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Book Review

Book Review: Diasporas and Development

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**Barbara J. Merz, Lincoln C. Chen, and Peter F. Geithner, editors (2007):
*Diasporas and Development***

Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, and London, 2007

published by Global Equity Initiative, Asia Center, Harvard University

274 pages (paperback), ISBN 0-674-02455-9; US\$ 19.95/EUR 17.00/£ 12.95

“Ordinarily nobody more disquieting ever appeared there than the bearded old Jew who sometimes tapped on our door around dinnertime; [...] he stood silently in the dim hallway while I went to get a quarter to drop into his collection for the Jewish National Fund (a name that never sank all the way in: the only nation for Jews, as I saw it, was the democracy to which I was so loyally – and lyrically – bound [...]).”¹

Witnessing his Jewish parents regularly donating to the yet to be founded State of Israel, the writer PHILIP ROTH, perennial favourite for the Nobel Prize in literature, encapsulates in this autobiographical passage an ubiquitous reality of Jewish life in the diaspora: neither did his parents or other members of the Jewish American community speak Yiddish or modern Hebrew nor did they heed plans to emigrate to the promised land. However, they shared the belief that Israel ultimately was their “homeland”, imagined though, but nevertheless their true home.

Such a collective memory, vision or myth about an original homeland and its subsequent idealisation was, besides the forced dispersal, considered to be one of the defining characteristics of a diaspora.² However, a glimpse at the case studies covered in “*Diasporas and Development*” already tells us that the notion of “diaspora” has evolved with the times, covering now a panoply of migrant groups³ which hardly resemble the Jewish “archetypal diaspora” (REIS 2004, p. 44) or the once frequently quoted Armenian diaspora. Instead of discussing these historical, albeit to date relevant examples, the volume contemplates what COHEN would have labelled victim, labour or trade diasporas (SHUVAL 2000, p. 43), namely Asian, African, Caribbean and Central American diaspora communities.

The choice of case studies has not been made haphazardly: “*Diasporas and Development*” belongs to a series of publications issued by the Global Equity Initiative (GEI)⁴ at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of Harvard University which seeks to advance equitable development. As a consequence, it focuses on the fields of human security, China and India, capabilities (in the sense of AMARTYA SEN’s capabilities approach to poverty alleviation) and philanthropy. In the course of studying the latter, the GEI has dedicated three books to the donation patterns of diaspora communities, focusing thereby on Chinese and Indian communities (2004), remittances by members of the Mexican diaspora (2006) and finally on the Pakistani-American community’s philanthropic endeavours (2006).

- 1 PHILIP ROTH (1988), *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography*, New York: Vintage International, p. 30.
- 2 MICHELE REIS (2004), *Theorizing Diaspora: Perspectives on 'Classical' and 'Contemporary' Diaspora*, *International Migration*, 42 (2), p. 43.
- 3 JUDITH T. SHUVAL (2000), *Diaspora Migration: Definitional Ambiguities and a Theoretical Paradigm*, *International Migration*, 38 (5), p. 42. On the terminological evolution cf. REIS, pp. 45.
- 4 Information on the GEI can be found at www.fas.harvard.edu/~acgei/.

The presented volume thus profits from the previous research, but permits the reader to get a notion of the practices of differently rooted diasporas. Moreover, the reader is not exposed to an array of case studies, but instead gains a comparative perspective thanks to the book's first three chapters dealing with thematic aspects: MARK SIDEL covers in "Focusing on the State" government responses to diaspora transfers, locating states along a continuum reaching from supportive to restrictive. The quantitative dimensions of diaspora remittances worldwide are highlighted by DAVID DE FERRANTI and ANTHONY J. ODY, whose contribution "What Can Remittances and Other Migrant Flows Do for Equitable Development?" also deals with financial instruments beyond the continually discussed remittances. DEVESH KAPUR on the other hand reveals "The Janus Face of Diasporas" by questioning the motives of donators and highlighting the negative impact of diaspora funds.

In spite of these seemingly disparate topics, one question runs as the main thread through the whole volume, thematic chapters and case studies alike: Do diaspora transfers promote equitable development, understood as "the expansion of human choice" (p. 4), in the country receiving funds or do they instead accentuate inequity? Although most case studies just briefly address this question directly and rather focus on obstacles for diaspora remittances or their relationship with the homeland, they generally conclude that diaspora transfers fail to foster equity: if the funds are not channelled and information on the country's pressing needs is not forwarded, they only provide relief to certain communities or families. In this light, BARBARA J. MERZ concludes her observations on "Diaspora Engagement in the Caribbean" with the remark that diaspora funds reinforce economic inequity, deploring their lack of a redistributive effect and their use for immediate consumption rather than for long-term investments. Yet, according to SIDEL even diaspora investments in basic social services bear dangers, since they might offer an excuse for states to withdraw from what many consider to be their primary duties. The perverse effect this might have is described by MOJÚBÁLÚ OLÚFÚNKÉ OKOME's study of African diaspora groups: with regard to the possible sources of diaspora remittances, the withdrawal of a state from its social duties might lead to a "system that makes participation in human and drug trafficking seem legitimate survival mechanisms for those with few other options" (p. 173).

Not only monetary transfers may have an impact on the receiving country, but also "social remittances" (p. 207) could have an equitable effect. While positive repercussions from a reversed brain drain are easily to be deduced, KAPUR discloses more unsettling effects of ideas transferred, e.g. the establishment of criminal networks. According to his analysis, these stem from the motivations of diaspora members that might contravene the interests of their home countries. While the case studies discern the "validation of identity" (p. 221) or "identity needs" (p. 144) as their main incentive to support families or communities at home, KAPUR refers to alternative explanations: for instance, supporting nationalism in the homeland may advance a migrant's situation in the host society, it being "the cheapest way for them to maintain their membership status within the immigrant community while eschewing any commitments [...] that might impede their upward mobility" (p. 106).

How far this thesis can be corroborated is, unfortunately, not discussed any further: although the motives for diaspora transfers might be key to understanding their effects on societal equity, the case studies hardly go beyond stating the incentives named by diaspora members. This can possibly be explained by the diverse nature of the case studies

whose level of analysis at times do not permit to dig deeper: while, for instance, ADIL NAJAM clearly focuses on the Pakistani-American community in his contribution on “Diaspora Philanthropy to Asia” and MANUEL OROZCO with “Central American Diasporas and Hometown Associations” chooses an even more focused approach, MOJÚBALÚ OLÚFÚNKÉ OKOME’s chapter covers the whole African continent. At times, this hampers the reader’s comparative reflections, while, on the other hand, the partly observable focus on diasporas in the United States is conducive to one’s understanding of the issue as a whole.

Grasping the issue as a whole and learning to view it from different, not solely economic angles thus is the main benefit students and researchers alike will draw from reading “Diasporas and Development”: case studies and thematic chapters go beyond the question at base – the advancement of equitable development, and let the reader explore motivations for migration and philanthropic donations in different cultural, geographic, political and economic contexts, inducing him to likewise question their effects. The authors may not answer all the questions they have forwarded themselves, but they succeed at bringing them to the reader’s mind and raise his awareness for the complexity of the issue at hand.

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Past Publications of the Global Equity Initiative on Diaspora Philanthropy:

GEITHNER, PETER F., CHEN, LINCOLN C. and JOHNSON, PAULA D. (ed.) *Diaspora Philanthropy and Equitable Development in China and India*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

MERZ, BARBARA (ed.). *New Patterns for Mexico: Observations on Remittances, Philanthropic Giving, and Equitable Development. Nuevas Pautas para México: Observaciones sobre Remesas, Donaciones Filantrópicas y Desarrollo Equitativo*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

NAJAM, ADIL (ed.). *Portrait of a Giving Community: Philanthropy by the Pakistani-American Diaspora*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.