



Comparing and theorizing state–diaspora relations



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A B S T R A C T

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This article reviews, synthesizes, and extends the theoretical underpinnings of existing research on state-diaspora relations, highlighting the fragmented, case-study oriented and a-theoretical nature of most existing work in this area, emphasizing the need to compare and theorize state-diaspora relations and suggesting topics and methods through which this can be done. First we describe the range of phenomena under examination and review the various strands of literature informing this area of research. From there we discuss the contribution of this special section of *Political Geography* and point the way towards a future research agenda that includes a comparative dimension, employs quantitative and qualitative methods, and engages theoretical debates in relation to policy diffusion, governance and norm formation.

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Introduction

Migration policy is still typically understood as immigration policy, but formal state initiatives towards emigration and emigrants have also recently become a widespread feature of politics in many parts of the world. Over half of all United Nations member states now maintain some type of formal governmental institution dedicated to their diaspora, which they conceive in various ways to include different groups of emigrants and their descendants (Gamlen, Cummings, Vaaler, & Rossouw, 2013). Many more states have been experimenting with programmatic initiatives to reach out to these populations.

What is happening, and why? Scholars focusing on this growing area of research have made great strides in explaining the various factors that drive or shape states' policies toward various forms of emigration (Brand, 2006; Collyer, 2013), identifying the institutional forms that characterize them (Agunias, 2009) as well as developing typologies (Gamlen, 2006; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Ragazzi, 2014) and theorizing on these developments (Brand, 2006; Iskander, 2010; Varadarajan, 2010). However, the question of why and when states engage their diasporas, particularly focused around

what explains variations or convergence in their practices, still needs answers based on substantive comparisons and theoretical framings.

This change in the relationship between states and emigrants represents an important transformation not only in the way migration is governed but also in the way that states and international society are organized. Because they project domestic policies beyond territorial borders, formal state policies towards diasporas fall into the grey area between Comparative Politics and International Relations, and have therefore been relatively overlooked by both fields. More fundamentally, such initiatives disrupt the assumed symmetry of the self-governing national population and its territorial jurisdiction, and give rise to unconventional modes of citizenship and sovereignty not envisioned at Westphalia or imagined as consistent with modern geopolitics since. These processes both reinforce and undermine the foundations of the nation-state (Varadarajan, 2010, p. 7).

Political Geography, with its interest in the spatial organization of politics, is an excellent intellectual venue for the study of state-diaspora relations. Our Introduction to this special section first reviews, synthesizes, and extends the theoretical underpinnings of existing research on this topic, highlighting the fragmented, case-study oriented and a-theoretical nature of most existing work and emphasizing the need to further compare and theorize state-diaspora relations. The articles collected here begin this task, comparing state-diaspora relations using new quantitative and qualitative data and novel analyses, and theorizing state-diaspora relations by bringing their empirical findings into conversation with ongoing conceptual debates to generate new

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insights. We discuss their contributions below, but also highlight what remains to be done, suggesting specific topics and methods to prioritize as part of a research agenda on state-diaspora relations.

Understanding and explaining state-diaspora relations

Though the term ‘diaspora’ was once reserved for a few archetypal groups that had managed to maintain an intact identity despite traumatic dispersal in the distant past, it is now seen more as an indicator of identity in flux (Cohen, 2008; Safran, 1991). Rather than fixed social entities, diasporas are now recognized as constituency-building projects initiated and led by political entrepreneurs in origin states and abroad (Brubaker, 2005; Dufoix, 2008; Mavroudi, 2007; Sökefeld, 2006; Vertovec, 1997; Waldinger, 2008). Government agencies in the origin state may play an important role in galvanizing groups to think of themselves as a loyal diaspora.

Such state-diaspora relations are not new (e.g. see Cano & Délano, 2007; Choate, 2008; Green & Weil, 2007), but they have proliferated since the 1990s. Some heads of state have proclaimed to govern on behalf of ‘their’ people living abroad, throwing glitzy celebrations for diaspora elites who they recast as national heroes instead of deserters (see inter alia Durand, 2004; Martinez-Saldaña, 2003; Nyiri, 2004; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003). Some states have expanded the scale and scope of their consular activities (González Gutiérrez, 1997), and created new bureaucratic arrangements for managing relations with diaspora groups (Levitt & de la Dehesa, 2003). Others have tried to capture and channel the remittances, investments and expertise of emigrants and their descendants (Goldring, 1998; Itzigsohn, 2000), while responding to the diaspora’s growing claims for political and social rights (see inter alia Barry, 2006; Brand, 2006; Escobar, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2000; Green & Weil, 2007; Smith, 2003a; 2003b).

Scholars have recognized the importance of these developments. Whether responding to the thickening of existing diaspora networks (Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999), or attempting to engineer new diasporas for strategic purposes (Margheritis, 2007), such origin-state efforts to engage diasporas redefine the parameters of citizenship and of the state itself (Levitt & de la Dehesa, 2003). Recent research has traced these trends, introducing terms such as “nations of emigrants” (Fitzgerald, 2009), “emigration nations” (Collyer, 2013), and “emigration states” (Gamlen, 2008a) to counterbalance the traditional focus of migration research on “immigration nations”.

But explaining how and why states engage diasporas remains challenging, partly because there are multiple factors involved at various levels and at different stages (Brand, 2006; Délano, 2011; Gamlen, 2006; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Shain, 1999). States’ positions on these issues are constantly changing, depending on, for example, the characteristics of the diaspora, the political nature of the regime in the country of origin, official and societal perceptions of emigration, reliance on emigrants’ economic investments and remittances, the role of the diaspora in domestic or international affairs of the country, citizenship laws or state capacity (e.g. consular infrastructures and budgets). External factors also matter, such as the type of host state and the legal status of migrants in that state, the relationship between home and host state, the role of international or regional organizations, and the specific international norms mediating aspects of the state-diaspora relationship (Brand, 2006, 2014; Délano, 2011; Waterbury, 2010a).

How can researchers make sense of all this? Which factors matter? When and where do they matter most? In this special section 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. Even now that there are almost as many case studies as there are countries, this tactic still forms the mainstay of work in this area. With the field no longer in its infancy, there is room for a wider range of approaches. In this collection we show-case examples from the more comparative and theoretically driven end of the spectrum of work on state-diaspora relations, and encourage future work of this kind. However, our first task is to review and synthesize the small but fast-growing research literature on this topic (also see Collyer, 2013).

Tapping into the development potential of migration

Much recent interest in state-diaspora relations is linked to a resurgence in optimism about the relationship between migration and development (De Haas, 2010; Faist, 2008; Gamlen, 2014; Skeldon, 2008; Spaan, Van Naerssen, & Hillmann, 2005). The so-called “new economics of labor migration” (Stark & Bloom, 1985) placed migrant remittances at the center of migration theory: where credit and insurance markets were weak, households sent emigrants abroad so as to access remittances to tide them through insecure times and allow economic expansion (Massey & Parrado, 1994; Taylor, 1999). Rather than draining their homelands, migrants could thus contribute to development by sending money across borders directly to those most in need. As migrants’ transnational cash transfers expanded to outstrip overseas development aid (Maimbo, 2004; World Bank, 2005), interest grew in the potential for policy makers to harness or ‘tap’ the resources of emigrants and their descendants.

In this literature, remittances are only part of the bargain. The wider aim of engaging diasporas is for origin states to help achieve an international ‘win-win-win’ outcome from migration, in which migrants exercise the freedom to move and benefit themselves materially (De Haas & Plug, 2006; United Nations Development Programme, 2009), while destination states get cheap labor and skills (Massey et al., 1998: 28–29), and origin states – if they tap their diasporas wisely – share in this success. To play their part, origin states must facilitate remittance flows (Barry, 2006; De Haas & Plug, 2006; Iskander, 2010; Itzigsohn, 2000), and solicit philanthropic donations, tourist dollars and investments from and through their diasporas (e.g. see Kuznetsov & Sabel, 2006; Newland & Patrick, 2004; Orozco, 2007). They must also capture the innovative scientific technologies and the market-fostering liberal ideals transferred home by migrants (Esman, 2009; Gillespie & Andriasova, 2008; Kapur, 2001; Riddle & Marano, 2008; Shain, 1999). While this optimistic view is widespread, it is not universal: many recent studies see attempts to engage the diaspora as futile efforts to mitigate economic dependence by appealing to diaspora elites for investment (Dickinson & Bailey, 2007; Faist, 2008; Larner, 2007; Mullings, 2011; Pellerin & Mullings, 2013; Varadarajan, 2010).

Other material interests may also drive states to reach out to their diasporas. As part of strategic competition, origin states may seek to thwart groups defined by the memory of violent dispersal (Demmers, 2007, p. 15), and who nurse ethnic grudges against homeland elites (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004, p. 575), perhaps even financing anti-state violence as “long-distance nationalists” (Anderson, 1992; Koser, 2003; Schiller & Fouron, 2001; Skrbis, 2000). Alternatively, states may seek to tap into these nationalist passions, fostering groups who define themselves by heroic service to a cause at home (Shain, 2002), and who may be willing in times of strife to adopt the role of double-agents, intermediaries or peace envoys whilst abroad, or to return as prodigal leaders once fighting has ceased. The same diaspora groups may play the role of both peace builders and peace wreckers, as studies have noted in Sri

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