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Diasporas good? Diasporas bad?

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Abstract

National and international policy-makers have renewed interests in ethnic diasporas. However, even between departments within the same governments, there are very different approaches to, or understandings of, diasporas. Some see them potentially as social formations that can bring economic benefits, others see diasporas as inherently disruptive to national societies or as threats to security. Here, a variety of current views and policy lines are explored surrounding diasporas, a category which represents some of the key characteristics of our times.

Keywords

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Introduction

Within policy circles at both national and international levels, mixed messages are being conveyed with regard to diasporas. Some agencies or government departments broadly see diasporas as good things to engage for various kinds of mutually beneficial activity; at the same time, others believe diasporas are potentially bad things that may do various kinds of harm to national societies. Who is saying what, and why now?

The word 'diaspora' derives from the ancient Greek *diaspeirō*, "to sow or scatter from one end to the other". In keeping with this etymology, a diaspora is commonly defined as a self-identified ethnic group, with a specific place of origin, which has been globally dispersed through voluntary or forced migration. Historians remind us that global diasporas themselves are nothing new, and that they have played important roles at various times and places in the past. Influential trading communities, religious institutions, cultural practices, political movements and migrant-homeland relations have developed within given diasporas and shaped consequential events around the world.

Following a surge in academic interest from the early 1990s through the present, it is widely recognized that diasporas have an enhanced presence on the world stage today. This changing position of diasporas arises for several reasons. It includes the fact that there has been a rise in migrant numbers over the past few decades (up to some 190 million). More people have moved from more places to more places; old diasporas have been replenished while new diasporas have been created.

Advanced technologies and lower costs surrounding travel and mobility, telephone calls, internet connectivity and satellite television have meant that dispersed groups can, with relative ease, stay in everyday, close contact with each other or with events in homelands and other diasporic locations. Regular and routine transnational practices of exchange (of people, money, resources and information) and mobilization (for business, religious, social or political purposes) within diasporic networks often ensure that common collective identities are maintained and enhanced. Also, over twenty-five years of multicultural or other diversity-positive policies in Western, migrant-receiving countries have meant that it has been widely acceptable for immigrants and their descendants to sustain culturally distinct practices and diasporic identities.

Until recently policy-makers on the whole have usually had little to say about the presence or activities of diasporas (although of course one must remember major political decisions such as the American internment of Japanese during WWII or longstanding government dialogues with the lobbies of various prominent diasporas). Particularly since the beginning of the 21st century, however, diasporas have climbed up various policy agendas. Depending on the government department or international institution concerned, this fairly new policy attention has been for different reasons calling for different measures.

Diasporas are good?

By the mid- to late-1990s one of the most significant ways diasporas caught policy-makers' attention was through sheer economic scale. For instance, the opening of China to investment – mainly from overseas Chinese – led some analysts to estimate that the combined equivalent GDP of the Chinese diaspora was perhaps as large as that of China itself. Probably the biggest wake-up call to the economic extent of diasporas came through the steep rise in the global value of remittances, alongside some countries' growing dependency on them, as the 1990s progressed. During that decade global remittances far surpassed the sum of foreign aid. Now, according to the United Nations, the annual worth of official global remittances is estimated to be some $232 billion. The total value including unofficial remittance flows – money and goods sent through family, friends, informal or semi-formal channels (such as *hawala* systems) – is thought to be much higher still.

These large sums have prompted various national government departments responsible for overseas assistance and international agencies such as the World Bank seriously to consider the potential of diasporas for supporting economic development and reducing poverty in their respective homelands. Hence a flurry of reports, conferences, consultations and policy recommendations has arisen in the last few years around the positive relationship between diasporas and development. These include discussions surrounding: how to lower costs around remittance transfers; how to encourage 'productive' uses of remittances (and how best to think about what 'productive' should actually mean); the best ways to create a 'banking culture' among migrants abroad and their families remaining at home; and the most effective ways local and national governments can support migrant hometown associations that seek to establish, finance and manage development projects in their places of origin.

Beyond remittances, there are various other diaspora-relevant policy discussions taking place. Under consideration are ways to 'tap' diasporas for more philanthropic funds and work supporting homelands, for instance in establishing educational institutions. Various schemes have been created to harness overseas professional networks in order to stimulate the transfer of their knowledge and experience gained abroad (that is, to facilitate brain circulation as a corrective to brain drain). Meanwhile, some migrant-sending countries have developed financial policies intended to reach-out and engage members of national diasporas (or at least their money) through expatriate-only incentives such as high interest foreign currency accounts, special bonds and tax exemptions for saving and investment. Other significant kinds of economic activity within various diasporas are being recognized, too. These include new modes of transnational ethnic entrepreneurship and migrants' roles in facilitating international trade. Members of diasporas play important parts in creating migrant 'spin-off' industries such as supermarkets and breweries selling to migrants abroad, law firms and travel agencies specializing in migration overseas or 'diaspora tourism' of the homeland, cyber cafes linking home and away, films and TV programs distributed for consumption overseas and companies specializing in the export of traditional foods and medicines.

The European Commission, government departments like the UK's Department for International Development and international agencies such as the World Bank are all currently espousing new circular migration schemes as the way forward in creating 'win-win-win' scenarios (to benefit migrant sending countries, receiving countries and migrants themselves). Such schemes would effectively create new (albeit temporary?) diasporas managed by international agreements.

In these ways diasporas are at present considered to be good things, at least economically.

Diasporas are bad?

In the security-gripped era since 9/11 diasporic identities and transnational relations have come to be viewed by many with suspicion. There have been growing fears of ideological fifth columns, terrorist sleeper-cells, and other enemies within. Dread of diasporas has manifested in policies surrounding Britain's Terrorism Act (which outlaws forty foreign political organizations), the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (which now oversees immigration issues) and the Patriot

Act (which, through measures to combat international money-laundering and terrorist financing, has had far-reaching impacts on legitimate remittance industries).

Suspicion-by-association or knock-on questions of dual loyalty have underpinned negative views of diasporas (in particular, relating to Muslims from certain countries). For instance, while a 2005 MORI poll revealed some 70% of British Muslims say immigrants should pledge primary loyalty to, and integrate fully into, Britain, the 2006 Pew Global Attitudes Project suggests British Muslims have negative views of Western values, and generally that their attitudes resemble public opinion in Islamic countries in the Middle East and Asia more than in Britain and elsewhere in Europe. The former findings get little attention while the latter makes headlines and increases public worries of diasporic duplicity.

In addition to the bad reputation of diasporas predictably thrown up by security concerns, another unfavorable picture has been growing. Across Europe, 'the failure of integration' has emerged as a widespread and prominent public discourse. In Germany, the Netherlands, UK and elsewhere this discourse arises in response to alarming socio-economic indicators showing that specific migrant-origin minorities – now in their third generation since arrival – are characterized by low educational attainment, high unemployment, poor housing quality, overcrowding and residential segregation, poor health, and lack of socio-economic mobility. A concomitant public discourse suggests such groups are living in 'parallel societies' marked by linguistic separateness, their own discrete neighbourhoods, schools, places of worship, associations and spaces of leisure.

In each context there are observers who put the blame for 'the failure of integration' and 'parallel societies' directly on multicultural policies and ethnic minorities' persistent homeland orientations. They argue that too much cultural preservation and too many maintained links to places of origin are responsible for the poor conditions surrounding immigrants and their descendents. One senior British city official recently suggested to me that, as she sees it, the cause of so many problems surrounding members of the largest ethnic group in her city is their 'village mentality' – explaining that by this she means their tendency to be more concerned with what's happening back in their village of origin, and with their own continuing social status there, than with trying to be successful within their immediate locality in the UK.

In response to these issues, policies to foster 'community cohesion' (by way of promoting core national values) and mandatory immigrant integration (through courses and tests on national

languages, laws and political structures and cultural practices) are being rolled out across Europe. Advocates of such policies say these are necessary in order to avoid ethnic conflicts and to ensure better social and economic outcomes for migrants; critics claim the policies are 'neo-assimilationist' and run counter to agreed ideals of valuing diversity. In any case, such cohesion and integration policies are largely premised on a view that diasporic identification and transnational practices tend to threaten social solidarity generally and the position of immigrants specifically.

In migrant-receiving countries, then, diasporas tend to be viewed with some concern if not dismay by many policy-makers, practitioners and the wider public.

Good and bad?

In yet other quarters, the jury is still largely out concerning diasporas and their benefits or drawbacks. For migrant-sending countries, their diasporas can cause political headaches. Often they might predominantly harbour politically critical or even radically oppositional views – which is why some governments resist extending to them too much in terms of citizenship or political participation. The long-distance nationalism maintained in many diasporas is sometimes of an entrenched, reactionary kind that has strong opinions about how politics should go without actually being there to engage democratically; this, too, may be resented in the homeland. Further, it is well known that many recent and current conflicts are rhetorically fuelled and concretely funded by diasporas.

However, sometimes it is members of diasporas who have also had key roles to play in processes of peace making and post-conflict reconstruction in war-torn regions. Moreover, several states now recognize that important and productive political voices are found within national diasporas, and various structures have been created to take account of these through overseas voting, parliamentary representation or special departments for diaspora.

Foreign ministries, such as that in the UK, are currently looking to establish and develop relationships with diasporic representatives from numerous key regions for a range of reasons to do with bilateral relations, security, trade and development. Yet we know that sometimes such diasporic consultation can backfire: the US government's dialogue with its chosen members

of the Iraqi diaspora may well have created seriously misleading understandings of Iraq in the run-up to war.

Mixed views surround diasporic cultural production and consumption, too. There has been widespread concern (in Germany, for instance) that ethnic minorities largely dwell on their own cultural forms: this is especially conspicuous through the consumption of satellite television broadcast from respective homelands. However, it is evident that some of the most creative contemporary works in literature, music, film and other arts have been produced by members of diasporas and consumed by other diasporic members, by people in respective homelands and by wider publics internationally.

Neither and both

Diasporas receive public and policy-maker attention now as never before. Despite their positive dimensions, it is the perceived negative sides of diaspora that concern most. Now it is not just xenophobia that is reflected in many immigration debates, but a 'diasporophobia' too: that is, fear of not just the 'foreignness' of immigrants, but also of their ongoing ties abroad.

But it is overly simplistic to think of diasporas as a monolithic type of social formation, to see transnational ties as of one kind, and to believe that diasporic identifications imprint specific values and kinds of behaviour. The history, composition and activities of diasporas are highly complex and diverse. Within any diaspora – whether based on ethnic, national, religious or local origin – its members do not feel or act as one. There is always a wide range and degree of attachment. Even among single families within a particular diaspora, some members will want to praise, support and recreate the homeland, some will want to respect it yet get on with their local life, others will want to leave the homeland altogether behind. Further, opinions about identity and views of the homeland tend to cover a wide spectrum: the Jewish diaspora, for example, includes some of Israel's strongest critics as well as its most trenchant supporters.

Through recognizing such diversity-within-diasporas, we can see that diasporic identifications and transnational practices are not necessarily antagonistic to immigrant integration. It is not a zero-sum game (i.e., the more transnational immigrants are, the less integrated or vice-verse). This is born out in recent research findings that demonstrate there is no direct correlation

between the kinds and degrees of immigrant integration and the extent of transnational identification or activities (Snel et al. 2006).

In many ways diasporas represent some of most prominent processes and features of our age. In addition to globalization and the complex inter-penetration of cultures, diasporas clearly demonstrate the rise of multiplicity – of cosmopolitanism, multiple cultural competences and assorted attachments. Regardless of class or provenance but exemplified perhaps most by migrants, it seems an increasing number of people today inhabit and express overlapping (if not competing) memberships of group, language, interest, nation and state. Yet it is rather prosaic just to say that we all – but especially diasporic peoples – have multiple identities. Some group affiliations or personal identifications are stronger or more binding than others, sometimes events (in the world, in national politics, in individuals' lifecourse) trigger particular identifications to condition interests, decisions and actions more than at other times. To slightly rework the approach of Fredrik Barth: it is not the stuff or nature of the identification itself – in this case, the category of diaspora – on which we need to focus academic and policy attention, but the ways, times and contexts in which the identification becomes salient.

Although it may be somewhat exasperating to see that diasporas are so broadly seen as good in some parts of the policy world and as bad in others, it is certainly not surprising. There are a number of topics that cut across the sometimes competing agendas between government departments and among international agencies. Migration is inherently one of these.

So it is not so puzzling that international institutions, national ministries of the interior, departments for home security, foreign affairs and international development are taking different views of diasporas. That is practically in their nature, although from the outside we can continue to call for greater policy coherence and 'joined-up government'. The generalizing messages they put out, however – especially those which might stoke 'diasporophobia' – should nevertheless be scrutinized.

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