

The concept of diaspora as an analytical tool in the study of refugee communities

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Abstract *This article proposes that the research area of refugee studies can benefit from contemporary discussions about the concepts of transnationalism and diaspora. It is argued that the concept of diaspora, understood as a transnational social organisation relating both to the society of origin and the society of settlement, can give a more profound understanding of the social reality in which refugees live. The article provides a brief presentation of current debates about transnationalism and diasporas. Empirical evidence from Kurdish refugee communities in Europe is used to highlight the fact that the concept of diaspora can provide an analytical tool for a sociological study of refugees in the country of exile. The article then goes on to argue that, in order to be a constructive analytical tool, the concept of diaspora has to be regarded as an ideal type in the true Weberian sense of the term. Finally, some of the limitations and dangers associated with the concept of diaspora will be discussed.*

KEYWORDS: REFUGEE STUDIES; TRANSNATIONALISM; DIASPORA; KURDISH COMMUNITIES

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in the notion of diasporas among social scientists. In the 1990s, migration researchers have used this old concept for a variety of new purposes (cf. Vertovec and Cohen 1999). It has even been argued that there has been a change of focus in recent publications in the sociology of international migration (Lie 1995). Instead of studying international migration, the focus is often on transnational diasporas. In the sociology of migration, the former interest in immigration and assimilation has largely given way to an interest in transnational networks and communities. The new interest in diasporic communities is accompanied by an interest in new patterns of global migration as well as hybrid cultural formations (Papastergiadis 2000).

An area of research in which theories of diasporas and transnationalism would seem to have a specific significance is the area of refugee studies.¹ Surprisingly, however, publications in the area of forced migration are seldom informed by the contemporary discussions related to transnationalism and diasporas. There is an abundance of literature on refugees, but only a fraction makes an effort to discuss conceptual or theoretical questions. The theoretical weaknesses of refugee studies have been described in several overviews of the research area. Vaughan Robinson laments the fact that most refugee research 'has been tactical, *ad hoc*, diffuse and reactive' (1993: 6). Anthony Richmond (1994: 47–8) points out that the existing empirical studies have, to a great extent,

been uninformed by developments in general sociological theory and the experiences of refugees are rarely distinguished from those of other migrants. Correspondingly, Steven Gold (1992: 235–6) finds that refugee studies in the ethnographic sociological tradition are rare, and that policy-oriented research has dominated the field at the expense of independent, holistic scholarship. Anthropologists like Ann-Belinda Steen (1992) and Liisa Malkki (1995a) have argued that key concepts like ‘identity’ and ‘culture’, which are both widely debated and held to be problematic in the social sciences, are too often used in an uninformed and confusing way in refugee research.

The above-mentioned shortcomings of the research area have been challenged by a number of recent ethnographic studies of refugee communities (Bousquet 1991; Fuglerud 1999; Gold 1992; Griffiths 2000; McDowell 1996; Steen 1992; Valtonen 1997; Wahlbeck 1999a). Interestingly, all these empirical studies describe how refugees continue to relate, in one way or another, to their countries of origin. However, despite this apparent *transnationalism* of refugee communities, refugee studies are usually not closely related to contemporary theoretical discussions about these issues. The publications that explicitly connect refugee studies and the debates about deterritorialisation or transnationalism are few (e.g. Al-Ali *et al.* 2001; Malkki 1992, 1994, 1995b; Shami 1996). Furthermore, discussions about the relation between displacement and deterritorialisation have occasionally been somewhat confused – see for instance the discussion in a recent volume of *Journal of Refugee Studies* relating to an article by Kibreab (1999). Thus, in the area of refugee studies, there is still a need for more clearly defined concepts and adequate theories that could describe the specific experiences of displacement and transnational social relations of refugees.

This article argues that the discussion concerning transnationalism within social science at large, and especially the concept of diaspora, can provide refugee studies with some of the conceptual tools that are needed to study refugees in an increasingly global world. The concept of diaspora can take into account the refugees’ specific transnational experiences and social relationships. Likewise, it is also possible that studies of transnationalism and diasporas can benefit from the more empirical tradition in the area of refugee studies. There is a danger that the enthusiasm for the concepts of transnationalism and globalisation could end up in a ‘global babble’, with no practical relevance for research (Abu-Lughod 1991). Empirical studies of refugees can indicate ways in which the processes of globalisation exert a practical influence on people’s everyday lives. Thus, there is much to gain from connecting the contemporary diaspora discourse with more traditional studies of forced migration, and from encouraging discussion between these two discursive domains.

In this article, results from a comparative study of Kurdish refugees constitute the basis for a discussion of the concept of diaspora and its relevance for a sociological study of refugees in the country of exile. I argue that the traditional way of looking at ethnic relations, in terms of a relation between strictly localised minorities and majorities, is inadequate to describe refugees’ specific experiences. Instead, I propose that the concept of diaspora, understood as a transnational social organisation relating both to the country of origin and the country of exile, can give a deeper understanding of the social reality in which refugees live. However, as explained later, in order to be a constructive analytical tool in refugee research, the concept has to be regarded as an ideal type.

Transnationalism

Before elaborating my argument about the concept of diaspora, the related, albeit more general, concept of transnationalism has to be introduced. It can be argued that, in the contemporary world, the process of globalisation is challenging the traditional ways in which migration and ethnic relations have been conceptualised. Globalisation 'denotes the *processes* through which sovereign national states are criss-crossed and undermined by transnational actors' (Beck 1999: 11). As Ulrich Beck points out, the processes of globalisation are clearly complex and have many dimensions. For the purpose of this article, it is only necessary to stress the fact that increased international migration and new technological developments have made it possible for migrants and refugees to sustain transnational social relations and networks more easily than was previously the case. This, in turn, has contributed to the establishment of 'transnational social spaces' (e.g. Beck 1999; Faist 2000a). The social relations of migrants and refugees are no longer confined within the borders of nation-states. Thus, the social relations can be regarded as transnational. The notion of transnationalism indicates a relation over and beyond, rather than between or in, the nation-states.

The discussion of transnationalism has been especially vibrant within anthropology (Hannerz 1996; Kearney 1995), where the localisation of cultures and social relations has been questioned by many authors (e.g. Clifford 1997; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). The anthropologists Linda Basch, Cristina Blanc-Szanton and Nina Glick Schiller (Basch *et al.* 1994; Glick Schiller *et al.* 1992) have made some of the most influential contributions to the discussion on transnationalism and international migration. In their studies among migrants from the Caribbean and the Philippines living in the USA, Basch *et al.* describe how the migrants' social, economic, political and cultural networks involve both society of origin and society of settlement. These processes are described using the notion of transnationalism:

We define 'transnationalism' as the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call these processes transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders (Basch *et al.* 1994: 7).

Today, the concept of transnationalism is widely used among migration researchers (e.g. Faist 2000a; Labelle and Midy 1999; Portes *et al.* 1999; Rex 1996; Smith and Guarnizo 1998) and it can be established that both migrants and refugees sustain transnational networks in one form or another. Recently, the debate has largely focused on the forms and implications of this transnationalism. Of special importance is Thomas Faist's (1998, 1999, 2000a, 2000b) recent work, which identifies and defines different dimensions of transnational phenomena in the area of international migration.

The transnational social relations of refugees have implications for the adaptation of theories of ethnic relations to refugee groups. In the classical ethnicity theory, an ethnic group is often regarded as defined by its relation to and interaction with other groups (e.g. Barth 1969). An ethnic minority is thus defined in relation to the ethnic majority within a specific society. However, it is difficult to adapt this relational context to the transnational social space in which refugees live. In a study of Vietnamese refugees in Paris, Gisèle Bousquet (1991) found that theories of ethnic relations are not easily

applied to refugee communities. Bousquet (1991: 71, 169) disputes Abner Cohen's (1969) suggestion that ethnicity is used to mobilise the members of an ethnic group within contemporary political conflicts, on the grounds that the Vietnamese refugees arrived in France already distinct as a self-identified ethnic group. Regrettably, Bousquet does not develop her challenge much further than this, nor does she draw any wider conclusions from her observation. A sounder approach to this theoretical dilemma can be found in Øivind Fuglerud's (1999) study of Tamil refugees in Norway. Fuglerud found that the ethnic 'boundary maintenance' theories (e.g. Barth 1969) were 'not entirely suitable' for his purpose, since the interaction between the ethnic groups in question could not be understood within a local setting. Focusing on the local setting would not have captured what was most significant to the parties in their day-to-day lives. As Fuglerud convincingly claims, maintaining relationships with the Norwegian people was not a major concern for the Tamil refugees. Instead, the situation in the homeland and maintaining connections to fellow countrymen were of far greater importance for them (Fuglerud 1999: 3).

As I have argued previously (Wahlbeck 1999a: 28–9), it can be suggested that the unsuitability of ethnic relation theories in refugee situations has nothing to do with the theories as such, but with the strict localisation of ethnic relations that these theories usually assume. In an increasingly globalised world, ethnicity might also be defined in relations that are transnational. Likewise, some scholars (e.g. Popkin 1999) argue that theories of ethnicity need to be expanded to take into account the multitude of transnational connections migrants maintain with their country of origin. The contemporary processes of globalisation and transnationalism do not diminish the importance of ethnicity; on the contrary, ethnicity acquires a new significance. One major contemporary change is that the connection between ethnicity and locality has become blurred. 'Ethnicity, once a genie contained in the bottle of some sort of locality (however large), has now become a global force, forever slipping in and through the cracks between states and borders' (Appadurai 1996: 41).

The transnational Kurdish refugee community

My interest in the theoretical questions presented in this article originates from the results of a comparative study among Kurdish refugees, newly arrived in Britain and Finland.² The aim of this ethnographic study conducted in the mid-1990s was to obtain a broad understanding of the Kurdish refugees' situation and problems as seen from their own point of view. In particular, the study aimed to examine the effects of diaspora formation on the integration of refugee communities into the host society. Most of the results from this study have been published in my book *Kurdish Diasporas* (Wahlbeck 1999a). Thus, only a few key findings are briefly introduced here and compared with subsequent developments in the Kurdish communities and recent relevant publications in the field.

The political events of the last few decades in Turkey, Iraq and Iran have driven millions of Kurds from their original homes. The number of Kurds living in Europe is estimated to be about 700,000, although no exact figures are available. Kurds from Turkey began arriving in Europe as labour migrants in the 1960s, predominantly to Germany, and today they form a majority of the Kurds in Europe. Following the revolution in Iran in 1979, the escalation of the Kurdish

conflict in Turkey and the serious deterioration of the situation in Iraq, successive waves of Kurdish political refugees have settled in Western Europe and, to a much lesser extent, North America (Sheikmous 2001).

The Kurds in Europe are a very heterogeneous group and the Kurdish communities in Europe stem from a multitude of different political orientations, religious beliefs, linguistic groups, social classes, educational backgrounds and gendered experiences. However, despite these differences, a common feature of all Kurdish communities in Europe seems to be the existence of transnational social relations. In my study, various aspects of transnationalism were evident in the Kurdish communities in both Britain and Finland. For example, when refugees in Britain were asked if they felt that they belonged to an 'ethnic minority' in the UK, many Kurdish interviewees had problems in understanding the question. As members of a 'Kurdish nation', numbering about 30 million people world-wide, they were not willing to see themselves as belonging to a small minority. Because of the continuing relationship which most refugees have to their homeland, they wanted to think of themselves within this framework and not within the framework of British ethnic relations. This indicates that the Kurdish refugees' ethnicity is primarily defined within the context of social relations in the countries of origin. Because of this orientation towards Kurdistan, it is difficult to regard the Kurdish refugees as an ethnic minority within the framework of the countries of exile (Wahlbeck 1999a).

The findings of my fieldwork support the argument, also presented by Bousquet (1991) and Fuglerud (1999), that theories of ethnic relations are not easily applied to refugee situations. Yet, on this basis, it is not possible to draw the conclusion that refugees do not constitute ethnic groups. As most scholars within anthropology and sociology agree, ethnicity is defined in terms of a relation between social groups. In the case of refugees, the most significant relation is not within the host society. What matters is the social relation with the society of origin, which is maintained through transnational contacts. Thus, instead of strictly localising the ethnic relations of refugees, it is useful to understand their social relations as something transnational (Wahlbeck 1999a).

The results from my fieldwork indicated that the Kurdish refugees' transnational relation to their societies of origin was not only a matter of memories, but also an ongoing and continuous relation. The Kurdish refugees continued to keep in touch with their friends and relatives in Kurdistan and in other countries all over the world. There were various social, economic and political relations and networks between Kurds in the diaspora and in Kurdistan, as well as between Kurds in different countries in the diaspora. For example, personal contacts were maintained through telephone calls, letters and personal visits. Travelling around Europe in order to keep in touch with friends and relatives was common and seemed to be regarded as a natural thing to do. Furthermore, the refugees continued to have a connection with Kurdistan through the mass media, including newspapers, radio and satellite television (Wahlbeck 1999a).

The Internet has recently become an important channel through which Kurds in the diaspora keep in touch with each other. In 1994, there was a handful of Kurdish Internet pioneers who had home pages on the World Wide Web. Now, seven years later, there are thousands of pages dedicated to Kurdish issues, including home pages of at least 200 different Kurdish organisations. Many of the home pages have an explicit Kurdish nationalist content.³ In the early 1990s, short-wave radio programming in the Kurdish language broadcast

by Voice of America was still one of the most important sources of news from Kurdistan. Now, new satellite channels on television have significantly improved the possibility for Kurds in Europe to get information from their countries of origin. Many refugees today regard satellite dishes as an important investment. In conclusion, modern technology has clearly made it easier to sustain transnational social networks. Yet, much of modern technology is expensive and most refugees have only limited access to it.

The importance of transnational connections and global mass media is emphasised in several recent ethnographic studies of refugee communities. For example, as described by Steen (1992), McDowell (1996) and Fuglerud (1999), Tamils in exile sustain extensive transnational social relations which have far-reaching consequences for the communities in question. In this particular respect, Tamil and Kurdish refugees seem to have much in common.

Kurdish satellite channels provide a good example of extensive transnational co-operation among Kurds in exile. The first channel, called MED-TV, started its broadcasts in 1995 and produced its programmes in different European countries, broadcasting them all over Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. The station was registered in Britain, but was financially supported by private benefactors in Kurdish communities all over Europe. It soon established itself as the most popular television channel among Kurds in Europe. The Kurdish satellite channel also had far-reaching international political repercussions. The whole project enraged the Turkish government, which is perhaps not surprising bearing in mind the oppression imposed on the Kurds in Turkey and the Turkish authorities' discontent at any Kurdish cultural expression. The Turkish government demanded that the station be closed down, since it was regarded as an organ for Kurdish separatists. Among other counter-actions, the Turkish authorities directed intensive diplomatic pressure against the channel (Hassanpour 1997, 1998). In March 1999, the channel was closed by the British government for 'breaching regulations on impartiality'. However, within a few weeks after the closure of MED-TV, two new Kurdish satellite channels started broadcasting: CTV, mainly produced in Stockholm and Brussels, and Kurdistan TV, mainly produced in Britain. These have been followed by Mezopotamya TV, broadcasting daily programmes from Copenhagen since June 2000.

Kurdish exile politics

Not surprisingly, Kurdish refugee communities continue to be influenced by contemporary developments in Kurdistan. In particular, political developments play a significant role for the refugees. In my study, many refugees expressed their wish to actively work for the 'Kurdish cause', despite the fact that they lived in exile in Europe. It seems as if this political activity also served the function of reinforcing an identity and a sense of order and purpose in the fragmented lives of the refugees (Wahlbeck 1999a). The significant role of political activities seems to be something that many refugee groups have in common. The importance of politics among Tamil refugees is described by many authors (Fuglerud 1999; McDowell 1996; Steen 1992), and similar evidence is found in the case of Vietnamese refugees (Bousquet 1991; Gold 1992) and among refugees from East Timor (Goodman 2000).

The transnational orientation towards the society of origin is especially evident in the political activism of refugee associations. The Kurdish organisations

in exile are often greatly influenced by the political and social divisions and allegiances in Kurdistan. As in the case of other refugee communities, the Kurdish community can be regarded as highly politicised. My study of Kurdish refugee organisations (Wahlbeck 1999a) found an often-expressed indirect support for the 'Kurdish cause' and the struggle of the Kurdish people. Because of the continuous political activism among the refugees, most of the Kurdish associations in exile are directly or indirectly associated with political parties in Kurdistan. On the one hand, this often leads to internal divisions in the refugee communities. Political conflicts which divide the community and render any united activities impossible is a common theme in studies of refugee communities. The impossibility of creating viable large organisations among Vietnamese refugees is emphasised by Bousquet (1991) and Gold (1992), while the political conflicts among Tamil refugees are described by Steen (1992), McDowell (1996) and Fuglerud (1999). On the other hand, the same issues that divide the refugee community as a whole, can unite smaller groups of refugees who share the same political beliefs and background in the country of origin. Although major ethnic organisations seem to be virtually impossible to create, small local organisations thrive and multiply. These smaller associations and informal networks can be used as a resource in order to solve the problems faced by refugees in their new country of settlement. In this way, a diasporic orientation towards the country of origin can also be a resource facilitating integration in the new country of settlement. Thus, a diasporic situation should not be automatically regarded as a hindrance to integration (Wahlbeck 1999a). This observation is supported by the findings of a comparative study of Kurdish and Somali refugees in London (Griffiths 2000). This study indicates that the Kurdish refugees from Turkey have been able to create viable formal organisations *at a sub-group level* while, in comparison, the Somali refugee community remains largely fragmented without any strong organisations. Griffiths (2000) argues that the reason for this difference is the Kurdish political mobilisation and quest for national recognition which provides a unifying factor for small-scale mobilisation.

The political situation and the Kurdish conflict are quite different in Turkey, Iran and Iraq, respectively. These political differences also have a clear bearing on the political activities among the Kurds in exile. Because of the political disagreement and violent clashes between different Kurdish parties in Iran and Iraq, many Kurdish refugees from these two countries feel disillusioned with Kurdish politics (Wahlbeck 1999a). This disillusionment is also reflected in the activities of the Kurdish organisations affiliated with these two refugee groups. This is different from the situation among the Kurdish refugees from Turkey, where one political movement dominated the scene in the 1990s. The Kurdish political party that has great support among Kurds from Turkey is the Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK). The role of the PKK among the Kurdish refugees in the UK has been emphasised by several authors (Griffiths 2000; Wahlbeck 1999a). Kurdish political activism has been especially vibrant in Germany (cf. Faist 1999, 2000b; Falk 1998; Lyon and Uçarer 2001), but similar patterns of diasporic political mobilisation among Kurds in exile can be observed in most countries in Europe. The strong support for the PKK became apparent during the world-wide protests by Kurds after Turkish authorities abducted the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, in Kenya on 15 February 1999. Dramatic demonstrations broke out in most European countries, during which a great number of Kurds living in exile expressed their support for

the PKK and the Kurdish struggle in Turkey. There were also unconfirmed reports indicating that there was global co-ordination of the demonstrations (Rogers 1999). After his imprisonment, Öcalan denounced the use of violence and the PKK subsequently declared that they would stop their military activities. It is too early to say how these political developments in Turkey will influence the Kurdish communities in Europe, but it is highly likely that this will have a pacifying effect on the Kurdish organisations in exile.

The ethnic mobilisation and political activism of Kurdish refugees in Europe cannot be properly understood unless we take into account the transnational context in which these occur. Clearly, political developments in Turkey and the Middle East have a direct bearing on social relations and political activities among Kurds in Europe. This observation is also supported by some other recent studies of the Kurdish communities in Europe. Thomas Faist (2000a) discusses the existence of 'transnational social spaces' among Kurds and Turks in Germany. The Kurdish political activism in Germany is described as a 'transnational ethnic conflict' by Alynna Lyon and Emek Uçarer (2001), while Martin van Bruinessen (1998) uses Benedict Anderson's term 'long-distance nationalism' (e.g. Anderson 1994: 326–7) to describe the ways in which the Kurdish diaspora has become connected to the Kurdish movement in the Middle East.

The concept of diaspora

Transnationalism is a phenomenon that has significance for all types of migrants in the contemporary world. As described above, it can be argued that the social relations of refugees create a transnational community not bound by the geographical borders of either the countries of origin or the countries of settlement. Although the Kurds have been used as an example, this seems to be similarly true for other refugee groups as well. These types of transnational social relations raise issues that have been largely overlooked in conventional refugee studies in which refugees have been studied within the context of specific geographical locations.

However, there are some significant differences between ordinary migrants and refugees in the form and content of the transnational social relations.⁴ It can be argued that refugees have a distinctive relationship with both the country they have been forced to flee from and the country in which they have involuntarily settled. One of the classical articles in refugee studies argues that 'it is the reluctance to uproot oneself, and the absence of positive original motivations to settle elsewhere, which characterises all refugee decisions and distinguishes the refugee from the voluntary migrants' (Kunz 1973: 130). As described in the examples above, these distinctive relationships are often manifested as political activism oriented towards the country of origin. The social structure of a refugee community is largely a continuation of patterns in the society of origin, although these are clearly transformed in the new environment. In the case of refugees, *political* allegiances and relations in the society of origin have a special significance. It can be argued that the very strong political orientation towards the 'homeland' is different from the relations other migrants have towards their countries of origin. Thus, it can also be argued that the concept of transnationalism is not precise enough if one wants to describe the specific refugee experience that distinguishes the refugee from the ordinary

migrant. Refugee research needs a conceptual framework in which the refugees' specific transnational social relations can be described. There is reason to believe that the concept of diaspora can provide this conceptual framework.

Originally, the concept of diaspora referred to the dispersal of the Jews from their historic homeland. Today, it is often used to describe various well-established communities that have an experience of 'displacement', like the overseas Chinese, the Armenians in exile, the Palestinian refugees, the Gypsies or the whole African diaspora (Clifford 1994; Safran 1991; Tölölyan 1996). Scholars have presented various definitions of diasporas, but the general criteria for a diaspora can be said to be forcible dispersal, settlement in multiple locations and the idea of a homeland. Many scholars today argue that the concept is used far too loosely and is often used to describe any community that in one way or another has a history of migration (Cohen 1997; Marienstras 1989; Vertovec and Cohen 1999). The concept of diaspora is used within several different academic traditions. One can roughly distinguish four different ways of using the concept (cf. Vertovec 1997; Wahlbeck 1999b).⁵

Firstly, the concept has been regarded as useful in describing the geographical displacement and/or deterritorialisation of identities in the contemporary world. Within this tradition, the concept has been seen as a way of avoiding previous essentialist discourses connected to ethnicity and 'race'. This approach, largely situated within the vague area of Cultural Studies, includes writings on syncretism, 'hybridity' and 'new ethnicities' among groups of migrant origin (e.g. Brah 1996; Gilroy 1987, 1997; Hall 1993). This tradition largely corresponds to the set of meanings that Vertovec (1997) has labelled 'diaspora as consciousness'.

Secondly, as Vertovec (1997) argues, there is a discussion where the meaning of diaspora is largely considered to be a 'mode of cultural production'. The production and reproduction of transnational social and cultural phenomena has mainly been studied by anthropologists (Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1996). However, it is obvious that this discussion frequently merges with the previously mentioned discussion within Cultural Studies about issues like cultural hybridity and creolisation among diaspora cultures.

Thirdly, the concept of diaspora has also been used among scholars who emphasise the political dimension of contemporary diasporas (Shain 1999; Shain and Sherman 1998; Sheffer 1986, 1995). This is a discussion mainly situated within the disciplines of Political Science and International Relations. Clearly, international relations are today increasingly complex because of the political activism of transnational communities and diasporas. The political relations between diaspora, homeland and country of settlement often constitute complex interdependent relations among three poles.

Fourthly, there are a number of scholars who regard diaspora as a form of social organisation (Cohen 1995, 1997; Faist 2000a; Van Hear 1998; Wahlbeck 1999a). A diaspora is regarded as *a specific form of transnational community*. As Van Hear defines it, the broader term *transnational community* 'is a more inclusive notion, which embraces diaspora, but also populations that are contiguous rather than scattered and may straddle just one border' (Van Hear 1998: 6). The authors mentioned above represent a discussion that corresponds to what Vertovec (1997) calls 'diaspora as social form'. This is the approach that I argue is of particular relevance for refugee studies. As Cohen (1997) describes, diasporas, as a form of social organisation, have a long history and are not only associated with the modern world. What is new in the contemporary world,

however, is the steadily increasing impact of globalisation. It is a process that, through the ease of international mobility and by facilitating transnational social relations, increases the opportunities for the formation of transnational communities, among them diasporas. As the Kurdish example indicates, the creation of transnational social networks is less difficult today because of various aspects of the process of globalisation. For example, with the help of modern technology, it is now easy to retain and establish social relations over vast geographical distances. These social networks might evolve over time into more firmly established transnational communities and diasporas.

Within this tradition of diaspora studies, several authors (e.g. Armstrong 1976; Cohen 1997; Shuval 2000; Van Hear 1998) have developed elaborate typologies of diasporas and have compared similarities and differences of various diaspora communities. Robin Cohen's book *Global Diasporas* (1997) has extended previous definitions of diasporas in order to include victim, trade, labour, imperial and cultural diasporas and he provides detailed examples in order to illustrate his typology. Another case in point is the book *New Diasporas* by Nicholas Van Hear (1998). This is an elaborate description of ten different examples of forced mass exodus (i.e. *migration crises*) in different parts of the world and the consequent dispersal and regrouping of transnational communities. The book includes a wealth of detail and important findings about different migration crises and the outcomes for the communities in question. But the range of different cases and outcomes is somewhat bewildering, and masks an understanding of the characteristic causes and consequences of the formation of diasporas. An emphasis on description and comparison of various cases does not in itself provide a general understanding of diaspora formation. In this sense, it can be argued that the description of diasporas provided by Van Hear is even *too* elaborate for the purpose of refugee studies. In the research area of refugee studies, where the existence of transnational communities and the consequences of globalisation are largely unacknowledged among many scholars (not to mention practitioners and decision-makers in the field), an emphasis on complexity and variety is not fruitful. For the purpose of the research area of refugee studies, a general definition of diaspora that simply emphasises the existence of transnational connections would seem to be more useful.

Diaspora as an ideal type

In Wahlbeck (1999a) I have argued that the concept of diaspora should be regarded as an analytical tool that can be used to study refugee communities in the country of exile. However, it has to be added and explicitly stressed that in order to be an analytical tool, the concept of diaspora has to be regarded as an *ideal type* in the true Weberian sense of the term. The adoption of a perspective that regards diasporas as a form of social organisation makes it possible to treat the concept of diaspora as an ideal type. However, it has to be clearly understood that an ideal type is developed for analytical purposes only. The only value of an ideal type lies in its usefulness in describing and explaining reality in terms of clearly understandable concepts. Yet, an ideal type is an abstraction of features from empirical reality and 'ideal' in the sense that it never exists in a 'pure' form in reality (Ringer 1997; Weber 1922).

An ideal type is useful for the purpose of comparison. Anthias (1998) has made a critical discussion of the descriptive typology of different types of

diasporas outlined by Cohen (1997). According to Anthias, the different types of diaspora (victim, labour, imperial, trading, cultural) constitute an incommensurable comparative schema according to which the different dimensions cannot be compared *in relation to* one another (Anthias 1998: 562–3). This type of problem can be overcome by using *one* ideal type, which, in itself, can be compared to different types of empirical cases respectively (cf. Ringer 1997).

In order to facilitate the use of the concept of diaspora analytically as an ideal type, I have preferred the precise definition presented by William Safran in the first issue of the journal *Diaspora*:

Expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics: 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original 'center' to two or more 'peripheral', or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship (Safran 1991: 83–4).

In fact, many of the groups traditionally regarded as diasporas fulfil only a few of Safran's six criteria. Thus, Cohen (1997) presents a modified version of these criteria in order to be able to include all the groups he uses as exemplary cases. Likewise, James Clifford (1994) argues that Safran's normative definition is too strict, and does not take into account all those instances that can be called a diaspora. He argues, for example, that there does not necessarily have to be any centre for the diaspora, nor do all members of a diaspora necessarily want to return 'home'. However, I would like to stress that the only constructive way is to regard 'diaspora' as an ideal type. The point is that regardless of whether a community is fully a diaspora or not, the concept might be used in order to describe some specific characteristics of the group in question. Far too much discussion has been devoted to whether this or that community really is a 'genuine diaspora' or not. Instead, it should be considered whether the concept of diaspora can be used to describe and study some specific qualities of the particular community in question. As already mentioned, ideal types never exist in a 'pure' form and are always constructed for analytical purposes only. It is the task of research to study how far or close any specific empirical case is from the ideal type, once a definition of it has been logically achieved (Weber 1922: 191). Thus, for example, the Jewish diaspora cannot be regarded as the ideal type of a diaspora as suggested by Safran (1991: 84).

Furthermore, by treating the concept of diaspora as an ideal type, it becomes possible to study the causes and consequences of diaspora formation, rather than only to develop descriptive typologies of different diasporas. Typologies, comparisons and empirical descriptions alone do not constitute theories; a theory must also include some form of *general* causal hypothesis. As Max Weber (1922: 190) explicitly argued, ideal types are not in themselves hypotheses, although they might suggest fruitful hypotheses. As an ideal type, the diaspora concept can be used in the development of hypotheses and theories concerning the causes and consequences of this specific form of social organisation. Diaspora

theory is still very underdeveloped and, in terms of theory generation, there is much work to be done.

As described in detail in my study of Kurdish refugees (Wahlbeck 1999a), there are several features of the Kurdish communities in Europe that characterise them as a diaspora in accordance with Safran's (1991) precise definition. The forced displacement of the Kurds, their collective memory of their original homeland, the alienation and discrimination they experience in Europe, their wish to return to Kurdistan, their collective commitment to the restoration of their homeland and finally their transnational social networks, are all features of the diasporic relations displayed by the Kurdish refugees in Europe. Thus, there is clearly reason to speak of a Kurdish diaspora in Europe. The notion of transnationalism is not precise enough if one wants to describe the specific experiences of Kurdish refugees in exile. Instead, the diaspora concept gives a more precise description of this specific transnational community. Clearly, not all Kurds in exile fulfil all of Safran's criteria, and clearly the concept of diaspora applies differently to different groups of Kurds at different times and in different circumstances. Despite this heterogeneity of the Kurds, the concept can illustrate something characteristic of the Kurdish refugee communities. It is in this sense that the concept has to be regarded as an ideal type.

In addition, treated as an ideal type, the concept of diaspora can also provide a tool for an analysis of refugee communities in general; this, despite the fact that clearly not all refugees always constitute diasporas. The concept of diaspora encompasses the transnational social relations characteristic of refugees and outlines the specific refugee experience. The concept can conceive the political project in the 'homeland', which plays such a fundamental role for many refugees. Thus, the concept of diaspora can also help to bridge the artificial 'before' and 'after' distinction commonly applied to migration, and hereby it can encompass the refugees' own definition of their situation. Seeing refugees as living in a diasporic relation is a way of shedding some more light on the special relationships that refugees have with both their society of origin and society of settlement. Although this might seem to be a rather simple thing to say, the fact is that refugee studies often tend to disregard this characteristic feature of refugee communities. Thus, the concept of diaspora can provide a new perspective on refugee studies.

Pitfalls of the diaspora discourse

The concept of diaspora is useful for a description of the refugee experience and the transnational social relations of refugees in exile. However, there is ambivalence connected to the concept, which one needs to take into account. There is a danger that a study of diaspora as a form of social organisation will lead to a preoccupation with 'migrant communities' and their relationship to their 'homelands', a preoccupation that may disregard the society of settlement and the power structures involved in majority-minority relations. An emphasis on the diaspora should not be connected with a disregard for the structural context of the society of settlement.

Theories and discourses that diasporize or internationalize 'minorities' can deflect attention from long-standing, structured inequalities of class and race. It is as if the problem were multinationalism – issues of translation, education, and tolerance – rather than of economic exploitation and racism. While clearly necessary, making *cultural* room for Salvadorans,

Samoans, Sikhs, Haitians, Khmers, and so forth, does not, of itself, produce a living wage, decent housing, or health care. Moreover, at the level of everyday social practice cultural differences are persistently racialized, classed, and gendered. Diaspora theories need to account for these concrete, cross-cutting structures (Clifford 1994: 313).

Even if a refugee community exists in a transnational and/or global social reality, people do live in very concrete localities with their own social structure and inequalities. Needless to say, globalisation has not led to a situation in which localities have disappeared. Rather, we live in a 'glocalized' (Robertson 1995) social reality where both the local and the global exist side by side and in relation to each other. As many authors (e.g. Faist 1998, 2000a; Labelle and Midy 1999; Portes *et al.* 1999; Smith and Guarnizo 1998) argue, transnational networks are not deterritorialised, they are always connected to and firmly rooted in specific localities and nations.

In using the diaspora concept, one must avoid generating a disregard of phenomena such as racism, discrimination and exclusion, which are connected to local social structures in the country of settlement. The introduction of the concept of diaspora is often regarded as a positive move towards emphasising agency and studying people in their own right. However, there is a danger that the concept will generate the perspective that immigrants 'choose' whether or not to integrate, and exclusionary structures and ideologies, such as racism, will not be seen as playing any significant role. In the case of the Kurdish refugees, it is clear that structures in the host society, like the structure of the labour market, the country's official resettlement policies and xenophobic opinions among the majority population all have a decisive impact on the refugee community. The different economic and social situations of Kurds and other refugee groups in different countries in Europe is a clear indication of this. For example, comparisons between the Nordic countries and the UK indicate that the same refugee group might end up in widely different social and economic positions in different host societies. Refugees in the Nordic countries often become disempowered clients of an extensive social welfare system and are sent from one employment or integration course to the other, but still remain largely unintegrated in the labour market; the case of Denmark is described by Steen (1992), Norway by Fuglerud (1999) and Finland by Valtonen (1998) and Wahlbeck (1999a). In comparison, the situation in the UK is quite different; although unemployment is a serious problem, certain jobs are available and some refugees might find employment immediately upon arrival in the country. However, the jobs are the most menial and poorly paid ones in an ethnically segmented labour market (cf. Steen 1992; Wahlbeck 1999a). The serious adverse effects of British policy on the settlement of refugees are also apparent in the results from a recent survey among refugees in East London (Bloch 2000).

Dilemmas connected to the concept of diaspora also exist within the debate that regards 'diaspora as consciousness'. As previously mentioned, the concept has been viewed as a way to avoid and question an essentialist approach to ethnic identities. However, Floya Anthias (1998) questions whether the concept itself has really managed to avoid the essentialism that it aims to question. Actually, the concept seems to be based implicitly on an essentialist idea of origin, since a diasporic identity implicitly assumes an origin in a real or mythical 'homeland'.⁶ Thus, the concept of diaspora cannot replace a critical discussion concerning ethnicity and cannot in itself overcome the problems that

are connected with an essentialist discourse of ethnicity and 'race' (Anthias 1998). A more practical and realistic view of diasporic consciousness is found in the writings of James Clifford: 'Suffice it to say that diasporic consciousness "makes the best of a bad situation." Experience of loss, marginality, and exile (differentially cushioned by class) are often reinforced by systematic exploitation and blocked advancement' (Clifford 1994: 312). Thus, in discussions about diasporic identities, it is also important to remember the structural context and the unequal power relations in which the identity has developed. In addition, it is not only the structure of the society of settlement one needs to take into account. The diaspora communities might themselves foster oppression. As Ong and Nonini point out in a discussion about the overseas Chinese: 'there is nothing intrinsically liberating about diaspora cultures' (Ong and Nonini 1997: 325). For example, as a politically active refugee, you might feel quite uncomfortable living in a close refugee community in case you do not share the same political opinions as the rest of the community. There are some indications of this particular dilemma in the studies of the Kurdish refugee communities (Wahlbeck 1999a) and the Tamil refugee communities (Fuglerud 1999; McDowell 1996), which are both highly politicised communities. In refugee communities, political divisions and allegiances often play a far more important role than ethnic identities.

Thus, it is important to remember that there is no reason to see diasporas as a solely positive phenomenon. Neither can the concept of diaspora replace a critical study of ethnic relations and identities. Despite these cautious remarks, my argument is that a sociological analysis of contemporary refugees in the country of exile has much to gain from the concept of diaspora and the diaspora discourse. The concept can shed some light on refugees' specific relationships to their societies of settlement and their societies of origin. The concept of diaspora can relate both to the homeland and the host society, and can bridge the gap between the periods before and after migration. Thus, the concept, with its connection both to the society of origin and the society of settlement, is useful for understanding the complexity of the social relations of refugee communities.

Conclusion

Results from recent ethnographic studies suggest that refugees sustain transnational social networks and have a diasporic consciousness. This indicates that the concept of diaspora is a useful one for describing the specific refugee experience. As far as refugee studies are concerned, the concept is a welcome new analytical approach. Although the focus of the empirical evidence in this article has been on the case of Kurdish refugees, I do suggest that the concept of diaspora can be a useful analytical tool in the study of other refugee communities. This is because the concept can simultaneously relate both to the country of settlement and the country of origin. In this way, it can also describe the transnationalism which is characteristic of refugee communities in general. However, it has to be stressed that in order to be an analytical concept in refugee studies, a diaspora should be regarded as an ideal type in the true Weberian sense of the term.

The dual orientation both towards the society of origin and the society of settlement is not as contradictory and paradoxical as it seems. In the refugees' own experiences, their homeland and their country of exile, as well as the time before and the time after migration, constitute a continuous and coherent

lived experience. The gap perceived between before and after migration, as well as the gap perceived between the country of origin and the country of exile, are largely superimposed on the refugees' experiences by the outside observer. The concept of diaspora can help the researcher to rethink these issues and to understand the transnational reality in which refugees are forced to live. Thus, the notion of diaspora can unify the artificial duality in which the refugee experience is too often conceptualised.

Notes

- 1 'Refugee studies' has recently developed into an independent research domain with its own institutions, journals and discourse. The most influential journal in this scholarly domain is the *Journal of Refugee Studies*, published by Oxford University Press since 1988. The largest research institutions are the Refugee Studies Programme at the University of Oxford, UK and the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University, Canada, both established in the 1980s.
- 2 The ethnographic fieldwork of this study was carried out in 1994 in Finland and in 1995 in Britain. These two countries were regarded as sufficiently different from one another to do a comparative study. The most important material consisted of semi-structured interviews with both male and female Kurdish refugees from Turkey, Iraq and Iran. In addition to the interviews with refugees, Kurdish associations in both countries were studied through interviews and participant observation (Wahlbeck 1999a).
- 3 I have compiled a selection of important Kurdish home pages at the address <http://www.abo.fi/~owahlbec/kurds.htm>.
- 4 It should be additionally noted that the categories 'refugee' and 'ordinary migrant' are also ideal types. There are, of course, various forms of intermediate situations and a person might move from one category to the other. As Richmond (1994: 48–74) points out, any distinction between voluntary and involuntary migration is of doubtful validity, since all migration movements include different constraints in varying degrees and forms.
- 5 In a previous article published in Swedish, I distinguish between three different ways of using the concept of diaspora (Wahlbeck 1999b). However, after having read Steven Vertovec's (1997) article, I see that there is reason to refine my categories. In addition to those who regard 'diaspora as a social form', I now see that one should make a distinction between the largely 'British/post-colonial' discussion within Cultural Studies about diaspora as a 'type of consciousness', and the 'American/cosmopolitan' anthropologists who write about 'diaspora as a mode of cultural production'. In my previous article I regarded these two debates as constituting one category. However, Vertovec has overlooked the predominantly American scholars within Political Science and International Relations who, according to my original categorisation, have to be regarded as a separate category studying 'diaspora as politics'. Thus, as a result, I now argue that there are four different ways of using the concept.
- 6 In addition to Anthias (1998), a similar argument about 'homelands' is raised in a short article by Soysal (2000). The article questions the deployment of diaspora as an analytical category in explaining the contemporary immigration experience. Instead, the making and enacting of citizenship is advanced as a more productive perspective. However, the article does not clarify what discourse or meaning of diaspora is being questioned. After a brief reference to Cohen (1997) and Van Hear (1998), and without any clear explanation, Soysal surprisingly states that: 'The thrust of my questioning is to do with the very assumption that underlies the concept. That is, its insistence on privileging the nation-state model and nationally-defined formations when conversing about a global process such as migration' (Soysal 2000: 2). And then, 'As such, the category of diaspora is an extension of the nation-state model, in that it assumes a congruency between the territorial state and the national community, and by implication a congruency between territory, culture and identity' (Soysal 2000: 3). Actually, I find it difficult to recognise the concept of diaspora in this critique. Since the basic premise of the argument is somewhat vague, it is unfortunately quite difficult for me to relate to the issues raised in Soysal's article.

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