CRITICAL REALISM, ASSEMBLAGES AND PRACTICES BEYOND THE STATE: A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING GLOBAL DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT

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CRITICAL REALISM, ASSEMBLAGES AND PRACTICES BEYOND THE STATE: A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING GLOBAL DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT[1]

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades state-based diaspora engagement institutions have proliferated. Meanwhile, the surge in diaspora engagement initiatives by non-state global governance actors is also on the rise. However, such 'global-ising' of diaspora engagement does not describe a simple 'scaling-up' of policies from the domestic to the supranational level. Rather, it suggests a reconfiguration of policies, actors and spaces by and through which diasporas are now being engaged/governed. No doubt, this calls for a reassessment of existing analytical frameworks. This paper makes the case for a new ontological perspective for studying global diaspora governance. It proposes that existing analyses of diaspora governance lack explanatory power for a number of reasons. They either fall into the trap of methodological nationalism, and thus fail to account for the complexities of contemporary global social and political configurations, or, if they do problematise complexity, they do so in a way that depoliticises global governance processes. Instead, this paper argues for a critical realist ontology, which suggests that we think about global diaspora engagement through the concept of the assemblage. Assemblages, this paper argues, allow us to consider global diaspora engagement as complex relations between human and non-human agents whose configurations shape the conditions of possibility for action in a particular circumstance. When paired with Bourdieusian practice theory, the assemblage can also act as the (de-/reterritorialised) field within which practices are hierarchically ordered, thus enabling the study of how political struggles unfold inside specific configurations of global diaspora engagement.

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[1] A draft of this paper was prepared for the "Beyond Positivism Conference", Critical Realism Network, 8-10 August 2017, Montreal.

INTRODUCTION

The last decade has seen a steady proliferation of institutions set up by states to harness the economic, social and political potential of their emigrant populations. A study found that in 2013 over half of United Nations member states had formal institutions dedicated to emigrants and their descendants.[2] These institutions have taken the form of symbolic and institutional capacity building processes; the extension of rights to the diaspora, such as voting-rights, dual nationality, extension of civil and social services; as well as extracting obligations from the diaspora through, for example, investment policies on remittances and foreign direct investment (FDI) capture.[3] More recently, there has also been a huge surge in interest directed at diasporas from countries with large immigrant populations, such as the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, as well as non-state actors such as the EU[4] and the World Bank (WB), international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and the private sector. Under Hillary Clinton's leadership, the US State Department set up the International Diaspora Engagement Alliance (IdEA), a public-private partnership designed to harness the potential of diaspora populations residing in the US to contribute to social and economic development in their countries of origin. Meanwhile, NGOs such as UK-based International Alert or the Mosaic Institute in Canada are working with diaspora peace-builders to confront prejudice on the involvement of diaspora communities in so-called 'home-grown terrorism' or 'imported-conflict' in the EU and North America[5]. Diaspora engagement is thus being pursued not only by states, but by a complex global set of actors that are operating beyond the state-level, across a multiplicity of spaces. It has overwhelmingly been framed as an operational strategy or management tool[6], thought to enhance the legitimacy of global governance interventions by diversifying the range of actors involved in decision-making. However, the inclusion of some diasporas in these engagement strategies necessitates the exclusion of others. Thus, far from apolitical best practice diaspora engagement for remains contested and highly political. It produces hierarchies within and among diaspora groups, and it can create and reify oppressive and exclusionary categories related to diasporas and migrants more widely (the terrorist-financier, or the "model minority" for example). But how exactly are these boundaries of inclusion and exclusion drawn?

A growing body of scholarship, primarily in the disciplines of International Relations (IR) and Human Geography, has been addressing the politics of diaspora engagement. Overwhelmingly, explanations for diaspora engagement or non-engagement are considered

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[2] Alan Gamlen, Michael Cumming, Paul M. Vaaler and Laura Rossouw, "Explaining the Rise of Diaspora Institutions," *IMI Working Paper Series* 78 (2013).

[3] Alan Gamlen, "Diaspora Engagement Policies: What Are They and What Kinds of States Use Them?" Working paper. COMPAS, University of Oxford (2006).

[4] Giulia Sinatti, Cindy Horst, "Migrants as Agents of Development: Diaspora Engagement Discourse and Practice in Europe," *Ethnicities* 15 no. 1 (2015): 134–52.

[5] John Monahan, Rima Berns-McGown, and Michael Morden. 2014. "The Perceptions and Reality of 'Imported Conflict' in Canada," (2014), http://mosaicinstitute.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/15.pdf.

[6] For example, "The Diaspora Option", in Hélène Pellerin, Beverley Mullings, "The 'Diaspora Option', Migration and the Changing Political Economy of Development." *Review of International Political Economy* 20, no.1 (2013): 89–120.

to be located at the level of structural developments, either as a function of neoliberal capitalism[7] or the Western drive to discipline diasporic bodies[8] in order to stabilise liberal order in the global South[9]. Such critical assessments give us interesting accounts of the political logics that might be driving interest in diaspora engagement. And yet, the idea that a singular and universal logic is driving diaspora engagement is not entirely convincing. Especially, because most of the above accounts remain married to a nation-state centric understanding of global political processes, which brings with it several problems.

Consider the following: There have emerged a small number of Tamil diaspora-run development organisations in Toronto that are led by young professionals in the business and finance industries, who are well-versed in the ubiquitous discourses and practices of social innovation, entrepreneurship and corporate social responsibility, are deemed legitimate and desirable partners in the international development community. These organisations and individuals win out over other grassroots, community-based, or culturally focused diaspora organisations whose work may not fit neatly into neoliberal discourses on individualised responsibility and thus rely on public spending. Meanwhile, the same entrepreneurial Tamils, who were just rewarded for their ability to raise money for homeland development initiatives, might also be under surveillance for suspicion of directing financial flows to insurgent/violent organisations in the homeland, because they are part of the oppressed ethnic minority. Alternatively, their technocratic professionalism, the very same quality that allowed them to act with authority in one context, might be considered illegitimate in local homeland settings, where cultural knowledge and shared experience/grievance outweigh other forms of social capital.

Political struggles like this remain entirely invisible to scholars who focus their attention on the macro level. And yet, it is precisely at this level - of practices amongst sub- and transnational networks of actors that diaspora engagement politics are fought out. This, no doubt, calls for a reassessment of existing analytical frameworks. Approaches that highlight the macro dimensions of diaspora engagement politics and remain tied to an understanding of the global order as being divided into nation-states, do not even see the political struggle that occurs at the level illustrated here. Thus, in the hope of advancing knowledge on the politics of diaspora engagement, in the following paragraphs I will explore the question of how we may go about studying them.

The paper will proceed as follows: first, I will present a brief review of the scholarship that deals with power relations in the field of diaspora engagement. I will offer some reflections on why these approaches fall short in terms of their conceptualisations of power, echoing the familiar agency vs. structure debate in the social sciences, but expanding it to include arguments made by critical realists on social ontology. I proceed to argue that the politics of diaspora engagement are best studied by employing Bourdieusian practice theory, which can offer a way out of the ontological impasse and also gives us a critical

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[7] Latha Varadarajan, *The Domestic Abroad: Diasporas in International Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2010); Francesco Ragazzi, "A Comparative Analysis of Diaspora Policies," *Political Geography* 41, (July 2014): 74–89.

[8] Elaine Ho, Mark Boyle, "Migration-as-Development Repackaged? The Globalizing Imperative of the Singaporean State's Diaspora Strategies." *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 36, no.2 (2015): 164–82.

[9] Mark Laffey, Suthaharan Nadarajah, "The Hybridity of Liberal Peace: States, Diasporas and Insecurity." *Security Dialogue* 43, no.5 (2012): 403–20.

understanding of power relations. Finally, I outline how assemblage theory can further a post-positivist understanding of the politics of diaspora engagement by making it empirically possible to study spaces beyond the state.

THE POLITICS OF DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT: A STATE OF THE ART

What are the politics of diaspora engagement? Who wins and who loses when policy-makers decide to engage diasporas and who has the power to decide over the inclusion and exclusion into winning and losing camps? In order to answer these questions, we first have to have a theory on how and where power operates in the social world. The following section will review the extant literature on diaspora engagement and then offer some insights on how diaspora agency has been conceptualised in Political Science.

DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT AND THE STATE

The most explicit discussion of the politics of diaspora engagement has taken place amongst scholars who have sought to make sense of the rapid proliferation of policies and institutions of emigrant states targeting their own diasporic populations. The bulk of scholarship has focused on explaining why individual states seek to manage[10] their diaspora populations, by, for example extending voting rights or introducing special visa programmes. For example, Mylonas[11] suggests that diaspora engagement, which he terms emigrant policies, are part of a wider nation-building project, while Gamlen et al.[12] have created a helpful typology for understanding why states might want to respond to the increased political and economic importance of diaspora by creating diaspora engagement institutions. Their large-N study found that diaspora engagement by states falls into either a 'tapping', an 'embracing' or a 'norm diffusion' logic. While these scholars can explain why states may seek to engage their own populations, drawing barriers of inclusion and exclusion along ethnic and national lines, this does not explain the interest in diaspora engagement by transnational and supranational actors or migrant-receiving states.

Others have taken a more macro-perspective, suggesting that diaspora engagement primarily benefits powerful western states. Here, the engagement of diasporas by the liberal international community is understood to be driven by a will to subjugate and discipline global populations. For example, Latha Varadarajan[13] suggests that contemporary state attitudes towards diasporas must be understood as part of the hegemony of a neoliberal global political economy, whereby diaspora communities offer opportunities for capitalist expansion. Meanwhile, Ragazzi[14] uses Foucauldian governmentality theory to explain why states are increasingly interested in engaging their respective diasporas, in an effort to

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[10] Harris Mylonas, *The Politics of Nation-Building: Making Co-Nationals, Refugees, and Minorities*, (Cambridge University Press 2013); Gerasimos Tsourapas, "Why Do States Develop Multi-Tier Emigrant Policies? Evidence from Egypt." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41, no. 13 (2015): 2192–2214.

[11] Mylonas, *The Politics of Nation-Building*.

[12] Gamlen et al., *Explaining the Rise of Diaspora Institutions*.

[13] Varadarajan, *The Domestic Abroad*.

[14] Ragazzi, "A Comparative Analysis of Diaspora Policies".

reproduce the global political economy. Similarly, Laffey and Nadarajah[15] support the view that diaspora engagement forms part of a liberal government logic, albeit this time as part of a larger effort to securitise and generate liberal order in the pacific region, and the Global South more widely. All of these authors offer critical insights into the structural forces that drive state-diaspora relations. In contrast to the liberal literature, they also make explicit the often-exploitative power relations which underlie diaspora engagement practices. The value of these critical contributions for the study of diaspora engagement politics is immense. And yet, some shortcomings remain, especially in light of the increasingly complex multi-level and multi-actor nature of diaspora engagement. The first problem is that they remain state-centric. They suggest that the state remains the main locus of power in global politics, and yet, diaspora engagement takes place in the spaces between states through networks of actors that include the state, but also non-state actors and processes. Only recently, has there been a loudening call to decenter the state[16] and to bring the role of NSAs to the fore of their analysis because clearly "both state and non-state agents are implicated in these projects"[17]. Similarly, others have noted that future studies on diaspora engagement strategies will "need to focus more on other actors and spaces" beyond the state[18]. However, this has yet to happen. A second shortcoming of the critical literature is that diaspora engagement is understood to be driven by singular overarching structural logics, be it the political economy or a liberal governmental rationality. This 'structure-centrism' means that they struggle to provide much detail as to how the systemic observations that they make might unfold at the micro-level. This essentially erases the agency of both the diaspora and the various actors that are tasked with engagement. Holzscheiter[19] has argued that poststructuralist approaches can often fall into this trap of ignoring the existence of social and political agents, or at least downplaying the ability of individual agency to bring about meaningful change. In the context of my study, such an oversight would mean that I would dismiss as meaningless cases in which diaspora engagement policies come to exist as a result of individual action. How can this dilemma be overcome? Délano Alonso and Mylonas[20] have suggested that we need to pay attention to 'microfoundations' of diaspora politics. One important aspect of these 'microfoundations' is diasporic agency. Thus, the following paragraphs will briefly outline how the issue of diaspora agency has been approached by scholars of diaspora politics.

[15] Laffey and Nadarajah, "The Hybridity of Liberal Peace".

[16] Catherine Ruth Craven, "Thinking about Governance through Diasporas: Decentering the State and Challenging the External/Internal Binary," *SFB 700 Governance in Areas of Limited Statehood Working Paper Series, (forthcoming 2018).*

[17] Elaine Ho. 2011. "'Claiming' the Diaspora: Elite Mobility, Sending State Strategies and the Spatialities of Citizenship," *Progress in Human Geography* 35, no. 6 (2011): 760.

[18] Alexandra Délano, Alan Gamlen, "Comparing and Theorizing State–diaspora Relations" *Political Geography* 41 (July 2014): 43–53.

[19] Anna Holzscheiter, "Between Communicative Interaction and Structures of Signification: Discourse Theory and Analysis in International Relations," *International Studies Perspectives* 15, no. 2 (2014): 142–62.

[20] Alexandra Délano Alonso, Harris Mylonas, "The Microfoundations of Diaspora Politics: Unpacking the State and Disaggregating the Diaspora," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, special issue (2017): 1–19.

DIASPORA AGENCY IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

The bulk of the early literature on diaspora in Political Science suggests that diasporas are internally bound actors who have causal impact on the social and political world. Diaspora engagement is thus understood as a mode of managing this causal process, to avoid negative diaspora impact[21]. Causal power describes a mechanical and therefore completely apolitical process. If diaspora impact (on, for example, civil conflict) can be measured as an independent variable, then exterminating the diaspora variable is the only rational policy option for modern liberal states.

Over time, this form of research on diaspora populations has become more differentiated and reflexive. In more recent discussions of diaspora mobilisation the individual agency of diaspora members is highlighted and they are cast as development entrepreneurs[22] or mediators in peace processes[23]. Crucially, in these accounts causal power is transferred to the diaspora agent. Subsequently, power struggles between the diaspora and those (global governance) actors that are doing the engaging (for example, states, NGOs or IOs) are conceptualised as interactions between rational thinking agents, whether driven by a logic of profit maximisation or normative appropriateness. In that sense, the politics of diaspora engagement are the result of individual speech acts, of persuasion or negotiation. This logic of communicative power[24], which is based on the writing of Habermas[25] and focuses exclusively on the micro-level mechanisms employed by individual agents, must confront several criticisms. First of all, while interactionist approaches manage to theorise a power struggle that takes place in real-time communication, they fail to acknowledge that agents who engage in this sort of discursive interaction also exist within a powerful structure. According to Anna Holzscheiter, assuming that norms and ideas are pre-given "discursive resources that can be intentionally put to use"[26] to further individual interests, is somewhat problematic. It assumes that discursive power flows simply from one actor to another in a discrete social event or speech act.[27] Ultimately, the Habermasian conceptualisation of power as communicative or deliberative, also encounters significant problems when applied to global and/or non-Western contexts, as it presupposes a rational individualist subjectivity and is thus anchored in modern enlightenment thinking, all the while holding on to claims of universalism and human progress. At the same time, suggesting that all agents have power to engage in political struggle for their own advancement completely legitimises any form of

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[21] Such as violent conflict, e.g. in Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, no. 4 (2004): 563–95; Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler, Måns Söderbom, "Post-Conflict Risks," *Journal of Peace Research* 45, no. 4 (2008): 461–78.

[22] Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, *Institutional Reform and Diaspora Entrepreneurs: The In-between Advantage*, (Oxford University Press 2016).

[23] Bahar Baser, Ashok Swain, "Diasporas as Peacemakers: Third Party Mediation in Homeland Conflicts," *International Journal on World Peace* 25, no. 3 (2008): 7–28.

[24] Thomas Risse, "'Let's Argue!': Communicative Action in World Politics," *International Organization* 54, no. 1 (2000): 1–39.

[25] Jürgen Habermas, "Towards a Theory of Communicative Competence," *Inquiry* 13, no.1-4 (1970): 360–75.

[26] Anna Holzscheiter, Children's Rights in International Politics: The Transformative Power of Discourse, (Springer Press 2010): 37.

[27] Ibid.

diaspora engagement policy that recreates injustice or inequality in the world, by suggesting that every person has the same tools at their disposal to negotiate for change. Unsurprisingly then, it is this decidedly liberal understanding of power (as individualised self-empowerment) that is highlighted most in policy circles that advocate for increased diaspora engagement. Evidently, where the literature on diaspora engagement is too structure-centric, the liberal mainstream of diaspora studies in Political Science overemphasises the power of the rational individual agent, often at the expense of social, political and historical context. Studying the 'microfoundations' of diaspora engagement politics does not mean doing away with all the structural constraints that diasporas and other global political actors find themselves in.

What becomes clear in the above paragraphs is that literature on diaspora engagement and the literature on diaspora agency both sit at different levels of analysis. And this problem of deciding at which level of analysis to situate power dynamics in social interactions is as old as social science itself. Accordingly, scholars have long attempted to resolve what some refer to as the structuration problem[28] or the levels-of-analysis problem[29]. However, most of these studies still give primacy or precedence to a certain causal mechanism (agency or structure), level of analysis (micro or macro) or a certain type of power (deliberative vs. constructive) when locating political struggles. So, in the seemingly endless debate about who has the power to act and to determine political outcomes, my suggestion is to look towards an analysis of practices.

By studying practices, not only can we reconcile the agency of global political actors with the structural constraints posed upon them by capitalism or liberal governmentality, we also begin to reterritorialise global politics. So, while post-structuralists rightly emphasise the spread of ideas and language, they fail to theorise how these processes of diffusion are embedded in material realities. The fact that even in critical social science spaces and bodies are so often overlooked, is a central tenet of critical realist theorising[30]. In the next section I will outline the conceptual building blocks of my study: practices and assemblages. I will conceptualise practices as my unit of analysis though which I can observe the local embodiment of global dynamics/structures; and I will locate these practices inside assemblages, which are a level of analysis that is different from the state.

LOCATING POWER IN PRACTICES

Practice approaches in IR are united by the premise that ontological priority is not given to either states, nor individual rational agents, or powerful structures, but instead to practices. Practices can be studied at the level of the individual person, where they might constitute a

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[28] As identified by both Giddens and Wendt; Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, (University of California Press 1984); Alexander E. Wendt, "The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory," *International Organization* 41, no.3 (1987): 335–70.

[29] Henry R. Nau, *Perspectives on International Relations: Power, Institutions, and Ideas*, (CQ Press 2014).

[30] Roy Bhaskar, "Realism in the Natural Sciences", ed. L. Jonathan Cohen, Jerzy Łoś, Helmut Pfeiffer, and Klaus-Peter Podewski, (Elsevier 1982), 337–54.

handshake or a wink[31], or, at a more collective level, in the form of diplomatic practices[32] or discourses and norms[33]. What is essential, however, is that rather than looking at these things occurring in the world and asking what (kind of logic) they represent[34], we take the practice itself seriously. Practices themselves are powerful and meaningful, not only as representations of structural or cognitive realms of consciousness. A practice always contains within it agency and structure. As it is embodied/enacted, it denotes an agent's positioning within a structure.[35] Thus, states and non-state actors, both individual and collective all have ontologically equal capability to act, and yet their positioning may be radically different. Beside decentering the state from its position as primary unit of analysis, by thinking about the world as constituted by practices we can also overcome the positivist inclination to search for an elusive a priori truth behind an action that we can never feasibly get at. Finally, practices ground structures in time and space and give them a material dimension (the body of the agent), thus countering the extreme ontological relativism of most post-structural approaches.

While a practice approach takes us some way towards overcoming the state-centric, positivist spectre that haunts the social sciences it does not, in and of itself, offer a theory on power which can shed light on the politics of diaspora engagement. It is specifically Bourdieu's practice theory which is required for this. Bourdieu's theory of power is a hierarchical one, rooted in neo-marxist theorising. In order to understand how power functions according to Bourdieu, we must familiarise ourselves with a few of his central concepts.

First of all, key to overcoming the agent-structure divide explored above is Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*. Habitus circumvents what I have referred to above as the structuration problem, by making social practices not simply the outcome of mechanical imposition of structures or the free intentional pursuits of individuals[36], but as the embodied interplay between agency and structure. In the words of Wacquant, habitus

> is a mediating notion that revokes the common sense duality between the individual and the social by capturing 'the internalisation of externality and the externalisation of internality' [in the famous expression of Bourdieu], that is, the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel, and act in determinate ways,

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[31] Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," *The Cultural Geography Reader*, (Taylor and Francis Group 2008).

[32] Iver B. Neumann, "Returning Practice to the Linguistic Turn: The Case of Diplomacy," *Millennium* 31, no. 3 (2002): 627–51.

[33] Holzscheiter "Between Communicative Interaction and Structures of Signification."

[34] Vincent Pouliot, "The Logic of Practicality: A Theory of Practice of Security Communities," *International Organization* 62, no. 2 (2008): 257–88.

[35] Roxanne Lynn Doty, "Aporia: A Critical Exploration of the Agent-Structure Problematique in International Relations Theory," *European Journal of International Relations* 3, no. 3 (1997): 365–92.

[36] Holzscheiter "Between Communicative Interaction and Structures of Signification."

which then guide them in their creative responses to the constraints and solicitations of their extant milieu.[37]

While habitus explains how agents enact and perform structures in the social world, the concept does not in and of itself explain exactly which practices end up being performed in a specific time and place. For this we must explore additional concepts. For Bourdieu, the concept of habitus is intimately tied to the concept of *capital*, in that habitus is essentially conditioned by it. Capital determines the power and position of an actor within a social order. Crucially however, capital is not just economic – as most Marxist scholars would argue - but also cultural and social. Whether capital actually translates to power is context-specific. Different contexts contain different hierarchical orderings of capital. Finally, Bourdieu conceptualises this context as a *field*. A field represents an arena or milieu of social interaction that is characterised by a particular hierarchical distribution of different forms of capital.[38] While one field may be structured so that economic capital is causally powerful, in another cultural capital may rank higher. In other words, it is a "structured space" that is organised around specific types of capital or combinations of capital.[39] This means that those actors who (through their specific intersubjective habitus) possess the dominant form of capital in a field are essentially more powerful in a given historically contingent context. Practices can then be understood as the outcomes of the constellations of habitus and capital within a field. Because distribution of capital is field specific and historically contingent, the struggle for power is the central dynamic of social life for Bourdieu.

In sum, a practice-based ontology allows us to overcome both the agent-structure divide in social research, and also circumvents the ontological fallacy of positivism. On top of this, Bourdieu's conceptualisation of practices as being hierarchically ordered within distinct social fields offers a theory of power, which can help us to explain the politics of global diaspora engagement. Let's briefly think back to our empirical example of young professional Tamil diaspora entrepreneurs. When we conceptualise diaspora engagement practices as taking place in different social fields, we are no longer at a loss to explain how struggles for power, legitimacy or political gain might play out differently depending on the hierarchical ordering of (social) capital in each field. And yet, Bourdieu alone cannot account for the politics of diaspora engagement in their full global complexity. His theory of power as embodied everyday struggles over capital is still intimately tied to his primary object of research – the French ruling class in the middle of the 20th century. Fields are very much imagined as existing within French national culture. In our effort to ontologically de-centre the state in our analysis of global diaspora engagement politics, we need to find a way of reshuffling Bourdieu's practice theory and his concept of the social field to a level beyond or

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[37] Loïc Wacquant, "Habitus," eds. Beckert, Jens, and Milan Zafirovski *International Encyclopedia of Economic Sociology*, (Routledge 2013).

[38] Zander Navarro, "In Search of a Cultural Interpretation of Power: The Contribution of Pierre Bourdieu," *IDS Bulletin* 37, no. 6 (2006): 11–22.

[39] Ibid.: 18.

other than the state[40], without simply scaling-up the assumption of *a priori* existing structures. This would simply reproduce the ontological positivism of state-centric social science on another level, e.g. the international system of states. We instead require a more flexible and abductive way of studying how practices of diaspora engagement are ordered in the social world without giving ontological priority to any one social structure (i.e. the state). In the next section I thus want to unravel the idea of state centrism in social research further and discuss how scholars of IR and Transnationalism Studies have attempted to overcome it.

OVERCOMING STATE-CENTRISM AND METHODOLOGICAL NATIONALISM

As I suggest in the literature review, one of the most often lamented shortcomings of existing approaches to the study of diaspora engagement is their state centrism. That there is a near-consensus regarding the need to include actors other than the state in order for analysis of diaspora engagement to be meaningful might seem commonsensical. However, it is crucial to look in more detail at the grounds upon which this need is articulated. This is because there is a crucial and consequential (ontological) difference between a) simply adding non-state actors to the scientific equation, b) historicising and/or decentering the state thus gnawing at the foundations of methodological nationalism and c) explicitly addressing the impasse that is intrinsic to methodological nationalism, which is its ontological positivism. I would argue that most of the existing calls to broaden the focus of study in political science and IR in particular have remained at stages a) and b). The following section will thus explore in more detail how and why scholars have argued for the need to de-centre the state in the analysis of transnational phenomena in the social sciences.

State-centrism in IR commonly describes the condition whereby the nation-state is understood as the primary unit of analysis in research. It follows that, in order to overcome this state-centrism, we simply need to include more actors in our analysis. This approach has been taken by various scholars in global governance research, following the broadening of the field of IR to include actors above and beyond the nation state. The development occurs as both liberal rationalists and constructivists begin to acknowledge that domestic, as well and trans- or supranational actors have a role to play in shaping state interests and the international environment. And yet, ontologically these actors then still exist only in relation to the state that they are influencing. This does not change the fundamental understanding that the world is oriented around the concept of the nation-state, with some additional actors operating below or above the national level and does nothing to actually address the scientific shortcomings of state-centrism in social research.

Unsurprisingly, some of the deeper and more refined critiques of state-centrism in the social sciences come from scholars of transnational migration processes. Accordingly, Wimmer and Glick Schiller[41] have explored the concept of methodological nationalism (MN),

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[40] See, for example, Loïc Wacquant, "Bourdieu Comes to Town: Pertinence, Principles, Applications," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 42, no.1 (2018): 90–105; Mike Savage, Laurie Hanquinet, Niall Cunningham, and Johs Hjellbrekke, "Emerging Cultural Capital in the City: Profiling London and Brussels," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 42, no. 1 (2018): 138–49.

[41] Andreas Wimmer, Nina Glick-Schiller, "Methodological Nationalism, the Social Sciences, and the Study of Migration: An Essay in Historical Epistemology," *The International Migration Review* 37, no. 3 (2003): 576–610.

which describes the "naturalization of a global regime of nation-states by the social sciences." They identify three variants of MN, namely the lack of a problematisation of the importance of nationalism to the modern Western project, its naturalisation through institutional practice, and as territorial delimitation. The critique that underlies MN is that concepts of nation and state structure our perception of social reality but often disappear as objects of critical inquiry. Thus, MN limits the ability of social scientists and historians to perceive processes that are above or below the level of the nation-state, for example, transnational processes such as migration, but also processes of global public policy making such as diaspora engagement. This critique of MN goes much deeper that the call to diversify the group of actors that operate in IR. It aims to de-centre the state in order to empower these other actors who engage in processes that cross state borders and are consequently vilified and criminalised for it. Overcoming MN is seen then as an essential step towards conducting empirical research that does not reproduce and reifying those analytical categories that are reductive, structurally violent, or western-centric. While I am sympathetic to this scientific endeavour, I am skeptical that it can be achieved without truly confronting the ontological roots of the problem. Without doing so, the logic of state-centrism will simply manifest in social science via another dogmatic and reified concept, even if it is now no longer the state. This is because methodological nationalism stands in for a much deeper underlying problem inherent in all (Western) social theory (but IR in particular), produced by its emergence out of modernist/enlightenment thinking. With this claim I echo Daniel Chernilo[42], who suggests that in order to transcend Methodological Nationalism we need to look at the foundational period of the (Western) social sciences. He argues that during its foundational period, all (Western) social theory strove towards universalism and the generalisability of 'natural law'. Therefore, social theory as a search for natural law ultimately requires ontological positivism. So, even though much of social theory in the 20th and 21st century has sought to shed its links to the notion of natural law (IR maybe less so), many of its presumptions are still deeply entrenched. For example, most post-modern or post-structuralist IR theory, even if it is able to challenge and historicise the nation-state, has largely failed to come up with alternative notions of how the contemporary world is structured. Thus, in order to offer a truly emancipatory analysis of the politics of diaspora engagement we need an alternative way of studying the social world, which does not rely on structuring it into preexisting categories, but is open to the fluidity, messiness and emergence of social structures. To summarise, if power resides in practices, in order to study the politics of global diaspora engagement we need to elevate the Bourdieusian field to a level beyond the state. However, we need to do this without reproducing the positivist ontology of other approaches that claim to address the issue of state-centrism. In the following, I will suggest that the concept of the assemblage as understood by critical realists, holds some promise in this regard.

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[42] Daniel Chernilo, "Social Theory's Methodological Nationalism: Myth and Reality," *European Journal of Social Theory* 9, no. 1 (2006): 5–22.

THE PROMISE OF ASSEMBLAGES: ACCESSING GLOBAL SOCIAL FIELDS

Within critical realist theorising, assemblages have emerged as an important conceptual tool, one which has only recently been embraced by scholars of IR and Public Policy. In IR the concept has been applied by Rita Abrahamsen and Michael Williams in their study of global security assemblages.[43] They define assemblages as "disaggregated structures with both material and immaterial dimensions" that function as a sort of a system of relations between humans and non-humans. Further, Acuto and Curtis[44] argue that "this ontology can provide a valuable starting point for the analysis of various social actors, including transnational corporations, institutional networks, epistemic communities, nation-states, cities, and terrorist networks" because as assemblages these actors are no longer incommensurable. The most important feature of assemblage theory for the study of the politics of diaspora engagement is thus, arguably, that it presupposes a flat ontology meaning that all social actors (from the sub-individual to the global or transnational) are best studied as assemblages of their component parts, which are in themselves assemblages. The differentiation between levels of analysis becomes obsolete.

Assemblage theory lets us imagine the world as made up of complex configurations of human and non-human agents, in which the state becomes only one of many possible configurations. By casting the state as an assemblage we decenter its ontological primacy. This does not mean that the state is no longer a powerful agent. What it does mean is that, whether and how the state (as an assemblage) has power to act, is now an empirical question. With regard to our attempt at applying Bourdieusian practice theory to the study of diaspora engagement politics, assemblage theory thus suggests that anyone can be an agent engaged in practices; not just states.

Further to broadening the scope of actors that partake in practices, the assemblage concept allows us to look at global politics or global governance and see not just a collection of states and non-state actors but to see clusters or compounds of processes, actors, institutions, sites and policies, that all share a certain relationship or goal (or logic). This relationship can be characterised in a variety of ways by a common identity[45], or common understandings of territory, authority and rights[46], once firmly embedded in national institutional frames. In that sense an assemblage, much like a social field in the Bourdieusian sense, is held together by a shared structuring logic, be that a "common identity" or a "common understanding of territory, authority and rights". If we translate these structuring logics into the language of Bourdieu, we can effortlessly recast them as the hierarchical distribution of capital within a field. In sum, assemblage theory offers a means to think about a global social field and thus of applying Bourdieusian practice theory to the study of the complex global politics of diaspora engagement. This is because it not only meaningfully

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[43] Rita Abrahamsen, Michael C. Williams, "Security Beyond the State: Global Security Assemblages in International Politics," *International Political Sociology* 3, no.1 (2009): 1–17.

[44] Michele Acuto, Simon Curtis, "Assemblage Thinking and International Relations," eds. Michele Acuto, Simon Curtis, *Reassembling International Theory*, (Palgrave Pivot 2014): 1–15.

[45] Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. 2nd edition, (University of Minnesota Press 1987).

[46] Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton University Press 2008).

expands the group of actors that we consider to be powerful agents in the world and places them on a flat ontological plane. But it also allows us to imagine and thus study a politics of diaspora engagement which operates across multiple assemblages and thus with multiple structuring logics and hierarchies of practices.

CONCLUSION AND AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In the preceding paragraphs, I have attempted to draw up a new theoretical framework for the study of the politics of diaspora engagement. After reviewing the state of the art literature on diaspora engagement by state and non-state actors, I concluded that these approaches could not shed adequate light on the politics and power struggles that characterise the diaspora engagement they describe. I suggested that this was the case for two reasons: first, because existing conceptualisation of power in diaspora engagement were caught in the aporia of the levels-of-analysis-problem, and second, because accounts of diaspora engagement overwhelmingly fell into the trap of methodological nationalism. I then suggested a two-pronged approach to address these issues. I proposed first a practice approach to the study of diaspora engagement, resting on the theoretical propositions of Pierre Bourdieu, which would overcome the levels-of-analysis-problem and also offer a critical reading of the power relations that characterised diaspora engagement practices. I then argued that, in order to apply Bourdieusian practice theory to the study of the (global) politics of diaspora engagement we need to reconceptualise two things a) the actors who were doing the practicing, and b) the spaces in which the practices were occurring. Ultimately, I concluded that, in order to even imagine powerful actors and spaces beyond the state,we needed to overcome the persistent ontological positivism of most mainstream but also much critical scholarship on diaspora engagement. In the final section, I discussed the ways in which assemblage theory could open up such avenues for post-positivist theorising and research and finally attempted to illustrate how assemblages could be combined with Bourdieusian practice theory to shed light on the politics of diaspora engagement, both theoretically and empirically.

While this paper has focused on ways in which to theoretically access and make visible the complex and multi-scalar/multi-actor phenomenon that is global diaspora engagement, I want to also briefly reflect on the promise that this theoretical model holds for empirical application. I have mentioned above that, far from being fixed and stable, assemblages (of states, of global governance, or of diaspora engagement) are always emerging. It follows that any analysis of them will only be a snapshot of a particular space in a particular time. Even though this means that assemblages do not fulfill the requirements for universal and generalisable research categories they make possible abductive theorising and rich empirical research. By not assuming the prior and unchanging existence of any social or natural facts, such as the primacy of states or the stability of state borders, they hold much promise for the study of the politics of diaspora engagement. And yet, this is easier said than done. Precisely because assemblages are abductively generated, we don't know what they look like until we have accessed them epistemologically. This has implications for empirical research. Rather than entering the field with preconceived analytical categories, which in the case of IR tend to be steeped in eurocentrism, post-positivist research requires fieldwork to be iterative and non-linear, to be able to take seriously alternative ways of knowing and thinking about the

world. And while this reflexivity is necessary for scholars seeking to combine realist ontologies with relativist epistemologies, it is also crucial that this catches on outside of niche philosophy of science debates.

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