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Introduction

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Introduction

By Nando Sigona, Alan Gamlen, Giulia Liberatore and Hélène Neveu Kringelbach

The self as plural

To put it bluntly – most of us prefer our own kind (Goodhart 2004).

David Goodhart's controversial essay on diversity in Britain has attracted sustained criticism from academics since its publication in the early 2000s. Scholars of diasporas and transnationalism have observed that in recent decades, 'Western' societies have undergone a prolonged and arguably irreversible process of diversification as a result of complex colonial and postcolonial histories that make the definition of 'our own kind' far less straightforward than Goodhart's work implies.

That human mobility is part and parcel of globalisation – both a cause and a consequence of further interconnectedness and new forms of belonging and identification – is now widely accepted. The emergence of diaspora studies, underpinned by an expansion in the notion of diaspora itself (cf. Brubaker 2005), forms part of this process, as does the worldwide creation of state bodies and initiatives to engage diasporas (Délano and Gamlen 2014; Gamlen 2014).

However, scholars of diasporas also remind us that processes of diversification are neither confined to the 'West' nor to the present alone, and we should therefore be wary of idealising the past as a time and place of social homogeneity and ethnic purity.

Drawing on contributions from Oxford Diasporas Programme core staff and associates and covering a range of disciplinary traditions,

including social anthropology, sociology, human geography, politics, international relations, development studies and history, the pieces brought together in *Diasporas Reimagined* evoke a world increasingly interconnected through migration, and yet layered with the sediments of previous encounters (not necessarily peaceful ones).

This publication marks the end of ODP, and offers the chance to look back on the work carried out during the lifespan of the programme while also looking forward to a future research agenda in diaspora studies. While it is not intended to offer an exhaustive overview of diaspora studies, we wanted to capture the vitality and variety of research being carried out in this field. Different epistemological standpoints inform the ways in which contributors use the term 'diaspora'. They fall along a spectrum between emphasising group identity as the bounded object of institutional intervention, to understanding diasporic belonging and mobilisation in more fluid, dynamic and performative ways.

The style of contributions varies, from photo essays to ethnographic vignettes, from theoretical ruminations to poetic contemplations, and from broad-brush literature overviews to detailed accounts of human encounters. We hope that the collection as a whole will provoke new ways of thinking around diasporas and some of the foundational concepts of social science. The structure of the collection has arisen from the pieces, rather than the contributions being shaped for particular headings; many pieces, therefore, could certainly fit within more than one heading.

The first section covers ways of imagining and conceptualising the notion of diaspora. In the following section, drawing on a diverse range of case studies, we explore issues related to diasporic belonging and home making. Spatiality and performativity are addressed in the third section, together with a discussion of the role of social networks and intermediaries in the process of diaspora formation and engagement. The collection concludes with a series of pieces addressing actors and factors shaping the politics of diaspora and the role of states and international organisations in this regard.

Metaphors, concepts, genealogies and images

We open this collection by juxtaposing images, poems, hidden

histories and botanic metaphors to capture the vast and elusive terrain of diaspora scholarship. A brief history of the term is laid out through two core elements: the loss of 'home' and the ongoing link to some notion of it. This is accompanied by a reflection on the images that have been used to grasp this multifaceted social phenomenon. Contributions consider the appropriateness of botanical metaphors as analytical tools for diaspora scholars, taking the archetypal image of a dandelion – a recurring presence on book covers and logos related to this field – as a starting point.

In addition to addressing definitional challenges, contributors look into the analytical frameworks that might help to capture the loose assemblage of meanings, practices and spaces of action that coalesce around the term diaspora. This section also includes images and poems that explore the constant negotiation of diasporic identity through the experience of nostalgia; words and images that echo the Cape Verdean *sodade* and the longing for an elusive 'something' that pervades hundreds of melancholic *fados*, and the powerful and yet fragile reach of transnational networks, made of emotions, relationships and time.

Belonging: imagining and remaking 'home'

The notion of belonging evokes an emotional attachment to a homeland, a place of origin, whether real or imagined. But as the pieces in this section show, 'home' is not always conceptualised as a specific location. Some transnational and diasporic groups reconfigure home in myriad other ways, from political and intellectual projects to divine kingdoms. Kenyan Pentecostals in London thus conceptualise home in radically de-territorialised terms, where the promise of the Kingdom of God, rather than the place of origin, is the ultimate home – even if it has not materialised yet. Homeland is very present in the imaginations of Hadramis across the world, both in the sense that they trace their ancestry to the south coast of the Arabian Peninsula, and in the sense that they carry their social hierarchies with them as they roam: this is a group for whom home is very much their sense of belonging to the diaspora group itself, regardless of where they are.

In many cases the reconfiguration of home highlights attempts to

promote a life well-lived and a culture of tolerance, as was the case with some of the Yiddish-speaking groups which thrived in East London at the turn of the twentieth century. They advocated not so much for the emerging Zionist project as for the cosmopolitan, radical political and intellectual movements burgeoning across Europe at the time. The notion of home pointing to a place of origin while keeping an eye out for transnational lives is also present in the piece on Senegalese migrants from Casamance now settled in Spain, whose ideas about conviviality draw on their experiences of living with difference in all the places they have traversed. Similarly, Nepalis in the UK often belong to multiple Nepali organisations while also being comfortable with practising several religious traditions simultaneously.

People's sense of belonging in diasporic contexts is forever in the making, and emerges in constant interplay with 'host' cultures, as Avtar Brah's (1996) seminal work on diasporas reminds us. Making home anew, therefore, is not just a matter of conviviality and tolerance; it is also one of friction and exclusion. For African migrants in Britain, for example, a diasporic orientation does not weaken the permanent nature of home in Britain; indeed perhaps the sense of grievance individuals of African descent express about racism reflects the depth of the stake they hold in that country. Yet, claiming membership is never simple, as shown in the piece on diasporic youth and British young men of colour in Luton and Swindon. Are these young men British, European or Asian, or all of these?

As part of the host culture, state policies have an important role to play in facilitating the making of new homes, particularly when old ones are threatened or contested. Thanks to generous Swedish multicultural policies, Swedish Kurds, for example, are able to mobilise and to engage in homeland politics without feeling detached from Swedish society.

Finally, diasporic home-making affects places of origin in multiple, often unexpected ways. In the small West African state of The Gambia, where over 60 per cent of the skilled population lives abroad, businesses of various kinds are riding on the back of the moral economy of migration. In other instances, it is return or migration to an old place of origin which brings into relief the complexity of belonging, as in the case of Armenian returnees who come to realise that home

is everywhere, and thus perhaps nowhere in particular. For many members of diasporas, a life well-lived involves a careful balancing act between home as imagined, experienced, and forever remade.

Diasporic spaces, networks and practices

The pieces in this section foreground churches, schools, burial funds and sites, trade links and transnational marriages, carnival festivities and inter-religious devotional practices. These spaces, networks and practices push us to view diaspora in novel ways. New analytical entry points are explored and the unexpected is revealed: from Hindus in East London engrossed in Catholic devotional practices, to Somalis from the West opting to resettle in Kenya rather than their places of origin. These contributions challenge assumptions, question mainstream trends and policies, and force us to reimagine diaspora anew. Viewing the spaces, networks and practices of diaspora in the making provides an opportunity to focus on the performative processes of adaptation and change, and on moments of creativity. Contributors use written and visual media to capture the texture of lived experiences, the expressions and feelings that are constitutive of diasporic living. They mark the passing of time, while capturing diasporic memories and nostalgic engagements with the past.

However, the pieces in this section also remind us not to romanticise fluidity or to simply equate it with creativity and resistance. Networks and practices are never neutral, but rather shaped by power dynamics, revealing of both resistance and constraint. Transnational polygamous marriages, we learn, can be constituted through immigration policies which seek to curtail them. Networks and practices can also fix and entrench, and spaces can be static and bounded, resulting in both forms of exclusion as well as forms of self-identification and solidarity. A church may be built to emphasise its distinctiveness from a community centre, symbolically marking off and preserving the spiritual from the encroaching secularity of everyday life. Efforts to ensure fixity and immobility can also have inverse effects. A Cuban school that seeks to educate citizens to serve and govern a socialist nation-state can conversely foster aspirations for social and spatial mobility, giving rise to movement and dispersal. Diasporic networks may emerge not in relation to a

shared homeland, but to an institution, or through a shared habitus. They become a source of social capital drawn on to seek employment or a place to live, and to navigate immigration restrictions.

Governance and mobilisation

Diaspora is a deeply political idea. Fundamentally it refers to a kind of 'identity' – a concept that entered social science through the notion of 'identity crisis': a situation in which a stable sense of human self is disrupted. However, it soon became clear that such crises were the norm rather than the exception: social identity arises not from some primordial source but from constant debates about who belongs to specific groups, who does not, and the power relations underpinning the responses to such questions. In a sense all identity is political because this question of who is 'in' and who is 'out' is the kernel of the basic political question of 'who gets what'.

But, as the pieces in this section illustrate, diaspora identity is especially political, because it inhabits a grey zone between different definitions of 'insider' and 'outsider'. In the post-Westphalian world the core unit of political organisation is the nation-state, and the question of who gets what is decided by who is a citizen – a formal member of the nation-state – and who is not. Citizenship is multifaceted and means different things in different contexts, but usually it combines a sense of common values or formative experiences, with a sense of common adherence to the rules of a specific shared place. For much of human history these two conceptions of political belonging have been more or less synonymous. Diasporas were the exception because they were inside the *demos* but outside the *polis*: inside the nation, but outside the state. But this decoupling of identity from place is becoming the norm rather than the exception in an increasingly mobile and networked world.

No wonder then that diasporas have become a preoccupation of politicians and policy makers, and that their enthusiastic embrace of the term – and their rapid recent establishment of government ministries and other institutions dedicated to emigrants and their descendants – is shifting the meaning of the word from a category of belonging defined in opposition to the nation-state, to one defined by it. Even Latvia now has a 'diaspora support programme', aimed

in a sense at governing those who leave. Such diaspora engagement institutions exist in the grey zone between the disciplines of political science and international relations, and have therefore caught social science unawares. Now that they are suddenly found in over half of all United Nations Member States, they deserve further theoretically informed comparative research.

But diasporas are not simply discovered by policy makers: they are mobilised by political entrepreneurs and opportunists toward specific ends. Recognition of a national cause in the eyes of a destination state is often one of these, as in the case of diasporic debate over the term 'genocide' amongst Armenian-Americans and Turkish-Americans. To be properly understood, diasporas must be disaggregated rather than reified as unitary actors. Their various spheres of engagement in the homeland must be analysed. Their squabbles over who is in and who is out must be examined, as it is through these contests that the boundaries of the diaspora group are drawn and redrawn. Indeed, cases such as Rwanda and Zimbabwe show that efforts to animate diasporas are not always successful or durable: diasporas are not eternal and pre-given social formations; they are born, they die and they may even have an afterlife.

Individuals are not always passively activated by established homeland authorities: their very statelessesness may be the source of their cohesion, as was the case with the archetypal Jewish diaspora. Nor are their engagements necessarily benign. If not weapons of mass destruction, they may become 'weapons of knowledge construction', as has been the case with Afghan-Americans who act as 'cultural advisers, interpreters, translators, and subject-matter experts' for the US military that occupies their homeland. Even through their efforts to evade authoritarian structures such as patriarchy, diasporic subjects may be 'servicing the imperial machine', for example by promoting the idea that violence against Muslims is legitimated by the plight of Muslim women. □