Transnational Citizenship Revisited
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Preface to a paper yet to be written

My plan for this conference was to write a paper that would reconsider the conception of transnational citizenship that I have defended and developed in various texts since about 1992 in the light of new trends in the literature on transnationalism and diaspora. The simple truth is that I have not managed to complete this paper in time for the conference. What I deliver below is a first sketch in the form of four interjections into the debate. I try to state these as provocatively as I can. I plan to conclude the paper eventually with a few normative reflections on the oxymoron of diasporic citizenship. Most references to other authors’ work and the bibliography still need to be filled in. Sometimes, organizing a conference and preparing one’s own contribution are tasks that interfere with each other. I apologize to the other paper givers who have delivered on time and to my discussant.

1. Transnational citizenship from above

Transnationalism has had a strong career as a concept in quite disparate fields of academic study. The three most important ones are probably (1) International Relations, where the concept started to be used already in the 1980s to refer to growing importance non-state actors (multinational corporations and international NGOs) in the international arena (Rosenau 2000, see Faist 2007); (2) Social movement studies, which were interested in political mobilisation across borders (Tarrow, della Porta), and, of course, (3) migration studies, where this perspective was introduced first by anthropologists (Basch, Glick-Schiller et. al. 1994, Vertovec) and later taken up and expanded by sociologists (Portes, Guarnizo, Levitt, Goldring, Faist, Pries, and many others).

Portes and Guarnizo introduced the influential idea that transnationalism was about “globalisation from below” and distinguished accordingly transnational from international relations by insisting that at least one of the category of actors involved in the former must be a non-state entity. This seemed to fit well the concerns in all three fields. However, there is something important missing here. Transnationalism is not merely about activities from below that are enabled or constrained by states, or, to use an influential social movement studies approach, by political opportunity structures. We should also consider the transnationalisation of state-bound institutions themselves.

The normative political theory perspective from which I introduced the concept “transnational citizenship” naturally focuses on political institutions and how they ought to respond to various boundary-crossing phenomena. International relations and social movement studies focused primarily on transnational or global political issues, such as concerns how the globalization of financial markets or of environmental problems affect regulatory capacities of states. These concerns have generated a broad normative literature on global justice and the need for cosmopolitan democracy (e.g. Beitz, Pogge, Held, Archibugi, among many others).
The migration studies stream in the emerging literature on transnationalism raised, however, a somewhat different question about political membership. Basically, the question was how to resolve the mismatch between states as territorially bounded jurisdictions and citizenship as an intergenerational status of membership in a political community. Democratic citizenship has a sticky quality: it sticks to individuals, and they cling to it as well, when moving across international borders. But democratic states are organized as non-overlapping territorial jurisdictions. Migration between states produces therefore citizens abroad and foreign citizens in the territory. I coined the term transnational citizenship as a response to this problem that could be partially derived from the evolution of democratic state practices, but that would also contain a normative surplus in the sense of providing guidelines how liberal democracies ought to transform their conceptions of membership when faced with transnational migration.

Of course, transnational citizenship is not itself a normative concept, but a descriptive one. It suggests a novel perspective that can be used in comparative and normative analyses of citizenship. Responding to Tomas Hammar’s influential discussion of denizenship and dual citizenship as alternative solutions for the legal and political integration of immigrants (Hammar 1990), I suggested that what these two statuses had in common was their transnational character. While Hammar had analysed them primarily from an immigrant integration perspective, they should be seen instead as a legal expression and recognition of overlapping circles of membership between two states.

Transnational citizenship in this sense was an institutional transformation of membership and legal rights. This perspective contributes also to the dispute whether migrant transnationalism was really a historically novel and numerically significant phenomenon. The proliferation of local voting rights for denizens, of external voting rights for expatriates, and of tolerated dual citizenship is by any standards both historically novel and numerically significant.

We still need to find a normative principle that explains how citizenship status and rights ought to be allocated within constellations of transnationally overlapping political affiliations. Since 2001 I have suggested a stakeholder principle, which I explain more extensively in the attached paper on external citizenship. This idea specifies and deviates to a certain extent from Joseph Carens’ earlier suggestion, which I initially adopted, that citizenship ought to be derived from societal membership. If we regard societies as bounded by the territories of nation-states, then it becomes natural to associate societal membership with long-term residence and to blend out the transnational aspects of migrants’ membership. Once we accept, however, the critique of this perspective as methodological nationalism, then there is no way of determining stable boundaries of societies, which at some level of analysis merge into a global human society. Societal membership becomes then too vague a criterion for determining the limits of claims to rights and status. In contrast with societies, political jurisdictions and communities are demarcated by territorial and

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1 In a thoughtful review of the literature Jonathan Fox warns against stretching the concept of transnational citizenship too far beyond this core towards thin and civil society based conceptions. “Only a high-intensity, rights-based definition of transnational citizenship holds up well. By this definition the term refers to dual or multiple citizenships that are grounded both in enforceable rights and in clearly bounded membership(s).” (Fox 2005: 194).
membership boundaries, even when these overlap or are nested. I suggest therefore individual stakeholding in the future of a political community as an explicitly political criterion for membership claims that allows criticising both exclusionary as well as over-inclusive citizenship regimes.

Citizenship is, of course, a multifaceted concept whose meanings are not exhausted by legal status, rights and duties allocated to individuals by states. Citizenship from above needs be matched with citizenship from below. This latter perspective includes the choices made by individuals with regard to legal statuses (e.g. denizenship vs. naturalisation, dual citizenship vs. renunciation of a previous citizenship) and with regard to exercising their rights (e.g. voting, joining parties and forming associations). Citizenship in this sense includes participation in social movements or other forms of political activity. From a normative perspective, there is a long republican tradition, which has recently been quite influential in public debates, emphasizing citizens’ political obligations and civic virtues.

It is important to link the comparative and normative analysis of institutionalised citizenship with this perspective of citizenship as activity and practice (see Dobson 2006 for an impressive attempt to do so for European citizenship). However, the specific theoretical challenge raised by migration should not be lost: Citizenship is at its core a status of equal membership in a self-governing political community and migration across the boundaries of such communities requires a rethinking of membership norms.

2. The skewed triangle

The study of transnational citizenship can therefore not merely be concerned with migrants’ political activities, but must ask how migration impacts on conceptions of political community in countries of origin and destination and how governments in both countries respond to transnational ties with efforts to control or to instrumentalise them.

In spite of frequent invocations of a triangular constellation involving migrants, sending and receiving countries, most of the literature on transnationalism seems to attribute unequal weight to the three corners of this triangle. If we determine weight by number of publications, I would guess that by far the highest pile is made up from studies migrants’ identities, activities, networks and organisations, a lower one examines sending country institutions and the smallest one looks at the institutions of countries of immigration from a transnational perspective.

International relations scholars, comparative political scientists and political geographers produce now finally systematic work on sending country efforts to promote, channel or constrain political transnationalism among emigrants and diasporas (see e.g. Brand 2006, Collyer 2007, Gamlen 2007). The study of immigrant receiving countries remains, however, still dominated by an immigrant incorporation approach that ignores the transnational aspects of migrants’ citizenship. This is true not only true for the social sciences but also for political theory. Immigration has been

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2 Thomas Faist’s recent studies on multiple citizenship may be mentioned as an exception (Faist 2007a, 2007b).
seen as contributing to ethnic and cultural diversity and normative theories have focused on the accommodation of such diversity through differentiated citizenship (Young 1990) or polyethnic rights (Kymlicka 1995). There is a certain culturalist bias in political theory debates about migration that see migrants primarily as ethnic, linguistic or religious communities within a receiving society rather than as individuals affiliated with two distinct polities.

The asymmetrical shape of the transnational triangle in the academic literature that neglects the transformation of receiving societies is somewhat surprising once we consider that the earliest use of the term (that I am aware of) was Randolph Bourne’s famous essay of 1916 on America as a “transnational nation”, which has to reimagine itself as a political community of immigrants with ongoing ties to their countries of origin (Bourne 1916).

3. What is national about the transnational?

This last observation leads to a further problem in the current literature on transnational citizenship. Most uses of the term “transnational” equate nation and state. What the concept refers to are institutions, networks and activities that transcend the borders of clearly demarcated state territories rather than the more fuzzy ones of nations understood as “imagined communities”. One could then more properly speak of trans-state phenomena (Fox 2005). We do not use the term transnational to refer to boundary crossing processes and relations inside plurinational states such as Canada, the UK, Belgium, Spain or India. While this may be deplored by scholars of nationalism, it is not really worth the effort to try and change well-established terminological ambiguities, such as the one between nation and state or, indeed, between nationality and citizenship.

What we ought to consider, however, is how transnational citizenship may be invoked and involved in nation-building projects. In this respect, the early literature on migrant transnationalism has often naively assumed that any process that transcends state borders will thereby also promote the transition towards an age of postnationalism (e.g. Glick-Schiller et al. 1994, Soysal 1994). As a focus on sending country governments makes immediately clear, from their perspective the promotion of transnational ties is more often linked to an ideology of nation-building beyond borders. The terminological problem is then quite obvious since in this view emigrants have crossed the state border but remain inside the national community.

What is largely missing so far is an effort to synthesize the literature on migrant political transnationalism with the one on territorial nationalism and the relations of homeland minorities with external kin states. Rogers Brubaker’s analysis of the triangular constellation involving nationalizing states, national minorities and their external homelands in Central and Eastern Europe (Brubaker 1996) is structurally isomorphic with the triangle that characterizes migrant transnationalism.

Migration is therefore not a necessary condition for transnational citizenship, which can be generated in both constellations. But it still makes a difference how the relation to an external homeland came about (through the movement of people or of borders).

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3 See Myra Waterbury’s contribution to our conference.
and whether the group concerned are recent arrivals and territorially dispersed in a receiving country or have continuously settled in a specific territory over many generations. How relevant are these distinctions for explaining phenomenologies of nationalism in both contexts and for normatively evaluating claims to transnational citizenship?

Governments and political parties in external kin states or countries of origin have certainly amply employed nationalist rhetoric in both constellations, but “host country” governments have reacted quite differently. The crucial question is whether trans-state nationalism can potentially raise territorial claims that could threaten the territorial integrity of the “host country”, which is more likely in the case of homeland minorities than of territorially dispersed immigrants. Yet, as the case of Northern Ireland illustrates, even this strong reaction to a potentially irredentist minority nationalism supported by an external kin state is not a historic inevitability. It depends very much on the dominant conception of nationhood in the host country and the degree of incorporation of the minority’s homeland into a hegemonic conception of the political community (see Lustick 1994, 2001).

Elsewhere I have argued that there is a normative trade-off between claims to territorial autonomy and transnational citizenship. If a nationalizing state transforms itself into a plurinational one that grants its homeland minorities territorial autonomy and power-sharing in institutions of central government, then such arrangements undermine simultaneous claims by nationalist minority elites that they also need protection by, and external citizenship in a neighboring kin-state (Bauböck 2007).

Analytical distinctions between the two transnational political constellations are important for explanatory and normative purposes, but they are frequently blurred in real world cases. Moving borders may trigger migration flows of those who do not want to end up as minorities in a nationalizing state. And ethnic cleansing may have similar effects as moving borders. More than 300,000 ethnic Turks who were pushed out of Bulgaria in 1989 have established themselves in western Turkey. After becoming Turkish citizens large numbers have reclaimed their Bulgarian citizenship and support today from the outside with their votes the political party representing the Turkish minority in their former homeland (Özgur-Bakacioglu 2005). Here the Brubakerian triangle illustrated by the Hungarian language minorities in Slovakia and Romania is expanded into a quadrangle with a migrant origin group settling in the previously external kin-state but still using their transnational citizenship in order to link up with the minority in their previous homeland.

Mexican migration into the border regions of the U.S. illustrates yet another mixed case, where recent flows of labor migrants replenish or recreate an originally autochthonous native minority. Mexican rhetoric about emigrants building a global Mexican nation abroad (Smith 2003) has invoked the annexation of Mexican territory by the US in the mid 19th century and the presence of a native Chicano population in the American South West. Samuel Huntington has conjured up a scenario how Hispanic immigration into this area could eventually transform it into a U.S. American Quebec (Huntington 2005), which for him seems to be a quite horrible prospect. This prognosis can be easily dismissed since there appears to be a persistent language shift towards English only among third descendants of Hispanic immigrants and there is little credibility or political support for territorial claims that would revise
the 1848 Treaty of Hidalgo. But there are harder cases, too. What about Russian language populations in Estonia and Latvia? Should they be seen as immigrants, as colonial settlers or as national minorities separated from their homeland through secession? These different ways of constructing minorities create or undermine legitimacy for claims to transnational as well as domestic citizenship raised by representatives of these minorities.

It is a mistake to think that this question can be decided by academic analysis rather than through the self-identification and mobilization of the group for a specific identity project. As Rogers Brubaker has repeatedly emphasized and as several papers at our conference point out, ‘national minority’ or ‘diaspora’ are not merely categories of analysis but primarily terms of political practice. They are invoked in political discourses in order to bring about what they claim exists already objectively (and has presumably done so for a long time). One conclusion that is frequently drawn in the constructivist literature on nationalism and diaspora is to expose uncritical uses of these terms by other academics who buy into the discourse of political entrepreneurs and contribute to reifying an essentially fluid and contingent phenomenon.

Yet an approach that moves away from empirical analysis to a level of conceptual meta-critique is also deeply unsatisfactory. It risks generating long lists of caveats that create ever more obstacles to empirical research and normative reflection. What I suggest as a better antidote against the dangers of group essentialism is to construct contextualised typologies of possible identity options and strategies and to contrast those promoted by ethnic and nationalist entrepreneurs with alternative ones.

For example, David Laitin’s term “beached diasporas” for Russian language minorities in the Baltic states, seems problematic because it suggests that these groups conceive of their primary identity as a diasporic one. There are, however, several possibilities for minorities separated from a homeland state through a new or restored international border. They can orient towards short-term emigration to the kin state, they can decide to stay but conceive of themselves as a diaspora linked to that state, they may also abandon their external ties and re-imagine themselves as a domestic ethnolinguistic minority, and they may finally decide that their best option is to assimilate into a dominant national identity of their country of residence (Bauböck 2007). Some of these strategies can only be pursued collectively, through mobilizing the group for a political goal; others (emigration or assimilation) can also be realized individually against the preferences of other members of the group. The overall identity orientation and citizenship claims of a group will thus depend on individual preferences, on collective mobilization by minority elites, on the institutional and discursive opportunity structures provided by the countries of residence and external affiliation, and on the ideological orientation and political decisions of political actors and authorities in these countries. ‘Diaspora’, ‘national minority’ or ‘ethnic group’ are still useful categories of analysis as long as we see them as potential outcomes of processes in this complex and dynamic field of institutions and actors rather than as terms that describe collective actors existing prior and independently of this field.

Such an approach will also be more useful to provide normative analyses with solid empirical grounding. The constructivist critique does not help to answer the question how to reconcile competing claims of politically mobilized nationalist projects. After they have been theoretically deconstructed, nationalism will remain alive and kicking
in the political arena. Mapping the field of ethnonationalist politics and all the various individual and collective identity options and membership claims articulated in it can inoculate normative theorists against reifying any particular identities and constructing biased justifications for corresponding claims. It provides a necessary basis for the genuinely normative task of applying general principles to particular cases in a way that could be defensible towards all interests involved.

4. Transnationalism and diaspora: which concept should swallow the other one?

Where does the academic literature on diaspora fit into this expanding field of transnationalism studies? Should we regard diaspora as a specific instance of religious and political transnationalism or the other way round? I want to make an argument for both cases and will resolve the apparent contradiction by distinguishing descriptive from analytic uses of concepts.

Classic definitions of diaspora by Safran, Kölöyan, Cohen, Sheffer and others include several elements that apply just as much to transnational migrant communities. So let me consider which among these elements may provide us with criteria that could distinguish the two phenomena. I suggest that there are only four and that three among these fail in the end to provide us with a clear enough distinction.

First, diaspora has been associated (also etymologically) with traumatic dispersal of a group from a common territorial origin towards multiple destinations. Second, diasporic communities resist full assimilation into the host society and maintain collective group identities across multiple generations. Third, diasporic communities create and maintain lateral ties across political borders between the various locations of settlement. Fourth, diaspora groups retain a strong orientation towards an external homeland and can be mobilised for political projects relating to the future of this homeland.

The first criterion is clearly not sufficient, since many refugee populations whose origin lies in coerced migration and who have been dispersed across many receiving states have blended into their host societies and no longer conceive of themselves as diasporas. The historic fact of traumatic dispersal will certainly shape personal identities of a first generation of coerced migrants, but this does not mean that they will always regard it as a public and collective identity associated with political claims. For their descendants who have not experienced these events in their own lives, it all depends on the parental stories they grow up with and on their identification as a distinct group of origin in the society where they have been born. The first criterion is not even strictly necessary, since even groups whose migration was not traumatic and coerced may eventually mobilise as diasporas in response to trouble in the homeland. During the Kosovo war of 1998-99 many migrants who had left the country as Yugoslav guestworkers raised funds for financing resistance against the Serb forces and quite a number of their sons volunteered to fight in this conflict.

The second criterion, the persistence of diasporic identity across multiple generations is therefore the most obvious candidate for distinguishing diasporic identity groups from the more ephemeral structures of migrant transnationalism. For the latter, in order to persist over multiple generations, the groups involved in transnational
networks need to be constantly replenished through new first generation migrants. When source countries are no longer sources of new flows, or when these flows are cut off by the receiving country, then migrant transnationalism is likely to fade away, as it did in the U.S. between 1918 and the 1960s. Diasporic identities are then phenomenologically distinguished from transnational ones through their capacity to be passed on to subsequent generations in the absence of new immigration from the same origin. This is, however, merely a description and it raises the puzzle how to explain such intergenerational resistance to full assimilation.

A similar point applies to the third criterion of lateral links across multiple places of diasporic settlement. Migrant transnationalism is generally structured as a relation between singular countries of origin and of destination. Even if migrants from the same origin settle in many different destinations, their transnational activities are primarily directed towards a country of origin where they have family ties, where they send remittances, in whose politics they take an interest and to which they may plan to return for retirement. Lateral ties to other countries of destination are of little interest to ordinary migrants. It is members of political, economic and religious elites claiming to represent these groups who may have interests and the necessary resources for forging such links. As research on transnational claims-making and mobilization of migrants in Europe has shown, their networks across borders are usually quite weak even in the politically integrated European Union and the primary addressees of claims remain member state governments (Koopmans and Statham, Guiraudon, Geddes). So the question is again, why do diasporic efforts to forge strong lateral ties succeed in certain cases? What explains their emergence and persistence against the background conditions for migrant transnationalism in liberal democratic societies that are not conducive to the stabilisation of diasporic identities?

The fourth criterion does not provide an answer, but raises the right kind of questions that could provide one. If we consider diaspora as a political project then we have to explain it not so much in terms of historic origins of the group but of elite interests and ideologies. An explanatory theory of diaspora will in this respect be no different from theories of nationalism. Diasporas have to be invented and mobilized in order to come into existence. A common historic origin and intergenerational continuity (through norms of endogamy) of a group is among the enabling conditions for such projects, but it does not explain the phenomenon. What we need to look for are current conditions that provide incentives for elites to mobilize a constituency around a diasporic identity and that explain success in terms of independent motives of these constituencies to engage in these projects.

From a sociological perspective, Brubaker is therefore right: “We should think of diaspora not in substantialist terms as a bounded entity, but rather as an idiom, a stance, a claim” (Brubaker 2005: 12). But comparative political science and political theory will be more interested in conditions for mobilisation and in the impact of successful claims than in merely dissecting the discursive uses of ‘diaspora’.

Taken together, the four criteria considered here can distinguish the phenomenology of diaspora from that of migrant transnationalism. From this perspective, diaspora emerges as a special case of transnationalism whose deviation from the more common

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4 See the paper by Paerregaard for our conference.
patterns is in need of explanation. Yet if the fourth one provides the crucial key for an explanatory account, then diaspora can also be used as a much broader concept that encompasses not only migrant transnationalism but applies to many other phenomena, too.

Let me explain. Under some conditions a claim that is made using the language of diaspora may succeed even in the absence of one, two or all three of the phenomenological criteria. If diaspora is essentially understood as a political project then we cannot rule out in advance that political entrepreneurs using the language of diaspora in a widely overstretched and metaphorical way will ever succeed in forging and mobilising a corresponding collective identity among a sufficiently large group. And if they do succeed, then their using the language of ‘diaspora’ will have created a new phenomenon with a real social significance.

My point here builds on the very elaborate argument made by Francesco Raggazi in his contribution to our conference: “Is it to the scholar to academically deny the claim that is being formulated in the social realm?” But I would take this critique one step further. It is to the scholar to distinguish fake claims that can be raised by anybody in all sorts of contexts from effective ones. Analysing from a linguistic theory perspective the performative quality of the term ‘diaspora’ is not enough to specify the conditions under which the image will catch the imagination of a target audience and prompts individuals to sacrifice many of their other interests in order to bring about a social formation that mirrors the image.

I have already alluded to conditions that may bring about a diasporic transformation of a group whose origins do not distinguish them from other migrants. If this is accepted then we can also relax the criterion of intergenerational continuity, since diasporas may recruit members that have no common ancestral roots with the core group (e.g. through intermarriage or religious and political conversion). There may be even conditions under which the reference to a territorial homeland, which can be demarcated on a geographic map is replaced with a virtual homeland, which exists as a mythological realm in the narratives of elites and in their adherents’ minds. Consider the case of politically mobilised orthodox Muslims, among whom there may be a substantial number of converts, who develop a primary identity as members of a global Islamic community. In their minds this umma is characterized by horizontal solidarity among its members across many different places of settlement and membership entails an obligation to work towards creating a future “House of Islam”, an Islamic polity whose territorial borders are yet unspecified. If all of these features resemble the self-description of other diasporic projects, on which grounds could one reject using the term when analysing such claims? There are good reasons for doing so (or at least for putting ‘diaspora’ in inverted commas) as long as such claims are merely fantasy projects without sufficient social support. But if and when they are successfully mobilised, then refusing to apply the category of diaspora also as an analytic one will only contribute to the indirect reification of other groups who are then accepted as “real diasporas” because of their historic origin and orientation towards a precisely defined territory.

This leads me to a somewhat paradoxical conclusion. We should, on the one hand, avoid overstretching the concept of diaspora by sticking this label onto all transnational political and religious networks and activities. Doing so would single
out one particular strategic project of collective identity formation from a broad range of possible ones and would wrongly assume that all individuals involved in transnational formations will naturally conceive of themselves as members of intergenerational communities whose primary identity refers to origins in an external homeland. Only a small subset of transnational political formations fits this description of diaspora. On the other hand, diaspora as a political project may succeed in mobilising individuals in a variety of contexts and none of the three descriptive characteristics of traumatic dispersal, lateral links across destinations and intergenerational continuity is a strictly necessary condition for such a project to succeed. The term diaspora should then also be used to analyse groups politically mobilized for a diasporic claim independently of whether any of the general descriptive characteristics are present.

This dual use of diaspora as a category of research still allows for reigning in conceptual overstretch. “If everything is constructed, then anything goes” is a bad motto for serious academic research. Scholars should not confuse their task with that of political entrepreneurs. They should not issue academic licenses to invent diasporas by stretching the concept to phenomena that neither match the descriptive characteristics nor refer to manifest political projects.