

## **TRANSNATIONAL CIVIC AND POLITIC PARTICIPATION: EXAMINING THE PRACTICES OF CHILEAN AND TUNISIAN ORGANISATIONS IN ITALY**

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### **Research problem's formulation**

This PhD dissertation aims to analyse the forms of transnational civic and political participation expressed by two different migrant populations in Italy. To achieve this objective, two case-studies have been developed by using a non-standard approach.

The author's process of formulating this inquiry has followed an unconventional path. On the one hand, the challenges posed by the pandemic hindered the possibility to conduct ethnographic research in reception services for asylum seekers and refugees. On the other, unforeseen events in Chile, a country to which the author has a strong connection, largely influenced the trajectory of the study.

In 2019, Chile experienced a major political crisis characterised by widespread protests and subsequent repression. I spent those days plugged into the computer until late at night, trying to gather material and testimonies provided to me by friends "before they were censored" and, only later, I began questioning myself more thoroughly about the agency of the Chilean activists residing in Italy.

The development of this exploratory case-study helped me to outline the key dimensions of migrants' civic and political transnationalism. Nonetheless, it became evident the need to broaden the research's scope and move beyond the examination of a single case. Given the unique historical migratory paths and contemporary socio-demographic features of Chilean migration in comparison to other immigration flows to Italy, I thus decided to investigate how similar processes affect migrant groups with different characteristics.

The Tunisian population was chosen not only because of considerations of field accessibility, but also because of its distinct demographic and socio-economic characteristics vis-à-vis its equally stable presence in Italy. Conducting this second case-study posed challenges in terms of data collection and analysis, particularly due to the researcher's different degree of familiarity with the two national contexts.

In short, the many differences between the two cases did not allow for the straightforward application of the comparative method. Instead, the cross-cases analysis (Yalaz and Zapata-Barrero, 2018) employed a 'replication' approach (Yin, 2009), a strategy whose aim is to explore the characteristics that a same phenomenon takes on in different contexts.

## **Dissertation's structure**

Chapter 1 offers a comprehensive overview of the concept of transnationalism within anthropology and sociology, with a specific focus on its intersection with integration and diaspora literature.

In Chapter 2 our understanding of civic-political transnationalism is defined, breaking down the concept into several dimensions that serve both theoretical comprehension and empirical observation. These dimensions include the policies and politics of citizenship, the institutional frameworks governing the status of the emigrants in their home countries, forms of civic and political participation linked to the society of origin, and the transnational processes occurring within the society of residence, particularly in relation to Italy.

The complementarity of civic and political transnational practices arises from both theoretical considerations emphasising the interdependence between civic and political action (Camau, 2002) and empirical evidence. In fact, migrants often face barriers to formal political participation in their host countries, leading them to engage in the public sphere through civil society practices (Boccagni, 2012).

The inclusion of migrants' civic and political activities targeting the host country within the study of transnationalism remains a topic of debate. This research aligns with prominent scholars (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Martiniello and Lafleur, 2008) in asserting that engaging in the public sphere of the host society from one's own migratory background represents an instance of transnationalism, because such engagement opens spaces for debate that extend beyond the boundaries of the national polity.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed account of the research's methodological approach and design: the main objectives and research questions; the process of case selection; a concise introduction to the two chosen cases; and the techniques used for data collection and analysis. The research mainly relies on qualitative data from interviews, but secondary quantitative data from national statistics agencies and supranational organisations have also been utilised.

Moving from the theoretical assumption that migrants' agency is largely influenced by the institutional action of origin and residence countries, and by the relations established between the two (Bauböck, 2003; Lacroix, 2014; Chaudhary and Moss, 2019), Chapter 4 and 6 have been dedicated to contextualising each case study. They cover the emigration policies of the origin countries, their bilateral institutional relationships with Italy, the historical and socio-demographic characteristics of each group.

Chapters 5 and 7 delve into the objectives, activities and transnational strategies of the formal and informal organisations of these migrant populations. These chapters constitute the core of the empirical research because migrants' collective organisations are a central node – hence a privileged location for the observation – of transnational civic and political practices (Portes, 2003).

Chapter 8 summarises the results of the empirical analysis, highlighting elements of convergence and divergence between the two cases, offers conclusive considerations on overarching theoretical issues, and provides suggestions for future research.

### **Empirical results: the Chilean case**

The population of Chilean origin in Italy shows a high level of integration, resulting from their characteristics before migration, the stability of their presence, and the existence of significant political, cultural, and religious affinities between the two national contexts.

The experience of the exiles and relationships established with the local civil society during the 1970s (Stabili, 2013) continue to shape the transnational activism of Chilean organisations in Italy, most of which embrace explicit political objectives. They are strongly focused on the politics of their home country, benefit from an open political opportunity structure in Italy, and engage in stable transnational practices, drawing on their accumulated knowledge and experience.

The mass protests that took place in Chile in 2019 have reinvigorated transnational attitudes among various actors, leading to a critical re-evaluation of their connection with the home country and increased engagement in the public sphere. This has also brought greater visibility to the claims of emigrants within Chilean society.

In terms of institutional action, there is a limited emphasis on the socio-economic involvement of emigrants, while cultural citizenship practices are promoted (Perret, 2012) but they appear relatively weak, at least within the context of Italy.

### **Empirical results: the Tunisian case**

Despite the geographical proximity and the shared historical-cultural elements between the two shores of the Mediterranean Sea, Tunisians face challenges in integrating into Italian society due to socio-economic marginalisation and discrimination in the public sphere.

As a result, activists show a strong need for identitarian and political recognition in the context of residence. The objectives of their organisations primarily focus on civic and cultural aspects, closely tied to their migratory experience in Italy: positive re-signification of the origin culture, promotion of social inclusion for immigrants, providing material aid and support to the co-nationals.

Explicit political goals are minoritarian, but they encompass issues such as securing citizenship rights for second-generation individuals, challenging European immigration policies, and addressing the authoritarian tendencies of institutions in the home country.

Tunisian emigrants have witnessed an increase in their political rights following the 2011 revolution, (Demesmay et al., 2017), and the establishment of oversea electoral districts has contributed to the transnationalisation of political action (Pouessel, 2017). Binational citizens play a key role in this context, as they can legitimately participate and advance claims in both societies (Geisser 2016, Withol de Wenden, 2016).

However, Tunisian transnational activism faces a range of obstacles, including origin country's political troubles, social exclusion in Italy, and an overall unfriendly geopolitical environment.

## **Conclusive considerations**

For both groups, emigrants' socio-political inclusion and human rights' defence are key issues that drive the engagement in home country's politics, while differences arise in the action directed toward the residence country, and in the broader impact of their transnational activities.

Chilean exiles' activism has exerted a significant political influence on Italian society. However, the predominantly protest-oriented nature of their collective action hinders the establishment of institutional channels for transnational participation in the home country.

In contrast, Tunisian emigrants are more involved in institutional transnational spaces. Nonetheless, their activism in Italy is comparatively less effective due to limited interaction with the local civil society, which is a consequence of both the distance between the two countries' political cultures and the social and discursive marginalisation experienced by this population. These findings contribute to the ongoing discussion about the relationship between transnationalism and integration.

In the past, the activism of Chileans has helped their integration, while their solid status in Italy has facilitated the maintenance of transnational connections. In the case of Tunisians, transnational activism is primarily a response to social exclusion, but unlike what has been observed in other studies, this leads to increased efforts to affirm affiliation with Italian society, rather than taking refuge in 'reactive identities' (Waldinger, 2017).

While spatial proximity is often seen as a facilitator of migrants' transnationalism, it plays a critical role in this research. Despite the geographical distance, Chile shares cultural, religious, ideological, and linguistic affinities with Italy. On the other hand, the geographical proximity between Tunisia and Italy takes on a negative connotation, as it facilitates unregulated human mobility, which – in a vicious spiral – is produced by and serves as justification for discriminatory migration policies.

This discussion further supports the viewpoint of scholars who highlight the complementarity between transnational action 'from below' and transnational institutional practices, confirming that transnational practices do not take place within deterritorialised social spaces, but rather depend on interactions between specific territorial and institutional contexts.

Transnational civic and political participation is intricately connected to various phenomena, such as the growing diversity within national societies; interconnectedness between territories, institutions, cultures and people of different origins; regional integration processes; the overlapping of individual identities; and the rise in binational citizens. As such, it represents a crucial social and sociological issue that will significantly contribute to future social transformations.

The hope is that by devoting increasing academic attention to the civic and political agency expressed by subjects who live on the move, poised or balanced between different places, could pave the way for their broader institutional recognition.

This shift will move away from perceiving emigrants' and immigrants' rights as opposing poles around which incompatible social models revolve, and instead recognise them as two facets among the many that constitute the prism of contemporary identities and democratic practices.

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