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Diasporas Reimagined: Spaces, Practices and Belonging, 2015 / Sigona, N., Gamlen, A., Liberatore, G., Neveu Kringelbach, H. (ed./s), Ch.33, pp.176-179

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15 March 2017

<http://hdl.handle.net/2440/102448>

Comparing and theorising state–diaspora relations

By Alexandra Délano and Alan Gamlen

Migration policy is usually understood as immigration policy, but formal state initiatives towards emigrants have also recently become widespread. What is happening in the realm of state–diaspora relations, and why? The question of when and why states engage their diasporas – and why their practices converge or diverge – still needs answers based on better comparisons and theorisation.¹

These questions remain challenging partly because multiple factors are involved at various levels and stages. States' positions are constantly changing, depending on, for example, the characteristics of the diaspora (including its economic and political importance), and the nature of the origin-country regime (including its perceptions of emigration as well as its citizenship laws and state capacities such as consular infrastructures and budgets). External factors also matter, including the nature of the destination state and the way it accommodates immigrants and relates to their origin states, and also the role of relevant international organisations and norms.

How can researchers make sense of all this? Which factors matter? When and where do they matter most? We highlight the importance of comparative and theoretical research in addressing these kinds of questions. Like many new research fields, state–diaspora relations grew out of in-depth single case studies that built theory from the bottom up rather than working deductively. This tactic still forms the mainstay of work in this area, but there is growing room for a wider range of approaches, and a need for more comparative and theoretically driven work.

Comparing state–diaspora relations

As diaspora policies become more widespread, research must focus less on the uniqueness of specific country policies but on the commonalities and contrasts among cases. What historical, geographic, ideological, political or economic factors explain the variations and patterns in policy design, implementation and timing? Are some types of policies becoming models and if so, who is promoting them, who is adopting them and why? What are the effects of these policies, both on the home state and the host state and on the populations that they target? How are these policies transforming the nation-state and the international system as a whole?

These questions call for more comparative work on state–diaspora relations. Qualitative comparisons based on ethnographic methods remain vital to understanding how different actors matter in the design and implementation of policies at different levels and in different moments, but quantitative comparisons are also necessary to measure and evaluate the drivers of diaspora policies and their effects. Quantitative studies have been particularly scarce, largely because data on diasporas and on diaspora policies is either unavailable or unsuitable for broad-sample comparisons. It therefore remains important to triangulate available sources and methods – including more mixed-method and multi-disciplinary studies in this field.

Previous research on state–diaspora relations has successfully ‘brought the state back in’, particularly by focusing on the role of origin states in shaping diasporas’ home- and host-country ties and even in creating (or attempting to create) diasporas. But key questions remain where comparative research can make important contributions: How and why does the state matter in shaping these relations and what motivates the states, institutions and elites carrying out the policies? Does the momentum come from states themselves, from diasporas, or from other actors such as international organisations? How do diasporas react to state influence? What variables explain similarities and differences across cases?

Future research on state–diaspora relations needs to broaden the scope of comparison beyond sending states themselves, and include other political actors and processes across a greater range of places and scales. We note three specific priorities:

- Comparing the roles of both origin and destination contexts in shaping state–diaspora relations. The field needs more studies comparing different diaspora groups in the same host state, and more studies comparing single diaspora groups across different destinations.
- Comparing the experiences of migrants with non-migrants. Systematically evaluating and comparing costs and benefits to migrants and non-migrants can provide perspective on both the scale and the success of state investments in diaspora policies.
- Comparing the experiences of groups included and excluded in official conceptions of diasporas. What do these patterns of inclusion and exclusion say about the wider legitimacy of these forums and discourses about diaspora engagement?

Theorising state–diaspora relations

We advocate these comparisons as a route to theory-building in an area that has sometimes been criticised as too policy-focused and a-theoretical.

First, we hope that future research builds on debates about de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation in order to theorise the spatialities of power involved in state–diaspora relations. Governmentality theory, for example, is a useful approach to frame the decentralised, marketised approach to global migration governance that engaging diasporas represents.

Second, we highlight the need for continuing work on the way that spatialities of power intersect with processes of identification and belonging in relations between states and diasporas. For example, links between transnational governmentalities and processes of constructing migrant identity and citizenship merit further development. Recent work focusing on citizenship as a lived experience and not just a legal institution pushes researchers to consider the various spaces and contexts in which multiple citizenship is practiced and enacted, beyond the formal granting of dual citizenship or external voting.

Third, this discussion of membership categories and practices inevitably links to long-standing debates about defining diasporas. Now that the term has been extensively adopted by policy makers

in municipal, provincial and national governments, as well as think tanks, NGOs and international organisations, the meaning of the word diaspora is shifting and stretching still further. Rather than seeking definitional consensus, future research should interrogate how and why the term is used by political actors, and to what effect. Where do working definitions used by state actors originate? How have these definitions travelled and changed over time? What do spatial and temporal differences in diaspora definitions reveal about the actors that use them, about their diaspora policies, about the groups included and excluded by these policies, and about the consequences for everyone involved?

Fourth, we encourage further research on the role of international norms in this area – a topic that has received very little attention, but is increasingly important as international forums and dialogues on migration proliferate, and promote diaspora policies in pursuit of international development. More work is needed to understand what kinds of development are being pursued, and what kinds of diaspora policy ‘best practices’ are being promoted, including where these policies come from, where they travel, and how mobility transforms them.

Finally, we encourage more comparative work on the short- and long-term impacts of diaspora engagement policies. On the one hand, precisely because of this focus on development, other potential short- and medium-term effects of state-driven policies, such as their contribution to integration in the host state, have been neglected. In the longer term, as with all forms of transnationalism, we also need to ask whether the current expansion in state–diaspora relations is leading to durable changes, what is new about them, and why they did not emerge previously.² □

Endnotes

1. Authors listed in alphabetical order. This paper is based on Délano and Gamlen (2014).
2. Further reading: Collyer (ed.) (2013); Délano (2014); Gamlen (2014); Ragazzi (2014).