their rights?**

TF – Contemporary Europe seems to favour a citizenship model that privileges individuals as bearers of "human capital" and draws a close link between work, economic productivity, and social justice. Free-floating individuals in the market sphere enjoy a contract with the nation-state only if they contribute to the economic prosperity and are not a burden to the social welfare system. More specifically, liberal-democratic states in Europe are increasingly leaning not against foreigners per se, but against a specific type of immigrant which seems incompatible with liberal ways of life. The selection of immigrants has shifted from openly discriminatory group-level exclusion to application of the criterion of individualistic skills, in addition to criteria based on human rights, such as family reunification and asylum. The blurring of racial, ethnic, and religious boundaries is enforced by a human rights discourse that stigmatizes group-level exclusion, but sanctions individual-level exclusion based on preferred languages, cultures, and above all human capital (formally highly qualified migrants). As regards refugees and their access to citizenship, the situation is dire. As it is getting harder to make claims to asylum on European soil, fewer refugees have been admitted in recent years. Also, those who file applications for asylum are less and less protected by decisions based on the Geneva Convention but only receive a subsidiary protection status, if they make it into the EU. The latter status means that the refugees have to return to the country of origin once open violence has ended. All of this means that fewer refugees have been able to claim citizenship in the destination countries.

OEm – The evolution of the debate on migration and development has been a focus of your research. What is the current prevailing line of thinking on migration and development? Do you agree with it?

TF – To a certain extent, empirically false assumptions are guiding public policies. For example, one often-heard claim in policy circles is that higher levels of socio-economic development (e.g. per capita income or Human Development Index indicators) make for less emigration from countries of origin. However, research points in a different direction. While this proposition may be true on the long run, the short-term consequences are usually quite different. More resources on the part of potential migrants may lead to an intermittent increase in mi-

gration. This insight is captured by what we call the "inverted U-curve": emigration is relatively low from poor and rich countries as compared to the middling ones, out of which it is relatively higher. Therefore, it is necessary to reject such simplistic causalities and ensure that inevitable mobility can be harnessed to improve the quality of collective goods in the countries of origin.

OEm – What does 'diversity' mean to you by way of your work and your field of expertise? Would you see diversity as a gate opener or as a functional term?

TF – The public discourses on diversity are helpful in directing our attention to the manifold differences viz. heterogeneities between groups which are relevant for categorizing people – for example, class, age, religion, gender, ethnicity & race, sexual orientation. In order to understand the production and reproduction of social inequalities and a whole range for issues labelled social problems, it is necessary to trace the mechanisms by which such heterogeneities turn into inequalities by way of negatively loaded categorizations – for example, the image of the "African-American welfare mother" or the "bogus asylum seeker". It is crucial to discern both the social meta-mechanisms such as social closure, exclusion, opportunity hoarding and exploitation and more fine-grained mechanisms which are at work.

OEm – I think your project "Transnational Mobility and Social Positions in the European Union", which had as its main objective to explore the role of social comparisons as the main social mechanism involved in the nexus of spatial mobility and social positions, is now finished. Can you talk a bit about the main conclusions you have reached with this project?

TF – In this project we asked: How does spatial mobility influence social mobility? Often, the 'objective' structural positions on the one hand and the 'subjective' definition of social positions on the other hand are not considered together. Yet this is necessary in order to gauge the consequences of mobility trajectories reaching across borders. The project thus deals with how we can study the interplay of perceptions of one's own social position and one's 'objective' social position to understand better how spatial mobility influences social mobility. This has required attention to objective social positions, subjective social positioning strategies, transnational approaches to the study of social positions and self-positioning, and social boundary theory. Our results have provided insights regarding the function of social comparisons, mobility trajectories and transnational social positions. Social comparisons are important ways in which migrants reconcile self-perception and outside perceptions in terms of social standing and group membership. This is because contradicting aspects of self-perception and outside perception are often particularly pronounced in migrants' life worlds. They have to reconcile different cultural and social values of social standing in different countries. When we delineated mobility trajectories, we found that very few respondents – migrants residing in Germany – had moved in a singular way from A to B. Quite often, a permanent move from A to B was pre-

ceded by spells of circular migration. And while we have looked at the relationship of mobility trajectories upon social positions and social positioning, the reverse direction from social positions to mobilities is relatively underexplored and thus a gap to be filled in future research.

OEm – I think you were also part of the project team "YMOBILITY – Youth mobility: maximising opportunities for individuals, labour markets and regions in Europe", which focused on nine countries (Romania, Slovakia, Latvia, UK, Sweden, Germany, Italy, Ireland and Spain) with different youth mobility contexts. Were the starting assumptions confirmed with the development of the study or did you discover similarities or differences between the countries that did not count?

TF – The Horizon2020 project "YMOBILITY – Youth mobility: maximising opportunities for individuals, labour markets and regions in Europe" addressed the motivations and experiences of young intra-EU migrants and return migrants and related implications for policies. The project found that the motivations for mobility among the highly skilled and less skilled workers and students often included a mix between the desire to improve one's chances in the labour or educational market and to gain personal experiences and acquire "soft skills", such as learning a new language or dealing with different social norms. Highly skilled workers and international students, particularly from the Southern but also from the Eastern European countries, often said that they are different from other young people who did not migrate by their emancipation from parents and other family member and their ability to live an independent live far away from the place where they grew up. For lower skilled workers, mainly from Eastern Europe, this was not so much the case, as here the economic factors as a driver for mobility were much more important. Regarding policies, it was above all high-skilled workers and international students from Southern and Eastern Europe who deplored that their certificates and diplomas often were not recognised, despite efforts by the EU to advance this process. Support measures provided by the EU as well as national governments for the integration of migrants as well as the social security & welfare system in the destination country are often underused by migrants because of a lack of knowledge and/or an unwillingness to rely on public support. Instead, most migrants use social networks, notably via social media, as their main sources of information and rely on support by family members - which is the most common way of support in many of the origin countries, particularly Spain, Italy, Romania, Latvia and Slovakia.

OEm – The restrictions on mobility imposed by Covid-19 made 2020 an atypical year in terms of international migration in particular and mobility in general. Do you think that after Covid we will see a change in international migration or will we go back to where we were?

TF – All I can do at the present moment is to engage in some sort of informed speculation. Since virtual forms of communication have expanded in recent months across the world, it is

unlikely that we return to a pre-Covid situation once vaccination and other forms of fighting the virus will have succeeded. The trend to engage in home office and other forms of remote virtual work is thus likely to continue. After all, employers have an incentive to save costs by having their employees and free lancers work from home. For some types of office work and service work it could be imagined that home-based virtual communication will partially replace physical mobility and migration. We should thus see a relative decline in cross-border mobility among selected categories of employees.

OEm – Is there a topic or question I haven't asked you about that you would like to talk about?
TF – No. Thank you for your stimulating questions!

OEm – Thank you very much for the interview and availability.

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