

Bruno Riccio

Boris Nieswand, "Theorising Transnational Migration. The Status Paradox of Migration". London: Routledge, 2011, 199 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/74874)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-agosto 2013

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

**Licenza d'uso**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

## Book reviews

**Boris Nieswand, *Theorising Transnational Migration. The Status Paradox of Migration*. London: Routledge, 2011, 199 pp.**

10.2383/74874

Within the social sciences, the transnational approach towards migration is more than twenty years old and it becomes more and more difficult to say something new and clever about it. This multi-sited study of transnational migrants between Ghana and Germany manages to overcome this difficulty by providing readers with an ethnography informed by a theoretically rich and analytically challenging discussion.

The protagonists of this book are the so called Burgers, an empirically induced ideal-type made by people who are considered neither highly qualified from the receiving country viewpoint, nor unskilled, poor or persecuted when perceived from the context of origin. They become mobile people to follow the expectations induced by the post-colonial ideal of a "modern" education in the countries of immigration. It is in these contexts that they experience, together with racialization and marginalisation, a loss of social status if compared to their aspirations. On the other hand, they often manage to enhance their status in the context of origin thanks to their engagement with remittances, investments in houses or local businesses and family rituals, such as funerals. This is the status paradox of migration. By relying on transnational and simultaneous inclusion in two nation states, these migrants exploit economic differences between contexts, but depend at same time on the conversion of economic capital into social status in the country of origin. They improve their status in Ghana by losing it in Germany. Their experiences provide an empirical example of the usefulness of a transnational perspective towards migration and free the analysis of social inequalities from methodological nationalism.

Indeed, the first chapter is focused on the analytical framework and on the need to overcome 'methodological nationalism'. In anthropology and the social sciences this notion refers to the assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world. In the empirical studies of migration it is indeed this process of naturalisation that has been particularly challenged by the transnational perspective on migration. Moving from the debate on immigration and integration into nation-states to the pioneering anthropological studies on rural-urban migration in Southern Africa in the 50's, to the closer conceptualisation of the migrant within the world-society, Nieswand shapes his perspective and calls it methodological transnationalism.

However, the adoption of a non state-centred approach does not imply the removal of the state and its impact as element of the analysis. For instance, when seen from Germany, transnational migration is discussed by stressing the role of border regimes and the significance of national labour markets. The author takes into account also the active role of the sending state in shaping a transnational social field by introducing the double citizenship law and diaspora policies introduced by Ghanaian governments throughout the 2000's. Indeed, national politicians use in multiple ways transnational connections like informal political capital, as testified by the birth of the Ghanaian Ministry of Tourism and Diaspora Relations.

Together with an historical background of the emigration from Ghana, the main focus of the chapter two is the link between transnational migration and the disillusion towards the aspirations induced by mass education. Supporting his argument with a case study, Nieswand shows how young men, because of their qualifications, had status claims that could not be satisfied and opted towards migration instead.

In chapter three the author analyses the process of socio-cultural localisation of migrants in Germany and more specifically in Berlin. Here the reader dives in the episodes of racisms, especially in Eastern Germany, the interplay with other ethnic groups like the Turks, the ambivalence characterising moral obligations among Ghanaian themselves and the institutionalisation of the situational relevance of ethnicity provided by different types of migrant organisations such as home-town associations or public events. The discussion of the multiple processes of identification is sophisticated and shows the coexistence of categories strictly connected to the locality of immigration (legal status, East vs. West Germans) and a symbolic repertoire stemming from Ghanaian discourses and regional divisions. This leads to the fourth chapter that focuses on processes of transnationalisation.

Here transnational migration is treated in its multidimensionality, taking into account economic engagements as much as kinship relationships connecting migrants and non-migrants. Nieswand shows how strategic interests and moral obligations may co-exist. The readers are led to understand how migrants build up symbolic representation of middle-class status in Ghana. Yet, they do so by doing working-class jobs in Germany and this status paradox constitutes the focus of chapter five, where a discussion of social status is approached theoretically, historically and ethnographically.

Transnational migration does not solve the problem of status inconsistency but shifts the problem from the national to the transnational space. In other words, Nieswand's book deals with global inequality analysed with the right balance or distance between celebratory readings of transnational migration and the portraits of migrants as victims caught in the double suffering of the global regime of power. In his analytical perspective, the author recognises migrants' agency without underrating the weight of transnational inequality. This book is a must for anthropologists, sociologists and any scholar interested in migration studies.

*Bruno Riccio*  
University of Bologna