

**Constructing the Diaspora:  
Diaspora Identity Politics and Transnational Social Movements**

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## Introduction

Interest in the roles played by diasporas in world politics is growing in both the academic and policy worlds.<sup>1</sup> Diasporas are increasingly being examined as agents of conflict perpetuation or conflict resolution; as forces for development, or democratization.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the study of “diaspora politics” has become somewhat of a cottage industry in the fields of Sociology, Anthropology and Migration Studies – if not yet to the same extent in Political Science and International Relations.<sup>3</sup> Yet, amidst this general interest in diasporas and their activities lie some deeper theoretical questions regarding the definition of what constitutes a “diaspora,” and the relationship between “diasporas” and transnationalism, transnational communities, migration, translocalism, “long-distance nationalism” and related phenomena.

In this paper, I wish to engage conceptually with the notion of “diaspora” in the context of this broader literature on transnationalism by putting forth the claim that “diasporas” are best viewed as the *products* or *outcomes* of transnational mobilization activities by political entrepreneurs engaged in strategic social identity construction. I argue that diasporic politics is a specific form of transnationalism that has as its primary aim the construction and reification of a transnational “imagined community.”<sup>4</sup> I draw on a social movement framework as a way of beginning to understand the process political entrepreneurs engage in when they “construct the diaspora.” This perspective on diasporas 1) places the analysis of diasporas within the broader context of other transnational phenomena and 2) calls into question much of

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the recent books by Shain 2007 and Sheffer 2003.

<sup>2</sup> On diasporas as agents of conflict or conflict resolution, see, for example, Adamson 2004; Adamson 2005b; Adamson 2006; Collier 2000; Lyons 2006; Shain and Cofman 2000; Shain and Aryasinha 2006; as agents of development see Georges 1990; Mohan 2002; Naim 2002; Shain and Sherman; Van Hear 1998; as forces for democratization, see Koinova 2007; Shain 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Although see Adamson and Demetriou 2007; Armstrong 1976; Haus 1995; King and Melvin 2000; Laitin 1998; Ogden 2008; Shain and Barth 2003; Wayland 2004.

<sup>4</sup> On imagined communities see Anderson 1983.

the conventional academic wisdom on diasporas in that it treats diasporas as *effects* as opposed to simply *causes*; as “dependent variables” rather than “independent variables;” as “political projects” as opposed to “agents” or “actors.”

In the rest of this paper, I lay out this basic argument in the following manner: First, I locate discussions of diaspora within the broader literatures on diasporas, migration and transnationalism. I examine debates surrounding the definition and use of the term diaspora, as well as the relationship between discussions of diaspora and other forms of transnationalism. Second, I outline a model of diasporic politics as a form of transnational political mobilization defined by political entrepreneurs engaged in processes of strategic social construction. I point out that insights into the process of “producing a diaspora” can be gained by drawing on the literatures on transnational networks and transnational social movements. Just like other forms of political movements, diasporic politics can be competitive, fractured and, in the words of Rogers Brubaker, defined by competing political stances.<sup>5</sup>

In the last three sections of the paper I discuss the relationship between particularistic identities and universalizing ideologies in the process of the strategic social construction of transnational identity communities. I argue that one of the unique features of “diasporic politics” is the attempt by political entrepreneurs to reify and reproduce in a transnational and politicized form a particular identity category -- whether that be national, ethnic, sectarian, or religious. Thus, attempts to forge a diaspora can be viewed as a subset of other forms of transnational politics and transnational ideological movements, which can be characterized as existing on a continuum defined by the extent to which an identity/ideology is universal or particularistic.

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<sup>5</sup> Brubaker 1996.

## **Diasporas, Migration and Transnationalism**

Over the past 15 years or so there has been a growth in the literatures addressing such topics as diasporas, migration and transnationalism. The literatures in these areas are simultaneously related to one another and overlapping, yet discrete. Debates on these topics are spread across a range of disciplines, encompassing Sociology, Anthropology, Geography, Cultural Studies, Migration Studies, Politics, and International Relations. They have spawned their own specialized journals, such as *Diaspora* and *Global Networks* and are increasingly prominent in disciplinary journals. In the following pages, I wish to briefly outline how the various literatures on diaspora, migration and migration networks, and transnationalism relate to each other, as a prelude to presenting a framework for understanding diasporic politics that draws on elements from each of these literatures.

### *Debates on Diasporas*

What are diasporas and how do they emerge? The answers to these questions are not obvious ones and in fact are heavily debated within the literature in diaspora studies. Diasporas, like other terms, are “essentially contested concepts.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, there is an implicit, if not explicit, debate in the literature on diasporas regarding the extent to which diasporas are pre-political, “natural” entities or whether they are socially constructed. This debate in many ways mirrors the essentialist-constructivist debate in studies of nationalism, a debate that also implicitly informs the treatment of collective identities in IR.<sup>7</sup> An understanding of this debate is important in that it

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<sup>6</sup> On essentially contested concepts, see Giovanni 1970. Nettl 1968, 561.

<sup>7</sup> The debate between essentialist (i.e. Connor 1972, 1978) and constructivist (i.e. Anderson 1983) approaches to nationalism is reflected in the different treatment of identities as fixed and given vs. malleable in the constructivist literature in IR. For example, constructivists variously treat identities as fixed and historically rooted in cultural or national identities (examples include the work of Kier 1997 and Johnston 1995) or malleable and a product of ongoing processes of interaction/socialization (examples include Wendt 1999 and Finnemore

suggests a range of different processes that may lead to the condition of diaspora: essentialists view diasporas as emerging simply out of boundary-crossing processes such as migration, exile and dispersal. Constructivists will instead view diasporas as being socially constructed – through discourse, elite manipulation, or processes of political mobilization. As a shorthand, one can classify the literature on diasporas into what I refer to as traditional (essentialist and restricted), pluralist (essentialist yet expansive) and constructivist approaches to diasporas.

The term diaspora itself originates from the Greek *speiro* (to sow) and preposition *dia* (over), and the ancient Greeks used the term to refer simply to migration and colonization.<sup>8</sup> Later, the term began to be more closely associated with a collective banishment or trauma suffered by an ethnic, religious or national group that leads to its geographic dispersal. In the process of resettlement the dispersed group retained a collective identity and attachment to a real or mythical homeland. In some usages, the term refers specifically to the Jewish Diaspora, and refers to the dispersion of Jews from Palestine in the sixth century B.C. and to communities of Jews living outside of Israel/Palestine. In the view of some scholars, the usage of the term should be restricted to Jews or similar groups that have experienced a traumatic dispersal, such as Armenians.

In addition to resulting from a collective banishment or trauma, some scholars argue, diaspora populations can emerge from a wide range of other forms of migration processes, such as labor migration.<sup>9</sup> Diasporas are conceived of as transnational ethnic groups defined by a common identity and attachment to a real or imagined homeland. Thus the term need not be restricted to particular groups, but should be more

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1996). In addition, there are IR scholars who view identities as highly manipulable by state or other elites (i.e. Snyder 2000 or Van Evera 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Cohen 1997, ix.

<sup>9</sup> Weiner 1986.

generally applied to describe any transnational ethnic group that results from boundary-crossing processes. Cohen, for example, has attempted to categorize diasporas according to their origins, functions and characteristics by dividing diasporas into “victim,” “labor” “imperial” “trading” and “cultural” – with groups such as Armenians and Africans in the victim category, British and other colonizers in the imperial category, Indians in the labor category, Chinese and Lebanese in the trading category, and Caribbean in the cultural category.<sup>10</sup>

Although problematic, Cohen’s categorizations echo the attempts of other scholars, such as Armstrong, to construct typologies of diasporas based on their relationship to a homeland and/or status within their “host country.”<sup>11</sup> More recently, a group of scholars with interests in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have begun to study diasporas that are formed not by “peoples crossing boundaries” but rather by “boundaries crossing peoples” – a distinction that was originally made by Brubaker.<sup>12</sup> This literature, while utilizing a more expansive definition of diaspora is still essentialist in that diasporas are conceptualized as “transnational ethnic groups.”

Still another approach to diasporas is what I am labeling as a constructivist approach to diasporas that treats diasporas as transnationally-organized “imagined communities.”<sup>13</sup> In this literature, which has been closely associated with Cultural Studies, diasporas are viewed as social and political constructions that are proliferating in tandem with processes of globalization. Diasporas are not viewed as prepolitical or “natural” entities that emerge simply out of boundary-crossing processes, they must rather be discursively constructed or mobilized. The process of

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<sup>10</sup> Cohen 1997, Weiner 1986.

<sup>11</sup> Armstrong 1976.

<sup>12</sup> Brubaker 1996; King and Melvin 2000; Laitin 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Anderson 1983.

social construction of transnational diasporic networks and identities is facilitated by a global communication and transportation infrastructure, which provides a context for the emergence of new political practices and identities. Viewed in this manner, “diaspora” is not simply a descriptive term, but also a prescriptive term, which can be adapted as a means of creating a de-territorialized social, cultural or political community.

Thus, for example, groups that are classified as immigrant groups, ethnic groups, or minorities in their state of residence can redefine themselves as belonging to a larger transnational community that exists beyond the state by taking up the label of “diaspora.” This involves a shift in framing of the political context to an incorporation of the “global” into local and national settings – rather than a minority within a nation state, a group becomes part of a global community beyond any single state within which they may be a minority. As Clifford notes, “Diasporic language appears to be replacing, or at least supplementing, minority discourse.”<sup>14</sup>

By highlighting the political dimension, the constructivist approach points to processes of strategic social construction that lead to the formation of diasporas, as opposed to simply boundary-crossing processes. A diasporic identity is thus a means of asserting a political identity, which can be taken up by groups as a source of empowerment. This notion has produced a surge in literature over the past decade in cultural studies and postcolonial studies on diasporas and transnational communities, with the term being broadened to take on a meaning that is synonymous with a broader notion of “transnational identity network” or “transnational collective identity.”<sup>15</sup> As Vertovec argues, “‘Diaspora’ is the term often used today to describe

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<sup>14</sup> Clifford 1994, p. 311.

<sup>15</sup> The expansion of the definition has produced a parallel set of literature on “transnational communities.” See Basch et al. 1994, 1995; Georges 1990; al-Ali and Koser 2002.

practically any population which is considered ‘deterritorialized’ or ‘transnational.’<sup>16</sup>

This is evidenced in the increasing use of the term to assert non-national forms of transnational “imagined communities” such as the “Muslim Diaspora” or the “Queer Diaspora.”<sup>17</sup>

*Migration Politics and Migration Networks*

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<sup>16</sup> Vertovec 1999, 277.

<sup>17</sup> On the Muslim Diaspora see Jenkins 1999; on the Queer Diaspora see Patton and Sanchez-Eppler 2000.

As can be gleaned from the above summary, the literature on diaspora has a partial and ambiguous relationship with the broader literature on migration and migration networks. On the one hand, the more traditional approaches to diaspora which focus on the Jewish or Armenian diasporas are more concerned with the ongoing perpetuation of a collective identity than with actual processes of migration and boundary crossing. While migration was certainly a key factor in originally producing a Jewish or Armenian diaspora, it is treated as an historical phenomenon and plays a relatively minor role in the understanding or analysis of contemporary Jewish or Armenian "diasporic politics".<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the broadest usages of the term "diaspora" can come to mean any form of transnational identity community, and also have a rather tenuous link with the migration literature. For example, one can hardly equate the concept of a "Queer Diaspora" with migration *per se*.

It is in the literature -- both primordialist and constructivist -- that treats diasporas as "transnational ethnic groups" or as the outcome of migration processes, where there is the greatest overlap with some of the literature on migration and migration politics. While much of the literature in Migration Studies is still state-centric in that it focuses on immigration, incorporation, integration, citizenship, political participation, labor market integration and so forth, there is a growing literature focusing specifically on the transnational dimensions of migration: Faist's work on transnational social spaces, Basch, Glick-Schiller and Szanton-Blanc's work on the transnational migrant; Portes' et al.'s work on immigrant transnational organizations all come to mind;<sup>19</sup> as well as the growing policy literature on transnational remittance flows and transnational political participation by migrants and descendents of migrants. These literatures focus on migration as a fundamentally

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Shain and Barth 2003.

<sup>19</sup> Faist 2000; Basch, Glick-Schiller and Szanton-Blanc 1994; Portes et al. 2007.

transnational process in which migrants "live lives...stretched across national boundaries."<sup>20</sup>

*Transnationalism, Translocalism and Transnational Communities*

Yet another literature that overlaps with these two literatures is a growing body of literature that focuses variously on transnational communities, translocalism or transnationalism. Like the literature that is framed in terms of "diaspora," much of this literature is implicitly about the transnational ties of migrants and their descendents. Much of the work done by authors such as Bauböck, Vertovec, Al-Ali, Koser and others which is framed in terms transnationalism is actually about migration networks and the transnational identities and politics of migrants and migrant communities -- whether economic migrants or refugees.<sup>21</sup> Many prefer a focus on transnationalism and transnational politics as opposed to "diaspora" since the transnational politics of migrants are diverse and varied, whereas notions of diaspora tend to reify particular identities and imply a level of homogeneity that -- scholars of migration studies would argue -- simply doesn't characterize the pluralism and diversity of politics found in migrant communities. Diaspora also assumes a level of transnationalism that may imply a lack of integration -- diaspora politics implies an ongoing political transnationalism, whereas the literatures on transnationalism or transnational communities also examine such issues as cultural and social networks, rather than simply political participation and political identifications.

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<sup>20</sup> Basch, Schiller, and Blanc 1994, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Al-Ali and Koser 2002; Bauböck 2003; Vertovec 1999; Vertovec 2001.

In addition, there is a broader literature on transnationalism that is relevant to the understanding of diaspora politics. In International Relations, for example, the literature on transnational networks and actors has produced a broad range of literature focusing on forms of transnationalism that include NGOs, global civil society, as well as intergovernmental and private transnational actors. Much of this looks at transnational processes, and has explored questions having to do with the relationship between the state and non-state actors, as well as questions of norm-diffusion and soft power.<sup>22</sup> Increasingly, there is a literature at the nexus of International Relations, Comparative Politics and Sociology which focuses specifically on transnational social movements, and which attempts to incorporate insights from the literatures on domestic social movements as a means of understanding patterns of transnationalism in world politics.<sup>23</sup> Unlike the literature in Migration Studies, however, very little of this literature has examined diasporic politics, transnational ethnic groups or transnational religious loyalties.<sup>24</sup>

### **Diasporas as Transnational Identity Networks: A Social Movement Perspective**

Despite the growing literatures on diasporas, migration and transnationalism, there has not been a systematic attempt to bring the various perspectives together in order to explain the nature of diasporas. In this section, I argue that one way of beginning to understand the nature of diasporas is by using a social movement framework that emphasizes the strategic social construction of transnational identity

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<sup>22</sup> The literature on transnational networks, NGOs and global civil society in International Relations is vast and growing. For some examples, see Boli and Thomas 1999; Brysk 2000; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Mendelson and Glenn 2002; Peterson 1992; Risse-Kappen 1995; Sikkink 1993; Wapner 1995.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Castells 1997; Della Porta 2004; Della Porta et al. 2006; Khagram, Riker and Sikkink 2002; Tarrow 1998; Tarrow 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Although see Adamson 2005; Mandaville 2001; Wayland 2004.

communities through processes of framing and political mobilization by diasporic entrepreneurs. Diasporas are social constructs, but one can hypothesize that they are constructed by political entrepreneurs who are acting rationally and strategically through the strategic deployment of identity frames and categories.<sup>25</sup>

As such, diasporas can be usefully compared and contrasted with other types of transnational networks. Keck and Sikkink, for example, distinguished three categories of transnational network in their *Activists Beyond Borders*:

- (1) those with essentially *instrumental goals*, especially transnational corporations and banks
- (2) those motivated primarily by *shared causal ideas*, such as scientific groups or epistemic communities and
- (3) those motivated primarily by *shared principled ideas or values* (transnational advocacy networks)<sup>26</sup>

Absent from this analysis is a potentially fourth category of transnational networks – those networks defined primarily by a *shared collective identity* – in other words, networks that are defined by a common identity marker or category, such as an ethnic, national, or religious identity. Such transnational networks can be referred to as *transnational identity networks*, and may overlap with, but are analytically distinct from transnational economic networks, transnational epistemic communities, or transnational advocacy networks.

Most work on transnational networks has viewed transnational networks as “interest groups” that implicitly espouse a liberal pluralist identity as members of a “global civil society.”<sup>27</sup> Diasporas differ in that, despite being transnational, their membership is bounded by a particular national, ethnic or religious identity marker. Diasporas seek particularism rather than universalism – even if their basis may be a universal ideology such as nationalism.

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<sup>25</sup> On strategic social construction and the strategic use of framing, see, for example: Bob 2005; Carpenter 2005; Goffman 1974; Khagram, Riker and Sikkink 2002; Klandermans 1992; 1997; Snow and Bedford 1988; Tarrow 1994; Zald 1996.

<sup>26</sup> Keck and Sikkink 1998, 30. Emphasis in original.

<sup>27</sup> Wapner 1995, Peterson 1992.

Drawing on the literature on transnational social movements, we can see how diasporas are a particular form of transnationalism that emerge through the process of strategic social construction and framing with the aim of constructing a shared collective identity or “imagined community.” This connects with migration in that globalization, exile, migration, and boundary-crossing from one political system to another all serve as impetuses for the creation of new identity categories and discourses, since these activities expose an individual to novel social and political conditions and thus allow for a reinterpretation of what might have previously been viewed as a naturalized state of existence. In this regard, the following quote by Edward Said is instructive:

because the exile sees things both in terms of what has been left behind and what is actual here and now, there is a double perspective that never sees things in isolation. Every scene or situation in the new country necessarily draws on its counterpart in the old country. Intellectually, this means that an idea or experience is always counterposed with another, therefore making them both appear in a sometimes new and unpredictable light.<sup>28</sup>

During episodes of diasporic politics, political ideologies and identities are deployed as a means of uniting disparate [often migration-based] networks and identities into coherent transnational identity networks at the level of the international system. A focus on the mobilization process elucidates how political identities and ideologies act as the “glue” that holds together diasporas in world politics.

Tilly, White and other sociologists have noted that there are two components to what they variously refer to as “groupness,” “collectivity” or “organizational structure.” The first consists of a *category* – which contains “people all of whom recognize their common characteristic, and whom everyone else recognizes as having that characteristic.” The second consists of *networks* of people who are linked to one

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<sup>28</sup> Said 1994.

another. “A set of individuals is a group to the extent that it comprises both a category and a network.”<sup>29</sup> This is surely a useful framework for conceptualizing a diaspora as a collective identity.

This is a useful framework for understanding the emergence of diasporas in world politics. It implies that the first step in the creation of a diasporic community is the activation of a transnational constituency from the mass of entangled and messy social networks that characterize the transnational social dimension of the international system. This involves the creation of coherent categories, discourses and symbols that can tie together dispersed social networks under a single diasporic category.

The task of the political entrepreneur engaged in diasporic politics is to construct or deploy identity categories that can be used to create transnational identity communities – transnational imaginaries -- out of existing social networks. This requires the deployment of an identity that is, in some senses, particular – that can function as an identity marker and boundary mechanism. This is in contrast to broader and more open forms of transnational politics and transnational political movements that may rely on universalizing and open ideologies, such as liberalism, socialism, or anarchism. In such transnational networks, membership and “groupness” is arguably more fluid and rests on shared beliefs as opposed to a shared identity.

In the next three sections, I wish to explore the possibilities of employing this perspective on diasporic politics by very briefly comparing and contrasting three forms of transnationalism and their relationship to the concept of diaspora. The three forms that I examine are transnational forms of nationalism; transnational leftist movements; and transnational Islamism. I argue that these forms are comparable in

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<sup>29</sup> See Tilly 1978, pp. 62-63. White uses the term “catnet.”

that they can all be conceptualized as transnational movements held together by ideologies, but that they exist on a continuum of “diasporic” politics in their level of particularity.

On the one hand, the use of *nationalism* by political entrepreneurs operating transnationally creates a classic form of diasporic politics, in that nationalism is a political ideology that assumes a degree of particularism and boundedness – a particularism that may reference territory, but need not be *located* territorially. On the other hand, broader transnational political movements, such as leftist movements, are hard to classify as diasporic per se: while they function in similar ways to diasporas, they are defined by what are constructed as shared beliefs as opposed to a shared identity. Transnational Islamism is perhaps harder to classify in that one can argue that it falls somewhere inbetween a more narrow identity-based, and a broader ideological movement.

*Producing the Nation in Diasporic Form: Transnational Nationalism*

One of the most widespread categories or political ideologies used in modern times to create a sense of “groupness” has been nationalism. Nationalism has been particularly successful as a mobilizing category due to what Benedict Anderson describes as its modular character. The political ideology of nationalism is a “distillation of a complex ‘crossing’ of historical forces; but that, once created... became ‘modular,’ capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations.”<sup>30</sup> The utility of nationalism as a political category is that it combines a universalist imperative – the

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<sup>30</sup> Anderson 1983, p. 4.

linking of cultural groupings to demarcated territorial spaces governed by centralizing institutional configurations (the linking of the nation to the state, to paraphrase Gellner) – with the flexibility to incorporate an infinitely wide range of cultural, linguistic and symbolic artifacts as mobilizing instruments.

Many political entrepreneurs who have historically used nationalism as a mobilizing ideology have been situated in transnational spaces as exiles, expatriates or migrants where, positioned at the nexus of two societies in a state of inbetweenness, they could cobble together new political categories by drawing upon universalist discursive frameworks and applying them to particular circumstances. It should not be surprising, therefore, that many of the great nationalist movements have had their origins in exile.<sup>31</sup> In short, many historical instances of *nationalist* mobilization have actually started as instances of *transnational* mobilization. This pattern has been largely ignored by social scientists due to the biases inherent in “methodological territorialism” and because the process of transnational mobilization and its spatial dimensions have not been adequately studied in isolation from the content of nationalism as a mobilizing ideology.<sup>32</sup>

The experience of migration and exile provides numerous opportunities for the creation of new political categories that can be used to transform passive social networks into activated diasporas and diasporic movements. In the United States, for

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<sup>31</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, for example, studied in London and his first major political project was to found the Natal Indian Congress in South Africa in 1894, which was established to fight discrimination of Indian traders, before becoming one of the leading figures of Indian nationalism. Ho Chi Minh studied in France and was a founding member of the French Communist Party before establishing his nationalist-communist revolutionary movement in Vietnam. The nation-state of Czechoslovakia was founded in Pittsburgh, USA, since “the mass base of organized Slovak nationalism was to be found in Pennsylvania, rather than in Slovakia.” Carpathian nationalism’s only institutionalized expression was in the American immigrant community, and had no organizational structure in the Hapsburg Empire. Hobsbawm 1989, pp. 154-155.

<sup>32</sup> See McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001, pp. 188-219 for a discussion of nationalist mobilization as a form of the larger category of contentious politics.

example, international immigration patterns during the nineteenth century led to new and expanded identifications in migrant communities through a combination of external labeling (due to social discrimination or the state's immigrant classification system); the imperative to engage in community-building as a source of mutual support; and the mobilization activities of local ethnic elites.<sup>33</sup> Tilly notes that "sets of connected immigrants who did not have a common identity at the point of origin acquired a new identification during interaction with others at the destination. In the United States, Piedmontese, Neapolitans, Sicilians, and Romans became Italians."<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Irish immigrants became Irish nationalists. "Irish identity, already formed in Ireland through opposition to the conquering English, altered in the United States under a bourgeoisie that promoted religiosity, nationalism, and political involvement."<sup>35</sup> Thus, it was the Irish diaspora in the United States that provided much of the impetus and support for the development of a politicized Irish nationalism in Ireland.

Perhaps the most spectacular instance of a transnational nationalist movement during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was Zionism, which provides the archetypical example of "diaspora nationalism."<sup>36</sup> In the case of Zionism, political entrepreneurs invented both a homeland and a language, transforming what had been dispersed religious communities into a transnational nationalist movement that was able to acquire its own territorial state, displacing native populations in the process. From its initial articulations in Russia by Leo Pinsker and scattered Zionist groups, to its consolidation as a political program by Hungarian Theodor Herzl, the movement was from the start transnational. The first Zionist Congress met in Basel, Switzerland

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Tilly 1990; Hobsbawm 1989, pp. 153-154; Kenny 1998; 1999a; 1999b; Miller 1990.

<sup>34</sup> Tilly 1990, p. 86.

<sup>35</sup> Tilly 1990, pp. 86-87.

<sup>36</sup> Gellner 1983, pp. 101-109.

in 1897, which established a transnational network of branches of the World Zionist Organization that engaged in grassroots mobilization of the Jewish population of Eastern Europe while simultaneously seeking support from Western Jews and third party states.<sup>37</sup>

In the current era, concepts of diaspora and diasporic identities are becoming increasingly significant, as a means of taking advantage of possibilities for mobilization that are offered by new communication and transportation technologies. In the case of Zionism, transnational networks were mobilized and activated to agitate for the founding of a territorial Jewish state; today the formation of diasporas and diasporic identities is often a political end in and of itself. Political entrepreneurs have taken the concept of diaspora and changed it from a *descriptive* to a *prescriptive* term – a category taken up by political entrepreneurs to organize internationally dispersed communities of “immigrants” or “ethnic minorities” in ways that allow for identifications, coalition-building and political action which can take place across national borders on a global, as well as a national and local, stage.<sup>38</sup> Of course, traditional forms of what Benedict Anderson refers to as “long-distance nationalism” still exist, and the process of creating imagined communities and seeking territorial statehood continues. Various diasporic nationalist movements have continued to agitate for a territorial homeland well into the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries – the Sikh, Tamil, and Kurdish movements all come immediately to mind.

### *Transnational but not Diasporic? Transnational Ideological Movements*

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<sup>37</sup> For discussions, see Cleveland 1994 pp. 222-225; Cohen 1992; Cohen 1997, pp. 115-125; Elazar 1976; Hobsbawm 1989, pp. 146-147; Hoffman 1998, pp. 48-56.

<sup>38</sup> See Basch et al. 1994; Clifford 1994; Danforth 1990; Gilroy 1993; Hall 1990.

National categories, of course, are not the only political categories that have been used by political entrepreneurs to activate networks and engage in transnational mobilization. Just prior to the wave of transnational nationalist mobilization in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, other political entrepreneurs were organizing transnationally to mobilize constituencies based on competing political categories. For these revolutionaries, the experience of exile also played an important role in this process. In Europe, transnational leftist networks proliferated, including the “Fraternal Democrats” (composed of ‘natives of Great Britain, France, Germany, Scandinavia, Poland, Italy, Switzerland, Hungary and other countries) and groups such as “Young Europe” and “Democratic Association for the Unification of All Countries.”<sup>39</sup> Exile played a particularly important role in stimulating the revolutions of 1848 in Europe:

Most political militants of the continental left were expatriates for some time, many for decades, congregating in the relatively few zones of refuge or asylum: France, Switzerland, to a lesser extent Britain and Belgium... A common fate and a common ideal bound these expatriates and travellers together. Most of them faced the same problems of poverty and police surveillance, of illegal correspondence, espionage and the ubiquitous agent-provocateur... In the centres of refuge the emigres formed that provisional, but so often permanent community of exile while they planned the liberation of mankind.<sup>40</sup> [They] organized, argued, quarrelled, frequented and denounced one another, and planned the liberation of their countries, or in the meantime that of other countries. The Poles and to a lesser extent the Italians... became in effect international corps of revolutionary militants.<sup>41</sup>

One of the most ambitious transnational movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was revolutionary socialism, whose main protagonists were two German exiles – Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Members of German expatriate communities in London, they were active in political organizations such as the “German League of

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<sup>39</sup> Hobsbawm 1996a, pp. 128-129.

<sup>40</sup> Hobsbawm 1996a, p. 131.

<sup>41</sup> Hobsbawm 1996a, p. 130.

the Outlaws,” which later became the “Communist League.”<sup>42</sup> Marx then went on to found the First International, the “International Workmen’s Association,” which was replaced by the Second International (1889-1914) and, following the Bolshevik Revolution, the Third, or Communist International.<sup>43</sup> Revolutionary socialism was inherently an international movement based on transnational mobilization by [revolutionary] political entrepreneurs, but it would be more difficult to refer to it as a form of “diasporic politics.”<sup>44</sup>

*Between Identity and Ideology: The Diasporic Politics of Islamism?*

This brings us to the question of how to characterize contemporary forms of transnationalism that employ the identity category/ideology of Islam[ism] as a frame for the purposes of mobilizing a transnational constituency. In Western Europe and elsewhere the category of “Muslim” is arguable becoming increasingly salient as a politicized identity category – one that at is at times being deployed by political entrepreneurs as a boundary marker and as a means of creating a transnational identity community – the *ummah* -- in ways that trump other national, racial, or ethnic categories (such as Asian, South Asian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Turkish, Kurdish, Algerian, etc.).

Neither Islam nor Muslims are new features of social and political life in Western Europe. Since well before the 1960s, there have been significant numbers of Muslims living within Western European states. What *is* increasingly new, however, is the emergence of “Muslim” as a salient *political category* or *discursive field* that is used by both Muslims and state authorities as a discourse that informs strategies of

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<sup>42</sup> Hobsbawm 1996a, p. 127.

<sup>43</sup> Hobsbawm 1994, p. 69.

<sup>44</sup> Hobsbawm 1994, p. 60.

both political mobilization and incorporation of so-called “immigrant” populations in Western Europe.

While the geopolitical context since 9/11 has certainly facilitated and accelerated the politicization of “Muslim” as an identity category, the broader trend certainly predates 9/11. Bujis and Rath argue that global geopolitical developments, such as the Iranian revolution, the Rushdie affair, the Gulf War, and the Palestinian *intifada* have all created incentives for the increased deployment of the identity category of “Muslim.”<sup>45</sup> The use of “Muslim” as a political category provides the opportunity for Muslim political entrepreneurs in Europe to make stronger symbolic links between the situation of Muslims in Europe and other Muslim populations around the world – thus directly creating a link between the situation of Muslims in Europe with those in Palestine, Chechnya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Uzbekistan, and so forth.

Mandaville has argued that there is a “reimagining” of the global Muslim *ummah* occurring, which has precedents in calls for pan-Islamism at the turn of the previous century, and which continued on in the deployment of Islam as an avenue for resisting colonialism.<sup>46</sup> As in previous periods, Muslim political entrepreneurs are able to deploy the category of “Muslim” as a means of bringing together diverse constituencies from across a variety of nation-states. The term “Muslim” can transcend categories of racial, ethnic, national and sectarian identities – while at the same time being articulated as a category of difference vis-à-vis other hegemonic identity constructions such as secular liberal identifications.

This is not to say that there is no internal variation in the use of the term “Muslim” by political entrepreneurs – in fact, one of the interesting tensions is that

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<sup>45</sup> Bujis and Rath 2002.

<sup>46</sup> Mandaville 2001.

“Muslim” is being explicitly used as a broader category, while at the same time there is intense debate within some segments of Muslim populations regarding the extent to which “Muslim” should be viewed explicitly as a counter-hegemonic identity (which rejects “Western” influences) and to what extent “Muslim” should be viewed as an identity category that should simply be more strongly asserted through a politics of recognition within a broader global [liberal] public sphere. In the UK this tension is apparent in, for example, the very different types of political mobilization activities that are taking place by political entrepreneurs using the frame of “Islam” to mobilize potential constituencies.

To illustrate this one can briefly take two very different examples of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). Both are arguably characterized by political entrepreneurs who are engaged in a process of strategic social construction by framing target constituencies as “Muslim.” In the case of the MCB, “Muslim” is being used as a means of constructing a British Muslim identity, and of attempting to collectively represent the interests of the broad range of Muslims living in the UK. The organization is explicitly oriented towards representing Muslims as Muslims (as opposed to as South Asians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sunni, Shia, etc.). While it is certainly not representative of the entire spectrum of Muslim organizations in the UK, and it has a number of vocal detractors, the main point is that “Muslim” is being deployed as a *political category* and as a category of claims-making vis-à-vis the British state. The MCB cultivates the notion of a united Muslim community, and its language uses essentialized categories to construct such a community within the context of Britain. As it writes in one of its publications, “The MCB gives practical shape and expression to the ties of faith and community that

*naturally* bring Muslims of all social and cultural backgrounds together. It also brings people from various schools of thought and political outlooks together.”<sup>47</sup>

In contrast to the MCB, HT is a global organization, of which the British HT is just one branch of a broader transnational movement that has branches in both Muslim majority states and non-Muslim majority states. It is an explicitly political organization whose self-described goals are both radical and revolutionary, with its ultimate aim being the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate and, eventually, an Islamic world order. It seeks to do this by liberating “Muslims from the thoughts, systems, and laws of *kufir* (non-believers) and replace the Judeo-Christian-dominated nation-state system with a borderless *umma* ruled by a new caliph.”<sup>48</sup>

Hizb ut-Tahrir is a global movement that, having been outlawed in most of the Middle East, operates largely from Europe, especially the United Kingdom (UK) – which increasingly, de facto, serves as its global headquarters. Since the 7/7 bombings in London, it has also been threatened with being banned in the United Kingdom. Hizb ut-Tahrir in the United Kingdom direct most of their activities and message at young second and third generation Muslims, and seek to recruit supporters to their movement by urging young Muslims to “own their own political destiny” by helping to create a global *ummah* and by working to build “a support base in the West for the return of the Khilafah state.”<sup>49</sup> HT has been relatively effective in stirring up political debate within second and third generation Muslims in the UK. In part, Mandaville argues, this is because they provide a framework and an ideology that attempts to explain the sources of the marginalization that some young Muslims feel in Britain,

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<sup>47</sup> “The Muslim Council of Britain – Its History, Structure and Workings,” available on [www.mcb.org.uk](http://www.mcb.org.uk). Emphasis added.

<sup>48</sup> Baran 2005, 70.

<sup>49</sup> A Khilafah state refers to a new Caliphate based on Islamic law that will eventually unite Muslims around the globe. Quotes taken from UK website of HT.

by placing those experiences of marginalization within a broader geopolitical context.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, both the MCB and HT draw on the category of “Muslim” as a means of constructing a political constituency that transcends ethnic, national and sectarian divides. As such, they both provide examples of the how “Muslim” is being increasingly deployed in Western Europe as a politicized identity category. At the same time, both organizations deploy the category for very different political aims – with HT being far more “diasporic” than MCB in its attempt to prioritize the transnational community of the *ummah* as an imagined community that poses a viable political alternative to that of the nation-state.

## **Conclusions**

What is a “diaspora” and how are diasporas similar to or different from other forms of transnationalism? I have argued in this paper for a view of diasporic politics as a form of strategic social identity construction in which political entrepreneurs attempt to create a transnational “imagined community” based on a particular identity category. In order to understand the processes used by political entrepreneurs in constructing diasporas, it is helpful to draw on the literatures on transnational networks and transnational social movements, which emphasize the strategic deployment of frames as a component of political mobilization.

In the preceding pages, I have suggested that a continuum exists of different types of transnationalism that can be classified according to the extent that they are defined by a particularistic identity or a more universal ideology. I have argued that classical forms of diasporic politics are defined by political entrepreneurs’ deployment of national or ethnic identities that are particularistic enough to function

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<sup>50</sup> Mandaville 2001.

as boundary markers. On the other end of the continuum are forms of transnationalism defined by more universalistic ideologies, including transnationally-organized political movements such as anarchism, socialism and communism.

The categorization of transnational Islamism is a more complicated issue and has components of both a particularistic identity category and a more universalizing ideological movement. Some forms of Islamism – such as that promoted by the organization Hizb ut-Tahrir which posits the global *ummah* as a political community that should be seen as competing with and superceding other forms of political community – may be more “diasporic” than others.

The social movement framework that I have suggested here is an entry into understanding diasporic politics as a specific form of transnationalism that can be contrasted with the usage of the term “diaspora” found in much of the contemporary literature. While there is growing interest in the role of diasporas in world politics, much of the recent literature on diasporas is conceptually thin – viewing diasporas as “actors” that have various “effects” – conflict perpetuation or conflict resolution; development; and so forth. What this paper has sought to do is to point out that diasporas themselves are “effects” – outcomes of processes of political mobilization; socially constructed identity communities; and transnational imaginaries – national or otherwise.

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