Labour Migration from the Seklerland after the Regime Change. A Review of an Anthropological Research Programme

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Abstract. The present review seeks to provide an inventory on the research conducted within the framework of the Department of Social Sciences of the Sapientia – Hungarian University of Transylvania in connection with the phenomenon of labour migration from the Seklerland region (Eastern Transylvania, Romania) during the period of 2005–2010. The concerned geographical area constitutes a peripheral, mostly rural region with only a few small towns. During the 20th century this region has continuously witnessed labour migration, which – due to the restrictions of the communist regime – meant at the time of socialism mostly an intra-country oriented phenomenon. After the 1989 regime change the industry collapsed not only in the considered region but throughout Romania and, consequently, the labour migration from the Seklerland began to be directed farther on, firstly towards Hungary and then towards other countries, so that the phenomenon of 'working abroad' became a salient social issue of the last twenty years. Our results based on the methods of cultural anthropology suggest that compared to the early 1990s when migration was perceived as a curious phenomenon, nowadays the phenomenon of labour migration is considered a more and more natural event of the life course and that those involved in the process are developing ways of behaviours which signal the patterns of transnationalism.

Keywords: labour migration, Seklerland, Romania, cultural anthropology, transnationalism

Introduction

In the present research review I am going to present the summary of the research programmes which had as a major aim to analyze the phenomenon of labour migration from the Seklerland region of Romania after the 1989 regime change. My focus is directed towards those aspects of the research which outline the major trends and patterns occurring in the course of the process of labour migration from the beginning of the 1990s until nowadays.

Our first research goes back to the period of 1994–1995 when, within the framework of the WAC – Centre for Regional and Anthropological Studies, we analyzed the labour migration directed towards Hungary. (In that period, the target country of the migrants was almost exclusively Hungary.) The aim of this research was to reveal the effects of labour migration on emitting environments, that is, on migrants' families and communities remaining at home. Results showed that the effects of labour migration consisted especially in the strengthening of the home world. Migrants' encounter with the strange world abroad – after the hard communist decades – resulted in ways of conduct which allowed them to draw a harsh demarcation between 'us' and 'them'. This demarcation affected the migrants' mentality and worldview and the issue of dichotomized worlds became one of the major aspects of the effects of migration right after the regime change (Bodó, 1996).

In the following period the researchers of the WAC have been continuously focusing on the phenomenon of migration and the migration-centred questions became part of several other research projects. It was in 2005 when we had the opportunity to focus specifically on labour migration and then we began a systematic registration of those important patterns which occurred in connection with the phenomenon. Between 2005 and 2010 we conducted three research programmes in connection with the discussed theme. These programs were realized by several members of the Department of Social Sciences of the Sapientia – Hungarian University of Transylvania, and by Sociology students.

Our results suggested that in the course of today's labour migration from the Seklerland there occur such kinds of tendencies which are similar to those described in the literature in connection with the case of transnational migration. These tendencies are in contrast with the experiences observed at the beginning of the '90s. That is, while in the first years of the transition period migrants separated themselves from the receiving contexts and developed a clearly delimited perception about their home countries and their receiving countries, towards the end of the period migrants have developed a double rooted way of life in which the two worlds of emitting and receiving contexts became more and more fluidized. Consequently, inward oriented attitudes and behaviours have been changed by mechanisms of convergence and near drawing. We witnessed the patterns of duality, in the forms of effective or perceived

twofold living and in forms of connecting to two or more social-cultural spaces (Bodó, 2008). These findings which were revealed in connection with this particular region are similar to those trends which were described in the international literature (for instance: Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton-Blanc, 1995; Faist, 2009; Levitt, 2004; Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007; Kivisto, 2001; Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002; Malkki, 2006; Niedermüller, 2006; Vertovec, 2002). The findings of these international works and their relevance for our research were presented in details in our project outcomes (e.g., Bodó, 2008: 24–30; Bodó, 2009: 32-36; Biró and Bodó, 2009: 12–14).

In the followings I am going to present, in turn, the main conclusions of these three research programmes. Each of the programmes followed the methodology of cultural anthropology, so that we used participatory observation, interviews with migrants (we collected more than 200 transcripts) and case studies, based on which there were several analyses published.

The first research: patterns of transnationalism in the case of labour migration from the Seklerland

The first research titled *Mobility and way of life: the effect of international labour migration on life conduct and identity patterns*[1] intended to study those emigrants who had been working in Hungary. We centred our research around this target group because of the fact that at the beginning of the 2000s, Hungary was the principal direction of emigration among the workers from Seklerland. The analyses of our observations, case studies and interviews let us summarize some of those patterns of the emigrational process which were different from the patterns observed in the early 1990s. The most important signs of change were inventoried in several research reports and articles. By using methods of cultural anthropology, we were able to analyze the considered phenomenon through its socio-cultural embeddedness. In the followings I am going to provide a short enumeration of those aspects which emerged in our research as patterns of transnationalism.

The repositioning of the own world – foreign world opposition

Compared to the period of the early 1990s when migrants operated with a harsh opposition between their own home universe and the foreign world of the receiving country, during the 2000s, migrants started to operate with less harsh oppositions in their representations of the two worlds. Thus, migrants started to use

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[1] The original title of the project, in Hungarian, was the following: *Mobilitás és életforma. A külföldi munkavállalás hatása az életvezetésre, az identitásmodellekre a székelyföldi térségben*. The project was supported by research grant no. 1282/25.10.2005 awarded by the Institute for Scientific Research, Sapientia – Hungarian University of Transylvania.

softer, smaller scale demarcations, for instance instead of 'us' and 'them' they fluidized (depending on contexts) their small home village and community with the urban worlds and ways of life of their receiving country.

Representations of gender

The changing and softening nature of demarcation began to appear also in relation with gender. In migrants' narratives men and women do not represent two major, antagonistic categories any more, but genders are described and represented through nuances focusing on the different gender experiences in the context of the foreign worlds.

Attitudes depending on migrants' family status

Migrants' attitudes towards the foreign world depend much on their family status. Independent people, those living in relationship or in marriages declared different ways through which they are connected both to the receiving contexts and to their homes. This kind of differentiation constitutes a new pattern of migration compared to the more unified habitus of migrants observed in the early 1990s.

Dealing with spatial distance: travelling and communication

The ways in which migrants are dealing with spatial distance is, in turn, very different compared to the early period of the 1990s. Now, the physical space becomes narrower, in the sense that migrants possess new and easier forms of communication through which they are able to overcome spatial distance and to mild the opposition between the two worlds of their home and foreign countries.

Reasons and objectives

There occur important changes also regarding the reasons and objectives of the labour migration. Our observations show that compared to the beginning of the 1990s, this new wave of migration is motivated by everyday and pragmatic reasons. Labour migration does not represent a special event any more, but a familiar, 'normal', taken-for-granted situation both in the case of migrants' environments and in the experiences and attitudes of migrants themselves.

Orientation on the labour market

Compared to the early '90s, today's migrants are orienting themselves with more confidence throughout the foreign labour markets. This leads to the fact that being a labour migrant is not perceived any more as a lower social status by those who experience the phenomenon.

Employment. Is it black, grey or white?

Our findings show that today the majority of emigrant employees are possessing official work permits. At the beginning of the regime change the situation was the reverse and then the prevalence of black work, respectively its unsafe nature had contributed to the existing asymmetry between the home world and the foreign world. The changing situation, that is, the evolution towards white labour makes the status of migrant employee more affordable and acceptable.

Developed region – underdeveloped region

International experiences teach us that migration is usually oriented from underdeveloped regions towards developed regions. Our case reveals the same pattern but, in the meantime, migrants' experiences show – once again – the softening of the demarcations between the home and the receiving region. This latter aspect means that migrants do not experience the development/ underdevelopment dichotomy as the principal character of the two major regions, but this duality is applied to lower life-segments, for instance to the case of employment areas.

Mental representations of the oppositions

The above mentioned aspects constitute an indicator for the way in which the two worlds are represented. Especially young migrants are those who represent the new environment in form of a puzzle, instead of a unified corpus. The foreign world and the new employment place are differentiated into various segments and each segment is represented and evaluated in a different manner towards which migrants develop particular mechanisms of adaptation.

Connections with the home world

The ways in which migrants and their experiences are represented at home, that is, in the migrants' native cultural contexts, have been changed also, compared to the first phase of migration. A decade earlier, labour migration was seen as a special, frequently stigmatized situation. Compared to this, today's labour migrants are taken-for-granted and accepted. The phenomenon became a generalized aspect of life, so that the evaluation of the migrants and their experiences do not require specific efforts and attitudes either from the part of migrants themselves, or from the part of those persons who remain at home.

Employees' narratives

During our research we have been familiarized with the personal history of several migrants and we had also the opportunity to compare these histories with those occurring a decade earlier. The major difference of these personal narratives is that migrants' experiences which occurred in the foreign world (and particularly

their bad experiences) do not constitute specific, salient parts of their grand life narratives, but these episodes are fluidized inside the migrants' life history. This situation denotes, once again, that labour migration does not constitute a special issue, but rather a natural part of the life course.

Second research: youth's labour migration

Our second research project was specifically focused on youth's labour migration and was titled *Employment: at home or abroad. The social background of the international labour migration of the youth from Seklerland*[2]. The focus on youth was motivated by our previous findings which signalled that this socio-demographical category constitutes a more and more salient presence in the emigrational stream. Young people's accentuated presence refers both to the number of young migrants and to those previously mentioned processes which are signs in the direction of transnationalization of the process of migration, in the sense that such patterns are especially characteristic in the case of the young.

This project brought a very rich and varied research material about young migrants, since we succeeded to collect interviews and case studies about youths from different social and geographical environments, about youths with different socio-demographical backgrounds and employment experiences, etc. Through these data we had the opportunity to observe more closely the complex and multi-faceted nature of the youth's labour migration. The richness of the data constituted our most important challenge as well, since we had to look for specific patterns inside these materials with the aim to draw as precisely as possible those developing trends of migration which are typical for this group of people.

We were interested in the following aspects: the youth's specific experiences as a result of their age; motivational factors of migration (both in terms of reasons and aspirations); experiences as migrants (during living abroad and then at home, in forms of remittances); encountering the other world and results of this encounter; the return. A particular interest was directed towards establishing the potential roles played by migrants' emitting environments on their further experiences as foreign employees and on their experiences abroad.

Our findings suggested that the two most important factors which influence migrants' behaviour and mentality are their educational level and their status on the employment market. The major part of young labour migrants is composed of lower educated youth (usually vocational training). There are, of course, other

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[2] The original title of the project, in Hungarian, was the following: *Munkavállalás: itthon vagy külföldön? Székelyföldi fiatalok külföldi vendégmunka-gyakorlatának társadalmi háttere*. The project was supported by the research grant no. 1033/15. 11. 2006 awarded by the Institute for Scientific Research, Sapientia – Hungarian University of Transylvania.

important segments as well, for instance higher education students, who especially during summer holidays go abroad for working reasons. But in general, the number of higher or secondary educated migrants is lower compared to the first category. Our aim was to detect those particular aspects of attitudes and behaviours which can be traced back to migrants' educational backgrounds.

We were interested also in differences according to migrants' target countries. This was motivated on the one hand by the fact that young migrants are choosing increasingly diverse countries for their labour migration. Thus, while at the beginning of our research, Hungary constituted the most important target country, and it has continued to be the leader in this sense, youth are more and more directed towards countries like Germany, Switzerland, United Kingdom, the USA, France, and even Egypt. On the other hand, we put forward the expectation that this choice is related not only to previous narratives of emigrational experience, but also to some personal characteristics, specifically to educational level.

As a summary, we can conclude that the behaviour and mentality of the youth labour migrants from Seklerland is very differentiated, depending on the socio-demographical background of the actors. However, there are also some patterns which are characteristic for older migrants as well. Thus, youth migrants do not see either their migration as a specific, not-seen-before issue, but as a normal event of the life course. Their migration decision is motivated by the aspiration of better earning, in the sense that they are not running away from the risk of being unemployed in the home country, but wish to earn better money abroad. There appear some other important, age related motivations as well. For instance, the learning opportunity (once abroad, youth migrants frequently reported that they were concerned about learning and developing new skills), adventure seeking, curiosity, etc. are important motivations of youth's labour migration.

Youth migrants declared that the economic and knowledge capital which they succeeded to earn abroad are valorized at home and constitute important contributors for their further development in the home country. These patterns are important signals concerning the emitting region, i.e. the Seklerland. The region experiences a continuous flux of labour migration and, in the meantime, continues to be the terrain where migrants' gains (whether in forms of experiences and remittances) are valorized. This group of migrants is very flexible both in the sense of opportunity exploitation and in terms of how migrants represent the receiving environment, i.e. the other world. The first aspect means that youth migrants, once returned home, continue to be open-minded in relation to new working possibilities and are ready to repeat their labour migrant experiences. In spite of this fact, labour migration continues to be a more or less frequently repeatable life event rather than a permanent choice.

Youth's encounter with foreign worlds and cultures signals – beyond the very many individual ways of representations – that norms, attitudes and behaviours

learned abroad are becoming parts of migrants' proper ways of looking at the world. Labour migration itself becomes a fluid terrain of encounter between us and them.

Third research: phenomena of transnationalisation

Our third research project was directed towards the better understanding of those more important trends which were outlined in the previous research programmes. We specified three areas wherein to follow those important changes in mentality and behaviour which can be considered aspects of transnationalisation in the process of migration. These areas were the following: the value system, the world of celebration and holidays, and the ways in which migrants maintain their contacts with their family members left at home. In connection with these three aspects we undertook in-depth qualitative research in order to reveal the ways in which migrants develop attitudes and behaviours which can be regarded as transnational, in the sense that attitudes and practices are bearing both the signs of the home and the foreign universe. The title of the project was: *Dividing space by relationships, rituals and values in the context of transnational migration*[3].

In connection with the three outlined areas we made the following observations.

The world of *values* constitutes the area in which some signs of transnationalism can be best outlined. Migrants hold values which are dividing between the home and foreign world, but this dividing does not mean a harsh separation. Migrants are able to differentiate norms and ways of conduct which are specific for one world or another, but they do not reject explicitly the norms of the foreign world. What is typical is the interpretation of the new value systems and their integration into the personal value system. In this sense, we can mention some signs of value change as well. For instance, there are signs of shifting from materialist towards post-materialist value orientations. Once migrants experience wealth and are able to consume a sort of material goods, they are beginning to attach greater importance to higher order values.

Migrants are in permanent *contacts* with their home world and this constitutes one of the patterns of transnationalism in the process of migration. For a migrant, different forms of contacts enable a comfortable living in the receiving country and enable migrants to remain up-to-date with those life events which occur in the emitting universe, that is, in their country and particularly within their close community and family.

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[3] The original title of the project, in Hungarian, was the following: *A tér kapcsolatok, rituálék és értékek szerinti felosztásának vizsgálata a transznacionális migrációs folyamatokban*. The project was supported by the research grant no. 209/40/02, April 2009, awarded by the Institute for Scientific Research, Sapientia – Hungarian University of Transylvania.

Migrants maintain their contacts with their home in various forms. Our research findings suggest that migrants enter in contact at least once a week, but generally every day with their home usually through the modern communicational devices and instruments, like Internet or mobile phones. The most important actors involved in these communications are, besides the migrants themselves, the members of the migrants' in-groups, that is, friends and family members. It is important to mention that according to our data, among the family members left at home, usually women are the most important contact persons, that is, they are responsible for keeping in touch with the migrants. Themes of the communication are usually centred around local news.

For the purpose of our analysis we established three types of holidays: official holidays, turning points of personal lives and holidays of smaller communities (friends, village, etc.). Migrants are returning home most frequently in the case of official holidays. At the same time, these types of holidays most negatively affect migrants' earnings, since in the case of return they miss an important part of their earnings.

Migrants are returning quite frequently to their families in the case of those holidays which mark the turning points of their personal lives, too. These events, however personal in their nature, take place usually within the small community (i.e. the extended family). Our findings suggest that these types of celebrations constitute, in the context of a more and more individualized world, opportunities for community-based linkages and networks centred around the migrant him/herself.

In the case of the third types of holidays we were able to observe how these newly emerged holidays have become opportunities for ritualistic and buzzing celebration of certain communities (e.g. circle of friends, rural communities, etc.). Migrants found that these are important opportunities for them and usually decide to travel back home for these fiestas which constitute, besides the event itself, opportunities for keeping one's local social networks alive.

Gifting, as a ritual activity has suffered changes over time and these changes are in accordance with the modification of the phenomena of migration. The normalization and everyday nature of the migration has brought with it the reduction of the gifts values and the diminution of the number of those who receive gifts from the migrants. All these changes affected the symbolic nature of gift.

As a conclusion of our third research project, it can be assessed that in the practice of transnational migration the connectedness with the home world and the maintenance of the home-based networks constitute important facets. Migrants however actuate these networks without entering in conflicts with the 'other' universe or with the actors of this universe. Consequently, migrants are able to deeply and openly live their home-based world, meanwhile this preoccupation is not ostentatious in the eyes of the 'others'. The numerous bridges between the two worlds allow migrants to connect and identify themselves to both worlds. Thus, they

are not forced to isolate themselves from any of these worlds, on the contrary, they are able to develop flexible relationships with both kinds of worlds. The changes in value systems, the specific aspects of communication and celebration, the new communicational devices offer numerous opportunities for splitting between the two worlds without conflicts and without harsh oppositions between them.

Concluding remarks

The findings of our research allow us to conclude that in the process of the international labour migration from Seklerland, there occur important aspects of transnationalisation and these aspects have become more and more accentuated and complex. From the perspective of our research, this means that the pattern which we found at the beginning of the 1990's and in which migrants operated with harsh oppositions between their home and foreign universes, lost its dominance and relevance. Instead of this pattern, there has appeared this new pattern of transnationalisation, according to which migrants are connected to both universes and the 'us' and 'them' do not constitute conflicting entities any more. It should be accentuated however that the phenomena of transnationalism occurs with different intensity depending on the types of actors, experiences and situations involved. Migrants' universes and corresponding practices are not so harshly delimited as two decades ago; however, elements of demarcation and opposition still continue to exist, but are obviously less acute as during the 1990s. Thus, it is legitimate to conclude that these two patterns are not completely exclusive, but are rather fading into each other.

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