

How sociology is 'going transnational': from the study of religious to cultural transformations

Peggy Levitt in conversation with Breda Gray

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BG: I would like to ask you about your work on transnationalism and how it fits with other approaches that focus on similar questions but are located under headings of globalisation, the mobilities paradigm, diaspora studies and so on?

PL: You're saying that there's been all kinds of work about globalisation and people use lots of different words and conceptual strategies for describing it and studying it, and I am certainly associated with a transnational perspective and to be honest that has to do with where I entered the conversation. So I entered the conversation to provide a counterpoint to the assimilation focus of so much of US scholarship on immigration. And how did we counteract that? Well, we said it wasn't just about the process of incorporation into the United States but it was about how people were involved in their homelands and became part of the United States at the same time, and that became called transnational. Having said that, and having spent the last six or seven years trying to spell out how that insight about migration links to insights about economics or politics or religion, I feel that there's an additional analytical purchase gained by using a transnational optic that builds upon the insights of globalisation studies, that builds upon the insights of world systems theory, that builds upon anthropological studies, but that doesn't assume the spatial unit

of analysis as given, doesn't privilege one layer of social experience over another, but tries to hold all of those levels in conversation with each other and see how they mutually inform each other. For example, we could study cells of a Maoist social movement or charismatic Catholic communities as disembedded phenomena, but then of course we would have to see how each was shaped by the national and global and local contexts in which it was nested. I see transnational studies as an optic or a gaze; I'm not saying that it's a theory. It's a way of asking questions, it's an epistemological approach and it's a consciously, publicly, sociological approach that requires a different kind of methodology. You can use that gaze to understand the global and the local and the regional rather than the other way around. Most people would say, Oh the transnational is somewhere between the global and the national, but it's more helpful to ask how does it have us ask questions? What's the appropriate spatial unit of analysis? At least taking a step back from the nation-state as we'll then miss half of it if we only focus on this nation-state container and we only focus on one level of social experience.

BG: So the transnational isn't always about processes that happen across national borders?

PL: No it's about what's the right region that I should be looking at this at? So say I'm interested in water management in the south west of the United States, I might design a study that's about Colorado, Texas, seeing Colorado, Texas, Arizona and New Mexico as one space because that's the alluvial plain or whatever it's called, you know. The point is that it's not a given; I am going to think what is the appropriate spatial configuration that I need to be bringing to bear on this question? And so sometimes it's sub-national, sometimes it's super-national, but even when it's that, I would still have to be asking myself for example, what is the national policy in the United States about water? What's the national policy about the United States and Mexico? What are the global water management regimes that have implications for this in terms of the UN economics environmental programme? So I'm bringing in those different layers even though the local space is that region, the primary space where I'm entering is that region. So that's what it's about.

BG: The term national [in transnational] sometimes creates a lack of clarity because the event or process is trans-boundary or trans-border?

PL: Right, Roger Waldinger has criticised transnational migration studies for that. He says, well this is about the trans-local like between Mira Flores and the Dominican Republic and Jamaica Plain and Boston, or this is about the US state and the Mexican state. But

we sort of see it as like a place-holder category and that's why I say that I kind of inherited the term, right? If I were doing this over I might choose a different term because I understand that it comes with that kind of baggage, but at this point there is a conversation that has momentum and so the best we can do, I think, is to kind of clarify what this is and why we think it's a more powerful conceptual tool than talking about diasporas or talking about globalisation in general.

BG: And why do you think it is?

PL: Well I think it's more powerful than the globalisation studies because I think globalisation is a steamroller-like thing that is often depicted as the same intensity, frequency, quality all over the place, when in fact it really has very different impacts in different places. I like the idea that there are these cultural, institutional forms that we see replicated globally, I just don't see that theorists of globalisation do a very good job of explaining how they get there, or that they're different in different places. It's like the actor has no autonomy, has no agency and is just a victim rather than speaking back to the global, so it's got this kind of juggernaut sense to it. And for me diaspora – and again I think this is part of where I started the conversation – but I think diaspora is just fine to talk about, old-fashioned kinds of diasporas where people were involuntarily expelled from their place. I'd rather use the term for that. For me, diaspora is a kind of subset of a transnational community; there are different kinds of transnational communities and diaspora community is one of them. But I'm not in favour of spending a lot of time trying to convince people to use my vocabulary or for them trying to spend a lot of time convincing me because we are talking about a lot of the same processes, so a more fruitful kind of conversation is to figure out, to be clear about what we're talking about and then get on with it.

BG: In the *Transnational Studies Reader*, you and Sanjeev Khagram draw on a wide range of literature from postcolonial theory to diaspora studies and Paul Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic' work to globalisation. How do these inform transnational studies?

PL: The idea there was to say, these are the books; these are the writings that influence us to start thinking this way. And another thing I should stress is that so much of transnational global stuff is about economics and politics and if you look at that book [the *Transnational Studies Reader*], there's religion in there, there's arts and culture in there, there's cultural circulation – looking at the actual flow of things and why that works the way it does. What we're trying to do is say there are a lot of similarities and patterns

across these different domains when they are enacted across borders and what happens if we all sit down in the same room and have a truly interdisciplinary conversation that says, I study politics and you study religion and I study social movements and you study economic production, but we see the same kinds of social organisation across these different domains and we see the same kinds of mobilisation strategies across these different domains and so what does this all mean for how we need to think about belonging and identity and citizenship in new ways? And so we said in that introduction that we're identifying these writers as part of the intellectual foundations of this new field that we're trying to articulate. We know some of them are not going to want to come along, but we want to pay tribute to the fact that, for example, Gilroy's Black Atlantic approach, that's the way you should do history; or Abu-Lughod's Middle Eastern and Asian Circuits, looking at India and Africa and the – you know – that whole region as one region, that's very powerful to me. I think that's really right.

BG: Because?

PL: Because what it meant to be Indian was shaped by that interaction with Africa or what it means to be Brazilian is that interaction between, you know, Brazil and Africa, the west coast of Africa and New Orleans and the whole, you know, trading routes that was constantly shaping racial identity construction, religious identity construction and it's disingenuous to think that there's some kind of pure religion in Brazil or to say that Brazilian Catholicism is formal Brazilian Catholicism when it's so obviously a composite of all these different elements in all these different places.

BG: And yet earlier you were saying the transnational optic or the use of transnational as a way into these questions was openly or consciously sociological?

PL: Well I don't, I don't want it to be just sociological so if I said that I take it back because I, I want it to be interdisciplinary. I think that we as academics make it so easy for ourselves by only talking to the converted, only preaching to the converted and when we're in interdisciplinary conversations saying, well, sociologists think of it this way. How many times have you been at a conference, around a conference table and they say sociologists think of it this way or we anthropologists do it this way? And that's really a cop out – you can't fall back on that disciplinary position, you've got to figure out a way to build bridges across those positions so that we can really push the conversation forward. So I don't want transnational studies to be transnational sociology, I want it to be transnational studies. But I recognise that that's a really tall order and just like we

have to let go of methodological nationalism, the whole academy is structured against this, whether it's regional studies, funding for regional studies that goes against it or whether it's how the incentives are structured in our profession that we need to perform in our disciplines, and so it doesn't behove me to publish in an anthropology journal, but I am trying to publish in the anthropology journals because I find the most interesting conversations, ultimately the most rewarding ones are those interdisciplinary conversations. But you need to really have a certain kind of person who's willing to stretch, to engage in them in a satisfying way.

BG: One of things that strikes me about the difference between diaspora studies and transnational studies is that most people who write within transnational studies seem to be sociologists, anthropologists or political theorists, whereas in diaspora studies you get cultural studies and literature scholars as well as those in the social sciences.

PL: That's true, but at least in terms of my own research and where it's going that's not a divide that remains.

BG: How do you see transnational studies moving more into cultural studies or literature studies-type areas? Or even being taken up by them? What would it have to offer those scholars, I suppose?

PL: Right, well I think it's more that we go towards them actually, you know, and start to see that there's this whole other set of social arenas and whole other set of data in the form of novels and artistic production and cultural products, material products that are also the grist for our analysis, so I think we have a lot to learn from them and I find it very exciting to be moving in that direction. You know there are – there's a whole active cultural sociology section in the American Sociological Association, it's one of the more vibrant sections, people who look at art per se; media studies; ethnomusicologists – these kinds of encounters in terms of music seem to me to have been studied more. And then you have audience reception and there are the institutions – but I think that the work on institutions seems to me to be very much about how national institutions respond to changing ethnic communities. So for example, America looks like this and American art means this and now it has to include Puerto Ricans and Filipinos or something like that, new Asian and new Latin American communities. But that's different than representing a sort of global citizenship or a transnational experience and that's where I think the interesting questions are. So there's a difference between being an ethnic American where your experience is shaped by living in and being Irish in the

United States, and then the experience of being Irish and having continued contact with Ireland and being informed by what's going on in Ireland. And so I think the interesting question is to what extent are these institutions realising that there's something beyond the immigrant experience or the ethnic experience that they need to respond to.

BG: Yeah, national art galleries, national museums were part of the nation-building project, but what would these transnational institutions or spaces be involved in building? I suppose one might be diasporic, if they have some ethnic tag to them, but then are there other kinds of more hybrid or less ethnically oriented projects that might give rise to these transnational institutions or spaces?

PL: When Barack Obama went to Germany last summer [2008] and gave that big speech in the Tiergarten and he said 'I'm here as a citizen of the United States and a citizen of the world', that's very powerful. So how do you create global citizens? And where do the values come from that global citizens embrace? And, so there is something beyond the ethnically associated membership beyond the nation state, there is a global citizenship, we talk a lot about global civil society. Well, you know, how do you get people to embrace values beyond their national self-interest? Do you need to and if you do, what role should these institutions play?

BG: In terms of global civil society, there is the whole UN/human rights infrastructure and one of your new projects is looking at women and human rights?

PL: It's about how global discourses about women's rights actually get used in local contexts.

BG: Would you see that infrastructure, UN structures around human rights and women's rights as an emerging infrastructure of a global civil society?

PL: Absolutely, absolutely. I think that all of these UN conventions, regimes, I think that they're global values packages that are out there and this is certainly what we found in our field work. Anthropologists have talked about this as assemblages, there [are] all kinds of metaphors for what these actually look like, but for me, when we went to China and India and Peru and in New York, and we did some research in Nigeria (although that didn't end up being one of our cases), there is a kind of global values package that's associated with neo-liberalism that's about democracy and human rights, gender equality, the rule of law and transparency in governance. And that is being promoted by the UN system and by the Ford Foundation and by all of these nationally based NGOs that are part of international networks and a whole cast of policy elites or leaders of these NGOs that go to trainings overseas, participate in international conferences. A lot

of these organisations are embedded in these international networks. So think about the Catholic church as a set of networks. In Peru, for example, one of the organisations that we studied was a parish-based group led by people who were very committed to liberation theology. They were linked in to the international social movement through a religious mechanism, as opposed to the other group that was linked into the international global feminist movement and wanted to take different pieces of that global feminist movement because it was very concerned with formulating a Latin American version of feminism as opposed to a global version of feminism. And so the networks here were really important and when you look at the literature on diffusion of innovations or global cultural circulation, it really stresses the networks and the structural constraints in these different kinds of cultural flows. So what we end up really emphasising is the role of culture, bringing culture back into that conversation. So it's not just the diffusion of culture but cultural diffusion. Like, what is the culture that allows for diffusion to happen? So in Peru there's already a whole conceptualisation of what human rights are and what women's rights are, these global values packages land in that cultural context and are appropriated and vernacularised in different ways than, for example, in China where they flow through similar kinds of networks, but there's a local understanding of social justice in each of these places, there are local understandings of feminism in each of these places, there are strong women's movements in each of these places. So that the vernacularisation is customising. It is different than translation because translation is just making it understandable and vernacularising is making it understandable so that somebody will use it so that it is acceptable and usable and they pick it up and they do something with it.

BG: When visiting women's NGOs in Yemen a few years ago, we noticed a Western NGOisation of modes of organisation, PowerPoint protocols, and use of language, including terms like 'mission statement' and 'capacity building', but feminism was identified as Western and therefore not appropriate. I wonder if this is related to the wider context of national government, UN, World Bank and global development discourses that are all so linked to funding and resources that they were taken up more easily than feminist discourses? So I would see it as not only about culture and cultural circulation, but as being mediated by global economics and the local state?

PL: No, but there is some agency in terms of, well there's a magic to the West, at least what we found was that, you know, certain groups appropriate certain things because they

want to be associated with that Western project, right? And there's a kind of magic to it. So there is this kind of – the package doesn't circulate hook, line and sinker and you're right that it's a package that consists of technologies and discourses and sort of material, that we all use Powerpoint wherever we are, right?

BG: But also linked to resources coming into the country.

PL: Yes. I would say that the Ford Foundation is responsible for introducing a certain version of human rights into China and the reason why the organisation that we studied is able to really push the agenda is because it is a highly visible internationally connected organisation and the leader travels all over the place and if anything were to happen there would be this big uproar from Hillary Clinton. And so there's a usefulness in that as well so.

BG: Going back to transnational studies and how that's been taken up, you will be familiar with the many criticisms that life has always been lived transnationally. There's nothing new about this. So how do you account for why this transnational optic has taken hold since the 1980s and 1990s?

PL: Well I don't think it's new. I think there are aspects of it that are different. So I always go back to the example of if I were an Italian immigrant in the 1920s and I took a picture of myself in front of the stoop of my house in Brooklyn and I sent it back to my mother and it took three weeks to get there in a letter, that's pretty different than getting a video of that stoop and the neighbourhood and the birthday party that we had earlier that day and my children and that's even more different than the photos that I can now take and upload that same day. And so there is a simultaneity about this and there is a materiality of being able to imagine yourself in a different place before you even go and so you have all these people who have many more tools with which to construct a social imaginary before they even migrate. And so that's why, you know, all the people in Mira Flores, you know, the 60 year-old mothers who have hardly ever been to Santa Domingo can talk to you about Mozart Street or whatever, because they had heard about it, they had seen, they had watched the videos and they were constructing this imaginary. I think that means that families can be connected and be intimate, it changes the nature of intimacy. And even in the time that I've been doing this research, it used to be a big deal to call and now it's nothing and the Pakistanis who I studied for *God Needs No Passport* are Skyping every five minutes and so that's a big difference. Now also what we talked about before, that states realise, sending states realise that people are not

coming back and first of all they're more solidified in their nation-state building project, they realise that people are not coming back, people still want to be involved and it behoves them to have those people involved. And so you have a whole range of states putting into place this whole set of policy mechanisms to try to encourage that, from the dual citizenship and the expatriate voting. I went to Morocco a couple of years ago and there was a line [queue] for the foreigners, the Moroccans who lived in Morocco and then there was a line for the Moroccans coming home. What more do we need to tell you, to say you're our favourite returning sons or whatever. You're going to see countries putting into place these kinds of strategies. And finally, I would say that we live in a world where multiculturalism, okay not everybody embraces it, but it's certainly part of that global values package. And so what is expected of emigrants now in terms of proving their loyalty and what they're supposed to give up is, they are allowed to retain a lot more of their ethnic diversity than before.

BG: In your 'Conceptualising Simultaneity' article with Nina Glick Schiller, you talk about different traditions within transnational studies and one of the projects you mention is the British ESRC transnational community project as a particular tradition within transnational studies. How do you see this project as having conceptualised the domain differently from those scholars working on transnational studies in the US?

PL: Well I think that this project was important in diversifying what were seen as appropriate fields of study. What I liked about that project was that it included a lot of different kinds of communities; it wasn't just migrant communities, it was professional communities, artistic communities, political communities and that was a step in the right direction; to say, okay, in these different kinds of networks, in these different kinds of organisations that span borders, in these different kinds of social movements what kinds of patterns do we see? And what kinds of motivations do we see? And what kinds of outcomes do we see? And is it the same in a professional network as it is in a sports network or something like that? Like what's the nature of the cultural encounter in each of these different places and what can we learn by making these comparisons? I like the fact that our attention gets called to the similarities between internal migration and international migration and I don't think we've done enough on this. So say the people who come from the Peruvian highland and come to Lima there's a lot of similarity, or the old studies of Africa from the sixties of rural to urban migration and how people sent money back and how those changed power dynamics in those communities and gender

dynamics in those communities. And what's the difference between when it's internal migration as opposed to international migration? Does the border really matter? In what ways?

BG: Are there other sites of transnational studies outside of Western countries?

PL: Well there's the [British] Arts and Humanities Council project AHRC, that project I think is very interesting because that seems to me to be a really good marriage of asking these kinds of questions social scientifically but also with the humanities lens and about sites of cultural production, so I like that BBC as a global diaspora, they call it a diaspora contact zone, I think that's a great project or a great set of questions that they're asking. There are a lot of people in Latin America and in Spain who study transnational phenomena. I think it's fair to say that it's not part of their agenda to come up with a shared intellectual product, you know, to say here's our way of seeing the world. So I see more and more people doing these kinds of studies, not just in US and Latin America but a lot of Europe, Africa and within Asia. There seems to be a group of geographers in Singapore associated with the National University of Singapore that does this kind of work. But I mean, what is the end goal? Is the end goal to get everyone to be convinced and come on board and then we'll reject this and have something new? Or is it enough to have the American Sociological Association form a section that's called global and transnational studies that got people in the room who study all kinds of different things, who are really concerned that American sociology is much too parochial and can't even believe that we're still having these, that this is still a hard sell. And it doesn't seem to me to be such a hard sell in Europe and I think that that's partly because of the whole European Union thing, it's partly because of the vision of particular scholars, but also because of the lived reality. But in terms of talking about transnational studies of religion, I think that is a European blind spot actually. I think it's a hard sell to get European scholars to take religion seriously. This is my impression as an outsider and somebody who has only limited data to make that play.

BG: I wonder if the modern history of secularisation in Europe is very different from the history of religion in the United States and its modernisation path, whether that makes a difference.

PL: I think it really makes a difference. I think the whole history of the Second World War is very fresh and that we (in the US) have this national narrative about a country of

immigrants and religious pluralism and that makes us blind to certain things, the idea of separation of church and state as being sort of indelible makes us blind to certain things.

BG: Like?

PL: Like how religion and culture overlap much more than we own up to. I believe in a legal separation of church and state, but I don't believe in a cultural separation of church and state in a place like Ireland or a place like Holland or I don't believe in one that happens fifty years after there's no official church. So Holland, for example, that's a country that was organised socially around Catholic institutions and Protestant institutions and it's not legal any more, but in any conversation that lasts more than three minutes about this topic there is some kind of reference to, oh he's part of the Catholic political party, or he's Catholic, and old habits die hard, so that it's a deeply embedded cultural template. So if you're a Muslim you're not just up against the fact that possibly your skin colour is black, you're also up against that there's deeply embedded Christian assumptions in how social life is organised that are really not explicit. We also have a very Christian model of what religion is and how it works and where to find it, so just like we need to learn to think outside the nation-state box, we need to learn how to think outside the Christian box.

BG: I think in *God Needs No Passport* you discuss the hegemony of Christian assumptions and practices in everyday life in the US. Do you have a sense of how these might be challenged?

PL: Well, I just think you need to call a spade a spade, sort of just name it, because you're right, they're so taken for granted that it's, even the most well-meaning person or the most intellectually sophisticated person falls back on that. And if you really care about religious pluralism and you care about something that's not tolerance but actually diversity, then you need to look that in the face. But I am surprised about the kind of reluctance to engage in this conversation in Europe in particular and I think that's ultimately really dangerous because I mean Europe is diversifying religiously at a very fast rate.

BG: In the book you edited with Mary Waters (*The Changing Face of Home. The Transnational Lives of the Second Generation*), you discuss the transnational family and the second generation and how it might be helpful to think about second-generation children as growing up in relationship to two or more places, rather than just as second generation in the receiving country or the country of destination.

PL: In the United States we get many first-generation immigrants who are involved in their homelands but this is not happening for the second generation so transnational parents don't necessarily produce transnational children. I think that kids who are brought up in a particular place are primarily socialised into that place and that's clearly true. But I also think that when you grow up in a household where there is a constant circulation of people and goods and social remittances from another place, you are socialised into a different set of social networks and you have access to a different cultural repertoire that you may or may not use at different stages of your life. So another project that I am just beginning is to try to understand the extent to which Indian American, Hindu and Muslim kids construct religious identities. When we think of religious identity and the children of immigrants are reinventing Islam or Hinduism in the US context just like they're reinventing it in Britain but I think that they do that in conversation with their co-religious peers all over the world. So in the initial interviews that we've been doing for this project there is a description of space that speaks to that. Most of these young adults see themselves as living in this multi-sided space and referencing how Hinduism is done in India compared to how it's done in the US and I'm not sure how much they think about it in England or they think about it in Holland. I think that's probably really dependent upon family members. But that means that you can't just dismiss the idea that this social space doesn't matter and it also drives home the need to look at these things over time because what you really see is how kids who never looked interested when they were teenagers became very interested when they were 25. I mean, I always bring up the Irish case as emblematic of that because so many of the people that I interviewed in Boston, Irish American, second and third generation, who knew nothing about Ireland growing up, whose parents had not told them anything, then started being interested in middle age and some of them were just on a roots journey, but some of them became transnational activists. So the guy who was raising money among his Irish-American friends to promote tourism from up in Malin Head [Co. Donegal] and raising money for the Gaelic football field or whatever it was, that's like what Mexicans and Dominicans do. So it's not everyone for sure, but I don't think you can summarily dismiss that, especially if instrumentally you get something from activating that Irish or Mexican identity. I mean, if it helps you circumvent racism at work, or a glass ceiling at work, because you're the one that knows how to do business in China at your investment banking firm, or you're the one who knows how to advise about Indian ways of doing

things, cultural factors that might influence outsourcing, then you're going to activate something that might have been dormant, but was there during your whole life.

BG: What do you think are the main triggers for identification as this is not the case for a lot of the second and third generation?

PL: Well I think for some people it is racism, for some people it's a middle-age crisis. But think about how Ireland makes it so easy, because there's a county heritage centre in each county and there's a clan association that will do you a customised genealogical search so the accoutrements are there when you want them, in a different way than another country. And I think that the way countries are reaching out you might be motivated to do this because you want your kid to get an EU passport. So how many people have reactivated their Irish citizenship so their kids can benefit from it because they see it as an advantage; I wish I could give that to my kids.

BG: Social remittances are obviously something that you're very interested in and the ideas, values and practices that migrants send back to their countries of origin; I think you mentioned in some of your work that women tend to invest in sending countries in ways that encourage more progressive development, is that right?

PL: Yes, that sometimes happens.

BG: Okay. And I know you are very careful to acknowledge mismanagement and corruption in the US, but a lot of that discussion seems to be about how, for example, transparency as a value is transported back to the sending country from the US. And I'm just wondering if there's a danger that linear notions of development get perpetuated in this kind of approach?

PL: Yes, I take that criticism and the only explanation I can offer is that when I thought about that concept [social remittances] I thought it was a response to the over-economisation of the whole migration discussion and I really wanted to say look, these cultural products and these social products flow. But I agree that it is not a one-way thing and I don't know exactly how to capture that because here's another way that I'm trapped by the vocabulary. The idea of social remittances has some attraction and I don't want to give up the term, but I do want to redefine it to capture more of a circulation rather than a one-way flow. Having said that, I was aware that when I was first thinking about it, and people did feel like they're not dupes at all, it's not like they have stars in their eyes about everything in the United States, but in a lot of the conversations that I had, there was a very clear distinction between how politics gets done or how governance gets

done in the US versus Brazil, for example, and a recognition that institutions or a feeling on the part of the immigrants themselves that institutions seem to work better in general in the US. And whether that's true or not or what do we call corruption in Brazil? What do we call it in the United States? That's a whole other topic, but that was certainly a perception. But in the kind of theoretical work that I'm trying to do, which comes out of that women's rights project, it really is about circulation and about how local notions about social justice and local notions about gender match or don't with these other kinds of things that are circulating, and I'm sort of at a loss for the metaphorical vocabulary to rectify this so if you have any ideas let me know. Because I think it's really important, it's another example of who your conversation partners are, so it makes a lot of sense to talk to a bunch of economists and say social remittances and not worry about all the power dynamics that you're glossing over because you want to make the point that there's something besides economics happening here. But then if you really want to talk about what's flowing and how it's flowing and why things get appropriated or they don't then you have to have a much more conceptually sharpened approach.

BG: I think somewhere you talk about how your main interest is in migrants' subjective viewpoints of their own lives and I'm wondering if that's the main focus in your research – trying to represent viewpoints and perspectives from the subjective positionings of migrants rather than the constraints or structural barriers. Is it the privileging of their subjective views that is the source of the optimism in your work? Because you could kind of take quite a pessimistic point of view, but you don't seem to do that, and there's always a strand of what's actually happening or what can happen within your work and I'm wondering if that's where it comes from or where do you see it coming from?

PL: Well I guess you could make that argument about *God Needs No Passport* and that certainly, that's a book about many things, but one thing it's about is about recuperating the progressive role of religion and that's a hard sell both because you just have to read the newspaper to see all the bad things that religion does in the world, and also because some of the Hindu communities that sort of return to neo-Hinduism or the Hindu nationalist movement in India seriously trouble many people and I hear those and I agree with that, I am seriously troubled by that too. And there are a lot of people who would say that non-resident Indians are behind that. So what do you do with that where in the newspaper there are examples of murders, all kinds of suspicious murders happening

around some of these groups, all kinds of accusations about corruption and who knows what? And then at the same time you've got people talking about what this means for them and what does Sathia do for them or why is it actually empowering to be a woman, a Sumerian as opposed to what it looks like from the outside. So I just think we need to give people enough credit to respect what they say, take their word for it rather than imputing our own, even if it's difficult for us to agree with it as researchers. But then in terms of the bigger picture about what religion, I try to be very clear about, I know that there are a lot of places around the world that the main source of tension is religion, but I also know that there were abolitionists and there were civil rights activists who were motivated by their faith, who have been exorcised from the picture because the religious right, at least in the United States, has controlled the airwaves. So I'm just trying to push it back towards the middle. I'm not arguing that religion is the end all and be all, but I want progressive religious activists to retake their place at the table and be a sort of counter balance to that, and offer another model, another way of using faith. And when I think Barack Obama, he used a lot of religious references; he was talking about healing the world because he's motivated to do that in part because of his beliefs, his religious beliefs and I think that's a good thing to do. I think if you have more discussions about what's moral you wouldn't have Enrons, or at least you'd have some kind of public discussion about what's wrong with that greediness and why we shouldn't all be making as much money as possible at the expense of our neighbours.

BG: But when you think about progressive religion or the progressive potential of religion, I suppose one might say, well there are other places to think about progressiveness. And when you think of the United States, for example, you might think of Christian fundamentalism and its impact on the world in the last whatever number of years, and Bush and Blair's statements about how they were morally bound to act and how religious belief legitimises such actions in certain kinds of ways.

PL: I agree with that.

BG: So one way you could counter that would be to say we should have a more secular public sphere where we agree on issues of social justice and morality through a secular discussion. But you're saying one way to counter this is by a more progressive engagement with what religion can offer?

PL: What I'm saying is that you can try to make things more secular, but I don't think that's going to work and so, and I think that's what progressives have tried to do for a very long time, and I don't think religion is going away, and so I think you need to learn how to deal with it, that's what I'm saying. So we can try to make things more secular, but I don't see the world going in that direction. So I think you need to find ways to deal with religious people, find common issues and part of the punch line of *God Needs No Passport* was that when you actually talk to people about what they care about yes, there are hot button issues, but most people care about schools and housing and jobs and the environment and so there are points of commonality, and I think that's what we need to do. I don't like it either when George Bush tells me what to believe, I am totally against that, but you can either fight that by trying to wipe religion off the political map, or you can say this is here, more and more people are kind of embracing it, how do we work with that and find points of commonality? And also resuscitate the progressive religious voice that has been too long dominated by the evangelical Christian voice. I mean I'm just as scared as you are when I listen to Mike Huckabee getting ready to launch his campaign for 2012 and what he has in store for all of us, I don't want that either. But he's not going to go away so what are you going to do about it?

BG: But what about the ways in which religion tends to work in terms of gender, gender roles and family, reproductive rights, gay and lesbian rights and the fundamental positions taken on these issues?

PL: I think those are particular versions of those religions and I think more and more in the year 2008, in a global world, there are many varieties of religion and what I also found in the book was that there were these different types of religiosity that were represented across faith traditions and one was a kind of self-help faith tradition that's very much consistent with this kind of self-actualised personhood that is on every bookshelf in bookstores now. And that is very utilitarian you know, uses religion for self, to be used to be self-actualised, so if it's going to make me a more powerful woman. So all I'm saying is that people don't take authority, it isn't like people are not owning this. Michelle Dillon's book about how gays in the Catholic church stay in the Catholic

church, well because they feel permission to sort of pick and choose just like the argument about seeing religion as a marketplace and you don't necessarily stay in the faith tradition that you were born into, you choose the religion that's going to give you the biggest bang for the buck. Well, people also choose elements of their faith traditions so that they can continue to remain in there. I think yes, there's definitely a strand of people that are 'this is the truth' and 'this is what the Bible says'.

BG: And the institutions, like the Pope says, so the institution says ...

PL: Yes, but how many Catholics take the Pope seriously?

BG: But the position of the Vatican, for example, has impact in terms of whether abortion gets legalised or not in Ireland.

PL: Yes, but at the same time, how many Irish people actually – you've seen a tremendous change in your own lifetime in terms of how people obey their church or not.

BG: But it means that over 5,000 women travel every year to have abortions and there are actually material impacts in terms of how it impacts on women's lives. And again, I'm thinking about how women negotiate in all religions around these patriarchal expectations. And, while they are not dupes and often hold very strongly to their faith and use it as an empowering tool in many ways, they also have to be incredibly strategic and use a lot of energy just to maintain a space for themselves in the public sphere.

PL: I hear that and I can't disagree with you. I just know that some of the Muslim women, the Pakistani women that I studied who are doing it differently, engaging with Islam in a very different way in the United States than in Pakistan, because in Pakistan they don't really go to the mosque very much so they're praying in a different way, they're running a religious school, they're involved in administering this mosque and tell people about that back in Pakistan. Now when I asked women there do they want to participate in the same way, some women said no, it's my privilege to be able to pray at home, but some of them wanted to change things, so is that going to change Pakistan? No, but is Pakistan going to stop being religious? No, so what are we going to do about this? If we're concerned about religious freedom and we're also concerned about a variety of religious voices that would reflect a variety of political positions then I guess the bottom line is that it's not black or white, you know, and because of our reluctance as intellectuals and many of us who are secular to even study religion, we're really missing a lot about what goes on and how it really works.

BG: One of the things that I think *God Needs No Passport* begins to show about the transnational workings of religion, and in a way we've just been talking about subjective relationships to religion, or religiosity as a feature of individual subjectivity, but there are the institutions and they're important in terms of how transnationalism is organised? And I suppose in places you talk about networks and networks seem to be significant in terms of organising transnationalism, but some religious institutions are also transnational or operate in a transnational way. Are there other institutions or other forms in which transnationality is channelled/organised/shaped?

PL: Well families, communities, policies, state policies, not only policies about expatriate voting or citizenship, but also policies that might enable people to move more freely out of healthcare and educational systems or job reciprocal credentialing – and I'm only answering this question from a migrant sort of perspective. But also think about corporations or commodity chains where [there is] economic production. There's that book *The Travels of the T Shirt* and I guess that's where my work is moving towards – the representation of transnationalism. The kind of message about it. The underlying discursive and visual apparatus that are produced by it, but also make it possible.

BG: And in production and consumption that will be mainly through global capitalism?

PL: Yes, but also I'm thinking about art and the artistic and cultural expressions of this kind of social imaginary that give people the idea of it and permission, and a road map in some ways.

BG: And it seems like some of these are bottom-up and some of them are top-down.

PL: Well I think about economics like the transnational entrepreneur and Louise Guarnizo has a whole argument about that because the entrepreneur generates so much income that countries are going to the IMF and getting the loans based on a promise of future remittances so it's a micro level action that's scaled up into macro level policy. Or Sarah Mahler's argument about migrants as agents of foreign policy who are not only carrying these ideas, doing these development projects, negotiating with governments and representing the government, the sending state to the receiving state sometimes, so they are kind of diplomats that potentially have an impact, but also their actions are getting scaled up, the impact of their actions or there's a response to their actions at a national level as well.

BG: Speaking of national levels, it seemed to me that *God Needs No Passport* is written primarily for an American audience?

PL: Yes.

BG: I think you've probably answered this question already, but I think of this book being written to an American audience with that imagined, bounded space and society in mind as an audience, but using a transnational optic and whether there's a contradiction in that, or how that works?

PL: Well I made that decision purposefully because I want people in the US to think outside that nation-state box and really realise what that means. I don't think there's a contradiction to that, I think that if anything, you could call me for having it be very bi-national, that each of the groups is about a place, a sending place and a receiving place, and my honest answer to that is okay well what do you want? I'm studying these four groups in these different places, that's enough? But if I had all the time and energy and money and the insights that I have now when I started the book I would definitely structure it in a different way and make it more of that conversation. I could have written this book and tried to convince Europeans of this but I guess I made a choice that I wanted to, and it's a book that's written to a broader public and it was to the American public so.

BG: Yes. This is an American as somehow identifying probably as white, probably as Christian and I suppose could suggest that these migrants or these communities aren't part of that American public?

PL: Well I guess that's a strategic choice about how you, how do you change that? And so I guess I was talking to the rule makers and trying to say that they need to open the gates basically, you know, open their gates and their minds as well so.

BG: Okay. Is there anything else that you want to say that you think is important in terms of your work?

PL: Well just in terms of this conversation, I think the conversation reflects my intellectual concerns, but also my more applied concerns and so I hope that it would be read that way. So just as the book (*God Needs No Passport*) is supposed to be read as a work of public sociology, it includes another book in the footnotes. I have set for myself the kind of tall order of walking the intellectual line but also always being cognisant of how it relates to real world issues and this conversation seems to me emblematic of that because we've crossed in and out of those worlds and sometimes if you read it expecting one thing you're going to be disappointed, so I want the interview to be read on those

terms, or I want the answers to be understood on those terms. And in the ideal world I'd like more and more of academia to be that kind of a conversation.

BG: Can you – I mean because that's one of the things that struck me about reading the book was that very clear decision that this was a book for a wide audience but I must say I really enjoyed the footnotes and presumably you thought a lot about that decision

PL: I did.

BG: And would you be able to say what kind of thoughts led to it?

PL: Well it was a very conscious decision and I think that some people really respect me for it and some people think I was very foolish. But I am tired of having, you know, insular, self-congratulatory conversations where we're allowed to not be very relevant or not really explain what we mean, hide behind jargon because we don't know how to speak with regular people. No I don't want to say it that way, but we don't know how to speak with people outside the academy. I think that's laziness and I think it's also meaningless and so I, I think we all have roles to play in the struggle to make the world a better place and so if I could be a translator, if I can be transnational in that I have one foot in the academy but one foot in broader discussions and can span those two worlds, not by sacrificing the rigour or the thoughtfulness by which I enter in each of them, then that to me would be a success. And that's a tall order and I'm sure I'm going to be successful at it sometimes but also fail at it sometimes, but that's what I'm trying to do. It's great to write books that graduate students and undergraduates are going to read. But those are also books that if you write them right, I think those books could also be read by a broader thinking public.

BG: Do you think there are any costs to taking this route?

PL: Sure, you won't get a job at Oxford, you know. I mean it clearly is going to exclude you from a certain kind of academic prestige but that's okay. That's my personal decision; I'm not looking for that academic prestige, my goal in life is not to be the most famous American sociologist, I couldn't do that and I'm not going to, I don't want to do that, you know. So what is my goal in life? My goal in life is to do meaningful work that changes the nature of the conversation and that ultimately improves, makes things better for the people that I care about and it's to do that in a global way not just a very parochial way.

BG Thank you so much Peggy.

Professor Peggy Levitt interviewed by Breda Gray at the University of Limerick, Ireland, 9 December 2008

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