Mobilizing in transnational space: a social movement approach to the formation of diaspora

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Abstract In this article I suggest analysing the formation of diaspora communities as an instance of mobilization processes thereby countering essentialist concepts of diaspora that reify notions of belonging and the ‘roots’ of migrants in places of origin. Taking the imagination of a transnational community and a shared identity as defining characteristics of diaspora and drawing on constructivist concepts of identity, I argue that the formation of diaspora is not a ‘natural’ consequence of migration but that specific processes of mobilization have to take place for a diaspora to emerge. I propose that concepts developed in social movement theory can be applied to the study of diaspora communities and suggest a comparative framework for the analysis of the formation of diaspora through mobilization. Empirical material to substantiate this approach is mainly drawn from the Alevi diaspora in Germany but also from South Asian diasporas.

The term ‘diaspora’ has become a catchword in the social and cultural sciences. The proliferation and popularization of a concept frequently results in a loss of precise meaning and analytic power and this has happened to diaspora (Brubaker 2005). The most frequently cited definitions of diaspora take a family resemblance or prototype approach and give a list of characteristics, a varying number of which may or may not apply to a specific example, which is then accorded the prestigious theoretical status of diaspora (Cohen 1997; Safran 1991). Defining a concept this way, however, does not really provide an exact delimitation. In a widely acclaimed attempt to clear the thick jungle of partly overlapping ideas, Steve Vertovec (1997) distinguished three categories of meaning of diaspora as social form, type of consciousness and mode of cultural production. The first of these meanings seems to be the one most frequently used in the social sciences, as well as in public or political discourse. In this article I am concerned with this first meaning, yet I will argue that it is difficult conceptually to separate diaspora as social form from diaspora as a type of consciousness.

Although the meaning of diaspora is broad and particular definitions disputed there appears to be a fairly common core understanding of what it is about. Thus, nobody would question that diaspora has to do with dislocation, with having left particular places and living elsewhere, or with simply being ‘out of place’. Yet precisely these ideas of home and (be)longing which seem to be so self-evident in concepts of diaspora have become the focus of a significant critique, first voiced by

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Floya Anthias (1998) and Yasemin Soysal (2002). Both authors deplore the proliferation of the diaspora concept and regard it as theoretically and politically problematic. Put broadly, they argue that while diaspora claims to offer a mode of conceptualizing relations of spatial mobility, locality and belonging, which seems to be less essentialist and to escape the earlier incarceration of identities or cultures in particular places, the concept in fact does not live up to expectations. Soysal points out that the notion of diaspora is still based on the same logic of fixed – if abandoned – places and a naturalization of belonging. The formation of ‘a diaspora’ seems inevitable, once people have moved and left their place of origin. She states that ‘this theoretical move, that is, designating immigrant populations as diasporas, ignores the historical contingency of the nation-state, identity and community and reifies them as natural’ (Soysal 2000: 3).

According to Anthias (1998; 2001) the diaspora concept does not really go beyond earlier paradigms of ‘race’ or ethnicity because it similarly appeals to a notion of primordial bonding and belonging (although this is rarely acknowledged). As with ethnicity, it tends to homogenize segments of a population and to ignore cross-cutting differences. Like Soysal, Anthias also sees the attribution of continuous homeland relations at the heart of the apparently unavoidable essentialization of diaspora.

In pointing to similarities between ethnicity and diaspora, Floya Anthias makes an important argument. Yet while she is critical of the conceptual adjacency of diaspora and ethnicity, she only takes essentialist versions of ethnicity into account (Sayyid 2000). I would like to make a more positive argument starting from anti-essentialist and constructionist concepts of ethnicity. The formation of diasporas can indeed be considered as a special case of ethnicity. The sweeping equation of diasporas with ethnicity-related social groupings like migrant communities or minorities in some approaches also points in this direction. The debate on ethnicity has been dominated by the opposition of primordialist/essentialist and situationalist/ constructionist approaches. In short, primordialists argue that ethnic identity derives almost naturally from experiences of belonging in primordial communities like the family or other congregations, that identity is largely stable and continuous and that it depends on given cultural traditions (see Isaacs 1975; Smith 2000). Constructionism, the theoretically dominant perspective today, argues in contrast that ethnic identity is the result of processes of attribution. Yet, the theoretical perspective of constructionism does not rid us of primordialism because primordialism is a very powerful political device. Benedict Anderson’s (1983) reminder is relevant here. The fact that nations are imagined communities does not mean that they are fictitious and unreal. Imagined communities – nations, ethnic groups or others – are real because they are imagined as real, because they are taken as real and because they therefore have very real effects on social life.

To accept that identities are generally and almost necessarily essentialized in political contexts does not mean, however, that such essentialized constructions have to be taken at face value by the scientific observer. To the contrary, it requires us to ask how, why, by whom and for which purpose such identities are deployed. As identities become politically effective only when they are employed and endorsed by
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a certain number of people, we have to ask how these people are mobilized for such an identity, how they are made to accept and assume it. Rather than being regarded as something that from the outset provides continuity and fixed structures for social life, as in primordialist approaches, identity becomes an issue of movement and mobilization.1

According to this approach, sentiments of belonging, attachment to a home and ideas of a place of origin do not constitute the ‘substance’ from which diasporas – like other identity groups – are made but the codes in terms of which ‘a’ diaspora is imagined. As a consequence I suggest defining diasporas as imagined transnational communities, as imaginations of community that unite segments of people that live in territorially separated locations. Many conceptualizations of diaspora refer to a shared identity as a significant element (Cohen 1997; Safran 1991; Tölöyan 1996). Yet, in most such definitions a collective identity, or as I prefer to say imaginations of community,2 constitutes but one element of definition among others. The problem is that it remains unclear whether a categorization of a given collectivity as diaspora rests more on ‘objective’ criteria that are ascribed by the observer, or whether it is based on ‘subjective’ criteria, namely a group identity or imagination of community. The quite simple definition I suggest, however, clearly combines an ‘objective’ and a ‘subjective’ criterion, both of which have to be fulfilled in order that a given collectivity is categorized as diaspora. It has to be a transnationally dispersed collectivity that distinguishes itself by clear self-imaginations as community.

To insist on both elements of the definition is to regard dispersal and imagination as independent variables. That is, the dispersal of migrants from a certain country does not necessarily engender an imagination of community. Migrants do not necessarily form a diaspora but they may become a diaspora by developing a new imagination of community, even many years after the migration took place.

To put the imagination of community at the centre of a definition of diaspora as community in a way conflates the first and the second categories of meaning of diaspora distinguished by Steve Vertovec, namely the notion of diaspora as a social form and the notion of diaspora as a kind of consciousness. There can be no diaspora community without a consciousness of diaspora, in other words without an idea of shared identity, of common belonging to that group. As ‘consciousness’ is a category that is notoriously difficult to ascertain in empirical research I propose replacing it with ‘discourse’, because consciousness needs to be expressed in discourse in order to produce social and political effects. Hence, we have to refer to discursive constructions of imaginations of community. A diaspora is distinct from other kinds of imagined communities because its imagination relates to a transnationally dispersed community. The reference to an imagination of identity does not presuppose that specific ideas of identity are actually shared within the community. To the contrary, such ideas may well be bitterly disputed. Yet the dispute about the precise formulation of an identity affirms the idea that there is a common identity, however it is to be understood.

The insistence on imaginations and discourses of shared identity distinguishes diaspora communities from other kinds of transnational social formations. Migrants
may maintain transnational ties, for instance with relatives that continue to live at the place from which they came. But without an imagination of community that exceeds such relationships they do not form a diaspora. On the other hand, the definition of diasporas as transnational imagined communities does not presuppose a high frequency of actual transnational social relationships. The transnational quality of the community may be purely imaginary and symbolic.

The focus on the imagination of community helps prevent primordialist and essentialist ideas slipping into the analytical and conceptual level. A given group of people cannot be equated with imaginations of community that are voiced about them. Ideas and identities may be held quite differently by different people. There can be actors who powerfully express an idea of community and who take part in its discursive and social construction. Others remain more passive or even completely aloof, giving the imagination of community little or no significance for their own lives. Again others subscribe to the imagination of a particular community but they imagine it in quite different or even contradictory terms. Imaginations of community are never true representations of social reality but instead cover up complexity and difference within the imagined community. Instead of mapping social life such imaginations project a community.

**Diaspora and mobilization: ideas from social movement theory**

If diaspora is understood as transnational imagined community and if we assume that the discursive imagination of community is not a direct and necessary outcome of migration movements, the crucial question becomes why and how a diaspora discourse arises among a certain group of people and how people are made to accept a certain discourse and to participate in it. The formation of diaspora is therefore an issue of social mobilization.

I propose that the study of diaspora should take inspiration from the field of the social sciences that is fundamentally concerned with the question of how people get mobilized for collective purposes and actions, the analysis of social movements. I neither intend simply to equate diasporas in their formative phase with social movements nor do I assume that diasporas and social movements (which can be of very diverse character) represent the same social form. Yet, I am convinced that there are many parallels in the processes at work and that we can take important clues for the study of diaspora from the analysis of social movements. A focus on mobilization in the study of diaspora effectively counters primordialist and essentializing approaches, which represent diasporas as given social formations that are naturally rooted in a distant ‘home’.

The study of social movements has become a vast field in the social sciences and cannot adequately be surveyed here. It deals with forms of collective action that challenge existing social and political structures and practices. Social movements demand change and are frequently agents of change. They raise new ideas, voice new demands or invent new kinds of action. A common denominator of approaches to the study of social movements is that such movements are not completely
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institutionalized collectivities that lack formal representation, and that are engaged in contentious issues and interaction with opponents of various kinds (Tarrow 1996). Yet, as well as being contentious, Tarrow emphasizes elsewhere that social movements do other things: ‘they build organizations, elaborate ideologies, and socialize and mobilize constituencies, and their members engage in self-development and the construction of collective identities’ (Tarrow 1998: 3). He defines social movements as ‘collective challenges based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities’ (Tarrow 1998: 4). Two broad paradigms of social movement theory can be distinguished. The ‘resource mobilization approach’ dominated movement research in the USA and was particularly attentive to questions of individual motivation and strategies of action. It has been criticized for taking a rational action approach. The ‘new social movements approach’ was especially influential in Europe and Latin America and looked at structural causes of social movements as well as at the collective identities they expressed. Recently, a growing number of authors have called for an end to the compartmentalization of social movement theory and for the development of a synthesis (Della Porta and Diani 1999; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001).

Diverse research perspectives notwithstanding, social movement theory has focused on three issues that govern social mobilization and that are conventionally labelled as political opportunities, mobilizing structures and practices and framing. Political opportunities refer to the structural, including institutional, conditions that enable the rise of social movements. Sidney Tarrow (1988) and Charles Tilly (1978) have emphasized the significance of political opportunities; they maintain that social movements are not a direct consequence of social grievances but that further contextual and structural conditions are required before the grievances can be expressed and transformed into a social movement. Among such enabling factors are the possibilities of communicating issues or forming organizations. Although movements are frequently directed against established institutional political structures, they are not independent of such structures. Tarrow (1998: 20) points out that enabling political opportunities have their counterpart in disabling political constraints, namely in factors that discourage contention.

Mobilizing structures are ‘collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action’ (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996: 3). Mobilizing structures can be networks of people that are bound to the same issue or formal organizations that are established for the purpose of making particular claims. Though social movements cannot be equated with organizations (Della Porta and Diani 1999: 16), organizations are frequently significant actors within movements and can give them a temporal continuity that exceeds the commitment of individual actors. Such mobilizing structures also organize specific mobilizing practices that enable individuals to take part in (and become part of) the movement, like demonstrations or information campaigns.

Framing refers to an idea initially developed by Erving Goffman (1974) that was applied to the study of social movements by David Snow et al. (1986). Frames are specific ideas that fashion a shared understanding for a social movement by rendering
events and conditions meaningful and enable a common framework of interpretation and representation. They are ideas that transform certain conditions into an issue, that help to define grievances and claims, and that legitimize and mobilize action. Snow and Benford (1992) distinguish specific frames that are significant in particular movements from ‘master frames’ that are of superior importance because as ‘paradigms’ they help define whole categories of social movements. Such master frames are, for instance, ideas of environment, human rights, or identity that play fundamental roles in many different movements and without which these movements could not have been conceived. The concept of framing also takes up the importance of culture, meaning and ideology, which the new social movements approach has emphasized. Melucci (1996: 203) points out that movements not only develop within certain contextual frames but that they also ‘fashion new meanings for social action’.

These central dimensions of social movements are also important dimensions in the formation of diasporas as transnational imagined communities. The mobilization of transnationally dispersed people for a diaspora community can be analysed with reference to political opportunities, mobilizing structures and practices and frames:

- Opportunities in relation to the formation of diaspora, for instance, include means of communication, media and transport, as well as the legal and institutional (for example multiculturalist) frameworks within which claims for community and identity can be articulated. While in social movement theory the consideration of political opportunities has generally been limited to single national contexts, the concept has to be broadened here to include several national and transnational contexts. Political opportunities vary according to national context; they may be very different in ‘host’ and ‘home’ countries. Opportunities in migrants’ countries of residence may enable a formation of community and of community organizations that have been repressed in the country of origin. Thus, diasporas can develop through taking up ‘homeland’ issues that could not be articulated in the country of origin.

- The formation of diasporas requires mobilizing structures and practices. People form networks through which the initiative for collective action is spread; and they establish associations that create and sustain discourses of community and that organize mobilizing practices like demonstrations and various community conventions. Such networks and associations can be very diverse; they may be situated at the local level (such as neighbourhood community associations) but they also include high-level associations that are themselves of a transnational character. Kinship ties can also be important (transnational) mobilizing structures.

- In the first place, frames include all the ideas from which an imagination of community is composed, the ideas that define migrants as members of a transnational community or relationships as relations of belonging. Thus, by being framed as ‘home’, a distant place that a migrant (or his or her parents) has left and perhaps visits occasionally, becomes home. Framing ideas of specific diasporas are dependent on master frames that endorse the belonging to a larger community. The idea of identity is an indispensable master frame of diasporas that may take
the more specific form of national identity. Yet, ideas of roots and the importance of history also are master frames that activate the imagination of diaspora communities. Framing processes establish not only the significance of the imagined community, but may also refer to specific events that are then defined as incidents that affect the whole community and that thereby trigger, as we shall see, the formation of a diaspora community.

The significance of the social movement approach far exceeds the narrow realm of the analysis of social movements. It centres on social processes as well as on the interaction of process and structure and goes beyond the old aporia of the social, namely the relationship between the social and the individual, by focusing on the question of how individuals are mobilized for social issues. The social movement approach works against taking collective phenomena as ‘unitary empirical dat[a]’ – it has to be asked instead how collective phenomena are ‘in fact the product of differentiated social processes, of orientations of action, of elements of structure and motivation that can combine in a variable manner’ (Melucci 1988: 331). Martin Fuchs suggests taking ‘movement’ as a synecdoche for the social in general. It is a synecdoche that engenders, however, a specific perspective that emphasizes dissent and the differences of social actors, their projects of action and processes of negotiation. It focuses on the initiative taken by actors and the constitution of the social through interaction (Fuchs 1999: 84).

**Diaspora and mobilization: questions of research and comparison**

If we take diaspora as a social form that is not a necessary outcome of migration but that is contingent on the imagination of a transnational community and upon the self-identification of actors as members of this community, we must ask how actors are mobilized for such identification. The social movement approach suggests that there must be opportunities, mobilizing structures and practices, and frames that enable this mobilization.

In the remainder of the article I ask some questions about how mobilization relates to the formation of diaspora, particularly in relation to mobilizing structures, practices and frames. I shall limit the discussion to these aspects because questions relating to opportunity structures receive more regular attention in the literature. I suggest that research on the formation of diasporas concentrate on four main topics and questions:

1. The formation of diaspora as a response to specific events and developments: if the imagination of community is not a direct consequence of migration, then what kinds of events and developments trigger the rise of a diasporic (namely transnational) imagination of community? What events and developments are framed in such a way that they require the response of a community?

2. Agents of diasporic imagination: who produces and disseminates a discourse of transnational community?
3. Mobilizing practices: given that diasporic imagination is not simply given or ‘natural’ but that people have to be mobilized for this imagination, what events, strategies and practices are instrumental in this mobilization?

4. Social and political dynamics of mobilization: what are the internal social and political dynamics of mobilization? Is there resistance to this mobilization or are competing imaginations of community proposed? Are there cross-cutting social processes that impede mobilization?

Question 1 refers to framing processes, and questions 2 and 3 to mobilizing structures, practices and their agents. Question 4 contextualizes diasporic mobilization by asking how it relates to other social and political processes within the imagined diaspora community. It acknowledges that actors can assume different identifications that intersect and may produce friction and conflict in processes of mobilization and organization. The questions suggested here constitute a framework that can also be utilized in a comparative approach to the formation of diaspora. If addressed systematically in relation to different cases, these questions can help identify similarities and differences and thereby may generate a general understanding of the formation of diaspora communities. In the next section of the article I discuss these questions with reference to a number of cases that exemplify the usefulness of this framework. I will refer especially to the Alevi diaspora in Germany because the framework proposed here is an outcome of my study of the Alevi case. Yet, to go beyond what Butler (2001: 190) criticizes as an ‘ethnographic approach’ to diaspora, namely a theorization derived from a single-case study only, I shall also compare and discuss the Sikh, Kashmiri and Tamil diasporas.

Formation of diaspora as a response to critical events and specific developments

To demonstrate the usefulness of my approach, I shall refer to diasporas that did not emerge as a direct consequence of migration but developed later in response to specific events that were unrelated to the original movement of migration.

The emergence of a Kashmiri diaspora in Britain dates from 1989 with the rise of a militant, anti-Indian insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir. As a consequence of a long history of migration, ‘Kashmiris’ had been living in British cities for several decades (Ballard 1983). Yet, originating mostly from the area of Mirpur, which is in Pakistan-controlled Azad Kashmir, they identified themselves not as Kashmiris, but rather as Punjabis or simply Pakistanis. These people maintained longstanding transnational relationships with their relatives back ‘home’ but these transnational connections did not produce a specific self-identification as (Azad) Kashmiris. The insurgency in Indian Jammu and Kashmir brought the unresolved nature of the Kashmir dispute to light and motivated the assertion of distinctive Kashmiriness or Kashmiriyat and the development of trans-Kashmiri solidarity. The Kashmiri diaspora is imagined in terms of a nation. Now, associations in the UK campaign for recognition of a Kashmiri as distinct from an Asian, Pakistani or Muslim identity in British political and administrative life and engage in transnational politics relating to the Kashmir dispute (Ali 2003; Ali, Ellis and Khan 1996; Ellis and Khan 1998).
In his study of the Sikh diaspora, Brian Keith Axel (2001) argues against what he calls the ‘place-of-origin-thesis’, namely the idea that a ‘homeland’ produces diaspora. He shows that in this case the supposed Sikh homeland was transformed from the diaspora and that the diaspora has created its homeland. The decisive development here was the rapid popularization of the movement for Khalistan, an independent Sikh nation-state, after the Indian army stormed the pre-eminent Sikh sanctuary, the Golden Temple in Amritsar in 1984. The attack on the Golden Temple and the ensuing violence between non-Sikhs and Sikhs in India turned the desire for Khalistan into a powerful moment that transformed the outlook of Sikhs throughout the world. The attack on the temple was framed as an event that concerned every Sikh. According to Axel, this event constituted the Sikh diaspora ‘as a diaspora’, namely in relation to a newly-imagined homeland called Khalistan (Axel 2001: 27; Tatla 1999: 193).

After 1984, the self-conceptualization of Sikhs as a nation became extremely popular, transforming the idea of Sikhism as ‘referring to the “peoplehood” not only of Sikhs in India but also of Sikhs around the world’ (Axel 2001: 5). In effect, the idea of a Sikh community was transformed into an imagined transnational community only after 1984, though before then Sikhs had lived for a long time outside India. Events that trigger the emergence of a diasporic imagination, like the storming of the Golden Temple, can be regarded as ‘critical events’ in Veena Das’s (1995) sense, namely events that cause new modes of imagination and action to come into being.

The Alevi diaspora is also a good example in this respect. Alevism is a religious and cultural tradition that emerged in Anatolia. Alevi first came to Germany as labour migrants from Turkey. Arriving after the early 1960s they remained for decades undistinguished from the general mass of Turkish labourers in Germany. This did not even change when the Turkish military coup of 1980 created a new wave of politically-motivated leftist Alevi to replace the earlier influx of labour migrants. The first two decades of the Alevi presence in Germany coincided with a time in Turkey when Alevism was keeping a low profile. Alevi, along with other ‘heterodox’ religious practices and organizations, had been formally prohibited since 1925 in an attempt by the young republic to curb religious difference and forge a unified Turkish nation. Turkish nationalism did not recognize religious, cultural or ethnic differences within the Turkish nation and therefore Alevi, like Kurds, remained unacknowledged in official and public discourse. After centuries of actual or imminent persecution as heretics in the Ottoman empire, Alevi practiced takiya (dissimulation), in other words they attempted not to be recognized as Alevi by the dominant Sunni Muslim population. Rural–urban migration inside Turkey in many instances destroyed a specific Alevi social structure. The hereditary relationships between religious specialists (dedes) and lay people (talips) that formed the necessary social structure for the practice of Alevi rituals loosened or were totally given up.

After the late 1960s a growing number of younger Alevi joined the radical leftist movement in Turkey, which entailed rejecting religious traditions and practices, including Alevism. Alevi religious practice almost totally subsided in Turkey during the 1970s and there was also no such practice by Alevi migrants in Germany. These migrants largely continued takiya. This changed gradually in the 1980s only to
‘explode’ into an Alevi movement after 1989 – a movement that struggles for the public and formal recognition of Alevis in Turkey as well as in Germany (Sökefeld 2003). In this movement, the Alevi community is imagined as a transnational community, as a community that is (or at least should be) united despite territorial dispersion in Turkey, Germany and other countries of migration.

Why, however, did it emerge in the late 1980s? Three specific developments can be identified as having triggered the Alevi movement. The first of these developments was the rise of multiculturalist discourse in Germany. In response to growing racism against migrants who were regarded as ‘foreigners’, multiculturalist discourse framed immigration and the new cultural pluralism it produced in Germany as a positive event. Migrant cultures were celebrated as an ‘enrichment’ of German culture and migrants themselves called for the preservation of their culture and identity. In a number of German cities like Berlin, Frankfurt or Hamburg multiculturalism became embodied in multicultural institutions, which sustained multiculturalist discourse through a host of activities.6 In Hamburg, several Alevi individuals who later became central activists of the Alevi movement, were variously engaged in these institutions. In this context the idea developed that Alevi migrants from Turkey should not only be committed to Turkish culture or identity, but specifically also to Alevi culture and identity. These individuals initiated the organization of an ‘Alevi Culture Week’ in October 1989, which was the first ever public event organized in the explicit name of Alevism. It marked a collective break with takiya and the emergence of Alevism in Germany as a public movement.

This event in Germany was also a response to two developments in Turkey, the first being the growth of political Islam in the aftermath of the military coup. The ruling generals devised the ‘Turkish-Islamic synthesis’ as a new national ideology that accorded Islam a greater significance in national identity and that was thereby meant to overcome the split that had developed in Turkish society in the 1970s through the polarizing opposition of rightists and leftists. As potential victims of Islamic political self-assertion, Alevi have been staunch supporters of secularism in Turkey and are wary of Islam acquiring political significance. A second significant development in Turkey was the emergence of the Kurdish movement. Although Alevis did not regard the militant struggle of the Kurds as a model for their own politics of recognition, the determined commitment to Kurdish identity was perceived as a call for the assertion of an equally negated Alevi identity. Being Kurds themselves, quite a lot of Alevis were also directly affected by repressive politics against Kurds in Turkey.

The formation of an Alevi diaspora as an imagined transnational community was not simply a consequence of migration but occurred in response to specific issues in both the country of residence and the country of origin that bore no relation to the original movement of migration. The focus of Alevis in Germany and other West European countries on political and legal conditions for Alevis in Turkey particularly contributed to imagining the Alevi community as a transnational community. In other words, in their politics of recognition, Alevis in Germany never referred exclusively to the situation of Alevis in Germany, but always addressed with much more urgency,
the Alevis’ continuing lack of legal recognition in Turkey. The imagination of Alevis as a transnational community depends on the concept of identity as master frame. The idea of identity as something that can be endangered, that should be protected and recognized, motivated diasporic mobilization.

Although the cases mentioned so far show that there can be a temporal gap between migration or dispersal and the development of a transnational imagination of community, it is also clear that such deferral of the formation of diaspora is not a necessary condition. A diasporic imagination may arise coevally with the migration. It is quite probable that this simultaneity of movement and imagination is found in cases where the migration is a consequence of communal violence and persecution. One such case is the diaspora of Tamils from Sri Lanka (Fuglerud 1999).

Thus, a diasporic imagination of community can emerge at the same time as movements of dispersal, but this need not happen because the emergence of such an imagination can also be deferred for years – or may simply never take place. Deferral of diasporic imagination is in effect a deferral of framing social conditions and events as relating to a transnational community. The opportunity for deferred emergence of diaspora is also a consequence of technological innovation and the concomitant ‘time–space compression’ (Harvey 1989) because the emergence of a transnational imagination of community as a result of critical events requires that such events are globally communicated. Without communication facilities the chance of a dispersed collection of people developing a shared imagination of community is rather small.

**Agents of diasporic imagination**

Critical events can be considered a necessary condition for the emergence of an imagination of community among transnationally dispersed people, but they are an insufficient condition. Events are only critical when they are perceived and framed in a particular way. Actors are needed to articulate that such events require new forms of action, discourse and ways of conceptualizing the world. In the first instance these are probably individual members of the imagined community, but in time collective agents are generally formed like associations, parties or community institutions, which carve a new discourse of community through which a particular diasporic imagination is negotiated (Sökefeld and Schwalgin 2000). For the Kashmiris in Britain, the local branch of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, the party that started the insurgency in Indian Kashmir, played a central role (Ellis and Khan 1998), but different associations like the British Kashmiri Association, or the Kashmiri National Identity Campaign, have also been established and produce the imagination of a Kashmiri community (Ali 2003). In the Sikh diaspora, transnationally organized associations like the World Sikh Organization, the Sikh Youth Federation and local gurudwaras (Sikh temples) with their ‘community leaders’ produce and reproduce the discourse of the (transnational) Sikh nation (Tatla 1999). For the Tamil diaspora the central organization is the LTTE (Fuglerud 1999). In all these cases different degrees of social participation are apparent, although they are largely eclipsed in community discourse in favour of a homogenized imagination of community.
In the Alevi case, such institutions were an immediate outcome of the emerging movement and they took the lead in further shaping and specifying the imagination of a transnational Alevi community. The Alevi Culture Week in Hamburg was organized by a rapidly growing and informal group of people, but afterwards a registered association called Alevi Culture Centre was quickly established. Such Alevi Culture Centres were almost simultaneously opened all over Germany and in neighbouring countries. This institutionalization of the movement received a further boost after another critical event. In July 1993 violent Islamists attacked an Alevi culture festival in the Turkish town of Sivas, resulting in the deaths of more than 30 people. This ‘Sivas massacre’, as Alevis refer to it, resulted in the mushrooming of Alevi associations in Europe. One significant result was also the formation of an umbrella organization, the Federation of Alevi Communities in Europe, which took the lead in advancing the Alevi cause by issuing pamphlets, booklets and a journal, by starting campaigns, and by organizing political conventions and cultural festivals. Hence, it is not simply the Alevi community that creates an imagination of community, but specific and identifiable individual and collective actors undertake this project and start a community discourse. While discursively the community is projected as one single body of which every Alevi is equally a part (although there are rivaling visions of this community), different degrees of participation and commitment can be detected at the level of social organization. At one extreme there are core actors, the functionaries of the Alevi associations, the fulltime activists in the name of the community who constitute a diasporic ‘leadership elite’ (Tölölyan 1996: 19), but at the other extreme there are people who may identify themselves as Alevis (or are identified as such by others) but who remain completely aloof from all community activities. In between these poles there is a range of different degrees of commitment. Some people regularly join activities, while others only attend special events like cultural festivals. The discursive construction of ‘the community’ is an abstraction – an imagination – which is not directly mirrored in social organization. An idea of community is not in itself permanent, but to be politically and socially effective it has to be reproduced time and again by specific actors and organizations.

Mobilizing practices

Imaginations of transnational communities are not established once and for all but have to be reproduced time and again in order to continue. Mobilizing practices are not only required at the beginning of the formation of a diaspora but perhaps even more urgently later when the initial urge for the community, springing from specific critical events, is gone. Initial strategies of mobilization may differ from later practices, just like ‘hot nationalism’ may be replaced by everyday ‘banal nationalism’ in the case of the successful establishment of an imagined community as nation (Billig 1995).

Among Alevis the critical event of the Islamist attack on the Alevi festival in Sivas in 1993 is of particular importance for mobilization. The event itself mobilized many Alevis to join Alevi associations. The impetus of the Sivas massacre can be
judged from the fact that a few days after the incident about 60,000 Alevis from all over Germany and neighbouring countries joined in a protest march in Cologne. Subsequently, Sivas has become the object of annual commemorative rituals in which the victims of the massacre are remembered and the meaning of the event for the community is explained. Sivas is represented in these ceremonies not as a local event that happened at a distant place but as an incident of violence that targeted the whole community and therefore concerns every Alevi. Thus, the commemoration of violence suffered by some Alevis helps to imagine the Alevi community as a whole.

Other events are meant to turn the imagination of community into a tangible experience. More than 1000 young Alevis participated by playing saz, a long-neck lute that has become an important symbol of Alevism, or dancing semah, the ritual Alevi dance, at two large cultural festivals called Bin Yılın Türküsü (officially translated as ‘Saga of the Millennium’) that took place in Cologne in May 2000 and in Istanbul in October 2002. To come together in a single place with so many others and to perform for a large audience was a very strong experience and it made them ‘really’ feel part of the (transnational) Alevi community.

Commemoration is also an important strategy of mobilization in the Sikh diaspora. After 1984, narrations of the atrocities committed by Indian security forces and stories about the Sikhs’ glorious past became part of the rituals performed at the gurudwaras. Sikhs in the diaspora that had lost relatives in the struggle in Punjab were honoured at local gurudwaras. Like the commemoration of the Sivas victims among Alevis, personal loss was turned into an issue for the whole community and many protest rallies and conventions were organized. Such practices offer opportunities to participate in communal activities and to identify publicly as members of the community (Tatla 1999). The writings on the Kashmiri diaspora unfortunately give no hint of what mobilizing practices brought about the reorientation of people from seeing themselves as Pakistanis or Punjabis to identifying as Kashmiris. Yet, one can assume that the protest rallies and community conventions that addressed the violence suffered by Kashmiris in Kashmir at the hands of Indian forces mobilized ‘Pakistanis’ in Britain to identify themselves specifically as Kashmiris. In the Tamil diaspora, festivals and conventions held by the LTTE are instrumental in reproducing a diasporic identification of Tamils. Writing about Tamils in Norway, Fuglerud (1999) points out that the significance of such conventions goes beyond the immediate following of the LTTE by endorsing ideas about the dispersed Tamil nation.

The need to reproduce the imagination of a diasporic community is a strong argument against primordial conceptions of diaspora. Diaspora is not simply a ‘given’ of migrants’ existence that is in itself permanent but has to be effected time and again by agents who employ a variety of mobilizing practices, though discourses that accompany such practices generally construct diaspora communities in essentialist terms.

Social and political dynamics of mobilization

I have discussed the formation of diaspora as a historically contingent process that involves critical events, actors who imagine a transnational community and produce a
related discourse, and mobilizing practices that secure the support of the members of the supposed diaspora. With all these aspects the formation of diaspora triggers a specific social and political dynamic within the imagined community, yet it is also bound to social relations and processes that precede the formation of diaspora and that may not be completely overturned by the emerging diasporic formation. We have seen that the formation of diaspora depends on actors taking the initiative and giving voice to a discourse of community. In many cases, such actors have already been involved in preceding commitments that may provide a specific dynamic for the formation of diaspora. Diaspora entails a differentiated involvement of actors with, for instance, positions of leaders and of followers. It is highly probable that leadership positions are disputed and that different factions that may be predicated upon different visions of community and identity evolve in the formation of diaspora. In the Sikh diaspora, conflicting factions and organizations emerged at the level of local associations as well as at the translocal level. The World Sikh Organization and the Sikh Youth Federation were bound to each other in serious dispute, also for control of local gurdwaras, and there was considerable conflict and factionalism within the associations (Tatla 1999). In the Tamil diaspora (as among Tamils in Sri Lanka) the main rift is between ‘the people of the movement’, namely the LTTE and its supporters, on the one hand and those who do not support the stance of the LTTE on the other. At the local level, Tamils in Norway have established welfare organizations that are prone ‘to split rapidly into factions and remain ineffective, often due to rivalry between followers of different candidates for leadership’ (Fuglerud 1999: 83). In the Kashmiri diaspora factions that support particular politicians in Azad Kashmir seem to be closely related to kinship networks (biraderi) that very effectively structure social relations and support in Azad Kashmir and in Britain (Ellis and Khan 1999); the question of whether the struggle in Kashmir should be fought with violent means or not is also disputed. A further difference, which is probably highly significant, is completely glossed over in the existing literature. In Indian Jammu and Kashmir, there are in fact at least two ongoing struggles: one for the establishment for a secular independent Kashmiri nation and the other for the unification of Kashmiri Muslims with the Muslim state of Pakistan, or even with the Muslim ummah at large (Sikand 2001). It is highly improbable that this is not reflected by more or less parallel factions in the Kashmiri diaspora. According to press reports, Muslim militant organizations in Kashmir have established their fundraising networks in Britain and receive large sums from the Kashmiri diaspora (Franchetti and Fielding 2002).

The Alevi case illustrates the social and political dynamics of diaspora formation very well. Most actors who played a significant role in the formation of the Alevi diaspora had been involved in other political contexts before. The formation of an Alevi diaspora was also the conjunction of two different political formations of Alevi migrants in Germany. On the one hand there were those who were committed to Turkish radical leftist exile politics and on the other hand those who were affiliated with Turkish political organizations that can be largely described as of social democrat orientation. Among the first section the largest and most significant group was constituted by an association called Dev Yol (‘revolutionary path’). Although Dev Yol
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dissolved years before the formation of the Alevi diaspora, the social networks that had been created by its membership continued to be highly effective. Even nowadays, 20 years after the dissolution of the organization, many leadership positions within Alevi associations are filled with former members of Dev Yol. They continued to impress their mark on many Alevi associations especially by assuming an attitude of strict opposition towards the Turkish state and by largely refusing a symbolic identification with the Turkish nation. The issue of identifying symbolically with state and nation by displaying the Turkish flag and images of Atatürk at Alevi premises and conventions was bitterly disputed for more than a decade within and among the Alevi associations. Alevi supporters of the Turkish CHP and of nationalist leftist parties always insisted on the Turkish flag being hoisted at Alevi conventions. Here, the social dynamic of opposing factions was mapped upon contradicting imaginations of the Alevi diasporic community, the first of which perceived the Alevi diaspora as an inseparable part of the Turkish nation while the other saw it as independent of and distinct from that nation. Similar relations of opposition were produced by other intersecting issues like the Kurdish conflict or the question of whether Alevism is part of Islam or not. In each of these issues, actors tried to mobilize support for their respective position, creating thereby a host of rifts among Alevis. Yet not all disputes were related to contradicting imaginations of the community. Power struggles between competing actors for specific leadership positions within Alevi associations also frequently created opposing factions. In fact, the discursive emphasis on the unity of the Alevi community hides all kinds of conflicts and disputes that frequently threatened the unity of specific Alevi associations. At the local level, such conflicts can produce a decline in mobilization. The local associations in Hamburg, for instance, have suffered a considerable loss of membership as a consequence of such disputes.

The cases discussed here show that discursive emphasis of the unity of community is not a reflection of social and political unity but rather conceals complex social and political dynamics of differences and disputes within the community. Community is not a social reality but a discursive construction, which, however, is meant to further the establishment of social unity. In the Alevi case, the discursive emphasis on the unity of community is often directly related with actual jeopardy of this unity, that is, community is emphasized when it is actually threatened. Thus, mobilization for diaspora need not be a straightforward process but can be intersected by other social and political processes that may be related to competing identifications. The process of diasporic mobilization is frequently disturbed and impeded by intervening action, crosscutting identifications and conflicting interests.

Conclusion

I started this article with a critique of diaspora as an essentializing concept that, contrary intentions notwithstanding, reified notions of belonging, that firmly bind migrants to places of origin and frequently disregards the historical contingency of nation-states and diasporas, as well as the historicity of identifications ascribed to
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such social and political formations. In her critique, Anthias pointed to the conceptual similarity of reified notions of diaspora and (primordialist) ideas of ethnicity. I suggested starting instead from constructionist conceptions of ethnicity that consider primordialism, not as substance, but as codes of identification that provide powerful symbols with which to express claims of identity. Constructionism has to take into account that actors’ primordialisms may be highly effective in social and political respects. It has to enquire in the first place why, how, by whom and for what purposes primordialist ideas are deployed. We need to ask how actors are mobilized for and by primordialist and essentialist identities. Identity groups are products of processes of mobilization. I proposed applying these ideas to the concept of diaspora and suggested we define diasporas as imagined transnational communities. The assumption of a shared identity that unites people living dispersed in transnational space thereby becomes the central defining feature of diasporas. Rejecting ideas of migrants’ natural rootedness and belonging to places of origin, I argued that diaspora identity and the imagination of a diaspora community is also an outcome of mobilization processes. The development of diaspora identity is not simply a natural and inevitable result of migration but a historical contingency that frequently develops out of mobilization in response to specific critical events. Diaspora is thus firmly historicized. It is not an issue of naturally felt roots but of specific political circumstances that suggest the mobilization of a transnational imagined community. The focus on mobilization in the formation of diasporas effectively counters essentializing concepts of diaspora.

Further, I suggested turning towards social movement theory and proposed a comparative framework for the analysis of diaspora formation that concentrates on mobilizing structures and practices and on issues of framing. Applying this framework I compared the Alevi, Sikh, Tamil and Kashmiri diasporas, focusing particularly on critical events, agents of diasporic imagination, mobilizing practices and the social and political dynamics of mobilization.

This brings me to my final point: I think that the conceptual shortcomings of diaspora derive in many aspects from unspoken and rather cosy connotations of the concept ‘community’. The notion of community has been regarded with considerable analytical distrust in social anthropology. It has been emphasized that, analytically speaking, a category of people must not be mistaken for a community and that one needs to question the social grounding of actors’ invocations of community. Hence, network analysis, for instance, was developed as a method for ascertaining actual social relationships beneath and beyond the assumption of community. Yet, despite analytical efforts that resulted in regarding it with scepticism, the concept of community still signals a rhetoric of ‘interpersonal warmth, shared interests, and loyalty’ (Baumann 1996: 15), which dates from the ‘pastoralist myth of community’ (Wellman and Gulia 1999: 187). It continues to be inspired by Tönnies’s (1887) opposition of community and society in which ‘community’ signals social intimacy and closeness while ‘society’ stands for anonymity and alienation. Brian Alleyne emphasizes that, especially in relation to migrants and minorities, the use of ‘community’ frequently remains unreflected and ‘can come to present an epistemological obstacle for the sociologist in the sense of obscuring the social construction
that goes into building and sustaining human collectivities because it may be allowed too easily to become an explanation rather than something to be explained’ (Alleyne 2002: 608). In her critique, Floya Anthias (1998) has pointed out that to assume an essentialist concept of diaspora does precisely this. It turns diaspora into an explanation instead of treating it as something that has to be explained. Social movement theory provides in two respects an antidote to the essentialism of ‘community’. First, it emphasizes the fluidity of the social, regards it as a ‘product of differentiated social processes’ and argues against treating collective phenomena as ‘unitary empirical data’ (Melucci 1988: 331). Second, it provides a set of theoretical and methodological instruments that facilitate the analysis of specific examples of collective phenomena as the result of such differentiated social processes. A social movement approach that specifically enquires into mobilization processes effectively counters the myth of community because it conceives of community not as a ‘basis’ or a ‘given’ of the social but as a product of social processes. In the same way, diasporic communities have to be analysed as historically contingent social formations that result from processes of mobilization.

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Notes
1. Kim Butler rejects considering diaspora as a form of ethnicity, arguing that ‘rather than being viewed as an ethnicity, diaspora may be alternatively considered as a framework for the study of a specific process of community formation’ (Butler 2001: 194, emphasis omitted). Her argument clearly relies on an essentialist understanding of ethnicity. I would suggest, however, that ethnicity should also be taken as a framework for the study of community (and identity) formation and not simply as the study of pre-existing groups.
2. In writing about identity it is almost impossible to escape essentialist implications completely and to avoid essentialist readings because the notion of identity cannot avoid the idenitarian logic that insists on the sameness of those who are said to be identical and suppresses their difference. The phrase ‘imaginations of community’ is intended to avoid these problematic implications as it does not presuppose that all those who are imagined as members of the community hold the same imaginations. Rather, this ‘identity of
imaginations’ is the intended (but certainly never totally achieved) outcome of the processes of mobilization to which I refer in the next section of the article. Whenever I use the term ‘identity’ in this text, it should be understood in this sense.

3. In my study of Alevis, however, I analysed the Alevi diaspora in Germany as a social movement (Sökefeld 2004).

4. With reference to transnational social movements, Passy (2002) also speaks about ‘supranational political opportunities’. McCarthy (1997), however, emphasizes, that transnational opportunities are not detached from ‘national’ opportunities as transnational mobilization still takes place within the context of nation-states.

5. For general accounts on Alevis and Alevism see Kehl-Bodrogi (1988) and Dressler (2002).

6. With the establishment of such institutions the identity frame was turned into a political opportunity. On the significance of multiculturalism for Alevis in Berlin see also Kaya (1998).

7. The LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) is the most important militant Tamil nationalist organization in Sri Lanka.

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