

***Diaspora as a resource:
transnational networks as cultural capital - factors in European integration ?***

Draft outline of research proposal,

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In historical, as well as in recent periods of socio-economic change, certain diaspora communities appear to be particularly successful. By virtue of their transnational or global orientation, some diasporas stand out as an economic or cultural avant-garde of transformation. This research project proposes a comparative study of economic, social and symbolic *success* in diaspora communities throughout Europe, based on in-depth ethnographic fieldwork and focussing on factors that may enable or hinder successful agency. Before the background of varying political and socio-economic conditions for diasporas in different European societies, major factors to be studied will include aspects of *cultural knowledge*, the structure and quality of *social networks* and *institutions*, and the specific conditions provided by metropolitan and / or port-cities as *urban centres of diaspora* formation. The project will include ethnographic research in Eastern, Central and Western Europe, the cases ranging from historical prototypes to “new diasporas”.

1. Diaspora social organization as a resource for integration and development

Since the beginning of the 1990es, the concept of “diaspora” has acquired a new and challenging position in public discourse as well as in social and cultural studies¹. Academic debates have contested the widening range of this concept from traumatic histories of Jewish, Armenian or Black communities² to various groups of migrants or ethnic origin and proposed typologies of historic and “new diasporas”³. Meanwhile, more and more groups once defining themselves as “ethnic minorities”, now claim membership in transnational or global networks of diasporas⁴. In the context of global cultural politics, the very concept of diaspora seems to have become a symbolic resource⁵.

Accordingly, in the past decade many ethnographic studies focussed on questions of community formation and identity politics in diaspora. Quite contrary to the dominating discourse of many diaspora elites, various case-studies have shown diasporic identities not as essential features to be “maintained” during time in the face of external change, but as constructed, reconstructed and redefined according to the changing demands of circumstances and internal relations of power⁶.

¹ Rivkind 1967, Tölölyan 1991, 1996, Kokot / Dorsch 2004. Most of this discussion has been taking place in the journal „*Diaspora. A journal of transnational studies*“, edited since 1991 by K. Tölölyan (University of Toronto Press).

² Safran 1991, 2004

³ Cohen 1997, van Heer 1998

⁴ E.g. in the Irish diaspora, see Gray 2004, Wonneberger 2001, 2004 a, b.

⁵ Hastrup, Fog Olwig 1997, Fog Olwig 2004

⁶ e.g. Schwalgin 2000, 2004, Sökefeld 2005.

But while the construction of diasporic identities and the agency of elites and institutions in identity politics⁷ remain important aspects of the social organization of diaspora communities, they are not the only ones. As Cohen's⁸ typology suggests, diasporas may differ in their historical experience as much as in their community structure, and they may be very differently embedded in the overall system of various societies. To make matters even more complex, these variations also appear in communities of the same origin, during different phases of their history⁹. Also, based on a general understanding of prototypical diasporas as "victim" minorities, many ethnographies tend to portray the relations of diaspora communities to "host" societies solely in terms of unequal power¹⁰, often disregarding the significant role of diasporas in economy, culture or politics¹¹.

Departing from earlier studies on identity formation, this project proposes a change of focus, aiming at a comparative view on diaspora social organisation and culture as potential *resources* in economic and social development.

As recent research in the Macedonian diaspora in Australia¹² suggests, major factors enabling or hindering the involvement of diasporas in economic development refer to the quality and structure of *social relations* and institutions, as well as the cultural meanings and rules referring to the management of social networks. Some variations may – as in the case of post-socialist Eastern Europe – be founded in recent historical situations, while others may be embedded in cultural schemata less related to actual experiences. At any rate: in times of political and economic transformation, some diaspora communities stand out as particularly successful in a socio-economic sphere by maintaining a difficult balance between internal cohesion and openness to the surrounding socio-economic system¹³, while at the same time others, who can also be considered as "diasporic", seem to lose social and economic standing. An example from history may illustrate this issue:

When the wave of Asia Minor refugees reached Greece after 1922, the *Pontic* Greeks from the shores of Black Sea started from a particularly disadvantaged position. While the urbanized western coast of Asia Minor had been dominated by Greek culture throughout, many Greeks in the Pontos area had formed diaspora communities in predominantly non-Greek cultural environments. As refugees, they were seen as a backward minority group speaking an archaic dialect and tainted by contagious culture contact with Turks or peoples of the Caucasus. In the eyes of many Greeks on the mainland, as well as of the refugees from the urban areas around Constantinople and Smyrna, they were barely to be considered as "real Greeks" at all¹⁴. Within two generations however, the majority of the Pontic Greeks had left the poor refugee quarters and entered the middle and upper strata of Greece's society, leaving many of the "civilized urbanites" from the West Coast far behind them. Their economic success was attributed, by friends and foes alike, to their combination of dense ethnic networking and economic and social flexibility.

⁷ See Introduction in: Kokot, Dorsch (eds.) 2004

⁸ Cohen 1997

⁹ Hasiotis 1993 and 2004.

¹⁰ Clifford 1994, see critique by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994, also Boyarin / Boyarin 1993, Marienstras 1989

¹¹ Cohen (1997) identifies „trade“ and „imperial“ diasporas. See also Cesarani 2002 and Cesarani 7 Romain 2005.

¹² Sekulovska-Gaber 2005

¹³ Granovetter 1973 and 1983

¹⁴ Hirschon 1998 and 2003, Voutira 1991

2. Research questions, methodological considerations and project design

This project proposes a *comparative investigation of diasporas* in conditions of socio-economic change, asking for factors that may enable or determine variations in “successful” social and economic integration. It will be based on a series of *in-depth ethnographic case studies*, to be designed within an overall research framework to ensure comparability.

The various political, social and economic conditions provided by different European societies in the course of historical and recent change, will serve as a general framework for the comparison of cases. The project is based on the assumption that, by virtue of their transnational and/or global connections, some diaspora communities may have special advantages in times of transformation – in fact, they may even become forerunners of change. But it is not enough to be a diaspora. In order to transform diasporic relations and belongings from symbolic into social and economic capital¹⁵, some basic factors must be present.

As suggested in various typologies of diaspora (e. g. Cohen 1997), one focus of this study will be on economic or socially successful or “elite” diasporas, comparing them to other groups which seem to be less upwardly mobile. “Success” is here seen as access to economic wealth, participation in economically and / or politically significant decisions and high social and symbolic prestige, i.e. in terms of economic, social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1983). This is a preliminary working concept, and we are very much aware of the fact that this attribution may be open to rapid, and even dramatic, historical change. Therefore, one of the first tasks of the further planning of this project will be to develop a working definition of “success” suitable for the purposes of systematic research.

As outlined above, we propose that some of the key factors to enable or hinder diasporic “success” may be found in the type and quality of *network relations* present, both within the communities and linking them to the overall socio-economic system. In-depth studies of networks and their systematic comparison will therefore be one of the core issues of this research. We also suggest that different socio-economic or political *institutions* will be closely linked to the type and quality of social networks, both referring to internal community organization and to the relations to other levels of society. Their exact theoretical position within this research framework and the methodological consequences have yet to be determined.

Within the framework of different European societies, we consider certain cities as particularly significant factors in the development and success of diasporas. In history, major port cities¹⁶ such as Thessaloniki, Amsterdam, Trieste or Hamburg (just to name a few examples) have been noted as centres of diaspora. Although today, the relations of cities and ports have changed significantly, many of the centres of old diasporas in Europe are also still attracting new communities – be it in major port cities, metropolitan centres or European capitals. In this project, the specific relations between *urbanity and diaspora* will be investigated by comparing different diaspora communities in the same city, as well as different cities hosting communities of the same origin.

Last but not least, both social networks and institutions are embedded in a cluster of factors that we propose to call *cultural knowledge*¹⁷. They include cognitive schemata, interpretations of history, notions of identity, value systems and rules for behaviour, all guiding the actions and choices of the individual actors that make up any diaspora community. Using methodological approaches based on cognitive anthropology, the study of cultural knowledge will be one of the core areas of all field studies in this project.

¹⁵ Bourdieu 1983

¹⁶ Cesarani 2002, Cesarani / Romain 2005, Kokot 2000, Mazower 2005

¹⁷ Strauss / Quinn 1997

3. Project partners, cases and fields of research

Cases for in-depth investigation will include old and new diasporas in several European cities. Based on our previous research in European and Latin American port cities, we have come to consider certain (types of) cities as particularly significant in the development of diasporas. Besides state capitals, certain major port cities have been noted as historical centres of diaspora (Ceasarani 2002, Cesarani / Romain 2005, Mazower 2005). Although today, the relations of cities and ports have changed significantly, many of these historical centres of diasporas are also still attracting the formation of new migrants and diasporic communities. In this project, one important factor to be investigated will be the specific relationship of urbanity (i. e. urban space) and diaspora, by studying different diaspora communities in the same city as well as different cities hosting communities of the same origin.

The *overall architecture of the project* will therefore combine individual case studies and comparison on different levels. To account for variations in political and historical conditions, communities of the same diasporic origin will be investigated in different European cities. Based on preliminary discussions among the project partners, cities to be investigated as centres of diaspora will include Amsterdam, Hamburg, Kopenhagen, London, Plovdiv (and / or Varna), Riga, Thessaloniki, and Vilnius. *Diaspora communities* to be investigated by ethnographic fieldwork will include Armenian, Greek, Chinese, Polish, Russian, Sephardic Jewish, and West African (this list is still open to further discussion in the next meeting, see below).

Obviously, not all diasporas studied will be present in all cities. On the other hand, researchers focussing on different communities of the same origin may face quite different conditions in their field regions. We propose to overcome these problems by forming *two levels of work groups*: grouping all researchers working on communities of the *same diaspora*, as well as grouping all researchers working in *one city or region*. Including all participants in two work groups will ensure a continuous exchange of results and systematic comparison.

For more than a decade, urban anthropology and ethnographic research in diaspora communities have been major themes in the work of the applicant¹⁸ at the Institut für Ethnologie (Hamburg University). Besides a series of individual case studies, these projects were presented in two international conferences, and in resulting publications¹⁹. Transformation processes in major port cities in Europe and Latin America have been the focus of an ongoing research project, including a partnership of researchers and NGOs funded by the European Union²⁰.

Based on these prior experiences, European researchers noted for their contributions in the field have agreed to participate in the proposed project:

Prof. Milena Benovska (Sofia),
Prof. Karen Fog Olwig (Kopenhagen).
Prof. Christian Giordano (Fribourg /Ch),
Prof. Waltraud Kokot (Hamburg)
Prof. Maja Korac (London), Bea Lewkowicz (London),
Dr. Bea Lewkoicz (London)
Dr. Flip Lindo (Amsterdam),
Prof. Eftihia Voutira (Thessaloniki)

Head of Project: Prof. Waltraud Kokot (Hamburg)

¹⁸ Kokot 1990, 1995, 2000, 2004

¹⁹ Kokot / Hengartner / Wildner 2000, Kokot / Tölölyan / Alfonso 2004

²⁰ Kokot 2005

4. Preliminary schedule: setting up theoretical and organizational foundations at two Round Table Meetings (November 2006 and April 2007)

The working group of researchers was established in a *first Round Table Meeting* (November 17 / 18, 2006), . which served to set up theoretical foundations and to develop a joint organizational structure.

This meeting is being followed by the preparation of a draft proposal including the decisions made by all participants, as well as by a *second Round Table Meeting* scheduled for April 27-28, 2007. This meeting will serve to set up the final organizational structure and to discuss a joint programme for field research and continuous exchange of information. Parallel to these activities, a project application will be provided and sent to funding agencies.

The project will be designed for ca. 6 years, starting (scheduled) in Jan. 2008.

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