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Embracing Complexity: Diaspora Politics as a Co-Construction

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Abstract

Building on cases of conflict-generated diaspora groups, the article proposes to understand diaspora politics as a co-construction between a series of actors that is not limited to home and host states. It argues that repeated attempts to understand diaspora politics as mostly produced by home or host countries is the result of an unwillingness to embrace the fundamentally disruptive nature of diasporas in interstate politics. Diasporas are hybrid political actors that have connections, not only with their countries of origin and of residence, but also with other diaspora groups located in the same country or elsewhere as well as with other actors at the transnational level. Taking stock of state-based approaches to diaspora politics, as well as of analyses focusing on internal diaspora matters, the article shifts the focus towards the interstate and transnational dimensions of diaspora politics and emphasises their potential to move across levels and spheres of engagement.

Keywords: diasporas; politics; transnational; hybridity; engagement.

Introduction

Traditional academic understandings of diaspora politics build upon a paradox. On the one hand, they acknowledge and sometimes even tend to overstate, their “hybrid” nature (see, for instance, Ang, 2003; Kalra et al. 2005; Laffey and Nadarajah, 2012; Werbner and Modood, 1997), their “neither here nor there” transnational positionality and their capacity to disrupt international politics fundamentally, still structured around the idea of nation-states. On the other hand, however, most attempts to understand and analyse diaspora politics propose doing so from the perspective of countries of origin, and/or of countries of residence, thus seemingly reducing diasporas’ politics to bilateral linkages. What these attempts usually lack is a readiness to embrace the complexity of internal diaspora politics and cleavages, whilst also factoring in, *at the same time*, their connections with countries of origin, with countries of residence, with international organisations, as well as with other (diaspora) groups active on the transnational political scene. The unwillingness to take seriously the specific positionality of diaspora groups, leads to severely understating the complexity of factors that shape, influence, and determine diaspora politics. It also fundamentally fails to grasp the challenging and potentially revitalising nature of diasporas for national, international, and transnational political spheres. The key hypothesis developed in this article is, therefore, that the ways in which diasporas are being “governed” cannot be understood by looking at either sending or receiving states, or even at diasporas themselves. Such understanding can only be achieved using an analysis framework that takes into account all of these actors at the same time, in particular,

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paying specific attention to how civil society organisations representing diaspora groups operate in national and transnational spaces. While acknowledging the importance of *issues*, such as identity or religion in understanding diaspora politics, because of space constraints, the focus here is mostly on the *actors* relevant for understanding diaspora politics.

In this article, various case studies of conflict-generated diaspora groups are built upon, because these have been the focus of numerous publications over the past decades (see, for instance, Sheffer, 1994; Lyons, 2007; Smith and Stares, 2007; Baser and Swain, 2008; Baser, 2015; Van Hear and Cohen, 2017) and because they display interesting characteristics for studying diaspora politics. As they often include representatives of opposition to home country regimes and individuals considered to be “radical,” conflict-generated diaspora groups are usually closely monitored and surveilled by both host and home countries. These diaspora groups are also frequently characterised by deep and sometimes violent internal cleavages and often display a high level of political mobilisation, which is however not consistent across all diaspora groups. That is, some sections of these diasporas are deeply involved in political activities in both receiving and sending countries as well as at the international level.

Building on the aforementioned examples, it is proposed here to understand diaspora politics as a co-construction between a series of actors that is not limited to home and host states. It is argued that repeated attempts to understand diaspora politics as mostly produced by countries of origin and/or countries of residence are the result of an unwillingness, or incapacity, to embrace the fundamentally disruptive nature of diasporas in interstate politics. Diasporas are hybrid political actors that have connections not only with their countries of origin and of residence, but also with other diaspora groups located either in the same country or elsewhere. Taking diaspora politics seriously, thus, entails looking beyond bilateral links with host and home countries; it means taking stock of the diversity and complexity of actors operating in the transnational space. The article starts by examining the promises and limits of state-based approaches to diaspora politics, before highlighting the wealth of analyses focusing on internal diaspora politics. In the last section of the article, the focus is shifted towards the interstate and transnational dimensions of diaspora politics, in particular, diasporas’ potential to move across levels and spheres of engagement.

Understanding “diaspora politics” through a state-centric approach

Over the past two decades, the literature on diaspora politics has blossomed, considering diasporas as political actors, in terms of receiving states’ migration, probing integration policies (Bauböck and Faist, 2010; Castles and Davidson, 2000; Vertovec, 2009), as well as investigating sending states’ attempts at controlling and managing their diasporas (see, for instance, Waterbury, 2010; Ragazzi, 2014). Experts in diaspora studies have been looking at large data sets, at groups of similar or contrasted case studies, as well as individual empirical examples, focusing notably on regime types or political divisions in countries of origin or on the concerned diaspora’s characteristics. A large part of that literature has been interested in how countries of origin govern their diasporas from abroad and try to influence their politics, often through the creation of specific institutions like ministries or directorates dealing with diaspora matters (Gamlen, 2014). Since the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, for instance, the Rwandan government has been attempting to control the political activities, as well as the mobility, of the Rwandan diaspora. It has notably done so by trying to define who should be considered a legitimate member of the diaspora and by seeking to discredit some of its opponents abroad (see Miall, in Féron and Orrnert, 2011: 61-62). Those who are identified as potential “enemies” are the targets of intensive surveillance activities, with the



Rwandan government closely monitoring cultural and political manifestations like commemorations of the 1994 genocide, which are organised by the Rwandan diaspora. Governments in home countries have also been setting up banking facilities in order to manage flows of remittances and to encourage diasporas to invest and spend money in their countries of origin (Gamlen, 2008). Some home countries also allow diaspora members to retain citizenship and to vote in home elections, although this often leads to heated debates (Collyer, 2014; Lafleur, 2015; Mirilovic, 2015; Paalberg, 2017). Such policies increase the impact of home countries' politics within diaspora circles, and sometimes lead to a reproduction of home country cleavages in diaspora settings (Féron, 2013).

While providing interesting and important insights into factors that influence diaspora politics, such a focus on home countries' policies has important consequences on the ways diaspora politics are understood and framed. One of them is that the "home state approach" tends to overlook the specific issues faced by stateless diasporas, such as the Kurdish and Palestinian ones. This type of analysis also ends up essentialising and overstating the importance of national/state belonging at the expense of other factors potentially central to diaspora identities, such as language or religion, which do not necessarily align with national/state borders. In addition, an exclusive focus on home states fails to account for cases where diaspora groups originating from the same country organise and mobilise in various countries of settlement in very distinct ways, as Bahar Baser has shown in her comparison between Kurdish mobilisations in Germany and Sweden (Baser, 2015).

A parallel focus on diasporas' countries of residence undoubtedly complements this research strand by stressing the importance for diaspora politics of factors, such as the host countries' integration policies (Joppke and Morawska, 2003), economic opportunity structures (Heisler, 1986) and also, models of participation and citizenship (among others, see Castles, 1995; Joppke, 2007; Just and Anderson, 2012). Mohammad-Arif and Moliner have shown how host countries whose model of participation is collective and/or promotes multiculturalism, favour diasporic mobilisation along ethnic lines (2007: §30). But these approaches focusing on countries of residence also remain limited insofar as they ignore the transnational dimensions of diaspora politics and because, most of the time, they focus on diaspora groups living within the boundaries of a specific state. These studies notably overlook the fact that diaspora groups are usually present and active in several host countries at the same time, with these transnational communities being in contact and influencing one another. In addition, with a few notable exceptions (among which, Fitzgerald, 2006), researchers have tended to ignore the multilayered character of contemporary states. That is, they have treated both receiving and sending states as if only national agencies and ministries had a say in designing and implementing migration policies. Ragazzi (2014: 78) notes the limitations of considering the state as "a unitary actor rather than a series of institutions with multiple, heterogenous and sometimes contradictory positions". Taking into account this heterogeneity is crucial, as many local actors and institutions have been granted a central role in the implementation of integration policies.² It is, therefore, important to recognise that diaspora politics might be conceptualised, structured, and implemented in very different ways at various levels within both sending and receiving states.

Whether focusing on home or host state policies, with a few exceptions (see, for instance, Adamson and Demetriou, 2007), existing research has, thus, buttressed rather than contested the

² Among many other examples, in Denmark, municipalities are responsible for both setting up and implementing policies designed to favour the integration of adult immigrants.

state-centric approach that dominates the international studies field. This is particularly problematic, because of the specific nature of diasporas, which have the potential to challenge and transcend state-based logics. Some recent publications have attempted to nuance these approaches, for instance, by analysing the varieties of diaspora outreach activities within countries of origin (Koinova, 2018), but state structures remain their point of reference. Transcending the home/host state fetish in diaspora studies is still difficult and as a result, diaspora politics are often understood as and reduced to, by-products of home and/or host state politics. Recent research highlighting the limits of such approaches and shedding light on the fact that diasporas are not necessarily the weaker actor in relations between diasporas and home countries, is in that sense most welcome.³

Focusing on internal diaspora politics

Research focusing more specifically on internal diaspora politics offers crucial complementary insights to state-centric approaches. As has often been stated (Werbner, 2002), all diasporas display a striking internal diversity at the political, social, economic, and cultural levels. Mobilisation and politicisation types and intensity vary dramatically not just from individual to individual, but also, across space and time (Sökefeld, 2006; Adamson, in Checkel, 2013; Burgess, 2014). Ethnic and “norm” entrepreneurs play a crucial role in these processes (see, for instance, Nomme and Wedmann, in Checkel, 2013). Cases of diaspora groups originating from war-torn countries seem to suggest that diaspora levels of mobilisation may be influenced by a series of factors, amongst which are the size of the concerned group (Baser, 2013), the political situation in the country of origin (e.g. whether the conflict in the home country is in an escalatory, de-escalatory, or conflict resolution phase: see, for instance, Koinova, 2016), as well as generational, economic, social, or other situational factors (Féron, 2017). As argued by Werbner (2002), diasporas should be viewed as evolving historical formations and not as crystallised and unchanging entities. In other words, diaspora politics are constantly changing, being affected on an ongoing basis by both internal and external factors.

Unpacking and understanding diasporas’ internal politics cannot be done without taking into account the role played by civil society organisations representing their communities. Most diaspora groups host a multitude of charities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), cultural and religious organisations, community groups, and political parties (Sassen, 2002). The abovementioned internal diversity factor can be brought into sharp focus by studying these organisations in all their forms, which will also enable the unpacking of the “black box” of how home and host states’ policies reach and impact on individuals living in the diaspora. Diaspora organisations, including those that are not openly political, are often major interlocutors of authorities in both receiving and sending states. Moreover, they are becoming important intermediaries between international organisations and diaspora groups too (Pries, 2008; Gamlen, 2014). What is worth underscoring here is that most of these organisations can have rather complex relations with both sending and receiving states. Those that strongly back home governments or promote radical options and discourses, do not always claim significant levels of support within diaspora groups. Similarly, political parties and organisations that oppose home governments are particularly targeted for surveillance by their countries of origin, and they can also find it difficult to mobilise diasporas, in particular when there are other pressing issues to attend to in their countries of residence (Canefe, 2002). In addition, existing research invites us to question the view that political organisations representing diaspora groups, especially those from war-torn countries, tend to focus only on political matters relative to

³ On the issue of memorialization and transitional justice, see, for instance, the work of Dženeta Karabegović (2019).



the situation in their countries of origin. Whilst some of them, indeed, dedicate much attention to what is going on “back home” and strive to achieve a change “over there”, most tend to adopt a low political profile as far as their home country is concerned and prefer to focus on issues related to the integration and mobility of the communities they represent (Féron, 2013).

Focusing on diasporas’ endogenous actors and processes does not entail understanding diaspora politics as completely autonomous from home country politics. The concept of long-distance nationalism (see, for instance, Anderson, 1992; Skrbiš, 1999), which has long dominated diaspora studies, posits that diaspora politics can notably be explained in relation to the (current as well as past) situation and politics in home countries. Other important notions such as that of the “diasporic turn” (Demmers, 2007: 8; Baser, 2014) are related to what is happening in the country of origin too. The idea of the “diasporic turn” suggests that specific events or developments happening in home countries can trigger diasporas’ identification and mobilisation, sometimes generations after migration has taken place. Famous examples include the “awakening” and mobilisation of the Kashmiri diaspora following the 1989 insurgency in Kashmir or that of the Sikh diaspora after the 1984 attack on the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Similarly, research focusing on the roles of diasporas as potential peace-makers or peace-wreckers in peace and conflict processes in their countries of origin (see, for instance, Østergaard-Nielsen, 2006; Smith and Stares, 2007) abides by the idea that what is happening in the home countries largely frames and explains diasporas’ political choices.

Recent research has, however, demonstrated that diaspora politics, even when they seem tightly related to those of the home country, for instance, by reproducing some of its cleavages and debates, are in fact often largely autonomous from them. In her study of the Kurdish diaspora, Bahar Baser has shown how political, economic and social conditions in countries of residence have induced shifts in the “asymmetries of power” between Kurdish and Turkish diaspora groups, thus entailing changes in the types of mobilisation and politicisation (Baser, 2013). The concept of “autonomisation”, nuancing approaches relying primarily upon the “long distance nationalism” thesis, captures these processes. The autonomisation of diaspora politics happens when “actors carry on using the categories and the language of the conflict raging in the country of origin, but are motivated by different underlying and current causes, such as a lack of social and economic integration in the country of settlement” (Féron, 2017: 368). Such processes underscore the fact that diaspora politics cannot be simply interpreted as extensions or consequences of home and/or host states’ policies and politics. Diasporas have to be analysed as at least partly autonomous and fragmented political actors. They also constitute dynamic spaces for political innovation and initiatives.

The other dimensions of diaspora politics: Interstate and transnational linkages

To understand the complex nature of diaspora politics, however, it is necessary to move beyond analyses that focus either on diaspora governance from home and host countries or on diasporic political activities within a specific country of residence. One of the factors influencing diaspora politics that has often been neglected, even by researchers primarily interested in how states influence these politics, is the interstate relations factor. The fact that a sending state is, for instance, a former colony of the receiving state, and that this colonial past is likely to have an impact on their respective stances and policies, has so far not been seriously and systematically examined. The same goes for states whose relations are highly asymmetrical or highly collaborative. The sending states’ ability to implement specific diaspora policies largely depends on the nature of their relations with

the receiving states. Some authors, such as Ragazzi (2014: 78) and Délano and Gamlen (2014: 44), have observed that it is important to take into account the international position of the sending state, because the ways in which countries of origin interact with their diasporas depends on where these groups are settled.

In addition, policies developed by home countries are heavily influenced by host countries because, as Ragazzi (2009) remarks, most “diaspora politics” take place within the receiving state’s constituency. Countries of settlement have their own agenda with regard to the management of migration, which might lead them to accept or refuse such “interference” from countries of origin. In particular, negative images associated with diasporas, such as describing them as being committed first and foremost to their countries of origin, as being divided by deep political cleavages and thus, more politically sensitive as well as being difficult to govern, might lead receiving states to accept grudgingly the intervention of sending states. Generally speaking, it is worth remembering that diaspora politics and policies can be used as a foreign policy tool, for instance, as a way to influence interstate relations between home and host states (Brand, 2006: 62).

The existence of postcolonial relations between host and home states deeply influences internal diaspora politics too. One interesting example, combining postcolonial and (post)conflict characteristics, is provided by the case of the Irish diaspora in Britain. According to the Irish government, around two million Irish citizens live in Britain, the majority of which are British born, and around six million British citizens (around 10 percent of the population) have at least one Irish grandparent. These human exchanges have long been favoured by the politics of visa, migration, and of access to nationality implemented by both Irish and British governments. Most members of the Irish diaspora in Britain are descendants of Catholics, who fled Ireland at various times of economic and political hardship, under British colonial rule or shortly after the creation of the Irish Free State. There are, of course, some Protestants with an Irish background too, but for political and historical reasons, they tend to identify themselves as British and not Irish. In spite of all these exchanges and policies, the maintenance of the conflict in Northern Ireland has long induced a degree of mistrust on the part of the host society. Some British people still associate the Irish diaspora with the activities of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland and tend to view it as a “community apart” because of its Catholic faith (Baumann, 1996: 96). As a consequence, the Irish diaspora in Britain is generally characterised by a very low level of politicisation and mobilisation, with Irish diaspora organisations mostly focusing on cultural activities, such as music or ceilidhs (sessions of traditional Irish music, storytelling, or dancing). Politically-related activities led by the Irish diaspora living in Britain, such as peace-building activities in Northern Ireland, have thus remained discrete.

Diaspora politics can also take place at the transnational level, beyond home state-diaspora-host state relations. Transnational forums notably allow diasporas to build connections with other like-minded actors that do not always have direct links with the concerned country of origin, and that do not belong in any way to that specific diaspora. Coalition-building among different diaspora groups is, indeed, not a rare occurrence (Koinova, 2019), and it provides a vivid illustration of the horizontal dimension of diaspora politics occurring in national and transnational spaces. Alliances between diaspora groups can be formed within the borders of one country of residence and also across several host countries, on the basis of common policy or political goals or to support a specific cause. Cultural factors, like linguistic or religious linkages, play a fundamental role in these alliances, with a specific historical experience, like colonialism or genocide, appearing to play a



crucial role too. There is also a growing awareness of the role played by the internet in these horizontal linkages and in the creation of “digital diasporas” (Brinkerhoff, 2009).

In addition, it is worth remembering that very different types of civil society organisations are active in the transnational space, some of which are not attached to a specific diaspora, but rather, represent various circles of support and interest in the affairs of a specific social, political, economic, religious, or cultural group. The Global Justice Movement, and its associated annual World Social Forums, provide an illustration of such dynamics. It is therefore important to underscore the fact that political links and alliances can be built between diasporas and organisations that are active at the transnational level, but are not necessarily diasporas. For instance, transnational coalitions supporting the Palestinians and the Palestinian diaspora frequently gather individuals and organisations that originate from different countries, ethnicities, and religious groups, pursuing largely different political goals.⁴

Transnational events and structures shape diaspora politics as much as they are shaped by them. As explained by Cochrane *et al.* (2009), events with a strong transnational echo, like the attacks of 9/11 and the US interventions that followed, can have a deep impact on diaspora politics, even within diasporas that are not primarily concerned by the event. International and regional organisations are also increasingly important for explaining diaspora politics. International courts, such as the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights, have, for instance, been repeatedly solicited by stateless diasporas, such as the Kurds. These examples suggest that diasporas can try to bypass the constraints associated with nation-state structures by harnessing international and transnational forums. This allows them to move across various political levels, from the local, where the diaspora groups are settled to the national in both home and host states and to the transnational, where they can build alliances with like-minded actors, using international institutions for their own political purposes. This ability to move across levels and planes, possibly to playing one against the other, constitutes one of the most fascinating and challenging characteristics of diaspora politics.

Concluding remarks

The picture that emerges out of this rapid overview is one of a co-construction of diaspora politics, where both sending and receiving states play an important, but not necessarily hegemonic, role. In particular, diaspora politics can “autonomise” itself from what is happening in the country of origin, and diaspora actors can initiate political innovation and resistance, for instance by setting up alliances with other groups active at the transnational level. In a context where diasporas are increasingly securitised and viewed with suspicion, developing a nuanced theoretical framework that takes into account the multiple actors relevant to diaspora politics is a matter of urgency. It also requires adopting innovative methodological approaches that allow, when needed, observation of all these actors at the same time, instead of focusing on just a few of them. This might call for more focused analyses that would, for instance, look at how specific themes or sequences of events play out in the case of a particular diaspora group.

Studying the complex and challenging nature of diaspora politics with the seriousness it deserves is not possible without examining more closely how methodological nationalism still heavily influences diaspora studies. Such an approach notably entails going beyond studying diaspora groups settled within one country or how home and host states try to control and govern

⁴ See, for instance, the work of Marc Hecker (2012).

their diasporas. When we put the focus on how diasporas make the most of their access and presence on the local, national, international, and transnational political scene, we can better understand how and why diasporas can sometimes disrupt international and national political orders, and become dynamic sites of political innovation.

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