Global Civil Society
Shifting Powers in a Shifting World

Edited by Heidi Moksnes and Mia Melin
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Introduction

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Recent interest in the formation of communities and identity within migration contexts could hardly avoid reflecting over the popular concept of “diaspora.” In mainstream literature, this concept frequently refers to an ethnic community, minority or other social group in dispersion (cf Cohen 1997; Safran 1991; Sheffer 1995). However, this conceptualisation is contested by, for instance, asking why it is assumed that people automatically belong to a certain diaspora, when very little is known about whether they identify with a diaspora group at all. Moreover, the concept does not contain any information about the role and function of a diaspora, beyond its being a description of migrants in dispersion. In many cases, diasporas are – just like social movements – motivated by a political struggle and a will to react to issues such as racism and discrimination (cf Alinia 2004; Gilroy 1993). In these cases, the diaspora becomes more like a system of action, and the diasporic representatives need to find a social basis and the legitimacy for such an engagement. This speaks for an alternative approach to diasporic studies, such as to focus on the agency involved in the “diasporisation” of the migrant population that is claimed to be part of a diasporic community. In so doing, the study of diaspora will revolve around the stances, practices or projects that aim towards this community (Brubaker 2005), rather than the assumed community itself.

As a “mobilised” social form, diasporas are typically capable of involving people in formations such as associations, clubs, religious organisations, and so on. They are also genuinely transnational, particularly in their significant practices and commitments (eg Castles and Miller 1993; Glick Schiller et al 1992; Vertovec and Cohen 1999; Al-Ali and Koser 2002). Through people’s ambition to be a motor in the development and maintenance of ties, to engage in “homeland issues” and to nurture the idea of “return” (Cohen 1997), a diaspora becomes a matter of networking.
between a country of residence and a country of origin. These networks serve to maintain social relationships within and between families, kin and friends. Hence, the transnational space is a resource for diaspora actors (Faist 2000). This bridging is crucial in order to both understand the extent to which, and how, the diaspora installs practices that respond to some “needs” in the population, and mobilises the targeted population of a community.

A frequent expression of practices where people use the transnational space is the different kinds of remittances that migrants send to their relatives in their country of origin (eg, de Haas 2007; Lindley 2009) and the formation of agencies that facilitate these kinds of services. Migrants also use the transnational space to facilitate different kinds of aid for locals in their “home villages” or for their political involvements of different kinds. In one way or another, these practices concern the public function of social networks in a migration context. What follows is that social networks, or rather their representatives in the shape of diasporic institutions and actors, could act as civil society institutions that provide solutions to people’s everyday needs, provide an arena for social gatherings, or function as mediators of political engagement. Transnational relations, involving several diasporic residences as well as the country of origin, can thus be an important resource when diasporas develop social practices of different kinds.

When diasporic associations or organisations mediate and distribute services, they include the transnational context as a resource in creating a “structure of opportunity” rather than restricting themselves to a national arena. Such diasporic associations may thus have similarities with well known and successful multinational corporations, but it is obvious that this transnationality operates on a smaller scale, for instance when families maintain strong social ties and services.

One of the crucial conditions for the practices generated in the diaspora is the responsibilities that transmigrants may assume for the welfare of family, kin and others within the social networks in their country of residence, as well as in their country of origin. In a world where power is distributed unevenly, and where the global reconfiguration of social relations is also refiguring the concept of civil society, it becomes even
more important to learn about the diaspora’s “civic” and transnational engagement. Modern nation states, however, are still powerful structures that organise societal life, even in times of globalisation. It is evident that the laws, policies and practices of the sending and receiving states have a decisive impact on how transnational activities and practices are shaped (Al-Ali and Koser 2002; Basch et al 1994; Guarnizo and Michael 1998). The transnational approach will thus direct attention to particular phenomena in social life and the coping with powerful structures and policy.

The focus in the research approach suggested here is the understanding of diaspora as a “mobilised” social form and the way diasporic organisations, associations, and even enterprises within migration contexts, assume responsibility for social issues, support, remittances and other demands of service emanating from social networks of transmigrants. According to my opinion, it is crucial to explore what new practices are generated when the diasporas become “agents” with a civic engagement that cross the border of the nation-state. From this point of departure it will be important to ask how these practices are shaped by their transnational connections and their wrestling with power structures – but also how these in their turn will shape the power structures. Transnational practices generated by the diaspora will presumably be affected by national policy and by states acting across national borders, while the diasporic “institutions” at the same time may become agents that engage in policy-making transnationally. The aim of such research, which is illuminated by the articles of this section, is to comparatively explore how civic engagement evolves in a number of diasporic migrant networks, and how various forms of practices are developed that contextually respond to different needs and power structures in a transnational space.

References


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