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TRANSNATIONALISM AND DIASPORA: WHEN IDENTITY AND TERRITORY COME INTO PLAY

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Abstract

This paper aims at re-analysing the concepts of ‘transnationalism’ and ‘diaspora’ in the new political environment and the debate that has lasted for several decades. Theories have shown that they indeed may touch base when looked at from certain perspectives, but others have also stated that transnationalism parts with diaspora when the problem of home and belonging occurs (Vertovec 1996).

One might wonder why the two concepts need to be put together in discourse. What is the logic behind this perspective? Who needs to compare them? Irrespective of their theoretical understanding, communities and individuals who have experienced migration and home-changing, better yet home-leaving, either forced or not², find themselves in the situation of reviewing their very identity and national affinities. Their social and legal status in the countries of destination becomes crucial not only at personal level but also on a more political one. Diaspora and transnationalism are obviously political acts, conscious or not. Moreover, one’s national affinities and citizenship may sometimes be a door that opens to opportunities, superior well-being and living, and even survival, yet at other times it is a door that remains closed to some. Indeed, the problem of belonging must not only be understood on a personal, psychological level, but as a worth-capacitated politically-based capital.

Keywords: *transnationalism; diaspora; identity; territory; migration; refugee.*

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1. Introduction

We are currently witnessing two bloody human-rupturing culture-destroying wars that have just reignited many people’s awareness of the power of ‘identity’ and of its force in politics, enforced by historical events that apparently have not yet known real closure. We are talking about the Soviet identity, defragmented for over thirty years now, which still instills old but strong feelings and political affinities thus throwing off a global order that, although not perfect, promised to keep serious risks and dangers at bay.³

A second event, having at its base a long-lived conflict over territory, identity, religion, and influence, further disrupts identities and affinities.⁴ Territory and belonging have been said to intertwine in the individuals’ consciousness. Likewise, territory and political power are interdependent.

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² The author will review the problem of ‘forced’ migration later in the paper.

³ The reference here is to the Russian-Ukrainian war.

⁴ The reference here is to the latest Palestinian-Israeli war that erupted after 7th October 2023.

Keeping all these in mind, the author tries to review the meaning of diaspora and transnationalism in the new socio-political discourse. Therefore, the public discourse should not take on old meanings of diasporic identity and transnationalism as they can no longer be valid as such in the new context.

2. Theories on transnationalism

Transnationalism and diaspora theory became extremely popular since the 1990s being used in a variety of disciplines from sociology and political science to geography and anthropology (Faist, 2010). The two concepts started overlapping as their empirical and conceptual scope has widened. But let us see how they began spreading meaning from “migrancy”.

It must be stated that the general term encompassing individuals who leave their countries of origin to live and work abroad is migrants. Yet not all those who migrate are grouped in one single category and not all migrants are diasporans. The concept of diaspora is analysed in more detail in the following subchapter. Although in political discourse “migrant” is the concept mostly used, theorists in Transnational Studies and Diaspora have suggested different terms. Thus, “migrants” describes people who only migrate temporarily with the purpose to find work but eventually return home; on the contrary, “immigrants” are those individuals who make a conscious decision to leave their countries and make a new home without wishing to return to the old home; however, transmigrants are those immigrants who develop and “sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch et al, 1994, 7).

The pioneers of the transnational turn, Glick-Schiller, Basch and Blanc Szanton stated in 1995 that migrants are social agents who inherently bring along in the countries of destination more than force labour but also different cultures, beliefs, religions, and ways of living. They are “agents” because they are exposed to the new culture while exposing the host population to their own cultures. Transnationalism focuses on a “circular flow of persons, goods, information and symbols triggered by international labour migration” (Vertovec, 2009, 13-14).

A negative take on transnationalism is offered by Thomas Faist (2010) who equates transnationalism with multinational companies and political parties. This view supports the increasing power of corporations to influence economic and financial trends at global levels through their subsidiaries in other countries than their original ones while exploiting employees who work overtime in sometimes unhealthy conditions for the purpose of highly effective production and sending the profit back to their countries of origin. Likewise, political parties may create powerful transnational ties with subsidiaries in other countries with the purpose of control and strong influence. For Faist (2010), transnationalism follows a triangular structure incorporating the country of origin, the countries of destination (noticing that one migrant may have various countries of destination) and the migrants and refers to “*processes that transcend international borders*” (Faist, 2010, 13).

Indeed, globalization and transnationalism are not viewed as separated (Vertovec, 2009). Vertovec (id.) calls transnational groups non-state actors who practice a multiplicity of exchanges between “businesses, non-government organizations, individuals sharing the same interests (religious/cultural/geographic)” (3). For him, transnationalism encompasses a triadic relationship that includes: 1) globally dispersed yet collectively self-identified ethnic groups; 2) the territorial states and contexts where such groups reside; 3) the homeland states and contexts whence they or their forebears came.

Vertovec also portrays transnationalism as avenue of capital and as a site of political engagement focusing on the ‘enhancement of public participation and political organization, lobbying of intergovernmental organizations’ such as that of INGOs (Vertovec, 2009, 10).

Transnationalism includes “economic, political, and cultural processes that extend beyond the boundaries of nation-states” and “suggests a weakening of the control a nation-state has over its

borders, inhabitants, and territory”⁵, in which immigrants maintain allegiance to a culture or religion being less likely to assimilate.

At European level, transnational communities are formed by “individuals or groups settled in different national societies who share some common reference – national, ethnic, religious, linguistic – and define their common interest beyond boundaries” (Kastoriano, 2007, 159). What is to be noted is their institutional feature supported by “a coordination of activities, resources, information, technology, and sites of social power across national borders for political, cultural, and economic purposes” (id.).

We will further see how, unlike transnationalism, diaspora is moreover characterised by similar heritage groups of people who dream of returning to their homeland.

2. Understanding diaspora

Etymologically, the concept of ‘Diaspora’ with capital D defines a community that is scattered, dispersed or separated. The classical use later incorporated the Greek, African, Armenian, even Irish and recently the Palestinian diaspora (Cohen, 2008). As Martin Baumann (2011) notes, in the past, it had a negative connotation as it referred to processes of dispersion, decomposition and dissolution into several parts. Later, taking on a soteriological meaning, it described the ‘gathering of the scattered’ by God’s grace. It also takes on the meanings of admonition and a reminder to obey the Jewish law.

According to William Safran (1991), there are several features characterizing what is known as the ideal types of diaspora. The first meaning, which has been long considered the old understanding of diaspora, is that of dispersal from an original land (usually accompanied by trauma) to two or more foreign regions. This is based on the experiences of the Jewish and the Armenian peoples, which encompassed the existence of a collective memory and myth about the homeland (its location, history, the suffering as well as the achievements of the people). We are speaking of a diasporic community if it possesses a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a common history, the transmission of a common cultural and religious heritage and the belief in a common fate. The real or imagined ancestral home is idealized by the community who is collectively committed to its maintenance, restoration, safety, prosperity, or even its creation. They also believe in and are enflamed by an eventual return to the homeland. Steven Vertovec (1996) calls this meaning of diaspora the social category, focusing on the diasporans’ sense of loss, alienation, and victimization⁶.

Another type of diaspora is the one based on the expansion from a homeland in search of work. Cohen (2008) divides it into the “labour diaspora” (e.g. indentured Indians), the “trade diaspora” (the Chinese), and the “imperial diasporas” created by colonial ambitions. In this case, the dynamics of power are reversed in that diasporans bring along their values, beliefs, and economic know-how. It is the minority group or community that establishes them in the country of destination.

However, these features have added the factor of cultural negotiation when migrants experienced troubled relationship with the host society due to a lack of acceptance. According to Cohen (2008), this is the second stage of diaspora encompassing the 1980s until the mid 1990s, in which diaspora could be made up of different peoples dispersed from the mainland. The focus is put on the relationships between the homeland and the hostland. Negotiation is possible when there is a sense of empathy and co-responsibility with co-ethnic members in the countries of settlement allowing for the possibility of an enriching life in the host countries. This ideal view sees a tolerance for pluralism and for real transnational relationships.

The third phase of diaspora identified by Cohen (2008) is the one starting with the mid 1990s. The social constructionist phase, informed by postmodernist readings, sees the homeland as being decomposed, while identities are de-territorialized, constructed and deconstructed in a flexible way.

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/transnationalism>

⁶ Referring to the Jews.

Avtar Brah (1996) notices that continuous movement of communities and individuals creates new diasporic communities and new subjectivities formed by intersection of values and cultures that eventually lead to the deconstruction of metanarratives. Brah believed in the necessity for flexible identities mandatory for real cultural negotiation. Likewise, Vertovec (1996) identifies diaspora as a mode of cultural production. For him, “cultural identity is fluid” because “it often results in ‘hybrid’ forms of expression” (e.g. bhangra music, curry houses).

Hybridity has been an attractive concept in Diaspora studies as many theorists have seen its inherent potential in “question[ing] fixed identities based on essentialisms” (Kuorti, 2007) instead of looking at it as an emerging sociological fact. The latest economic and political events of the last (almost) five years have yet shown that more migrants have left home in search of work and of safety. The initial step is not taken in search of pluralism; it is not triggered by the individuals’ awareness of fluid identities nor by their need to express their “innate” hybridity. This is not the author’s wish for the state of things to be as they have been detailed here, but an observation based on the current socio-political dynamics. In short, reality has shown that irrespective of the positive attitude towards pluralism, multiculturalism, and hybridity, people are forced to leave their home for very practical reasons.

Nonetheless, the trend of empowering hybridity and of new subjectivities is critiqued by another value added to the concept of diaspora: the diaspora as problem (Vertovec, 1996). According to this view, transnational communities may pose “threats to state security and to the social order when seen from right-wing perspectives within the ‘host’ countries” (Vertovec, 1996, 54). Here, the individual’s connection with the country of origin calls into question their loyalty to the host country: “the existence of hybrid cultural forms and multiple identities are viewed as diluting or undermining the traditional norms of the indigenous population” (ibid.). Anthias (2008) also warns against views on diaspora “disregarding disparities in power and opportunities between diasporic individuals and groups” (570). Migrants have to negotiate their existence as part of minority communities because their “*being* in the diaspora means *living* in a cross-cultural context” (Hussain, 2005).

The main question raised here is related to the migrants’ integration in the country of settlement. Older views of diaspora view diasporans as not being fully socially integrated. The lack of integration may be the consequence of the dominant (majority) population creating certain boundaries to minority groups through discrimination. Assimilation of diasporics is wished by the social dominant group but not by diasporans who do not want to totally erase their identity and culture. Therefore, newer views on diaspora approve of cultural hybridity and transnational mobility (Bhabha, 1994; Avtar, 1996). “Nation” would be replaced by “dissemi-nation” (Bhabha, 1994) and the home-return by circular exchange (Faist, 2010).

The most frequent trope in diaspora studies is the concept of home (homeland). Theories have analysed home both in physical terms, as well as a symbol of belonging – “the symbolic conceptualization of where one belongs” (Salih, 2003, 70) -, as well as both an “actual place of lived experience and a metaphorical space of personal attachment and identification” (Armbruster, 2002, 120). The physical home is a practical element located in a real place, occupying a real piece of land. Additionally, home also encompasses the feelings of being home, memories of prior homes and of belonging to a place and a community: “(...) migrants’ perceptions of and dreams of home and belonging are fuelled by memories of prior homes, by notions of where ‘we’ came from (Davidson 2008: 26; Leung 2008: 164)” (quoted in Stock, 2011).

Belonging becomes problematic because, like the concept home, it may also be seen from different perspectives. Is belonging in connection with the diasporics’ original home or is it a reference to their actual living in the country of settlement? This tension (called the “empowering paradox of diaspora” by Clifford, 1994, 322) is generated by the experience of “living here relating to a there” (Baumann, 2000, 324). Therefore, it would be more appropriate to speak of homes (in the plural) and of an ambivalent belonging both here and there, the plurality enabling diasporics to move between localities while disempowering essentialist discourses of nation and ethnicity.

3. Conclusions

To sum up, one can say that the concept of diaspora has known many stages and facets but its core meaning lies in the indisputable wish to return home. It may always remain a wish and never a reality due to the life changes that generate new life situations and circumstances that no longer allow diasporics to return. Transnationals however may be either members of influential groups or common members of transnational families who live or are citizens of various countries, thus moving beyond borders.

However, the multiplicity of spaces and the continuous movement back and forth of diasporics may create “a disturbing in-betweenness of belonging nowhere” (Stock, 2011, 26). The problem of territory starts raising its head again. It is common thing to acknowledge that memory/memories – that shape identities - are less concrete and more fluid than territory. In times of crises, individuals – either members of the dominant population, “natives”, or those of diasporic communities – tend to look for security and certainty. Plural homes become useless if not a burden. In times of war, for example, an individual’s citizenship may be a disempowering mark in certain social and political environments that politically oppose one’s country’s regime.⁷

Taking these problems into consideration, the previous view on the transnational mobility of diasporics gains less importance. The impulse of starting moving (see the Ukrainian new diasporics) has been triggered by two powerful elements: the factor of territory masked by the belief in the re-ignition of a so-called Soviet identity. The trigger for the new Palestinian diasporics has been a terrorist attack followed by a wary and powerful counter-attack. The conflict is also based on territory and doubled by religious views and mostly by claims for freedom.

Lastly, diasporas occur out of needs for safety and for finding refuge in the face of danger – the so-called forced migration. However, if looking at safety strictly economically with individuals migrating in search of labour with the purpose of financially supporting others at home, one may easily say that all migration is forced. This statement is supported by the new wars that take place in the world these days and by the increasing number of Asian immigrants coming to countries they have not considered so far (all Eastern and Middle-Centre European countries, including Romania).

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⁷ There have been cases in which common members of Russian origin have been attacked or verbally abused by other individuals due to the country’s opposition to the Russian – Ukrainian war. Or anti-Semitic attacks on Jewish individuals and businesses in European countries after the latest Israeli-Palestinian War. Discriminatory behaviour may also occur against members of the Palestinian communities or new Palestinian migrants coming to other countries of destination.

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