Turkish Journal of Diaspora Studies

ISSN: 2717-7408 (Print and Online)
Journal Homepage: tjds.org.tr

Interview

Dániel Gazsó

To cite this article: Dániel Gazsó (2020, November 3) Personal communication [Email interview], Turkish Journal of Diaspora Studies, 1(1), 108-114, DOI: 10.52241/TJDS.2021.0009

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.52241/TJDS.2021.0009

Published online: 30 March 2021

Turkish Journal of Diaspora Studies
2021, Vol. 1, No. 1, 108-114
https://doi.org/10.52241/TJDS.2021.0009

Interview

Dániel Gazsó
Research Institute for Hungarian Communities Abroad / Faculty of Public Governance and International Studies, University of Public Service in Budapest & Hungarian Journal of Minority Studies, Budapest, Hungary

Q1. *The concept of diaspora is used to define almost any community who has a distinct identity tied with an imagined or territorialized nation outside the resident country. Nationalization of the concept of "victim" diaspora seems no longer prevailing but communities beyond the territory of a nation generally fit the picture. Migration or exile is not the only cause to form diasporic communities. To some studies, socially, culturally, religiously, ethnically, linguistically, and/or geopolitically amalgamated communities are also deemed to form diaspora. Having said that, what do you think about the impact of the proliferation of the usage on the conceptualization of diaspora? And/or, how would you conceptualize diaspora?*

A1. The term diaspora does not have a single definition. However, this is not uncommon in the social sciences. Anthropologists do not provide a unique definition for culture, neither do sociologists for society, nor do scholars on nationalism studies for nation. The concept of diaspora started to be used in an increasingly broader sense in the 1960s–70s, as a result of which its original religious-meaning content has now been extended to refer to almost all kinds of dispersed communities. This approach is well expressed in the open, and now a classic definition stated by Walker Connor, according to which a diaspora is "that segment of a people living outside the homeland." Khachig Tölölyan—considered one of the precursors of new diaspora studies—explained this shift in the meaning of the concept of diaspora through several events. Firstly, he mentions the Afro-American civil rights movement known as Black Power, which provided a new conceptual framework to people of color living in the United States. Partly as a result of the achievements of this movement, the designation 'Black' was replaced by the term 'Afro-American' and finally, 'African diaspora.' The second decisive event in Tölölyan's explication was the political lobbying provided by the Jews living in the United States to Israel during the six-day war in June 1967. This support policy of the Jewish diaspora started a process that Tölölyan calls "re-diasporization of ethnicity." Following the six-day war—ending with Israel's victory—and upon seeing the achievements of the Jewish movement, the leaders of the different ethnic communities living in the United States (Greeks, Armenians, Irish, Cubans, etc.) formulated more and more commitments urging for mutual assistance between ethnically related communities living all over the world—now called diasporas—and their kin-state. Thirdly, Tölölyan highlights the approval of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 in the United States, which banished the ethnicity and nationality based quota system. The approval and the social support for the so called Hart–Celler Act was a confirmation of the fact that the general opinion regarding immigration had changed radically in the United States. In general,

CONTACT *Dániel Gazsó* *daniel.gazso@bgazrt.hu*

the melting pot theory had been replaced by the idea of multiculturalism, which paved the way for unfolding the organizational life of the diasporas. Finally, Tölölyan highlights the change of focus in the scholarly world toward identity, ethnic differences and cultural diversity, which led to the creation of brand new and multidisciplinary branches of science such as diaspora studies. These events, among others, have contributed to the popularization of the term diaspora and the expansion of its meaning.

The problem with assigning such a broad semantic field to the concept of diaspora is that the category becomes stretched to the point of uselessness—as Rogers Brubaker pointed out: "If everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so. The term loses its discriminating power—its ability to pick out phenomena, to make distinctions. The universalization of diaspora, paradoxically, means the disappearance of diaspora." Scholars in this field with the aim to overcome this problem and avoid conceptual confusion have established certain criteria which allow us to distinguish diaspora of migratory origin from other types of macro-communities, such as the so called autochthonous national minorities. This task is closely related to the emerging tendency toward typology construction, which consists of modelling diaspora communities based on some observed characteristics. It is neither a unique method nor a novelty, since typology construction has always been of great importance in the field of social sciences. Within diaspora studies, one of the mainly accepted criteria to identify different types of diaspora is the manner of social integration, i.e. the quality of the relation of diaspora communities with the society surrounding them. A milestone in the scientific foundation of this topic is John A. Armstrong's distinction between proletarian diaspora (i.e. communities of migratory origin that live in a marginal and disadvantaged position on the periphery of their new home) and mobilized diaspora (which have achieved a distinguished social status for themselves, thus they are able to mobilize the economy or even the foreign relations of the host-state). Another, also widespread pattern of diaspora typologies is the feature of the mass migration, which gave the opportunity for the development of the studied communities. According to this, there is a distinction between diasporas formed by voluntary or economic migration, on the one hand, and by forced or political migration, on the other. The concept of victim diaspora—mentioned in the above question—has been used to determine the latter type by several authors, among them Robin Cohen, generally known for his five-component typology, which distinguishes victim, labor, imperial, trade and deterritorialized diasporas. This tendency toward typology construction provides general overviews on research topics and comparative analysis, however, sometime it can be misleading. Typologies within diaspora studies tend to ignore the dynamic and often controversial feature of diasporic life. They highlight the differences between ideal types of diaspora as much as they lose sight of the diversity within the same dispersed community. For example, focusing on the feature of migration, we see that almost every diaspora of the present has developed through migration waves, which occurred in different times and for different reasons. Therefore, to categorize an entire community into a victim diaspora type provides a false image of reality.

In short, the clarification of the conceptual framework for diaspora studies is a necessary and urgent task. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we must seek a closed definition of diaspora looking for static group characteristics, or create typologies by comparing and generalizing specific cases. Instead, we should provide interpretive explanations of the sociopolitical

processes that shape the diaspora, namely migration, social integration, cultural assimilation, ethnic boundary maintenance and homeland orientation. The conceptualization of diaspora must begin with a rethinking of these increasingly important processes.

Q2. *States are increasing their efforts all around the world for diaspora engagement; however, they still lack in giving efforts in internationally debated policies. This does not mean that states do not have diaspora policies of their own but we don't see the diasporic issues discussed among states perhaps due to political and socio-cultural sensibility. Is it possible for states to consider debating diaspora internationally beyond assimilation or nationalization policies?*

A2. Governments seem to pay more and more attention to strengthening ties with co-national communities living abroad. To appreciate this, it is enough to take a look at the number of governmental institutions responsible for diaspora-related issues, which have increased dramatically in the last decades. While at the beginning of 1980 there were only a handful of such institutions, at present, over half of all states in the United Nations have established at least one of these. Nevertheless, despite the rapid proliferation of kin-state activism, diaspora issues are very rarely discussed at the international level, and if so, it is usually about conflict management, rather than exchanging experiences. Indeed, this deficiency can be explained by the sensibility of the matter, however, the main question is why did diaspora issues become so delicate. To answer this question, we need to focus on regional and national specifics and their historical aspect, rather than global comparisons and generalizations. Although there are some seemingly similar diaspora practices adopted almost all over the world—such as the ethnic preferential naturalization—they cannot be considered under the same category without taking into account the differences in the sociopolitical context and historical background. Indeed, dual citizenship does not mean the same in Eastern Europe as it does in the West, where the term citizenship is often used interchangeably with the term nationality.

Regarding Central and Eastern Europe, diaspora policies in this region, in one way or another, are related to the national question, i.e. the question of the proper relation between the territorial borders of the state and the imagined limits of the nation. This question has become a central feature of political life mainly because of the historical background of the current states. On the one hand, during the development process of modern nation-states in the 18th and 19th centuries, the national forms in Central and Eastern Europe had developed within the great and vast, ethnically heterogeneous Habsburg, Ottoman and Romanov empires. Thus, the political units radically diverged from the cultural units in this region. Nation-states in most cases were formed by the struggles of nations—often determined by a commonly shared ethnicity, culture and language—to establish their own political and territorial sovereignty. On the other hand, in addition to this cultural nation approach to national belonging, during the 20th century, the political space of the region was reconfigured twice. Firstly, in the aftermath of World War I, through the disintegration of the above mentioned multinational empires and the creation of new states. Secondly, due to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia following the end of the Cold War. Thereby, millions of people became minorities living in territories detached from their national homeland. If we add to this finding the historical legacy of international tensions and conflicting relations between the states, it

further complicates the situation of the national minorities and kin-state activism. These historical and political circumstances explain why kin-state policies in Central and Eastern Europe are so tightly tied to the national question. Moreover, it suggests that diaspora policies cannot be treated separately from all these matters, because diaspora engagement practices in this region have actually evolved from the policies targeted primarily toward autochthonous co-national minorities formed as a result of 20th century border changes and state dissolutions.

A generally accepted model to study the national question and its consequences in Central and Eastern Europe has been provided by Rogers Brubaker. This model consists of a dynamic triadic nexus relationship, which involves three distinct and often mutually antagonistic elements: the "external national homeland" (in international law called kin-state); the "nationalizing state" (also called host-state) and the "national minority." Brubaker—following Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social fields—conceives of each of these three constitutive elements as parts of an interdependent relational nexus, not as fixed entities or static conditions, but rather in terms of dynamic political fields of competitive actors. This triadic nexus model is applicable to research issues related to both types of co-national communities, the autochthonous national minorities, as well as the diaspora communities of migratory origin, and it helps to capture specific cases—such as the Hungarian diaspora policies—in their complexity. Nevertheless, Brubaker's triadic model should be augmented with at least one additional element, namely the international organizations, which play a decisive controlling and regulating role in ethnopolitical conflicts. In order to maintain the *status quo*, international organizations—such as the UN, the EU and the NATO—seek to avoid the radicalization of the opposing political positions: the separatism in the case of national minorities; the irredentism in the case of kin-states; and the extreme nationalization, i.e. the forced social homogenization or cultural assimilation in the case of the host-states.

Although this regulating role of the above mentioned organizations has developed significantly in recent decades, an international framework for kin-state's responsibility related to minority protection has yet to emerge. Therefore, the legal and social affairs related to diaspora communities dispersed around the world are still primarily discussed at the local level. In general, this absence of debating diaspora issues internationally is due to the fact that in the broader field of minority protection, the controversy between individual rights and collective rights still remains at large. In other words, while on the international scene the language of individual rights is spoken, the kin-states think of collective rights.

Q3. *Since the world entered into the nation-state system, territorial states have not been able to contain nations, rather led to increasing diasporas. So how do globalized nations and governance impact territorial state and diaspora relations?*

A3. Following the end of the Cold War, the processes of globalization, or to use Arjun Appadurai's term, the "global cultural flows" mean the end of the age of nation-states in the eyes of many. The ever-growing network of diaspora communities reaching across state borders, as the most conspicuous outcome of these processes, only supports this assumption. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether the sum of the globalization will create a homogeneous and transnational world in which the national aspirations of the state authorities become insignificant. Experiences

seem to indicate that national identities and the policies that target and construct them constitute the basis of self-identification and world order up to this day. The increasingly intense symbolic and pragmatic presence of kin-states in the organizational life of diasporas confirms rather than refutes what Benedict Anderson claimed almost forty years ago: "The reality is quite plain: the 'end of the era of nationalism,' so long prophesied, is not remotely in sight. Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time." Of course, this does not mean that national aspirations are present in the same form as they were in the early period of the birth of modern nation-states. Nationalisms—just like other ideologies, public cultures and political religions—are constantly changing, they are continuously adapting to the new social, political, economic and cultural circumstances. Diaspora policies of increasing priority are the most striking manifestations of a new kind of governments' national aspirations, which globally spread in the 21st century. In short, there are no globalized nations, only diaspora communities with a cross-border network of relations, closely tied or even depending on their kin-state.

Q4. *In general, diaspora studies are not at their peak values. A small number of scholars dedicate their time to diaspora issues. For those who are eager to study this subject, what are the fundamental approaches to studying the concept of diaspora? Why is it important to study and how do you see where diaspora studies are heading to or need to go?*

A4. Diaspora studies is a multidisciplinary field *par excellence*. Its practitioners need to combine the theories and methods of different social sciences to gain a holistic picture of the sociopolitical processes that shape the diaspora, and thus make comprehensive interpretations of the communities studied and the policies that target and construct them. However—just like other relatively new multidisciplinary fields of social sciences—diaspora studies also has grown from a pre-existing, broader field of science, in this case from minority studies, whose theoretical and methodological bases are rooted largely in nationalism studies. What Benedict Anderson and Eric J. Hobsbawm—just to mention a few classics from the latter area—asserted about nations also holds true for diaspora. The latter can also be described as "imagined political community," and viewed as a dual phenomenon "constructed essentially from above, but which cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people." In brief, the fundamental approaches toward diaspora stem from the modern scientific perspectives on minority and nation.

Regarding the specific subjects of diaspora studies, the main aim of this new field—as I stated above—is to provide interpretive explanations of the sociopolitical processes that shape diaspora communities, rather than to search static group characteristics. These processes that constitute the subject of diaspora studies—including migration, social integration, cultural assimilation, ethnic boundary maintenance and homeland orientation—are of increasing importance today. Diaspora studies focusing these areas may help to understand, on the one hand, that the cultural assimilation is not absolutely necessary for the social integration of communities formed by immigration waves; and, on the other hand, that the avoidance of cultural assimilation, i.e. the institutionalization of diasporic life for maintaining ethical boundaries does not necessarily lead to the formation of opposing social groups. This knowledge is essential for the peaceful management of potential conflicts arising from the encounter of different cultures.

Orcid

Dániel Gazsó *https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7894-0156*

References

Anderson, Benedict: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso: London, 1983.

Appadurai, Arjun: *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1996.

Armstrong, John A.: Mobilized and Proletarian Diasporas. *American Political Science Review*, 1976, 70 (2). 393–408.

Brubaker, Rogers: *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1996.

Brubaker, Rogers: The Diaspora' Diaspora. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2005, 28 (1). 1–19.

Cohen, Robin: *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. Routledge – Taylor and Francis Group: London – New York, 1997.

Connor, Walker: The impact of homelands upon diasporas. In: Sheffer, Gabriel (ed.): *Modern Diasporas in International Politics*. Croom Helm: London, 1986.

Hobsbawm, Eric J.: *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1990.

Tölölyan, Khachig: Diaspora Studies: Past, Present and Promise. *IMI Working Paper Series*, 55. April 2012.