

# Diasporas: historical and conceptual analysis

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On September 15, 2010, four students from New York University announced the source code for a new international social network, which they named Diaspora. They regard it as an anti-Facebook social network: whereas Facebook is an entirely centered network that users cannot really modify and appropriate because of strict control by the site owners, the Diaspora social network is supposed to be more democratic and more open, and to function as a truly multipolar network in which no real center is visible. Its users become actors and contribute to the evolution of the network.

This very recent episode is symptomatic of a dual contemporary evolution of the word “diaspora.” It first bears witness to the exceptional inflation of its use in the last four decades; and the possible success of this social network would only give further impulse to this trend. Second, it illustrates the growing popularity of a recent, decentered, conception of the term that stands in opposition to the more traditional meaning of it, which relied on the sense of exile from a territorial center, on loss, on the importance of origin, and of eventual return to the homeland. Often associated with “postmodern” thinking, the decentered conception emphasizes the absence of any territorial center or origin and the impossibility of return, and it valorizes deterritorialization.

In the early 21st century, the very word “diaspora” has thus acquired the power to describe contradictory phenomena. This particularity, which is certainly key to the success of the word, does not stand true only for the realm of the Internet; this latter use is a metaphoric one as far as the history of the term is

concerned. From its original religious conception associated with the theological, and sometimes actual, dispersal of people bounded together by the same faith, it has more recently become a fundamental concept in the field of migration studies to describe stateless populations, political exiles, or migrant groups and their descendants. This evolution is a product of a long and specific history.

## The stratified meanings of diaspora

The first occurrence of *diaspora*, in its original Greek form, can be found in the Septuagint – the translation into Greek of the Hebraic Bible, in the third century BCE. As we have no record of the use of the word before that time, we should consider it a neologism coined for this translation. Contrary to a widely held view, the 14 appearances of *diaspora* in the Septuagint do not translate a single specific Hebrew word, and the Hebrew words *galouth* or *golah*, which mean “exile” or “banishment,” do not belong in the list of words translated as *diaspora*. In fact, the uses and meaning of *diaspora* in the Septuagint are to be understood in a theological sense. *Diaspora*, then, does not indicate a historical dispersal such as the Babylonian exile of Jews in the sixth century BCE; it describes the divine punishment – the dispersal throughout the world – that would befall the Jews if they did not respect the commandments of God. Not only does the word refer to a theological, eschatological horizon rather than a historical situation, but the dispersal, as well as the return of the dispersed, is a matter of divine, and not human, will.

*Diaspora* seems to be almost exclusively confined to the Jewish biblical literature until the first century CE. During this century, two facts modify its meaning. First of all, the Roman destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem in 70 CE and its outcomes, such as

the repression of the Bar-Kokhba uprising in 135, made Jewish dispersal out of Palestine a real and terrestrial phenomenon, and not simply a theological threat. As a consequence, the Jewish rabbis assimilated their current exile from the Holy Land (*galouth*) to the fulfillment of the curse delineated in Deuteronomy. The meanings of *diaspora* and *galouth* were thus confounded, but the word *diaspora* itself was withdrawn from the Jewish lexicon, whereas *galouth* came to describe the state and the space of dispersal as well as the population of the dispersed.

Secondly, the rise of Christianity created competition between the two religions. In the New Testament, uses of *diaspora* do refer to a member of the Christian church being exiled from the City of God and dispersed across the Earth. The condition of dispersion is understood as the very proof of their being the Chosen people. Christian writers eventually abandon *diaspora* in the 2nd century CE. They limit its use to the Jewish dispersion as an exemplary curse for their sins. With the replacement of Greek by Latin within the Western Roman empire in the first centuries of the Christian era, *diaspora* is confined to the Eastern Roman empire and later the Byzantine empire. Uses of it perpetuate until the mid-15th century.

Apart from its Jewish and Christian meanings, a new religious meaning emerges in the 18th century with the rise in Germany and diffusion abroad of the Protestant Moravian church. In this case, *diaspora* is not merely the name of the dispersion, but the official name of the link maintained between the members of the Moravian church, despite their geographical distance and their living in countries in which different faiths prevailed. In the Moravian Brothers' lexicon, the "diaspora mission" represents both the maintenance of the link and the statistical addition of all members.

From the first decades of the 20th century onward, several general processes characterize the evolution of *diaspora*: first secularization, the extension to nonreligious meanings; then trivialization, the widening of the spectrum of

relevant cases; and only later formalization of the establishment of criteria, allowing the shift from a definite to an indefinite category with its subtypes.

If the secularization of its uses is visible from the early 20th century, with the word being applied to ethnic or national populations, the number of populations concerned increases progressively in the next decades: Armenians, Chinese, Irish, Indians, Greeks, black people first; and later on Italians, Pakistanis, Tamils, Spaniards, Eritreans, Australians, Congolese, and so on.

The popularization of *diaspora* is highly dependent on its importation from the religious realm into the vocabulary of the social sciences. Some scholars have played a pivotal role in this. A pioneer is the Jewish Russian historian Simon Dubnow. In the "Diaspora" entry of the *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* (1931), he provides a definition that goes beyond the Jewish case:

Diaspora is a Greek term for a nation or part of a nation separated from its own state or territory and dispersed among other nations hut preserving its national culture. In a sense Magna Graecia constituted a Greek diaspora in the ancient Roman Empire, and a typical case of diaspora is presented by the Armenians, many of whom have voluntarily lived outside their small national territory for centuries. Generally, however, the term is used with reference to those parts of the Jewish people residing outside Palestine. (Dubnow 1931: 126)

A few years later, sociologist Robert E. Park relies on Dubnow's writing to reframe and even enlarge the scope in order to apply it to Asians: "There are, at the present time, between 16,000,000 and 17,000,000 people of Asiatic origin living in the diaspora, if I may use that term to designate not merely the condition but the place of dispersion of peoples" (Park 1939: 28). In the 1950s, anthropologist Maurice Freedman makes a similar attempt to demonstrate that Chinese and Indians constitute "other 'diasporas' . . . in which it is common to find the overseas sojourners accused of trying to maintain an *imperium in imperio*, of fostering a separatist educational system, of breaking

the loyalty of citizens to the land of their birth by stimulating the use of a foreign language and by inculcating the political and cultural values of a nation across the seas" (Freedman 1955: 236; also see Freedman 1959).

Progressively, *diaspora* comes to lose some of its negative flavor and acquires a more neutral and academic connotation. From the 1960s on, it sometimes even becomes a positive term. This evolution is particularly visible in the works of British historian Arnold Toynbee. When the first volumes of his monumental *A Study of History* were published in the 1930s, his use of the word was associated with the idea of fossilization. Thirty years later, in the 12th volume, he reconsiders his earlier judgment. In 1972, when revising his whole work, he goes as far as to write that

the accelerating improvement in means of communications of all kinds may do more to promote the creation of diasporas by facilitating it than the Assyrian war-lords were ever able to do by force. In a society that is "annihilating distance", world-wide diasporas, rather than local national states, look like "the wave of the future". The transformation of the world into a cosmopolis favours social organization on a non-local basis. (Toynbee 1972: 65–69)

Until now, scholars all agreed that the first written occurrences of the expressions "African diaspora," "black diaspora," and the use of *diaspora* to describe the situation of blacks living outside of Africa, date from 1965 (Irele 1965; Shepperson 1966). In fact, as has already been suggested, but not demonstrated, by some scholars (Edwards 2001), not only did the idea occur earlier, but the words themselves did, too. They were often used to explicitly make the analogy between Jewish history and black history, or to note the existence of discrimination that both groups faced in the countries where they lived. In his 1916 book *American Civilization and the Negro*, the African American thinker and doctor Charles Victor Roman raised the question of the future of blacks in Africa and the American South and wrote that "the slave-trade was the diaspora of the African, and the children of this alienation have become

a permanent part of the citizenry of the American republic" (Roman 1921: 195).

Soon afterward, in 1917, the analogy between blacks and Jews was drawn on the Jewish side. A Yiddish newspaper, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, made the connection between the race riots that erupted in East St. Louis, Illinois, on May 28, 1917 and the Kishinev pogrom in 1903, during which more than 50 Jews were killed: "The situation of the Negroes in America is very comparable to the situation of the Jews . . . in Russia. The Negro diaspora, the special laws, the decrees, the pogroms and also the Negro complaints, the Negro hopes, are very similar to those which we Jews . . . lived through" (*The Forward*, May 29, 1917, quoted in Diner 1977: 75–76). Those two occurrences hardly spelled the formula's success. Even if Robert E. Park was one of the first, in 1942, to associate the word *diaspora* with the destiny of "the Negro outside of Africa" (Park 1942: xx–xxi), its usage would not become common until the 1950s and 1960s. We find it in the texts of English-speaking historians of Africa, like Colin Legum or Basil Davidson (Legum 1962; Davidson 1964) and also of French scholars and intellectuals like the French ethnologist and great Haiti specialist Alfred Métraux (Métraux 1951) and the French psychiatrist and writer Frantz Fanon, who wrote in his 1961 book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, about "the Negro diaspora, that is, that tens of millions of blacks spread over the American continents" (Fanon 1970: 148).

It seems that a distinction has to be established between 1960s sporadic British or French academic or militant uses and the development of an actual self-denomination as diaspora by parts of the African American population. From the late 1960s, academic and nonacademic publications started to multiply within the African American community that used "diaspora" to refer to black people residing outside Africa. This use was characterized by its looseness and by the absence of any real reflection about its origins and its Jewish flavor. "Diaspora" provided black people with a name for themselves. This name was at the same time both a reminder of their historical tragedy and

a positive way to recover a sense of unity by emphasizing the connection and the return – spiritual and intellectual if not physical – to Africa. This emphasis established the existence of continuities or survivals between black people living outside Africa and their African origin.

From the mid-1970s, *diaspora* became more and more commonly used and its scope became larger and larger. Occurrences of its use in the newspapers increased. To give but one example, the number of uses of *diaspora* in the *New York Times* has increased dramatically since the end of the 19th century, from only one occurrence in the period 1881–1990 to more than one thousand in the years 1991–2000. This quantitative increase goes hand in hand with the expansion of populations deserving the appellation. Yet, until the 1990s, this multiplication of instances of *diaspora* has been spontaneous more than anything else. It does not rely on a precise definition or on an academic conceptualization.

### **From conceptual definition to best practice**

*Diaspora* only starts being academically conceptualized from the late 1970s. Two different streams can be distinguished, forming two separate versions of diaspora. The first one, mostly relying on the paradigmatic Jewish case, sees diasporas as characterized by migration or exile, nostalgia, perpetuation of original traditions, customs, and languages, and dream of return to the homeland. In this respect, this is a centered version of diaspora. Its first conceptual presentation is certainly the one given in 1976 by political scientist John Armstrong, according to which *diaspora* applies to “any ethnic collectivity which lacks a territorial base within a given polity, that is, is a relatively small minority throughout all portions of the polity” (Armstrong 1976: 393). While his definition includes nomadic groups, it is no longer the case with the first comprehensive and collective work on diasporas directed by Israeli political scientist Gabriel Sheffer in 1986.

In his introduction to this volume, Sheffer bases his analysis on a definition that insists on

the belief in a common origin, and especially on the existence of regular contact with the homeland through the establishment of trans-state networks: “Modern Diasporas are ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin – their homelands” (Sheffer 1986: 3; see also Sheffer 2003).

Quite often, these trans-state centered versions of diaspora display categorical definitions, proposing a set of criteria that entitle some populations to constitute a diaspora, but not others. Here, a distinction is usually drawn between “true” and “false” diasporas, with subtypes identified depending on the number of criteria used in a given case. For instance, French geographer Yves Lacoste considers that “true diasporas” are recognized by a simple variable: “the scattering of most of one people.” In this respect, there are only five true diasporas: Jewish (Ashkenazi and Sephardic), Lebanese, Palestinian, Armenian, and Irish (Lacoste 1989: 4).

On the other hand, multi-criteria definitions often try to preserve the meaning of *diaspora* by drawing on one historical case to identify the relevant criteria. In 1991, in the first issue of the interdisciplinary journal entitled *Diaspora*, founded by Khachig Tölölyan, American political scientist William Safran constructs the very first set of criteria for diasporas. According to Safran, the concept of diaspora can be applied only if it shows “several of the following characteristics”: dispersion from an original center to at least two foreign regions; existence of a collective memory about the original homeland; common belief in the minority status of the group; definition of the homeland as the place to return to; commitment to maintenance or restoration of the homeland; and continued presence of relationships to the homeland (Safran 1991: 83–84).

In *Global Diasporas* (1997), the sociologist Robin Cohen relies on the previous attempt by Safran to propose a conceptual model that includes nine common features of a diaspora: (1) dispersal or (2) expansion from a homeland to at least two foreign regions, (3) a collective memory about a homeland, (4)

idealization of the homeland, (5) a return movement, (6) a strong ethnic consciousness, (7) a troubled relationship with host societies, (8) a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members, and (9) an enhanced creativity. Cohen then distinguishes various subtypes: victim diasporas (Jews, Africans, Armenians, Palestinians), labor diasporas (Indians), trade diasporas (Chinese), and imperial diasporas (Britons, French, Spaniards, Portuguese).

The second version of *diaspora* relies not on the Jewish, but on the black/African diaspora. Its origins lie in the evolution of British cultural studies toward a greater attention to identity issues from the mid-1970s. British sociologists Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy epitomize this version. Though Hall's ideas were already expressed during the mid-1970s – for instance in a conference entitled “Africa is alive and well and lives in the Diaspora” given at UNESCO in 1975 – they were more formally displayed only from the late 1980s onward. His vision of “blackness” being cultural and not phenotypical, he considers that “Africa” is constantly reinterpreted and re-elaborated outside Africa. Instead of postulating some kind of “African essence” or “purity,” he insists on the importance of the cultural production of “Africa” in the Caribbean, even if this production results in the search for African origins of the Caribbean culture. As he puts it, “it has been a matter of interpreting ‘Africa’, rereading ‘Africa’, of what ‘Africa’ could mean to us now, after diaspora” (Hall 1999: 12–13).

In this respect, the word “diaspora” changes meaning once again. Not referring to any kind of real and direct connection to Africa, it becomes the positive symbol of “life” as opposed to “survival,” of “decentering” as opposed to “centering,” of “heterogeneity” as opposed to “homogeneity”:

I use this term here metaphorically, not literally: diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea. This is the old, the imperialising, the hegemonising form of “ethnicity”. . . . The diaspora experience as I intend it

here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of “identity” which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (Hall 1990: 235)

Paul Gilroy stands somewhere along the same line. He too insists on the fact that “diaspora” does not necessarily imply static and fixed conceptions of identity, and articulates the idea of the “changing same,” borrowed from the black American poet and writer Leroi Jones. The “changing same” is tantamount neither to essence nor to absence of unity: “Neither squeamish nationalist essentialism nor lazy, premature post-modernism – the supposedly strategic variety of essentialism – is a useful key to the untidy workings of creolized, syncretized, hybridized and impure cultural forms . . .” (Gilroy 1994: 211). Yet, as far as the relationship between “Jewish” and “African” – or “black” – diaspora is concerned, Gilroy's view is somewhat different. In particular, he grants more importance to the historical minglings between both than to a frontal opposition between them:

It is often forgotten that the term “diaspora” comes into the vocabulary and the practice of pan-Africanist policies from Jewish thought. It is used in the Bible but begins to acquire something like its looser contemporary usage during the late nineteenth century – the period which saw the birth of modern Zionism and of the forms of Black Nationalist which share many of its aspirations and some of its rhetoric. (Gilroy 1993: 205)

Similarly, in James Clifford's works (Clifford 1994), the two versions of diaspora are opposed one to the other: a modern, centered, territorial vision, versus a postmodern, emancipatory, and deterritorialized one.

Such an opposition could have sterilized the concept and made it unusable. On the contrary, however – it only enlarged the semantic horizon of *diaspora*, making it available to various categories of people (journalists, scholars, militants, spokespersons, politicians) who had the opportunity to choose between the

several meanings associated with the word: a minority, a migrant community, a transnational community, a statistical group of expatriates, or even any kind of group whose members happen to be dispersed across many territories. Yet, the structural contradictions in the evolution of the uses of *diaspora* obviously do not constitute the only element that may account for its contemporary spread. As a matter of fact, the “elective affinity,” to use a Weberian formula, between the word “diaspora,” with all its stratified meanings, and the multifaceted transformations of the worlds of identity and space and their interpretation in the social sciences made it possible for the word to go beyond a mere conceptual use.

Imported from the social sciences by community leaders, civil servants, journalists, and Web masters, this practical use resulted in its increasing capacity to embrace more and more populations and situations. Now having become a “global word” that fits the “global world,” it may be used without any precaution or definition. For a very long time confined first to the religious then to the academic realm, it has now progressively made its way into common language, almost completely relieved of this negative value and of a precise definition. Recent years have seen the multiplication of strange instances of diasporas: those of soccer players, of engineers, of Greek painting or of Italian music, of “beef soup,” “Katrina’s diaspora,” and even the “Obama diaspora” . . .

Three other elements contributed to the further spread – reaching worldwide level – of *diaspora* insofar as they made it possible for a new version of the concept that seemed to reconcile both centered and decentered visions, combining the existence of a territorial center with expatriate populations nurturing a special interest to the homeland and its evolution without considering it necessary to return.

Firstly, the evolution of the state of Israel needs to be taken into account. At its creation in 1948, one of the main objectives of the Israeli authorities was the “ingathering of the exiles” onto the new territory. After most Jews’ refusal to “return,” an intense ideological dispute split the Jewish population. It took 20 years before this situation was normalized. In 1967, in the

context of the Six Day War, Jews outside Israel, and especially American Jews, came to consider that their American citizenship did not impede their special relationship to the state of Israel. Under the Hebrew name of *tfoutsoth*, the “Jewish diaspora,” mostly composed of non-Israeli citizens, coexisted with the existence of the state. The very definition of the nation gets transformed for it extends beyond national borders but also beyond the legal distinction between nationals and foreigners.

Secondly, with the emergence and spread of information and communication technologies making it possible for migrants and expatriates to keep in close touch with their relatives at home, with what is happening in the homeland as well as with their fellow citizens or ethnics living in other parts of the world, emigration and expatriation have been less and less analyzed as a “brain drain.” According to the “brain drain” theory, expatriation, and most especially high-skilled migration, is a danger threatening national development that can only be solved by the return of expatriates. From the mid-1990s onward, “brain drain” analysis was gradually superseded by “brain gain” theory that valorizes expatriation and considers that geographical distance does not necessarily imply lack of interest in the future of the country.

Through the creation of Internet networks, high-skilled migrants can participate in the development of their country from abroad. Some scholars have called this opportunity the “diaspora option”:

The diaspora option is the most recent policy that has come under full implementation in regards to migrations of highly qualified human resources. As a brain gain strategy it differs from the return option in the sense that it does not aim at the physical repatriation of the nationals living and working abroad. Its purpose is the remote mobilization of the diaspora’s resources and their association to the country of origin’s programmes [sic]. Scientists and engineers may stay wherever they are; what matters is that they work for their mother nation in some way. This is done through a formal, institutionally organized, networking. (Meyer et al. 1997: 287)

Thirdly, it is important to note that the last 10 years have witnessed the increasing role of

international organizations, in particular the World Bank and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in the appropriation of the concept of *diaspora* from the social sciences. Relying mostly on previous conceptual works by Robin Cohen or Steven Vertovec, experts from these international organizations seize the word and make “diaspora policies” a specific dimension of the “best practices” that newly independent or emerging states are increasingly supposed to implement.

Within this context, a new definition of *diaspora* emerges. In this respect, the term describes expatriate populations, possessing citizenship of the homeland or being of national origin, that states now have to take into consideration and for which they are strongly urged to implement specific policies aiming at embracing them more efficiently into the space of the nation: organization of meetings between the state and the diaspora; election of representatives of the diaspora to sit in national assemblies; implementation of voting rights from abroad; possibility of dual nationality or dual citizenship; investment facilities into national economy, and so on. If states had already designed and implemented several of these policies between the 1970s and the 1990s (among which are China, India, Armenia, and Ireland, to cite but a few), they have now been included into an international framework that generally becomes compulsory for more and more states. The international bureaucratic lexicon has appropriated *diaspora* with a new conception that articulates both the existence of a territorial center and the presence abroad of expatriate populations that can contribute to the development of the homeland without being requested to return.

This conception goes even beyond nationality, thus acknowledging the growing importance of “double consciousness” and dual loyalties. In a recent, undated but undoubtedly post-2008 document, experts from the IOM write the following:

There is no single accepted definition of the term “diaspora”, neither is there a legal recognition of the term which consequently has given rise to many different meanings and interpretations.

The term “diasporas” conveys the idea of transnational populations, living in one place, while still maintaining relations with their homelands, being both “here” and “there”. The term “diasporas” refers to expatriate groups which, in contrast to “migrants”, apply also to expatriate populations abroad and generations born abroad to foreign parents who are or may be citizens of their countries of residence. (International Organization for Migration n.d.: 1)

This last dimension is fundamental since it accounts for the last step in the globalization of the word. Coined in Alexandria some 2,300 years ago, it has known different kinds of extensions – religious, academic, media-related – that made its use larger and larger but also more and more widespread. Yet, one can only record that the crucial role goes to the political extension. In its latest international and bureaucratic version, it has allowed for the global diffusion of the word for the last 10 years within the compulsory framework of state policies toward expatriates, and for the official entry of the word into the political lexicon of an increasing number of countries.

Once a local and singular term, *diaspora* is an ancient word that became a contemporary one through a long and unpredictable process. The “fossil” has survived and found a new life in its association with the new consciousness of globalization that, among others, praises the shrinking of our world and the concomitant potential ubiquity it enables. However distant diasporas might be from the state, the land, or the territory, their spokespersons claim a link, a reason for diasporas to become particularly well adapted to our global world.

SEE ALSO: African diasporas, theories, representations and definitions; Arab diaspora, United States; Armenian diaspora; Jewish migration, 19th century to present

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