



## Diasporas in a digital age

Leon Tan

**review of:**

Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff (2009) *Digital diasporas: Identity and transnational engagement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (HB, pp. 288, £18.99, ISBN 9780521741439).

Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff's book *Digital Diasporas: Identity and Transnational Engagement* provides a great deal of useful material concerning the use of Internet technologies for social organizing among diaspora communities. As the author notes, this is an area that has been relatively under-researched and, for that matter, under-theorized. Drawing on a diversity of case studies including Afghani (AfghanistanOnline), Egyptian Coptic (MyCopticChurch), Tibetan (TibetBoard), Somali (Somalinet) and Nepali (Thamel.com) diasporas, Brinkerhoff demonstrates how such communities may take up the social and expressive affordances of the Internet to achieve a range of benefits in differing circumstances. Thus she shows that online conversations and interactions between diasporans enable the expression and negotiation of cultural identities, the accumulation and distribution of material benefits, the achievement of collective goals (in homeland and/or host-land), and a decrease in social marginalization. The resulting portraits of diaspora life in the Internet's digital spaces are both evocative and detailed, and make the book a worthwhile read.

In selecting such a wide range of diaspora organizations to study, Brinkerhoff manages to convey a lively sense of the contemporary world economy in its ongoing transformations. One of the key changes is a rapid globalization of actual locales by the spread of Internet-based social networks and an accompanying intensification of flows of people, passions and desires. The inclusion of verbatim quotations from case study subjects enables diasporans to acquire a voice in the narrative, and thus speak for themselves to some degree. This strategy lends validity to the book by demonstrating respect for a principle articulated by Gilles Deleuze (2004: 208), namely, 'the indignity of speaking for others'. What is especially moving is the way Brinkerhoff attempts to capture not only the semantic content of online interactions between diasporans, but also their emotional reactions. Emotions are, after all, the basis for affective bonds that motivate families and communities to maintain and nurture ongoing connections across the Internet after separation from each other by migration across geopolitical borders. It is a shame, however, that the psychological reasoning provided by the author tends to

be relatively unsophisticated, and would benefit from a deeper consideration of existing literature in psychosocial disciplines.

While Brinkerhoff acknowledges evidence of the Internet's use for 'terrorist' activities, it is commendable that she avoids the paranoia to be found in many popular discussions concerning the Internet's impacts on national and international governance. Instead, she focuses on so-called 'liberal' uses of the Internet by diasporans, with case studies providing evidence for 'American values of pluralism, democracy, and human rights' (57). A central theme recurring across the book is that diasporas play an important, though neglected, role in international affairs; their activities have contributions to make to global security, integration, political and economic development. As an outcome of her research, Brinkerhoff makes a number of laudable policy recommendations, for instance, continuing provision of IT access and privacy, non-interference with the making and negotiation of identity claims online, the creation of enabling environments for high quality lives for diasporas, and relationship building between governments and diaspora organizations. These recommendations, if implemented, are likely to enhance the growing capacities of diasporas in various host countries and indeed to improve the lives and livelihoods of such communities.

If the book has a major downside, it is that Brinkerhoff copiously references 'liberal values' without once stopping to elucidate the term liberal. Neither does she give pause to question the role of the US, explicitly associated with liberal values, engaging in illiberal practices such as torture and the purveyance of global violence and protection services<sup>1</sup>. What is also disquieting is the way in which Brinkerhoff appears to equate democracy with non-violence in her discussions, while neglecting to critically analyze the last several decades of US military violence and its contribution to the enlargement of numerous diasporas. Think, for instance, of the displacement of Vietnamese, Cambodians, Iraqis and Afghanis resulting at least in part from respective cases of US foreign policy 'interventions'. The lack of attention to such issues is surprising given the book's interest in international affairs, migration, diasporas and the promotion of non-violence. Brinkerhoff also makes the strange claim that 'American culture and socialization place far fewer limits on expectations and possibilities for those born into less fortunate circumstances' (191). Such a claim is directly contradicted by the disproportionate representation of African-Americans in US prisons, as well as the persistent under-representation of Indigenous Americans, African-Americans and women in state and federal government and in the top tier of corporate management and ownership.

This book would benefit from a critical discussion of the history of US government instigation and financing of armed violence in numerous regions of the world, and the contribution of such history to global insecurity, the displacement of communities and stimulation of migration flows. The world systems analysis trajectory of Immanuel Wallerstein and the recent work of Francis Shor (2009; 2010) are instructive in this regard, especially in relation to US hegemonic succession and corresponding world crises. Brinkerhoff's social analysis, while rigorous, would benefit from attention to

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1 Charles Tilly's (1985) historical analysis makes a strong case for such cases of war-making and state-making as 'our largest examples of organized crime' (169).

suitably critical work done by the likes of Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow (2007) on the dynamics of contentious politics and social movements across the world economy. In effect, what Brinkerhoff portrays may be fruitfully theorized in terms of digital 'repertoires of contention' with which diasporas and their organizations engage in the making of more or less contentious claims. The advantage of employing Tilly and Tarrow's work is to provide a more sophisticated account of identity mobilization and social boundary formation than what is currently given in the book.

The analysis would also benefit from a consideration of Charles Tilly's (2007) *Democracy*. In contrast to Brinkerhoff, for Tilly there is no such thing as democracy in general, only populations of individuals and groups organizing more or less democratically. Democratic organizing depends on four intermeshing components: *breadth, equality, protection* and *mutually binding consultation*. Thus a regime is democratic 'to the degree that political relations between the state and its citizens feature broad, equal, protected and mutually binding consultation' (Tilly, 2007: 13-14). Tilly's key contribution to theorizing democracy is his observation that it is best considered as a *process*, with individual world-economies continually subject to waves of *democratizing* and *de-democratizing*. Democratizing and de-democratizing consist of large-scale processes increasing or decreasing a political regime's degree of democracy. As concepts, they allow for the portrayal of political life in individual world-economies not solely in terms of political organizations, but more importantly in terms of *movements* and *transformations*, making possible a more nuanced social analysis than the one presented by Brinkerhoff.

One wonders at the omission of critical analysis regarding concepts such as democracy and liberal values, and at a seeming failure to consider the embeddedness of diaspora organizations in long duration world-economic history. For what Brinkerhoff claims to be the first book-length study of online diaspora organizations, it seems strange not to devote at least a chapter to these issues. This lack of critical discussion handicaps an otherwise useful book by giving the impression of deliberate avoidance or naïvete. *Digital Diasporas* nevertheless makes an important contribution to the study of diasporas and their uptake of the Internet's social expressive affordances. Its major strengths lie in the broad coverage of different diaspora organizations and the detailed description of diasporan interactions. To Brinkerhoff's credit, the book is written in a clear and engaging style, even if it is at times a little too repetitive. Because of this clarity, the resulting images of diaspora life online and offline may be widely accessible, even to those for whom English is not a primary language. At the very least, this book opens up an important area for discussion and further research.

## references

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