

Diaspora and Transnationalism

Concepts, Theories and Methods

RAINER BAUBÖCK & THOMAS FAIST (EDS.)



Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods

IMISCOE

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edited by Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist



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Preface

The success of concepts in the social sciences is often measured by the number of academic publications referring to them, by their capacity to cross the boundaries of disciplines and by their penetration into mass media and wider public discourses. If, however, we take qualitative criteria such as the explanatory power of a concept and its precision in distinguishing different social phenomena as indicators for its usefulness in social theory and research, then successful proliferation may diminish academic value. This diagnosis seems to apply to the concepts of transnationalism and diaspora. Both have become extremely popular since the 1990s and are today applied to much broader classes of phenomena. This widening of empirical scope has also led to increasing conceptual overlap so that diaspora and transnationalism have become increasingly difficult to distinguish from each other. Yet even in their multifaceted contemporary meanings, each concept still shows the birthmarks of distinct imaginaries, research puzzles and disciplinary styles of reasoning. The danger is that the broadening of conceptual scope will not only result in conceptual inflation, but also in conceptual flattening in the sense that concepts lose their capacity to drill deeper and connect the multiple layers of socially constructed realities in ways that enhance our understanding.

The goal of this book is not to settle once and for all the conceptual debate by proposing coherent and authoritative definitions. We have instead come to the Wittgensteinian conclusion that the meaning of transnationalism and diaspora must be inferred from their actual uses. This pragmatic attitude suggests also that the best test for the present academic value of these concepts lies in their capacity to trigger new research perspectives and questions. This is the test that we wanted to apply in this volume. And we think that the result is positive.

The chapters of this book are grouped loosely into three sections. In the first part, the emphasis is on the variety of interpretations of the two concepts (chapters 2 – 5). The second part deals with new theoretical approaches and research questions (chapters 6 – 10). And the third part addresses methodological problems and innovations with respect to the study of boundary-crossing activities and affiliations (chapters 11 – 14). The book is framed by an introductory essay that connects the

strands of the debate (chapter 1) and concluding reflections on how empirical research perspectives may enhance our understanding of the evolution of transnational membership norms in democratic polities (chapter 15).

A multidisciplinary book project like this one always risks ending up as a compilation of disconnected essays. We have attempted to reduce this danger by engaging all authors in an intensive process of debate during an initial conference as well as in subsequent rounds of elaboration and revision of the chapters. The project started with an IMISCOE theory conference hosted at and co-organised by the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence from 10-12 April 2008. A call for papers was launched within the IMISCOE network and the EUI, and was eventually also circulated within other networks. Altogether 40 extended outlines of papers were submitted. A programme committee involving seven IMISCOE members invited 28 scholars to submit full versions of their papers at the conference. Apart from Nina Glick Schiller's chapter 6, all contributions in this book were presented in initial draft versions at the conference. And all essays, apart from Valentina Mazzucato's chapter 11, are original contributions that have not been published before. A full draft version of the book was reviewed by three anonymous peer reviewers, whose detailed suggestions were extremely helpful for the last round of extensive revisions. This project has also resulted in an IMISCOE policy brief 'Ties across borders: the growing salience of transnationalism and diaspora politics' by Rainer Bauböck, which is available at www.imiscoe.org/publications/policybriefs.

Apart from the authors and editors, several other persons have been involved in this project and have contributed to its successful conclusion. Listing them and their locations shows how producing this book on transnationalism was itself a transnational process. Wiebke Sievers, based at the Austrian Academy of Sciences and long-term administrator of the IMISCOE thematic cluster on migration and citizenship, was pivotal in the administration of the conference and its follow-up. At the EUI in Florence, Eva Breivik provided secretarial support and Eduardo Romanos' editorial assistance was crucial for preparing the book publication. In Toronto, Edith Klein carefully edited the manuscript for book publication. The IMISCOE Network Office in Amsterdam and the IMISCOE Editorial Committee, spread across Europe, have consistently supported the project. Karina Hof's patient assistance and professional advice deserve to be specially mentioned here. The Amsterdam University Press team (Erik van Aert, Jaap Wagenaar and Christine Waslander) has also been very supportive. We are grateful to all of them.

Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist

Chapter 1

Diaspora and transnationalism: What kind of dance partners?

Thomas Faist¹

1.1 Introduction: Diaspora and transnationalism as awkward dance partners

Over the past decades, the concepts of diaspora and transnationalism have served as prominent research lenses through which to view the aftermath of international migration and the shifting of state borders across populations. The research has focused on delineating the genesis and reproduction of transnational social formations, as well as the particular macro-societal contexts in which these cross-border social formations have operated, such as ‘globalisation’ and ‘multiculturalism’. Although both terms refer to cross-border processes, *diaspora* has been often used to denote religious or national groups living outside an (imagined) homeland, whereas *transnationalism* is often used both more narrowly – to refer to migrants’ durable ties across countries – and, more widely, to capture not only communities, but all sorts of social formations, such as transnationally active networks, groups and organisations. Moreover, while diaspora and transnationalism are sometimes used interchangeably, the two terms reflect different intellectual genealogies. The revival of the notion of diaspora and the advent of transnational approaches can be used productively to study central questions of social and political change and transformation.

The goal of this volume is to bring together these two awkward dance partners, which talk about similar categories of persons involving forms of forced and voluntary migrations. In contrasting and comparing these two concepts across a range of social science disciplines – sociology, political science, geography and anthropology – the book is meant to be theoretical in the wide sense of the term. The aim is not to develop a comprehensive theory or a synthesis of a theory, nor to apply a distinct set of theories to cross-border social phenomena. The term ‘theory’ here relates to theoretically guided empirical propositions, ranging from thick descriptions aiming at particular events and sites, on one end of the continuum, to grand general theory at the other end. Neither is this

an effort to develop an integrated theory of diaspora and transnationalism. To avoid conceptual confusion and talking past one another across academic disciplines, the chapters contained herein are organised according to three clear-cut tasks, and the volume is accordingly structured in three sections.

Part 1 Concepts

We need to study the history and evolution of the two concepts and attempt to clarify their uses for theoretical purposes across different disciplines and research traditions. This part of the volume explores whether and, if so, in what ways diaspora and transnationalism are useful concepts guiding systematic empirical analysis in order to avoid the danger of conceptually rich but proposition-poor research.

Part 2 Theory

We need to compare how different social, cultural and political theories explain the formation of diasporas and the emergence of transnationalism and what weight these phenomena are given in broader theoretical accounts of change in contemporary society. This part of the volume develops theoretically informed propositions that can be used to explain certain phenomena, or identify the causal mechanisms and processes that can be seen in their effects.

Part 3 Methods

We need to develop methodological toolboxes and innovations for studying transnational and diasporic phenomena empirically, without falling into the traps of methodological nationalism or essentialising groupism. This part of the volume engages in reflections on how to conduct research and assess evidence. Our endeavour here also includes discussion and application of relevant research techniques.

Before embarking on a more detailed description of these three tasks, it is necessary to sketch the public and academic relevance of the debates in which the terms ‘diaspora’ and ‘transnationalism’ are used.

1.2 The state of the debate(s)

Diaspora and transnationalism are important concepts in both political and policy debates and academic research – diaspora even more so than transnationalism. Diaspora has become a politicised notion while

transnational approaches have not yet found entry into public debates to the same degree. While diaspora is a very old concept, transnationalism is relatively new. Not only in public debates but also in academic analysis, the terms have fuzzy boundaries and often overlap. This immediately raises the question of why we should be interested in studying these concepts.

Quite strikingly, over the last decade, the term 'diaspora' has become popular in both academic literature and public discourses. Nationalist groups or governments often use the concept of diaspora to pursue agendas of nation-state-building or controlling populations abroad. The concept is invoked to mobilise support for a group identity or some political project, sometimes in the service of an external homeland, such as the protection of ethnic minorities living in another state (i.e. kin state protection). Recently, even source countries of migration have used 'diaspora' to encourage financial investments and promote political loyalty among economically successful expatriates. Because it has been politicised in multiple ways, scholars have argued that the term should be used with care and not regarded as an innocuous analytical concept (Brubaker 2005). Yet, simply doing away with the term altogether would be throwing the baby out with the bath-water. It is important to study how diasporas are constituted, with which consequences for the various agents and institutions involved and how the boundaries of the concept have changed.

Does 'transnationalism' offer more analytical purchase than diaspora? The former term – and its derivatives, such as transnational social spaces, fields and formations – have been used to connote everyday practices of migrants engaged in various activities. These include, to give only a few examples, reciprocity and solidarity within kinship networks, political participation not only in the country of emigration but also of immigration, small-scale entrepreneurship of migrants across borders and the transfer and re-transfer of cultural customs and practices. Though not used as widely as diaspora, nor as politicised, the concept is hardly devoid of political connotations. After all, the pioneers of the transnational turn in the early 1990s coined it as a concept with an approach that brought migrants 'back in' as important social agents (Glick Schiller, Basch & Szanton-Blanc 1995) – in contrast to large organisations such as multinational companies and political parties that had been the object of earlier research of a transnational vein (Faist 2009a). An agenda prioritising the empowerment of migrants is reflected in titles such as *Transnationalism from Below* (Smith & Guarnizo 1998). And indeed, the '-ism' in transnationalism suggests an ideology. Yet, it is not clear who would adhere to such an ideology: researchers, migrants or other political agents. Above all, since its introduction to migration studies in the early 1990s, transnationalism has sparked discussions on

the integration of immigrants. Are migrants' transnational orientations at odds with their social integration in societies of settlement? Or is there complementarity – and, if so, in what circumstances?

These brief references already suggest that diaspora and transnationalism are both at the cross-roads of academic research and public debates. It is therefore of great importance to get a better sense of the uses of the terms, their similarities and differences. As the contributions to this volume make clear, the two concepts cannot be separated in any meaningful way. To do so would be to neglect the rich panoply of definitions and meanings that constantly overlap. Nonetheless, since Wittgenstein (2009), we have known that meanings of concepts can be inferred from how they are used. In a Wittgensteinian spirit that does not rely too much on definitions, this introductory chapter poses the following questions: what do the two concepts have in common? What distinguishes them thus from other branches of globalisation studies, and what distinguishes transnationalism from diaspora studies? And to what ends can they be fruitfully used?

Diaspora is an old concept whose uses and meanings have recently undergone dramatic change. Originally, the concept referred only to the historic experience of particular groups, specifically Jews and Armenians. Later, it was extended to religious minorities in Europe. Since the late 1970s, 'diaspora' has experienced a veritable inflation of applications and interpretations. Most definitions can be summed up by three characteristics. Each of these can be subdivided into older and newer usages. The first characteristic relates to the causes of migration or dispersal. Older notions refer to forced dispersal, and this is rooted in the experience of Jews, but also – more recently – of Palestinians. Newer notions of diaspora often refer simply to any kind of dispersal, thus including trade diasporas such as that of the Chinese, or labour migration diasporas such as those of the Turkish and the Mexicans (Cohen 1997). The second characteristic links cross-border experiences of homeland with destination. Older notions clearly imply a return to an (imagined) homeland (Safran 1991): an example is homeland-oriented projects meant to shape a country's future by influencing it from abroad or by encouraging return there. By contrast, newer uses often replace return with dense and continuous linkages across borders, as in the migration-development nexus (Faist 2008). Such newer meanings do not remain bound in the imagery of origin and destination but include countries of onward migration, and thus emphasise lateral ties. Even wider uses speak of a diasporic experience of all mobile persons as 'trans-nation' (Appadurai 1996). In some cases, the imagined homeland can also be a non-territorial one, such as a global Islamic umma. This latter interpretation highlights the fact that, even in its earliest historic uses, diaspora refers not only to ethnic but also to religious groups

or communities. The third characteristic concerns the incorporation or integration of migrants and/or minorities into the countries of settlement. Older notions of diaspora implied that its members do not fully integrate socially – that is, politically, economically, culturally – into the country of settlement, making and maintaining boundaries vis-à-vis the majority group(s). This notion of diaspora is also often associated with boundary maintenance by a dominant majority through discrimination against diaspora groups. Assimilation would mean the end of diaspora, whether ethnically or religiously defined. Newer notions of diaspora emphasise cultural hybridity in the wake of ‘dissemi-nation’ (Bhabha 1994). In line with older notions, it seems that diaspora implies some sort of cultural distinctiveness of the diaspora vis-à-vis other groups.

Clearly, the older and newer usages of diaspora are not always compatible. Yet, this tension may also constitute an opportunity to raise questions for further analysis. First, newer usages refer to any kind of dispersal and thus blur the distinctions between various kinds of cross-border mobility. For example, for analytical and political reasons, differences between more voluntary and more forced forms of migration may be crucial. Second, the emphasis on return has been replaced by circular exchange and transnational mobility. This development raises important questions about changing forms of migrant membership in communities of origin and destination. Third, while both older and newer usages emphasise the fact that diasporic groups do not assimilate in regions of immigration, more recent discussions go beyond the idea of cultural distinctiveness and focus upon processes of cultural innovation. This raises the question of whether migrant integration, on the one hand, and cultural distinctions, on the other hand, may coexist. In sum, the questions raised are also to be found in discussions about the second term central to this book, ‘transnationalism’: changing forms of cross-border mobility, membership and citizenship and the compatibility – or incompatibility – of migrant integration and cultural distinctions.

While the term ‘diaspora’ always refers to a community or group and has been heavily used in history and literary studies, concepts such as transnationalism – and transnational spaces, fields and formations – refer to *processes* that transcend international borders and therefore appear to describe more abstract phenomena in a social science language. By transnational spaces we mean relatively stable, lasting and dense sets of ties reaching beyond and across borders of sovereign states. Transnational spaces comprise combinations of ties and their substance, positions within networks and organisations and networks of organisations that cut across the borders of at least two national states (Faist 2000b). In migration research, the concept of transnationalism was coined to focus on the grassroots activities of international migrants across borders as being something distinct from the dense and

continuous relations of macro-agents such as multinational or transnational companies. In this sense, the term 'transnationalism' builds upon – yet is distinct from – transnational relations in the political science sub-discipline of international relations, and differs from that usage in its focus on non-state actors (Portes 1996). In transnationalism, non-state agents, among them prominently but not exclusively migrants, are defined as crucial agents. Country of origin, country of destination and migrants (plus their significant others who are relatively immobile) thus create a triangular social structure, which can be expanded through the inclusion of countries of onward migration. In this multi-angular structure, the element of migrant formations covers a host of organisations and groups, including migrant associations, such as hometown associations, religious communities and employer organisations.

1.3 Part 1 – Concepts: Defining diaspora and transnationalism

Striving for exact definitions of terms such as 'diaspora' and 'transnationalism' may seem a futile exercise. Diaspora, in particular, has become an all-purpose word. It may therefore be more meaningful to look at its uses. As the uses of these terms often overlap and are sometimes even interchangeable, no clear separation is to be expected. Nonetheless, a close conceptual comparison is an opportunity to bring to light crucial questions about cross-border processes. Towards this end, it is useful to compare the two concepts first to globalisation studies. While the impact of globalisation is often assumed to be universal and worldwide, approaches linked to the concepts of diaspora and transnationalism refer to phenomena that occur within the limited social and geographic spaces of a particular set of regions or states. Globalisation approaches and world theories differ from diasporic and transnationalist approaches in at least three respects.

First, all cross-border concepts refer to the importance of cross-border or even 'deterritorialised' politics, economics and culture. Yet, diaspora and transnational approaches emphasise intense connections to national or local territories, especially in the case of migrants. For example, the lobbying that Kurdish migrant organisations do may take place at the European Parliament in Brussels, but its focus is on 'local' issues, such as Kurdish autonomy in Turkey or the right to organise in European Union member states. In this way, cross-border social phenomena have a clear territorial reference and are thus also local or national in their focus and goals (see Lyons 2006).

Second, there is also no claim that a global or world consciousness is evolving in a linear way. The broad definition of transnational spaces,

fields and formations as sets of dense and continuous social and symbolic ties encompasses all kinds of social phenomena. These definitions apply across the board, from the cross-border activities of non-governmental organisations and social protest movements, through the migration flows that link specific sending and receiving countries, to the ongoing ties migrants retain with their countries of origin. However, in diaspora and transnational approaches, the intensified cross-border transactions are not necessarily connected to a global consciousness, a global horizon of world society, global justice and cosmopolitanism (Beck 2006) or the growing importance of universal norms in the world polity approach (Meyer, Boli, Thomas & Ramirez 1997). In particular, migration is a case where there is no neat coincidence of 'globalisation from below' (Portes 1996), no growing awareness of 'one-worldness', on the one hand, and universal ideas, on the other. Moreover, diaspora and transnationalism – as concepts and observable phenomena – are not necessarily coterminous with what is called global or transnational civil society in the form of 'transnational advocacy networks' (Keck & Sikkink 1998). Transnational advocacy networks are often portrayed as promoting universal values, such as human rights, democracy and gender equity. Similarly, transnational social movements are studied as an instance of globalisation and the universalisation of practices and rights from below (Della Porta, Andretta, Mosca & Reiter 2006). By contrast, diaspora and transnational concepts often relate to the observation that, when it comes to understandings of the political, human mobility may reinforce and recreate all kinds of beliefs and – isms, including nationalism, patriarchy, sexism, sectarianism and ethno-nationalism.

Third, terms such as 'diaspora' and 'transnationalism' or 'transnationalisation' do not suggest a (linear) progression of the universalisation of rights, as world approaches do. For example, post-national approaches posit that migrants' 'right to have rights' (Arendt 1973 [1959]) has led to the evolution of post-national membership, which – in liberal democracies – guards essential social and civil rights of migrants, though falls short of full political rights and citizenship (Soysal 1994). According to this view, the ultimate source of this tendency is to be found in a diffusion of Western norms of human rights into the regulations and constitutions of national states. While considerations attached to terms such as 'diaspora' and 'transnationalism' do not provide comprehensive theories on rights and citizenship, there are no clear-cut assumptions about the global spread of norms. Instead, the focus is usually on contentious struggles around issues such as rights in both national and transnational arenas (Faist 2010). Diaspora and transnational concepts, in contrast to global and world theory concepts, often start from the observation that, while there is less of a requirement of

physical or geographical proximity for social life, there is still no clear tendency towards universalisation. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the co-presence of universalising and particularising processes. Thus, universal norms – such as collective self-determination, democracy and human rights – may enable local or national claims. For example, demands for political autonomy or multicultural rights of cultural groups often refer to global norms such as the right to collective self-determination. In this way, the concepts of diaspora and transnationalism are closely related to ‘glocalisation’, which combines the notions of globalisation and localisation (Robertson 1995).

While the conceptual differences between globalisation, on the one hand, and diaspora and transnationalisation, on the other hand, may seem rather straightforward, it appears more difficult to distinguish the latter set of terms. The extent to which the literature on diaspora and transnational studies overlaps and intersects can be discerned from Tölölyan’s (1991: 5) memorable remark that contemporary diasporas are ‘the exemplary communities of the transnational moment’. Diaspora mixes, and overlaps with, meanings of words like ‘expatriate’, ‘migrancy’ and ‘exile’ to form ‘an unruly crowd of descriptive/interpretative terms’ that ‘jostle and converse’ in the modern lexicon of migration studies (Clifford 1994a: 303).

The contributions to the conceptual part of this volume focus on the origins of the two concepts, their expanding interpretation and applications to novel phenomena and the links between academic and wider public discourses. Some of the contributions focus on the history of the concepts and discourse analyses of their present uses, while others propose definitions of the two concepts and identify their various dimensions and contextual specifications. The general perspective of the contributions in this section is interdisciplinary in that the authors draw on insights from a variety of social science disciplines to advance their analysis. Nonetheless, the authors of the chapters are firmly rooted in specific disciplines: Bruneau in human geography, Dahinden in sociology, Weinar in political science and Paerregaard in cultural anthropology. The concepts of diaspora and transnationalism can be usefully grouped into three realms of meaning: descriptive-analytical notions, references to the social constitution of diasporic and transnationalist phenomena and references to a socio-cultural condition.

1.3.1 *Diaspora and transnationalism as descriptive analytical notions*

The use of diaspora as a descriptive and analytical category has a strong tradition. Examples in this volume include Safran’s and Cohen’s taxonomies of diaspora and Sheffer’s effort to systematically analyse diaspora politics (Sheffer 2006). Making frequent references to family