WINNING AND LOSING

Where You Live Really Matters

APPLIED CASE STUDY

Many researchers have suggested that, in the present period of globalization, we are seeing the emergence of a transnational elite, or 'transnational capitalist class' in the words of Sklair (1998). In this case study, we will consider German businesspeople and diplomats in London in light of how well they meet this definition, and in what ways they could be considered a transnational capitalist elite.

According to Sklair, the TCC (to borrow his abbreviation) consists of 'those people who see their interests … and/or the interests of their countries of citizenship, as best served by an identification with the interests of the capitalist global system, in particular the interests of the transnational corporations' (1995: 8). Critics of this concept, such as Coles and Fechter, however, suggest that the term may be misapplied; they note that, first, their own interviewees in this area did not self-identify as such, and, second, that definitions such as 'elites', 'cosmopolitan' and 'capitalist' are relative. It thus remains to be seen to what degree the German case supports Sklair.

While perhaps 'class' might not be the right term to use, the Germans do certainly show a number of the traits one would expect from a transnational elite social group. Their residence in a global city is one such indicator (see Chapter 2 and the case study for Chapter 3). Many of them have attended elite universities around the world, and seek out educational and business opportunities without regard to geography, choosing to do MBAs, for instance, based on which accrediting institution has the best reputation rather than where in the world it is located. They all work for transnational institutions, many of which are internationally recognized. They make use of their transnational networks for both social and geographical

ability, with many capitalizing on their sojourn in the UK to pursue international careers elsewhere in the world. In terms of their cultural interests they are cosmopolitan, participating in the international arts and entertainment scene offered by London, exercising alongside their peers at costly fitness centres, and shopping with one eye on the international fashion and technology markets. The international network of German Schools, also, provides a means for social reproduction, whereby the children of the elite can receive a German education along with other children in the same social bracket. Finally, it could be argued that Germanness itself is becoming a transnational identity, given that many members of the community considered themselves to some extent 'German' even if they had not been born in Germany, or if they had spent most of their lives away from the nation in question.

At the same time, however, evidence exists which challenges this picture. The Germans need to connect locally in all aspects of their lives, with the German School being as deeply embedded in local educational networks as it is with the German school system, and many of them also give up their transnational lifestyles as they find more social reasons to settle (children, mortgages, and so forth), although the place in which they settle may not be the place in which they were born. Most, although they say they do not feel tied to their German origins, nonetheless retain firm social connections to Germany, and all said they had a sense of *Heimat* towards Germany (*Heimat* is a complex term usually translated as 'home' or 'hometown', but which is more complex than that, incorporating feelings of belonging, ethnic identity and local solidarity). Most, as per Coles and Fechter, did not self-identify as transnational capitalists, and most were better described as multilocal or regional rather than truly transnational, as their careers were spent in only one or two locations, mainly within the European Union.

The situation regarding the Germans was thus a complex one, and one perhaps less described in terms of the formation of a transnational capitalist class in Sklair's sense, than of the emergence of groups which incorporate a variety of global and local aspects to their behaviour and lifestyles in different ways. It is worth pointing out that there also existed a number of legal and infrastructural barriers to transnationalism (German citizens' freedom of movement within the EU, for instance, probably explaining their concentration in the home region), and that there is also a life-cycle aspect to transnationalism, with most living more transnational lifestyles before having children and/or after their children leave home.

Although it may be premature to hail the arrival of a transnational capitalist class, then, the concept is not without foundation. However, the picture which emerges from the case of the Germans in London is a complex one, incorporating different patterns of embeddedness and mobility.

QUESTIONS

1. Evaluate Sklair's criteria for defining a transnational capitalist class in light of the examples considered thus far in *Global Shift*. To what extent is it applicable as a general category?
2. How important do you feel *Heimat* and similar concepts may be in preventing the development of a transnational capitalist class?
3. If a transnational capitalist class is emerging, what can transnational corporations do to encourage its development?
4. If a transnational capitalist class is *not* emerging, how do you account for the transnational presence of groups like the German businesspeople and diplomats described here?

FURTHER READING

Coles, Anne and Fechter, Anne-Meike (eds) (2007) *Gender and Family among Transnational Professionals.* London: Routledge.

Forster, Nick (2000) The myth of the 'International Manager'. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 11 (1): 126–142.

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Sklair, Leslie (1995) *The Sociology of the Global System*. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.

Sklair, Leslie (1998) The transnational capitalist class and global capitalism: the case of the tobacco industry. *Political Power and Social Theory*, 12: 3–43.