Diasporic Relations and Social Exclusion:

The Case of Kurdish Refugees in Finland

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This article will describe the experiences of social exclusion and diasporic consciousness among Kurdish refugees in Finland. In general, refugees suffer from widespread social exclusion, and resettlement policies cannot mitigate the problems created by the economic recession. These issues lead to a number of problems for Kurdish refugees in terms of their integration into Finnish society.

The article suggests that the currently popular diaspora discourse, with its emphasis on the refugees' own social networks, can facilitate a rethinking of the present problems. The concept of diaspora can provide a deeper understanding of the social reality in which refugees live. The article argues that the refugees' own diasporic networks can be a useful resource for the refugees in their efforts to improve their situation in their new country of settlement. Of course, these networks can never replace egalitarian welfare states and their structures, but in a situation where integration does not work in an optimal way, there is also a need to look at the internal resources of the refugee communities themselves.

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The diaspora concept

In recent years, in the sociology of international migration, there has been an increased interest in the notion of diasporas. Lie (1994) argues that there in recent publications has been a change of focus from an interest in international migration to transnational diasporas. The new diaspora discourse has thus meant that the interest in immigration and assimilation has largely given way to an interest in transnational networks and communities. This discourse has emphasised personal experiences, and the researchers, who themselves are often from the minority communities, have tried to describe the minorities' own interests and definitions (Lie 1994).

The concept of diaspora originated as a concept describing the Jewish dispersal from their original homeland. It has often been used to describe different well-established communities which have an experience of "displacement", like the overseas Chinese, the Armenians in exile or the whole African diaspora. Today, however, it is used increasingly to describe any community which in one way or another has a history of migration (Marienstrass 1989). The concept has also been regarded as useful in describing the geographical displacement and/or deterritorialisation of identities, cultures and social relations in the contemporary world (cf. Gilroy 1991; Hall

1993). Furthermore, it can help to bridge the often artificial distinction between before and after migration. Thus the concept of diaspora is today used to describe the processes of transnationalism, as well as the salience of pre-migration social networks, cultures and capital, in a wide range of communities which experience a feeling of displacement (Clifford 1994; Safran 1991; Tölölyan 1991).

The diaspora discourse does not in itself represent a radically new way of looking at migration. The importance of social networks transcending national borders has previously been an area of considerable interest within migration research (e.g. Jaakkola 1984; Nyman-Kurkiala 1991; Pohjola 1991; Tilly 1990). Furthermore, it is a well understood fact that immigrant and ethnic minority associations, both formal and informal, can have many important functions for their communities (e.g. Carey-Wood et.al. 1995; Jenkins 1988; Joly 1996; Rex, Joly & Wilpert 1987).

Nor are diasporas a phenomenon connected solely to the contemporary world (Cohen 1995). What, however, is new in the contemporary world is the steadily increasing impact of globalisation, which may be defined as a "social process in which the constrains of geography on the social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding" (Waters 1995, 3). It is a process which increases the possibilities for the formation of different diasporas. Furthermore, it is possible to understand the diasporas as transnational social organisations. These forms of social organisations "have pre-dated the nation-state, lived within it and now may, in significant respects, transcend and succeed it" (Cohen 1995, 16).

Finally, it is important to remember that there is no reason to see diasporas as a solely positive development. As James Clifford points out: "Suffice it to say that diasporic consciousness 'makes the best of a bad situation'. Experiences of loss, marginality and exile (...) are often reinforced by systematic exploitation and blocked advancement" (Clifford 1994, 312). Although diasporas often are defined in relation to nation-states, it must be remembered that a diaspora cannot provide its members with the same services and opportunities that are provided by the state for its citizens. Thus, it is important not to see diasporas as a positive and sufficient alternative to egalitarian welfare states (cf. Wahlbeck 1996).

The research methods

This article is part of a much larger comparative study which deals with newly arrived Kurdish refugees in Britain and Finland. Here I will use only some of the results from the fieldwork in Finland. Ethnographic field research methods described by Schatzman and Strauss (1973) and Burgess (1984) have been used and a variety of material was collected in this study.

The most important material consists of semi-structured interviews with both male and female Kurdish refugees from Turkey, Iraq and Iran. 23 refugees were interviewed in Finland during the Autumn of 1994. The aim of the interviews was to obtain a broad understanding of the refugees' situation and problems as seen from their own point of view. Some of the interviews had to be completed with the help of interpreters. In addition to the interviews with refugees, Kurdish associations were studied through interviews and participant observation.

The Kurdish diaspora

Many refugee communities display a political and social orientation towards the country of origin. In many cases political events and conflicts in the country of origin continue to influence and often divide the communities (cf. Bousquet 1991; Gold 1992; Kay 1987; Lundberg 1989; Steen 1992; Valtonen 1996). On the other hand these same divisions can unite

those refugees who share the same political beliefs and background in the country of origin. The associations and informal networks growing out of this unity can be used as a resource to solve the problems faced by the refugees in their new country of settlement.

The following quotation expresses how refugees continue to be oriented towards the country of origin and the political struggles in which they have been involved. However, this Kurdish man from Turkey also found that his contacts with other Kurdish refugees and their collective political activities in relation to their country of origin helped him to overcome the problems he faced in Finland:

"It was very good (that there were other Kurds in the reception centre). And in my opinion, these Kurds, when we were together, it helped me a lot. Because it could have been really very difficult for me. I could have become mad or something. But when I was together with other Kurds, it helped me a lot. I was more interested in the Kurdish issue, and slowly, when I worked together with other Kurds for the independence of Kurdistan, you could say that after a while I totally forgot about my own problems and application for asylum, because the problems in Kurdistan were more important than my problems in Finland. There was a war, a really terrible war. When I listened to the BBC radio from London and when we called to Kurdistan they told us about the situation. This was all more interesting to us than our own life in Finland, because our family was there and all our relatives and our whole life. Part of our life was there and we ourselves were here. It was really difficult."

The diasporic consciousness expressed in these words was apparent among most of the Kurdish refugees in Finland. As I have argued elsewhere (Wahlbeck 1996), the Kurds in Europe can be seen largely as living in a diaspora. Although the Kurdish communities are deeply divided along predominantly political lines, there are several features of the communities which characterise them as a diaspora in accordance with for example William Safran's (1991) precise definition. The forced displacement of the Kurds, their collective memory of their original homeland, the alienation and discrimination they experience in Europe, their wish to return to Kurdistan, their collective commitment to the restoration of their homeland and finally their transnational social networks, are all features of the diasporic relations displayed by the Kurdish refugees in Europe.[1]

It is impossible to know the exact number of Kurds in Finland since the available data indicate citizenship and not ethnic identification. By comparing different sources I have arrived at the conclusion that the Kurds living permanently in Finland numbered between 1300 and 2000 by the end of 1994. Of these, 300–550 persons were from Turkey, 550–800 from Iraq and 450–650 from Iran.

All Kurds in Finland are recent arrivals, almost all of them having moved to Finland during the 1990s. The Kurds from Turkey arrived as asylum seekers, while most of the Kurds from Iran and Iraq arrived as quota refugees through UNHCR. Due to the resettlement practice in Finland, the Kurds are dispersed in small groups around the country. There is a tendency for the Kurds to move later either to the capital area or to some of the regional centres. The Kurds from Turkey are mostly living in the capital area.

Resettlement policies in Finland

Finland has similar refugee resettlement and reception policies as the other Nordic countries. The emphasis is on a positive integration of the refugees into society. Integration is encouraged through an extensive programme of language training and orientation courses. The emphasis in these programmes is often on finding employment for the refugees. The introductory courses for immigrants include practice at different jobs and extensive guid-

ance about different career opportunities. In Finland, as elsewhere, employment is often seen as a key factor in the integration of refugees (cf. Ekholm 1994; Phillips 1987; Miles 1993).

Cultural pluralism has not usually been regarded as a political problem in Finland, and there is a kind of multi-cultural ethos embedded in the official resettlement policies. However, as Matinheikki-Kokko (1994) has pointed out, Finnish policies are contradictory. The government papers about refugee resettlement are based on liberal pluralist ideas, but the policy recommendations are still universalist. Of course, discrepancies between theory and practice also exist in the immigration policies of other Nordic countries (cf. Schierup & Ålund 1991).

I would argue that in practice Finnish resettlement policy is often based on rather unrealistic expectations of a fast integration or even assimilation of refugees. At the same time, refugees are often seen as persons who have lost everything, in terms of material, social and cultural capital. Consequently, refugees are sometimes treated in the same way as small children, or as persons who must undergo a kind of resocialisation into Finnish society. [2]

One policy which has been criticised by many authors is the policy of dispersal according to which refugees are resettled in small groups all over the country. This practice does not support any creation of cultural communities among the refugees; nor does it try to take into account the resources which exist within the refugees' own social networks. Furthermore, Liebkind (1993) has argued that the lack of cultural communities is a detrimental factor affecting the psychological well-being of refugees in Finland. Accordingly, the Finnish resettlement system has not taken into account the transnational networks and the diasporic nature of the Kurdish refugees' experiences. Instead the resettlement system has been dominated by the Finnish authorities' preoccupation with "integration".

It should also be mentioned that those Kurds who arrive as asylum seekers in Finland experience many more problems than do the quota refugees. One obvious problem is the long delays, often of several years, before an asylum decision is given. Many interviewees also complained about the complicated bureaucracy in Finland.

However, it is important to remember that the resettlement policies do work very well in some respects. For example, one sympathetic feature of the Finnish resettlement policies is the realisation that the refugees' stay in the country easily becomes permanent, therefore temporary status and special arrangements have largely been avoided. Another feature which works very well is the language tuition which in Finland seems to be very efficient. In addition, most of my interviewees were pleased with the social services they received from the authorities. A refugee from Turkey, who had also helped other Kurdish refugees with their practical problems, told me about the variety of difficulties asylum seekers experienced, but still found that things had worked well in one respect:

"In the social sector the Kurds have received everything they need in Finland. Kurds and Finns have been treated in the same way, and you cannot say that one has got a better service than the other. The rights of the Kurds have been the same as for the Finns."

The shortcomings in the integration of refugees should perhaps not be blamed solely on the resettlement policies. Rather the major reasons are to be found in more general structures in Finnish society, and these will be discussed in the next section.

Social exclusion

There are of course several factors affecting the process of integration. However, my fieldwork among the Kurdish refugees indicated that there were two major obstacles to a positive integration of refugees into Finnish soci-

ety: first, the employment situation in Finland, and secondly, the racism and xenophobia which the refugees had to endure (these two issues are clearly not unrelated).

The employment situation among refugees in Finland is today extremely bad. Ekholm (1994) has used official statistics to calculate the exact unemployment rates for refugees. The rate was 61,4 % of the economically active refugees in 1992, when the national average was 13,1%. Since the national average unemployment rate grew to 18,4% in 1994 (Statistics Finland 1995), we can assume that unemployment among refugees was even worse in 1994 when I did my fieldwork.

A few Kurds arrived in Finland before the economic recession, and some of them managed to get jobs. However, among the main group who arrived in the 1990s the employment situation is very bad. A few Kurdish refugees have been employed as interpreters and Kurdish language teachers, while others are self-employed in fast food outlets and shops selling oriental foodstuffs. The start money for unemployed persons who establish businesses (a scheme administered by the Employment Offices) has been of great help to many Kurdish refugees. Nonetheless, those who have managed to employ themselves are exceptions, and during my fieldwork it became very clear that most Kurdish refugees are unemployed. It is likely that none of the Kurdish refugees who arrived in the 1990s have managed to get permanent jobs.

As I have explained earlier the Finnish refugee resettlement programme is clearly oriented towards integrating refugees into the labour market. During the present economic recession, however, refugees have not been able to find employment. The integration of refugees has instead been into the vast army of alienated and marginalised unemployed. It is clear that the relatively high unemployment among refugees can only be seen as a failure of the Finnish resettlement programme.

All refugees want to get a job and achieve integration into the labour market. They might not always have the necessary skills for the labour market, but still many of them are highly educated. Taking this into account, the relatively high unemployment rate among refugees suggests that they face discrimination in the labour market. It looks like they are not given a fair chance to compete for the few jobs which, despite the employment situation, are available. A young man from Iran, who spoke rather good Finnish, told me:

"Once it happened, in the Employment Office, that there was this idea that the worker there had found a job for me as a cleaner. I said that I wanted to have a job, even if it was a job as a cleaner. But then he showed me that it said in the advert that the employer had written that you had to speak Finnish, so I could not get it."

This was, however, the only occasion when I heard about somebody even having a remote chance of getting a job through the Employment Offices. Instead the unemployment situation in Finland has created a situation where the refugees are so marginalised that they cannot even experience the luxury of being discriminated against in the labour market.

Most of my interviewees had several experiences of different kinds of xenophobia and racism. What I found especially appalling was that most of the single men had experienced obviously racially motivated and vicious violent attacks. The other refugees had mostly experienced different vocal expressions of xenophobia and racism. However, rather surprisingly, only a minority of the interviewees had experienced what they would have described as actual discrimination. For example, only in a couple of cases had interviewees experienced discrimination by the Finnish authorities.

The surveys made by Magdalena Jaakkola (1995) indicate that Finnish attitudes towards foreigners and immigration have become considerably more negative during recent years. The opinions expressed in Finland are more

negative than the ones which have been revealed by similar studies in Sweden. However, there are great variations between different social groups, and it can still be argued that only a small minority can actually be described as racist or xenophobic.

The existence of a small, but loud and outspoken, xenophobic and racist minority was also emphasised by several of my interviewees. Most of the refugees had Finnish friends and enjoyed good social relations with Finns generally. Many of my interviewees wanted to emphasise that only some Finnish persons caused problems. This was described, for example, by a man from Iraq who had lived in Finland for several years:

"But I think that it is obvious that there are different attitudes and behaviour in Finland. Those who behave in a different way, they do not hide their feeling for themselves, but I have not had any experience (of racist attacks). I have not confronted any such situation."

Even if only some of the refugees have experienced actual racist attacks or discrimination, all of them are affected by the racist and xenophobic attitudes which many Finns display. This of course affects the possibilities of social contact with Finns. An older man from Iraq told me how his family's contacts with Finns were damaged:

"Yes, all the time when you walk on the street you think that perhaps that person hates me. Because it happens some times, that is why you have it with you all the time. We respect Finland and what they have done for us, but we do not know who is against us here. In Kurdistan we knew who was the enemy."

A typical experience is expressed in the following quotation from an interview with a younger man from Iraq who told me that he usually had no problems, apart from encounters with drunken persons:

"On Saturdays and Sundays we do not usually go out very much because they insult us in the street. For example, we cannot go to any bar, disco or hotel if we want to drink something, because they bother us. That is why we avoid places like that."

It can thus be stated that the Kurdish refugees in Finland experience isolation and social exclusion as a consequence of unemployment, racism and xenophobia, as well as the geographical dispersal of their ethnic community. The present economic situation, with high unemployment, seems to have become permanent. Additionally, the racist and xenophobic discourse in Finland has become more and more influential over time. In present conditions the Finnish resettlement programme, with its emphasis on employment and positive integration, has clearly not achieved its goals. Over time some positive effects of the resettlement programmes are also being lost. For example, the language skills which the refugees acquire are declining over time (cf. Valtonen 1996). Thus, it is important to rethink the resettlement programme for refugees. Although there is no reason to discard the general goal of integration, one could perhaps at the same time also examine the resources for a positive integration which the refugee communities themselves possess.

Rethinking resettlement

Resettlement policies should take into account the fact that the diasporic relations exist, and should make the best of these transnational social networks. As I argued in the previous section, this is today not being done. Instead the resettlement of refugees is concentrated on an integration into the labour market, and occasionally even an assimilation of the refugees is presupposed.

It might perhaps be expected that the diasporic relations which the refugees display would be a hindrance to integration. The lack of motivation to settle in a new country could present an obstacle for integration, for example to the refugees' learning of a new language. However, contrary to what one might expect, the diasporic relations can also be a

useful resource for the refugees in their new country of settlement, and can thus assist in the integration process. The diasporic social networks within the community can help refugees to start businesses and find employment, and can generally provide social and psychological support for newly arrived refugees.

How, then, could the resettlement policy in Finland take greater account of the diasporic social networks in the refugee communities? An alternative policy should clearly support the refugees' own associations to a greater extent than is the case today.

The Kurdish refugees in Finland come from very diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, most of the few Kurdish associations in Finland are associated with different political parties in the countries of origin. Thus the Kurdish refugees are not a unitary community and have experienced problems in getting formally organised. Despite this the existing organisations can work as a resource for the smaller group of refugees whom they have managed to mobilise. Although the organisations are oriented towards Kurdistan, they can also help the refugees with their problems in their new country of settlement. The following quotation is from an interview with a man from Turkey who tried to explain to me what his organisation meant for him:

"I am extremely satisfied with the fact that in every place there are supporters of the PKK (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan, Kurdistan Workers Party). And I believe that if this information centre did not exist in Finland, in that case the Kurds could all become mentally ill. But when there is the information centre, and when we are working and we are getting information about our own country, this helps us a lot. It is like morality, our life. For example without this party I am nothing. And with the Kurds, with the PKK, we have contact. Because of the party, in the name of the party. If there were no party, no PKK, we could not perhaps even say hello to the Kurds. But because of the PKK, because this PKK is the key, this key opens the door to us all Kurds, that is how, with the name of PKK and with the support of PKK."

In addition to the divisions within the community there are a number of other obstacles facing Kurdish organisations in Finland. One problem is the geographical dispersal of the refugees which means that it is difficult and expensive to keep in touch with each other. A second problem is the poorly organised public support for these organisations, which means that there are almost no funds available for activities. Occasionally the Finnish authorities' negative opinions towards political activism among refugees might also be an obstacle. All these last mentioned obstacles could quite easily be removed by a change in the authorities' policies towards refugee associations.

Conclusion

This study has generally confirmed results from earlier studies concerning the role of associations and social networks for refugee communities. It has also identified similar problems to those of other studies which describe refugees' experiences in Finland. However, this article seeks to discuss these issues within a slightly different conceptual framework.

The diaspora discourse is an attempt to take into account the specific refugee experience and to rethink the notions of integration and resettlement. Of course, diasporas are not a way of avoiding social exclusion, and diasporic social networks cannot replace the welfare state and its structures. However, the social networks within the refugee community can work in a complementary way in cases where integration does not work in the desired way. The diaspora discourse within contemporary migration research is one way to highlight the social networks and resources which exist within the refugee communities. Thus, the diaspora discourse can also provide some ideas for a possible rethinking of resettlement policies in Finland.

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Notes

[1] According to William Safran diasporas are "expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics: 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original 'center' to two or more 'peripheral', or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host country and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship (Safran 1991,83–84). I would argue that all the above mentioned characteristics of a diaspora can be found in the Kurdish refugee communities. Therefore I suggest that there is enough reason to talk about a Kurdish diaspora, despite the fact that the Kurdish communities in Europe have a relatively short history.

[2] The description of the resettlement policies in Finland is based partly on my own experiences working with the resettlement of refugees during 1992 and 1993, as well as being influenced by the fieldwork for my MA thesis (Wahlbeck 1992).

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