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INTRODUCTION

The microfoundations of diaspora politics: unpacking the state and disaggregating the diaspora

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ABSTRACT

Recognising the need to unpack the ‘state’ and problematise the term ‘diaspora’, in this special issue we examine the various actors within (and beyond) the state that participate in the design and implementation of diaspora policies, as well as the mechanisms through which diasporas are constructed by governments, political parties, diaspora entrepreneurs, or international organisations. Ex tant theories are often hard-pressed to capture the empirical variation and often end up identifying ‘exceptions’. We theorise these ‘exceptions’ through three interrelated conceptual moves: First, we focus on understudied aspects of the relationships between states as well as organised non-state actors and their citizens or co-ethnics abroad (or at home – in cases of return migration). Second, we examine dyads of origin states and specific diasporic communities differentiated by time of emigration, place of residence, socio-economic status, migratory status, generation, or skills. Third, we consider migration in its multiple spatial and temporal phases (emigration, immigration, transit, return) and how they intersect to constitute diasporic identities and policies. These conceptual moves contribute to comparative research in the field and allow us to identify the mechanisms connecting structural variables with specific policies by states (and other actors) as well as responses by the relevant diasporic communities.

KEYWORDS

State-diaspora relations; diaspora engagement; diaspora politics; migration governance

Introduction

The field of diaspora studies has changed dramatically since the time when the concept was primarily applied to historical diasporas, such as the Jews, the Greeks, or the Armenians (Armstrong 1976). Moreover, while the study of diasporas was traditionally more popular within history and anthropology, in the past three decades it has received increasingly more attention by economists and political scientists. Diasporas have been linked to economic development (Smart and Hsu 2004), capital flows (Leblang 2017), war and conflict (Adamson 2013), and foreign policy (Shain 1994; Mearsheimer and Walt 2007). Relatedly, while case studies and ethnographic work dominated the field in its early stages, the comparative method, statistical analyses, and a focus on the microfoundations of diaspora politics – the ways that various actors participate in the design and implementation of diaspora policies at local, state, national, and regional levels, and their
interactions with different groups that constitute the diaspora (or diasporas) – have been gaining ground. Our microfoundations approach is a call to start thinking about diaspora politics both as a local and a global phenomenon.1

Recognising the need to unpack and problematise the categories ‘state’ and ‘diaspora’ – both challenged in the existing literature – in this special issue, we move away from these static categories. Instead we examine the various actors within (and beyond) the state that participate in the design and implementation of policies categorised as ‘diaspora engagement’ (Gamlen 2006), as well as how emigrant or co-ethnic groups are constituted (or not) by government bureaucracies at different levels, as well as by political parties, diaspora entrepreneurs and diaspora groups, or by international organisations as ‘diasporas’. We hold that this approach contributes to comparative research in this field and allows us to focus on the mechanisms that connect structural variables with the actual policy choices by states and other actors as well as the responses to them by specific groups within the diaspora.

Existing typologies of states and diasporas are often hard-pressed to capture the observed empirical variation and often end up identifying ‘exceptions’. We strive to theorise these ‘exceptions’ by examining dyads of states and specific diasporic communities differentiated by time of emigration, place of residence, socio-economic status, generation, or skills. This special issue also gathers research that deals with different aspects of the relationship between states, as well as organised non-state actors, on the one hand, and their citizens and/or co-ethnics/affiliates abroad (and at home – in cases of return migration), on the other. In part, this special issue is a response to calls for research exploring the multiple actors that participate in shaping and implementing diaspora policies (governments, diaspora organisations, political parties, international organisations, the media, businesses, NGOs) (Adamson and Demetriou 2007) and at multiple levels of analysis (local, national, transnational, regional, and global) (Délano and Gamlen 2014). Finally, it is also a response to calls for theoretical and empirical approaches that consider migration in its multiple spatial and temporal phases (emigration, immigration, transit, return) and how the intersect and constitute migrant identities and practices, as well as political and societal responses to migration (Ho 2016).

The contributions included in this issue centre around three main questions:

(1) Given that the analysis of state-diaspora relations has now been established over three decades, with typologies that help clarify existing policies and the interests that drive them, how do we evaluate which diaspora engagement strategies have been favoured by state and non-state actors and why? Are existing typologies useful to understand the interests of non-state actors in diaspora engagement? How do factors – including the characteristics of the diaspora – shape these policies and practices, their variations, and changes over time? Which state and non-state actors (including the diaspora itself) are driving processes of policy diffusion (Jörgens and Neves 2017)? While most of the existing literature focuses on examining why more than half of the UN member states have some sort of institutionalised diaspora engagement policy (Levitt and Schiller 2004; Gamlen 2014; Ragazzi 2014; Délano and Gamlen 2014; Weinar 2017), there is very limited analysis of the reasons for the absence of such policies in the other half of states, described as ‘disinterested’ (Levitt and Glick-Schiller 2004) or ‘indifferent’ (Ragazzi 2009). What do these ‘negative’ cases tell us about
broader patterns in the development of diaspora policies? The cases presented here contribute to our understanding of policy diffusion and the way it operates, vertically and horizontally, the different actors involved (from international institutions, neighbouring countries and regional governments to the church, political parties and diaspora organisations) and its limits. After all, not all states are moving in the direction of adopting such policies. Moreover, they propose that institutionalisation may not always be a measure of the success of such policies, providing examples of informal practices that offer flexible and adaptive frameworks to respond to the realities of limited resources without compromising the broader goals of supporting migrant populations in their access to a better quality of life in another country and/or maintaining links to their communities in the origin country.

(2) What are the logic(s) underpinning the differential treatment by the state of various communities within a diaspora? Why are some diasporic communities recognised/nurtured while others are neglected/denied by nation-states and other actors (i.e. international institutions, political parties, churches, non-profit organisations, and different levels of government)? Building on the work by Mylonas (2013b), Mullings (2011), Ho (2011), Campt and Thomas (2008), the articles in this collection provide examples of how diaspora engagement activities have the potential to disrupt existing class, racial, gender, or ethnic hierarchies but, at the same time, can reinscribe or create new forms of inequality between states and among emigrants/co-ethnics. Moreover, the cases presented here demonstrate that this differentiation in terms of the value and interest of state or non-state actors in what they identify as the diaspora does not only occur while members of this group reside in another country, but also (or perhaps only) when they return.

(3) How do different groups within the diaspora respond to attempts at engagement from the state and other actors (or the lack of interest in doing so)? While the term diaspora and its uses continue to be debated, the heterogeneity within diaspora groups and the need to move beyond generalisations is clear in order to understand the drivers of diaspora policies as well as responses to them (Bauböck 2005; Koinova 2017; Délano and Yescas 2014; Délano Alonso Forthcoming). A closer look at the characteristics of specific groups (including migration status, generation, socio-economic position, class, race, gender, level of organisation, among other factors) reveals the need for analytical distinctions, which are presented in some of the articles in this issue as a step toward a more nuanced understanding of the design and implementation of diaspora policies, as well as the varying responses to them by members of the diaspora. This approach allows us to further examine the interests that drive these policies as well as their results, both from the perspective of the state and its various components as well as the perspective of the intended or unintended recipients of such policies.

These three broad focus areas are examined from a multidisciplinary perspective, through the lens of geographers, historians, political scientists, anthropologists and through a number of policy areas, including the extension of voting rights, ethnic return migration policies, remittances and investment policies or homeland sponsored educational trips. The empirical cases span the globe geographically. The works included in this special issue compare and contrast dynamics across a wide range of geopolitical and economic contexts including Morocco, Germany, Israel, Greece, Serbia, Egypt, the United
States, China, the United Kingdom, and Belgium using a variety of methods that contribute to academic and policy debates through theoretical, methodological, and empirical innovations.

I. Unpacking the state

One of the main contributions of the existing literature on state–diaspora relations has been to ‘bring the state back in’ to transnational studies and focus on emigration policies in response to a field dominated by approaches focusing predominantly on developed immigration countries. Origin countries (or emigration states) are often developing countries, and thus the literature assigns to them limited agency to respond to the pressures that generate out-migration or to advocate for the rights of their emigrant populations in destination countries that may hold an economic or political advantage over them. Work by Gamlen (2006) and Agunias (2009), however, has challenged these assumptions pointing to the similarities between diaspora engagement policies across developed and developing countries. The studies presented in this special issue add to this debate by demonstrating the similarities in interests and strategies across states but also introducing a more nuanced approach while explaining empirical puzzles, moving beyond explanatory factors such as the economic or political power of the state, or its position in the international system, as well as distinguishing between actors within the origin country that participate – formally or informally – in the planning and implementation of diaspora policies, without necessarily sharing the same goals.

As Délano and Gamlen (2014) note, up to now, the field has been mostly dominated by single-case studies. There is still room for theory-building (as noted by Brand 2006; Varadarajan 2010) as well as for more comparative studies (exceptions include Smith 2003; Levitt and de la Dehesa 2003; Brand 2006; and, more recently Lafleur 2013; Gamlen 2014; Ragazzi 2014; and Pedroza, Palop, and Hoffmann 2016). Through case studies as well as large-N studies from various disciplinary approaches, the existing literature has established typologies to make sense of variation in policies across states (Levitt and Schiller 2004; Gamlen 2014; Ragazzi 2014; Mylonas 2013b). It has provided us with a complex and nuanced understanding of the reasons why states engage their diasporas (political or economic), when they do so (considering regime change, a changed position in the international system, the influence of international organisations, neighbouring states or diaspora organisations, or as a result of changes in the diaspora itself), the means through which they do so, the diffusion of certain policies, and the variations in implementation (Weinar 2017). While these typologies allow us to discern general trends, they often adopt a state-centric approach that does not allow for differentiations based on the sub-diaspora group characteristics (and variations in policies toward them), the environment or context in which these policies are developed, or the agency of various actors in creating and implementing these policies – often diverging from the general policy guidelines or goals presented by ministries or sub-ministries.

While advances in the field are significant, there is a clear need to open the ‘black box’ of the state and study the various actors driving diaspora policies. Moreover, even though some studies argue that a majority of states have some form of diaspora policies (Gamlen, Cummings, and Vaaler 2017) it is necessary to discern what types of policies are being adopted (Pedroza, Palop, and Hoffmann 2016), how and by whom they are implemented,
when and where they matter in practice, when and how they change, how they vary in their interactions with different groups within the diaspora (Mylonas and Žilović 2017), as well as to explore cases where these policies may not exist. Such policies invite us to reflect on the complex set of actors that constitute them, as well as the heterogeneity of individuals and groups within the diaspora (Koinova 2017). Moreover, by paying attention to the ‘exceptions’ beyond monolithic typologies assuming unitary states and among diasporas, we examine new forms of relations between actors that have either been neglected in the literature or have only recently been looked at in an incipient way. Building on calls for a multi-level approach to state-diaspora relations (Délano 2011), we attempt to move beyond the state and emphasise the need to understand mechanisms that link different levels of analysis and various actors that are constitutive of state-diaspora relations. In other words, we seek to unveil the microfoundations of diaspora politics.

**State and non-state actors driving diaspora policies**

Continuing with the task of taking stock of the spread of diaspora engagement institutions across the globe over the last three decades, the article by Gamlen, Cummings, and Vaaler (2017) goes further in examining not just how and when diaspora institutions emerge, but also the ways in which they adapt to changes produced by external factors. Looking beyond individual state interests, they demonstrate the importance of international organisations and neighbouring states in influencing diaspora policies from an institutional perspective. While Gamlen et al. open new terrain in looking at the various actors that shape diaspora institutions and some of the external factors that they respond to, Arrighi and Lafleur (2017) move beyond examining the broad trends in specific country-level policies such as external voting. Instead they focus on different scales at which these policies are implemented, moving from national elections to subnational levels. By documenting the various strategies of regional governments to engage diasporas from a political perspective they demonstrate the broad range of electoral arrangements, and how political parties and groups within the diaspora respond to them, based on regional and not just national identities (in this case, Scotland and Flanders).

Continuing with the topic of external voting, Paarlberg adds to existing scholarship on transnational and diaspora politics that focuses on the agency of migrants or state elites, by examining the agency of political parties and their cadres. Paarlberg reminds us that what Arrighi and Lafleur term horizontal diffusion of external voting rights is in many ways a puzzling phenomenon. Significant financial and logistical costs involved in campaigning and organising the electoral process in diaspora are regularly hard to justify with the usually meagre participation rates of diaspora voters. Paarlberg tackles this puzzle through a case study of the Salvadoran diaspora in the United States and shows that homeland political parties utilise diaspora members not only as voters but also ‘as activists, fundraisers, lobbyists, candidates, influencers from afar, and symbols in party campaign messages’. The two main Salvadoran parties, however, exhibit considerable variation in their capability and interest to tap into the diaspora’s multifaceted electoral assets. Whereas the main leftist party, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) has mobilised a large organised base in the diaspora conducting on-the-ground campaigning and lobbying on behalf of the party, the main rightist party Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) lacks an effective grassroots diaspora base, and instead uses the
diaspora as a ‘rhetorical symbol in its campaigns’. Both parties have roots in the Salvadorean civil war that pitted leftist insurgents and rightist incumbents against each other. This crucial episode of modern Salvadorean history also created the largest wave of Salvadorean emigration to the United States consisting mostly of refugees with left-wing leanings. Because of that, the FMLN has from the start enjoyed a greater ideational appeal in the diaspora than ARENA. Paarlberg argues that the highly disciplined, hierarchical organisational structure of FLMN has a greater causal weight when it comes to accounting for the ability of the party to lock-in its near-hegemony amongst the diaspora population.

Paarlberg’s article starts to fill the lacuna of research on the motivations of parties and politicians to reach out to diasporans independently of official state policy and institutions (Mügge 2012; Østergaard-Nielsen and Ciornei 2013; Burgess 2014). But because the greater investment that the FLMN has made in its party infrastructure abroad can be partially attributed to its lack of access to consulates and other state resources in the formative years of the civil war, Paarlberg’s article also demonstrates how party and state-diaspora strategies influence each other over time and sometimes need to be examined simultaneously.

Sub-state actors’ motivations and objectives in relation to diaspora groups are formed separately from state policies and institutions, which on occasion lead to more positive reactions from the populations that they target. Brinkerhoff (2017) introduces a variation on this theme of examining non-state actors’ interactions with diasporas by looking at the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt. She reveals how non-state and informal arrangements of diaspora engagement are often more successful at reaching the intended population, particularly when there are weak governing structures at the state level, but also considering the context in which the diaspora is embedded as well as its characteristics (such as the level of organisation). This case study is in dialogue with David Fitzgerald’s earlier work (2008), which examined the Catholic Church’s model of diasporic engagement in the Mexican case. Brinkerhoff’s work emphasises the complexity and benefits of what she describes as a ‘multi-polar diaspora engagement’, pushing against the monolithic state-centric approach but also generating questions around the institutionalisation of diaspora policies and how we measure its impact on the success or sustainability of diaspora policies. Brinkerhoff conceptualises and describes the evolution of diaspora politics by a subnational actor – the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt. She demonstrates through the data obtained from interviews with Church leaders and a survey of the Coptic diaspora in the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom that the Church increasingly tries to tap into the resources of the Coptic diaspora community to strengthen its activities on the ground in Egypt, and relatedly to help the Copts abroad sustain their diasporic identity. Rooted in some of the least developed areas of Egypt, the Coptic Church operates as ‘the de facto public service provider to Coptic communities in Egypt’. Rather than developing a fully articulated and formalised diaspora engagement policy, the Coptic Church reaches to its diaspora through a multitude of actors and options for engagement – a characteristic that may be shared by other actors with fragile governing structures, including weak states. However, similarly to the Salvadoran political parties studied by Paarlberg, the ability of the Coptic Church to achieve these twin goals is sometimes challenged by its own decentralised governance structure. At other times, Brinkerhoff finds, this type of decentralised
and often ad hoc engagement brings with it the benefits of flexibility. It enables diaspora constituents and non-Church-based Coptic charities to share in the social work of the Church, and sometimes even to hold the Church leaders accountable for the implementation of assistance programmes.

**Exceptions and differentiation within diaspora groups**

Three other articles included in this special issue (Klekowski von Koppenfels 2017; Han 2017; Mylonas and Žilović 2017) push us to look at instances where the seemingly pervasive trend of diaspora engagement is either not taking place; is taking place in a context of competing claims; or only for specific sub-diaspora groups. The case of the US, examined by Klekowski von Koppenfels, provides an example of an immigration state that has not fully assumed its identity as an emigration state and whose diaspora policies are rejected by its diaspora. The US government vigorously protects and assists citizens residing overseas temporarily but lacks programmes addressing the needs of the long-term emigrant population. In fact, Klekowski von Koppenfels argues that the American political discourse even lacks a narrative that could ‘make sense’ of these overseas Americans and allow them to fully partake as legitimate members of the national community. As such, they are acted upon by the US government but are rarely the object of government action. Instead, they benefit or suffer from being lumped together with some other groups of Americans figuring more prominently in the national imagination and government’s priorities. In 1975, the extension of external voting rights to the long-term American diaspora came about as a byproduct of the extension of the franchise beyond the overseas active-duty military to civilian federal employees. Similarly, post-2010 long-term emigrants of American origin have found themselves greatly inconvenienced by the government’s effort to clamp down on overseas tax evasion by rich citizens – who are often de facto resident in the US.

Drawing on an original opt-in online survey of citizens and former citizens living outside the USA, Klekowski von Koppenfels finds that the implementation of this new and strict mode of extra-territorial citizenship-based taxation has made overseas Americans feel collectively stigmatised by the US government. ‘For overseas Americans, the state’s unreflective action serves to underscore the absence of the overseas population in the national narrative.’ Paradoxically, adverse policies by the homeland can have an unintended consequence of solidification of diasporic identity as overseas Americans based on the shared feeling of being unjustly treated by the homeland. But, in the US case, this diasporic identity has also been accompanied by record (if still low overall) rates of renunciation of US citizenship.

Diaspora studies often assume the existence of neatly matched diasporas and homelands, but Enze Han draws our attention to the instances when more than one putative homeland competes over the allegiance of the same group. Such is the case with the Chinese living in Southeast Asia that has at different times been claimed by both the communist government in the mainland of China and the Kuomintang government in Taiwan. Through a study of the Chinese communities in northern Thailand and Myanmar, Han shows that competition between the two homelands resulted in mutual influences that have co-shaped each government’s diaspora policies. Similar dynamics
can be found in other cases of Cold War era bifurcated homelands such as the two Koreas or the two Germanies (Panagiotidis 2015).

Han’s article also illustrates how international system-level changes combine with domestic political transformations to render certain claim-making discourses more prevalent and effective at particular times. Such was the case of the homeland competition over the Chinese diaspora that emphasised ideological differences during the Cold War, but was transformed into the competition over different visions of nationalist authenticity in the post-Cold War period. With the post-Cold War trend of the indigenisation of independent Taiwanese identity on the island, and the economic success of the People’s Republic of China, ‘in an ironic way, the old anti-Communist KMT villagers [actively nurtured by Taiwan’s Cold War era policies] have become the loyal nationalists that the [post-Cold War] PRC is actively courting’. The importance of international system-level variables has recently been noted in several prominent research areas, such as third-party state-building (Darden and Mylonas 2012), civil wars (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010), and political regimes (Boix, Miller, and Rosato 2013). Often this insight has emerged from the use of new historical datasets that extend beyond the ‘convenient’ post-WWII cut-off point. It is not hard to imagine that the truncated post-Cold War focus of most diaspora studies suffers from similar blind spots, which is why Han’s argument seems particularly pertinent for future research in the field of diaspora politics – and especially so in the era of an ongoing transition to a multi-polar world order.

Mylonas and Žilović (2017) examine how states choose to engage certain segments of a country’s diaspora and not others depending on geostrategic interests. They focus specifically on variation in ethnic return migration policy. Through a comparison of post-Cold War policies in Greece and Serbia, they uncover group-level variation in state policies pursued toward different groups of ethnic return migrants. Intriguing empirical puzzles motivate their research. The Greek government pursued an elaborate integration policy toward Greeks from the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s but not toward Greeks from Albania. Relatedly, Serbia decided to integrate Serb refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 2000s, but neglected Serbs from Kosovo. This kind of group-level variation across recognised co-ethnic communities – even when some of their members are in dire need – is a quandary for the literature on nationalism as well as for the ‘embracing’ perspective in diaspora studies. Seeking to resolve these puzzles, Mylonas and Žilović develop competing hypotheses and test them with fine-grained evidence of primary and secondary sources. They find support for their geostrategic argument where group-level variation in ethnic return migration policies is largely driven by the state elites’ ex ante foreign policy objectives, and the role that each particular group is assigned in these strategic objectives based on its territorial origin. When state elites harbour revisionist designs – or benefit from retaining a revisionist posture – toward the territory of the co-ethnic group’s origin a favourable repatriation policy is unlikely. When state elites are status-quo oriented, favourable repatriation policy becomes likely.

**Diasporas as actors shaping policies and practices of engagement**

The work discussed so far inevitably leads to the question of how diasporas react to state and non-state actors’ attempts to engage with them or lack thereof. There have
been many calls to include the voices of the diaspora and their varying reactions to these policies and in this special issue we include several examples of such work, focusing on different groups within the diaspora—in terms of organisation, generation, and status. The article by Klekowski von Koppenfels (2017), speaks to the question of how state-diaspora policies are perceived and reacted to by the ordinary, non-elite members of the US diaspora. Several other articles in this special issue, including the article by Han discussed above, also speak to this understudied issue. But the final three articles in the collection engage fully with the diaspora as an actor and the ways in which it shapes and reacts to diaspora policies. Abramson’s work (2017) on the Jewish diaspora shows how the diaspora itself becomes an actor in constructing the identity of the diaspora (independently of state efforts) and fostering its connections with the homeland through educational trips, while Mahieu’s work (2017) shows the ways in which similar attempts in Morocco are often disparaged by second- and third-generation Moroccan youth. From the perspective of return, Zeveleva (2017) examines how individuals adapt their narratives of migration and identity in order to access resources in their country of origin.

Abramson explores the active attempts of non-Israeli Jewish elites to make a diaspora—to construct a collective identity centred on Israel as a homeland. It focuses on the efforts made by North-American and Israeli Jewish elites during the 1980s and 1990s to guarantee Jewish continuity. The empirical part of the article deals with the Taglit-Birthright—a free educational trip to Israel offered to young Jewish adults. While not aiming at emigrants’ descendants (a ‘new’ diaspora), such as in the Moroccan Summer Universities’ case Mahieu writes about, but at the young members of an ‘old’ ethno-religious diaspora, the Israeli Tallit-Birthright falls into the same family of diaspora engagement policies. Abramson asks why it is that these kinds of initiatives emerge in the first place given their significant costs and questionable effectiveness. A state-centric focus, present in most of the diaspora politics literature, would have us look for answers in the preferences of the diasporic homeland or possibly in the preferences of the state of residence, but Abramson offers an explanation resting on dynamics internal to the diaspora community itself. He argues that Taglit-Birthright emerged in the context of the decline in anti-Semitism worldwide, the greater sense of inclusion within the American society, and the improvement in the economic and strategic power of Israel. These developments threatened the ontological security (Giddens 1986, 1990, 1991) of the Jewish-American community, as they undermined its specifically diasporic identity:

When the diaspora feels at home abroad, it risks losing its constitutive narrative as a diaspora—its constant ‘homing desire’ (Brah 1996). In such cases, diasporic elites invoke the homeland itself to reaffirm and reproduce the diasporic identity for younger generations.

If the goal was simply to bolster Jewish identification, a range of other less costly and seemingly more logical strategies were available within the United States, but Taglit-Birthright was perfect for bolstering specifically diasporic Jewish identity. Abramson, thus, problematises an often overlooked question of how diasporic identities are preserved over time and across generations, and provides an original explanation based on the critical interpretation of internal documents, media reports, and secondary literature.
Zeveleva’s work (2017) reminds us that the voices of the diaspora, which some of this work tries to bring forward, are embedded in power relations. She argues that the construction of these group identities responds to the ways in which the narratives of diasporas, and their needs upon return, are codified into laws that govern welfare programmes. Through interviews with non-elite co-ethnic return migrants in Germany, Zeveleva examines how they strategically adopt state discourses to make sense of their own and their families’ past in the Soviet Union, as well as to maximise access to symbolic, political, and economic resources distributed according to the state-proscribed criteria of true Germanness. State discourses cluster diverse identities into schematised categories that are ‘legible’ (Scott 1998), but at the same time they have the power to standardise individual narratives and self-perceptions at the cost of silencing and forgetting of the ‘non-conforming’ aspects of personal and family histories. In other words, they have the power to discipline selves making them easier to govern (Foucault 1991).

Like Zeveleva, Mahieu looks at the interaction of state discourses and diaspora members’ personal narratives, but this time in the context where state power is much weaker and clearly time-limited – in homeland tours the Moroccan state organises for its diaspora youth. Moroccan summer universities are intended as the occasion for the government to showcase to diaspora youths an image of a dynamic modernising monarchy, and thus encourage their continuing attachment to the homeland. However, Mahieu’s work questions the effectiveness of these engagement policies because she finds that diaspora youths routinely draw on their own experiences, as shaped by ‘parents, family, friends, media, educational institutions in the country of residence’, to challenge the state discourse and even certain managerial practices of the organisers. Moroccan summer universities, thus, emerge as the sites where both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic identities can be formed and performed.

These latter findings open an important debate around the methodologies used to capture the diasporas’ reactions to such policies (which in these cases include participant observation, interviews, and surveys) and the power dynamics involved in shaping their responses. They also add to the continuing discussion around what is meant by the term diaspora, how it is constructed by different actors (and by the diaspora itself), and how this impacts policies and practices of diaspora engagement, including policies of return.

II. Disaggregating the diaspora

As the literature on diasporas has expanded significantly in recent years, so has the interpretation and use of the term, both in the academic literature and in policy debates. While many authors resort to a broad definition of a diaspora as ‘an imagined community dispersed from a professed homeland’ (Vertovec 2009) which echoes Safran’s earlier definition (1991, 83), others problematise the term, following Brubaker’s call to ‘think of diaspora not in substantialist terms as a bounded entity, but rather as an idiom, a stance, a claim’ (2005, 12). The contributions in this special issue invite us to challenge and expand our understanding of the term by considering specific cases of groups that do not self-identify as diasporas or are not considered as such by their origin state or non-state actors driving diaspora policies. Beyond the symbolic or material attachment to a specific nation-state, some of the cases presented here understand a
diaspora as a group of people that belongs to the same Church or are citizens of the same region. Some of the scholars focus on diasporans while they live abroad and other on the diasporans once they ‘return home’.

In Gamlen, Cummings and Vaaler the diaspora is treated as an undifferentiated whole. For the purposes of their large-N analysis, they use the term ‘diaspora’ more or less synonymously with ‘emigrants and their descendants’. Thus, their study of diaspora institutions around the world focuses on ‘formal state offices dedicated to emigrants and their descendants’. In contrast, for the purposes of an analysis focused specifically on regional electoral practices in Europe and North America, Arrighi and Lafleur (2017) have a narrower definition of ‘diaspora’ which they describe as ‘non-resident citizens’ or ‘citizens living abroad’. The most general term they use is ‘regional expatriates’ – those among the population of nationals abroad who can justify a biographical connection with a particular region. Regional expatriates may also include ‘domestic emigrants’. This move from the national to the regional expands our understanding of the term ‘diaspora’ and adds new layers of complexity that could be used by scholars trying to understand sub-diaspora policy trends. Moreover, it forces us to think about the relationship between ‘domestic’ and ‘international’ emigrants.

With a similar focus on electoral participation by citizens residing abroad, Michael Paarlberg (2017) explores outreach efforts by political parties. Unpacking the various mechanisms through which political parties try to influence potential voters (at home and abroad), he presents the diaspora ‘not only as voters, but as activists, fundraisers, lobbyists, candidates, influencers from afar, and symbols in party campaign messages’. The distinctions drawn between diaspora policies, based both on political and economic practices as well as on identity construction, are also manifested in the different uses of the term diaspora. For example, in Abramson’s work, a ‘diaspora is constituted by a narrative of dispersion, attachment to a homeland, and a sense of group identity’ but the author is particularly interested in how and why diasporic identity endures – empirically focusing on Taglit-Birthright, a free educational trip to Israel. Mahieu adopts a similar definition to examine another case of state-sponsored homeland tours for Moroccan youth, but focusing empirically on the stories told by various participants. These stories provide insights into the connections that states make between ‘diaspora building’ activities – focused on identity construction – and their economic and political goals. They also reveal the gaps between the state’s narrative and the migrant populations’ responses to such efforts. Both authors draw attention to the need to unpack the diaspora by looking at the temporal dimension of diaspora identities and the variation across generations.

Drawing a stark contrast with efforts to construct the diaspora, Klekowski von Koppenfels focuses on perceived negative diasporic outreach by the US government toward American citizens abroad. The term diaspora in this context is coterminous to ‘US citizens abroad’ or ‘Overseas Americans’ and it is primarily a legal definition. This case is a valuable empirical example to support recent work pointing to this overlooked pattern in state-diaspora policies, namely how some diaspora policies (such as international taxation, in the US case) may lead to disengagement (i.e. renouncing US citizenship). Délano and Gamlen (2014) have also pointed out that not all diaspora engagement is ‘positive’ and Mylonas (2013a) has shown that strategic neglect (with an aim to keep diasporans abroad) is another policy employed by governments.
In the Chinese language the term ‘Overseas Chinese’ is preferred over others such as ‘diaspora’, but Han uses the term interchangeably as an analytical concept rather than one of practice (Brubaker 2004). The group on which Han is focusing is described as ‘Yunnanese Chinese’, and despite its ethnoregional designation, their ‘difference’ is primarily political/ideological from the rest of the ‘Overseas Chinese’. These people were ‘remnants and descendants of Chinese Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) troops’. What is rather unique in Han’s account is that belonging to a certain diaspora is primarily ideologically determined, not just based on membership to an imagined community or emigration from an origin state. Moreover, this ideologico-political determination is dependent on domestic political developments (including a change of the Taiwanese understanding of nationhood) rather than just subjective beliefs of the ‘Yunnanese Chinese’.

Mylonas and Žilović (2017) focus on nation-states with an ethnocultural definition of nationhood and thus define the term diaspora as ‘citizens and purported co-ethnics residing abroad’. In particular, they study repatriating members of the imagined national community, i.e. ethnic return migrants. Given their emphasis on non-uniform diaspora policies, they necessarily conceptualise diaspora as a multilayered entity. In their work, the layers which generate sub-diaspora groups are primarily based on the geographic location from which these groups are repatriating from. However, there could be other basis for such groupings to emerge. For instance, Brinkerhoff’s work (2017) focuses on the Coptic diaspora, one of the sub-groups of the Egyptian diaspora, while Zeveleva’s work (2017) focuses on state policies toward German ‘co-ethnic migrants’ from the former Soviet Union. Her empirical focus is on the stories told by members of co-ethnic migrant groups. She shows that these stories are structured by diaspora policies that aim to monopolise definitions of co-ethnic migrant groups, and to standardise the stories group members tell about their historical ties to different states.

The distinctions made by the authors around what constitutes the diaspora, challenge common assumptions about diasporas as an already mobilised actor and push us to examine the scales and temporal dimensions in which diaspora identities are formed, animated, or activated, by whom and for what purposes. What are the interactions between state-led diaspora identity formations and diaspora-led identity formations? How do these identities shift and what factors shape them? Under what conditions are these identities sustained over time? How do these identities shift based on where the diaspora is located, and how are these groups identified by the state or other actors, or among themselves, upon return to the origin country? Beyond more widely examined phenomena such as external voting participation or formal diasporic organisation, where do we see the agency of diasporas at the micro-level, considering the variety of experiences, perspectives, and characteristics of the populations interacting with state and non-state actors seeking to engage them for a variety of purposes?

III. Methodological innovations and paths for further research

Even though diaspora policies are becoming common and follow more predictable patterns, examining the various actors that participate in their design and implementation and their temporal and spatial variations contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how these policies are constituted, how they evolve over time and their effects – at
home and abroad – across different groups identified (or not) as part of the diaspora. The articles in this special issue provide methodological, empirical, and conceptual tools to help us understand broad trends as well as exceptional cases, and open up avenues for further research.

From a methodological perspective, the articles by Gamlen, Cummings, and Vaaler, as well as Arrighi and Lafleur (2017) are significant contributions to the operationalisation of quantitative indicators to support and develop theoretical approaches. Building on an increasingly maturing field of inquiry spanning several academic fields and responding to prominent calls in the literature (Gamlen 2014; Délano and Gamlen 2014; Ragazzi 2014), Gamlen, Cummings, and Vaaler (2017) use an original dataset coding 113 countries from 1992 to 2012 to conclude that the spread of diaspora institutions is largely explained by the diffusion of global norms of shared governance over emigrants and their descendants (the governmentality hypothesis). However, two other explanations for this trend – the tapping perspective (stressing how origin-states engage diasporas as assets in the spheres of development and security) and the embracing perspective (highlighting the importance of the diaspora in defining and securing the origin-state’s political identity) also find support across a wide spectrum of cases around the world.

This dataset and the patterns it is depicting establish the growing practical importance of diaspora politics across the world. Another notable feature of this new dataset is that it is based on over a decade of interviews, participant observation, and detailed documentary research with diaspora policy-makers around the world. The vast diversity of actors and goals of diaspora politics require this kind of detailed case knowledge for the refinement of future quantitative datasets. Similarly, such a development can help policy-makers in the much-needed task of assessing the effectiveness of the existing diaspora engagement policies in shaping international flows of people, remittances, investments, and technology transfers.

However, most of these datasets rest on prior extensive qualitative work. This qualitative work often allows us to move beyond generalisations to decentralise and unpack the state-level focus of diaspora policies. Several of the articles in this special issue serve as examples of how state-level analysis can be complemented and furthered through disaggregation of actors, goals, modes, and targets of diaspora policies. Speaking directly to the ambition of this special issue, Gamlen, Cummings, and Vaaler suggest that future quantitative datasets could be improved by going beyond country-level policy data to code dyadic data (Mylonas 2012; Mylonas and Žilović 2017).

Arrighi and Lafleur (2017) build one such dataset containing data on external voting rights in subnational elections in 292 regions clustered within 17 European countries, plus Canada, United States, and Mexico. Arrighi and Lafleur note that widespread horizontal diffusion of external voting in national elections has rarely been accompanied by a parallel vertical diffusion of external voting rights for regional representative bodies. However, they also note that the number of regional elections in which expatriates can vote has been on the rise, and that both this trend and the diversity of electoral arrangements through which they can do so deserves further comparative research. While prior research has investigated how regional and local governments had come to play an important role in immigrant integration policy, Arrighi and Lafleur present one of the first attempts to examine diaspora engagement policies of regional authorities.
In their empirical section, Arrighi and Lafleur select two emblematic negative cases – Flanders and Scotland – for closer qualitative examination. Both of these regions are characterised by strong levels of sub-state nationalism, and they both in the recent past seriously considered extending external voting rights to expatriates but ultimately decided against it. Thus, they satisfy the ‘principle of possibility’ that Mahoney and Goertz (2004) have suggested for selecting cases that have the potential for theory-building and theory-testing. Analysis of the franchise-extension debates in the two regions shows that whether regional external voting rights are extended depends on (1) the region’s legal authority to alter the composition of the franchise; on (2) the expected electoral gains and losses among political parties within the sub-state party system; and most importantly on (3) the perceived compatibility of an extension of the suffrage to citizens abroad with the broader pursuit of autonomy goals by the regional nationalist elites. In Scotland, the persisting exclusion of emigrants went hand in hand with the inclusion of immigrants, reflecting the effort by the Scottish Nationalist Party to paint its quest for Scottish independence with the image of civicism. By contrast, concern about preserving ethno-linguistic homogeneity and fear of a Francophone interference in regional politics were crucial in derailing any attempt to enfranchise emigrants from Flanders. Future work should extend the explanatory analysis to areas in which regional ruling elites do not nurture separatist or nationalist goals, but it is precisely the fact that such elites are present in Flanders and Scotland that gives the cases particular practical importance.

Another central message of our special issue is a call to focus on what accounts for group-level variation in policy both toward emigrants living abroad as well as toward those who ‘return’. The work by Mylonas and Žilović (2017) systematically analyses group-level variation in ethnic return migration policies in two different countries and calls for further efforts documenting, conceptualising, and explaining group-level variation in other cases of ethnic return migration but also variation in diaspora engagement policies. Délano Alonso’s work (forthcoming) also addresses the variation in Mexico’s diaspora policy toward undocumented youth based on whether or not they are DACA recipients, their leadership within their communities, as well as the lack of support for this same populations once they have returned to Mexico (voluntarily or forcibly). Her work demonstrates the limits and contradictions of diaspora policies when evaluated from a holistic perspective, including emigration, immigration, transit, and return migration. However, the study of diaspora policies – many of which are considered innovative and progressive from the perspective of development, sovereignty, governance, citizenship, and social rights – and their impact on emigrants, whether in relation to transnational social protections, integration, empowerment, political mobilisation, or institutional frameworks, can be a guide for changes within origin countries to address the causes of migration and the challenges for return populations.

Most contributors to this special issue base their articles on single or comparative case studies. In their effort to unpack the multiplicity of state and non-state actors that pursue diaspora policies, as well as to disaggregate actorness of diaspora itself, our contributors employ a range of cross-disciplinary techniques, including interviews (Paarlberg 2017; Mahieu 2017); participant observation (Mahieu 2017); biographical sociology focusing on interview narratives, critical discourse analysis of state discourses, and ethnographic observation at the localities (Zeveleva 2017); analysis of primary documents (Abramson 2017; Mylonas and Žilović 2017); and surveys (Klekowski von Koppenfels 2017;
Mahieu 2017; Brinkerhoff 2017). Putting the articles in conversation reveals there is still a need to put qualitative and quantitative methods in dialogue in order to test the generalisability of hypotheses developed in the context of single-case studies or smaller-N comparisons. The work of Pedroza, Palop, and Hoffmann (2016) on emigration policies across Latin America attempts to fill some of these gaps through mixed-method comparative analysis and serves as a model for future work.

While there are clear trends in the types of diaspora policies being adopted, the institutional frameworks that support them and the norms that guide them, this special issue demonstrates the need to examine cases where this is not happening or is happening in different modalities. This allows us to have a more critical approach to the emergence of norms in relation to state-diaspora relations, the actors that are guiding such processes and the power dynamics involved in the design, implementation, and reaction to diaspora policies. Some of the articles included in this collection call for incorporating diasporas’ reactions to such policies to more fully understand the construction of diaspora identities, policies and institutions.

The articles in this issue reveal the complex array of actors and factors that shape diaspora politics and challenge the state-centric approach as well as a narrow definition of the term diaspora. They reveal the need to theorise at the micro-level in order to understand the differences or similarities in motivations of these actors vis-a-vis the broader trends that have already been established in the literature. Further research should explore whether and how non-state actors operate based on the same logic as the national state (Koinova 2017). Existing typologies provide a rich framework for such analyses, while their results will also offer more nuanced understandings of the broader trends at the national or global level. From the perspective of diaspora groups, key questions remain about how their responses to policies vary depending on which actor drives the policy. Moreover, to respond to the general agreement in the scholarly literature that recognises the heterogeneity within diasporas and problematises the term, it is necessary to develop approaches to study variation in groups’ shape and/or responses to diaspora programmes and policies. Applying the popular diffusion framework at this level also requires considering how the responses of one diaspora or sub-diaspora group influence another diaspora or sub-diaspora group, respectively. Similarly to other calls for further research in the field, it is necessary to consider not just the economic and political context of the country of origin, but also how the context of reception – the specific location of the diaspora (not just at a country-level but even at a municipal level) – influence how it is viewed by these actors as well as their responses to them. Beyond the actors examined here (political parties, the church, local governments), how can we move toward an analysis of other actors, including businesses or the media?

Finally, one of the challenges for further theorising in this field is to incorporate the study of exceptions and outliers. As the field grows, and as our current political moment calls for imagining new ways to respond to the challenges and opportunities of migration, the field of diaspora studies has uncovered innovative practices and frameworks that help us rethink questions of citizenship, sovereignty, territory, welfare, and rights. One of our challenges as scholars is to translate our work beyond our academic circles in ways that can help shape these debates and practices at the macro and micro-levels, recognising academic research as a mode of diffusion with varying implications,
but most importantly, keeping the individuals who are affected by these policies (or lack thereof) at the centre of our research enterprise.

Notes

1. We use the term ‘microfoundations’ to suggest that all our macro-level theories causally linking variables should be explicit about the mechanisms and, when possible, to take into account the behaviour of individuals, groups, state elites, and international organizations. We, thus, use the term microfoundations in a way that is reminiscent to Thomas Schelling’s work on *Micromotives and Macrobehavior* (1978), namely forcing us to think about how aggregate social phenomena are produced by micro-level dynamics and/or actors’ incentives. We are not using the term ‘microfoundations’ in the narrower sense used in the field of Economics, namely that macroeconomic models should be constructed from the behaviour of welfare optimising individuals (Pepinsky 2012).

2. For a similar example in the case of Armenia, see also Darieva (2017), where the ‘homeland’ and the ways of relating to it are designed by groups within the diaspora, sidestepping the state itself and expanding notions of origin regardless of diasporans’ family or property ties and the state’s territorial location.

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