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The 2000 Years of Diaspora Conference

Lisa Anteby-Yemini

- 1 A conference entitled 2000 Years of Diaspora was held on February 14,15 and 16, 2002 in Poitiers. This international conference, organized by L. Anteby-Yemini (CNRS/CRFJ), W. Berthomière (CNRS/MIGRINTER) and G. Sheffer (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) was the result of the combined efforts of the Centre de recherche français de Jérusalem, the MIGRINTER unit (UMR 6588, Poitiers) and the Department of Political Science of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and was made possible by sponsorship from the French Ministry of Research, the Poitou-Charentes Region (Com-Science), the CNRS, the University of Poitiers and the MSHS. The goal of the conference was to shed light on the concept of 'diaspora' through a critical and interdisciplinary approach to its various meanings. This encounter, that brought together anthropologists, sociologists, geographers as well as political scientists and historians, was designed to prompt a methodological and theoretical reflection on the evolution of classic diasporas (Jewish, Armenian, Greek) the emergence of new diasporas (North-African, Russian, Asian...), the construction of notions of exile and return, representations of the homeland (imaginary or real) (Palestinians, Gypsy...), transnational networks (Chinese, Turkish, North-African diasporas) and the future of diasporas when integration and assimilation are the variables that orient their future contours. Just as each diaspora has its history, this conference also had its own. Thus, like diasporas that are exiled from their homelands, this conference unfortunately acquired diaspora features and needed to exile itself to Poitiers instead of being held in October 2000 in Jerusalem. Because of the political situation in Israel, many French colleagues were unwilling to come to Jerusalem and the conference was postponed and relocated.
- 2 The conference sessions took place in the pleasant facilities of the Social Sciences Building of the University of Poitiers, and much to the satisfaction of the Anglo-Saxon participants, simultaneous translation was available. The purpose of the first day was to draw up a comprehensive picture of studies on diasporas and to approach the theoretical issues, by attempting to define the term 'diaspora', with the Jewish diaspora, the

archetype of diasporic groups, as a starting point. The conference began with short opening addresses by a representative of the Poitou-Charente region, a representative of the administration of the University of Poitiers, M. MaMung (the director of MIGRINTER), D. Bourel (Director of the CRFJ), and the organizers.

- 3 The first session, entitled “The Jewish Diaspora Today” began by a historical overview of survival strategies and diaspora organizational structures that could account for the ‘miracle’ of Jewish continuity (S. Epstein, Hebrew University of Jerusalem). In the absence of a homeland, major centers that were important demographically, politically and intellectually served this reference role. The next speaker presented trends and demographic projections concerning the Jewish diaspora worldwide and the transformations to be expected in the definition itself of the Jewish community (S. Della Pergola, Hebrew University of Jerusalem), sparking strong reactions from the Palestinian participants and leading to a heated debate. Two concrete examples were presented, one concerning the restructuring of identity in the American Jewish diaspora at the end of the twentieth century (U. Rebhun, Hebrew University of Jerusalem) and the other, a fairly provocative lecture “The Tenuous Link between Hostlands and Homelands: The Progressive De-zionization of Western Diasporas” dealing with the loss of the centrality of the land of the forefathers, by W. Safran (Colorado University, USA), the author of one of the basic articles in the field of diaspora studies. These lectures all raised the issue of the future of the Jewish diaspora and suggested that there is a need to rethink the term diaspora itself, given changes in the construction of identities of the Jewish communities and the growing role of Israel as the homeland in these processes.
- 4 The second session, “Defining Diasporas” helped better define the notion of diaspora through presentations by researchers from different fields. The first was the terminology used in Greece and in the Hellenistic world to describe diaspora phenomena (M. Bruneau, CNRS/TIDE); the term ‘diaspora’ was then analyzed from the perspective of political science (S. Dufoix, University of Paris-X Nanterre), sociology (M. Hovanessian CNRS/URMIS) and anthropology (S. Weil, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev). These theoretical reflections around the concept of diaspora showed above all the diversity of its meanings and its different geopolitical, cultural, religious, ethnic and linguistic dimensions.
- 5 Finally, an inaugural session ended this first day with lectures by international specialists in the field of diasporas who introduced new research frameworks and suggested resituating certain analysis models such as the use of appropriate terms to designate diaspora populations, the examples being the Chinese diaspora (E. MaMung, CNRS / MIGRINTER), diasporas as “The negation of geographic ideology” (G. Prévélakis, University of Paris-I, Sorbonne), a political approach to ethno-national diasporism (G. Sheffer, Hebrew University of Jerusalem) and the mobility-sedentarism tandem in the study of diasporas entitled “Institutions and Diasporic Agency in the US” by K. Tololyan (Wesleyan University, USA) editor of the journal *Diaspora* and a major figure in the field.
- 6 The second day was above all devoted to developing concrete examples of different diaspora communities, in particular the Jewish and Palestinian diasporas, but also Black diasporas and the new diasporas of Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean. The first session, entitled “Exile, Memory and Return” was aimed at presenting the operational mechanisms of diaspora through the memory of lost territory in Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (K. Dora, CERMOC/MIGRINTER), mechanisms that differ from those created by the elites in Europe and the USA, in particular concerning the idea of return (which still

remains virtual), and the declining role of the homeland as a physical center in the Internet age (S. Hanafi, SHAML, Ramallah). In contrast, in his lecture on Jews living today in Morocco, A. Levy (Ben-Gurion University of the Negev) showed that this country represents a symbolic center as well as a diaspora for the Jewish community. Finally, Gilad Margalit (Haifa University) presented the case of the diasporization of a community without an ancestral homeland: the Sinti (Gypsies) of Germany. All these lectures emphasized the complex relationships between the center (real, virtual, symbolic or imaginary) and the periphery in exchanges between a diaspora group and the homeland, and suggested new ways of perceiving these ties.

- 7 The next session was devoted to Black diasporas and presented three cases of groups whose common denominator is to be Black and relocated: the Ethiopian immigrants in Israel and the relevance of the concept of an emergent Black diaspora when it involves a Jewish group returning to its ancestral homeland (L. Anteby-Yemini, CNRS/CRFJ); the black experience in the Americas and the plurality of diaspora models – continuity, creolization, alienation – which can be applied to it (C. Chivallon, CNRS/TIDE), the Black Hebrews, a group of Afro-Americans who use a diaspora discourse of return to the homeland to settle in Israel although they are not recognized as Jews by the State of Israel (F. Markowitz, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev).
- 8 The afternoon concentrated on diasporas in the post-Soviet era, with lectures by W. Berthomière (CNRS/MIGRINTER) on the construction and deconstruction of the Jewish diaspora in the FSU in coping with its recent reconfigurations (immigration to the USA and Germany; repatriation to Israel or remaining in the new Independent States), and A. de Tinguy (CNRS/CERI) who questioned the relevance of the term diaspora itself to designate the new Russian diasporas as well as their role as relays of Russian influence in their relationships within the homeland-diaspora-host country triangle.
- 9 A second session looked at emerging diasporas, such as the one formed by immigrant Palestinians in Peru (D. Cuche, University of Paris V), migrants from Central and Eastern Europe (D. Diminescu, MSH-Paris) North African merchants (M. Peraldi, CNRS/LAMES) and the Turkish émigré population (S. de Tapia, CNRS/CERATO). The speakers gave examples which provide alternative diaspora models that challenge the definition of a diaspora in the case where the process of diasporization has only just begun (Palestinians of Peru) or the migratory and circular movement is made up of backs-and-forth (individuals from Central and Eastern Europe) or when the term diaspora only very approximately describes the mobility of informal commercial mobility (North Africans in Marseille, Istanbul and Tunis) or finally when it involves a population that is diversified socially, linguistically, ethnically, religiously and ideologically (such as the Turkish immigrants who are Jews, Armenians, Assyro-Chaldeans, Kurds, etc.)
- 10 The third and final day attempted to fine-tune and summarize the topics that emerged during the conference. In the last session entitled “Challenges to the Nation-State or Assimilation to the Host Country?” the speakers were: E. Flores-Meiser (Ball State University, USA) on the Philippine diaspora and its relationship to the homeland; I. Simon-Barouh (CNRS/LASEMA/CERIEM) on Cambodian refugees in France, J. Blaschke (Berlin Institute for Comparative Social Research) on the Muslim political diaspora in Europe, and P. Werbner (University of Keele) on the “Vulnerability of Muslim Diasporas in the Face of Global Terror”. The first two speakers discussed the relationship of the home country in the diaspora experience, its construction, reconstruction, its role in identification processes and transmission of this bond to the second and third

generations. The latter two speakers focused primarily, in the case of the Muslim diaspora in Europe, on the impact of worldwide conflicts on the constitution of a collective Muslim identity.

- 11 Following this, a lecture by D. Schnapper (EHESS, Paris) on a working definition of the concept of diaspora and closing lectures by J. Shuval (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) and M. Bruneau (CNRS/TIDE) attempted to synthesize the different dimensions of current day studies on diasporas by introducing new concepts such as world-peoples (Bruneau) or by reexamining key concepts such as home and homeland, the resurgence or the waning of diaspora activism and the multidimensional ties between a given diaspora dispersed across several parts of the globe. To conclude the conference, a round table composed of C. Benayoun (CNRS/Diasporas), A. Dieckhoff (CNRS/ CERI), G. Prévelakis (University of Paris I), W. Safran (University of Colorado, USA) and A. Weingrod (Ben Gurion University of the Negev) attempted to summarize the ideas that emerged during these three days. They all stressed the quality of the presentations and the valuable contribution of the numerous examples brought to light for the study of the diasporas in question. Whereas some stated that the concept of diaspora seemed more unclear and complex than they had believed before the conference, they had only one solution to propose to extend these discussions: hold a second conference on this topic!
- 12 Note: the proceedings of the conference are currently in preparation and are slated for publication by the Presses Universitaires de Rennes.¹

NOTES

1. <http://www.mshs.univ-poitiers.fr/migrinter/index.php?text=documentation/diasporas>