Diaspora: A Look Back on a Concept

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There are some words that are used at losing their meanings. Diaspora is one of these. Full or empty of meaning, we are speaking today of “Cultural Diasporas” (Cohen), of “Fear Diasporas” (Appadurai), of “Virtual Diasporas,” etc. This introductive paper is an attempt to clarify the development of a concept since the beginning of its life inside the Social Sciences during the 70’s.

The term diaspora finds its roots in the Greek language and is based on a translation of the Hebrew word, Galut. Based on speiro (to sow) and the preposition dia (over), in the Ancient Greece, the word referred to migration and colonisation. In Hebrew, “the term initially referred to the setting of colonies of Jews outside Palestine after the Babylonian exile and has assumed a more general connotation of people settled away from their ancestral homelands” (Shuval, 2003).

In social sciences, the term diasporas is recent. Before the 80’s, there are only few quotations of this concept. It was due to the fact, as Judith Shuval (2002) underlined, that “before the 1960’s, immigrant groups were generally expected to shed their ethnic identity and assimilate to local norms. Groups that were thought unable to do this, weren’t admitted, eg. Chines to Canada, non-Whites to Australia”.

During the 70’s, when assimilation theory and other theories based on the same meaning of integration models demonstrated their fallibility, the notion of diaspora occurred progressively to describe migrants groups: migrants maintaining their ethnic tradition, a strong feeling of collectiveness (Bruneau,

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1995; Dorai et al., 1998; Shuval, 2003). So, it is only during the 80’s that the concept of diaspora has known a period of expansion. But, quickly, some authors such as Alain Medam (1993) or James Clifford (1994) expressed their disinterest in the concept because in more and more researches the concept was quoted just for to describe phenomena characterized only by the dispersion of a population originated from one nation-state in several “host countries.” And these authors called for more theorization.

The key question for the Academics was to explore the notion of diaspora to find those specific elements that explained the need to refer to this notion rather than any other concepts of social sciences. To summarize this period, the question was: does there exist a “disposition,” such a specific spatial and social organisation that characterizes and differentiates the migrant groups, described under this denomination of diaspora, from the other social and spatial “disposition,” produced by the other migrants groups and studied before.

I. A need to theorisation

The first theory of diaspora appeared, according to Gabriel Sheffer, with the work of Armstrong in his paper: “Mobilized and proletarian diasporas” published in the American Political Sciences Review in 1976 (Dorai et al., 1998). Gabriel Sheffer, himself, in his book “Modern Diasporas in International Politics” (published in 1986) wrote that it is a mistake to maintain the concept of diaspora only for the Jewish people because may others have existed before (such as Nabatheans, Phenicians or Assyrians). And, also, because during the second half of the XIXth Century some groups with many similarities with the Jewish diaspora appear in Europe, such as the Greek diaspora or the Chinese. In his point of view, three criteria could be proposed for a definition:

1. the maintenance and the development of a own collective identity in the “diaporsised people;”
2. the existence of an internal organisation distinct from those existing in the country of origin or in the host country;
3. Significant contacts with the Homeland: real contacts (i.e. Travel remittances) or symbolic contacts as in the sentence: “the next year at Jerusalem” at the end of the prayer for Pessah (Easter).

More recently, Robin Cohen (1997a) in his book Global diasporas: an introduction continued to underline the lack of theorization in the publication about diasporas and suggest that the “Jewish archetypal” could be a base for reflection even if it couldn’t be a transposable model. William Safran, one of the first authors to be published in the review Diaspora edited by Kachig Tololyan,
suggests that in his view the term diaspora could be consider as a “metaphoric designation” and could apply to various populations (expatriates, political refugees...). In his essays (1991 & 1999), Safran defines the diasporas as follows: expatriate minority communities:

1. that are dispersed from an original “center” to at least two “peripheral” places;
2. that maintain a “memory,” vision or myth about their original homeland;
3. that “believe they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host country;”
4. that see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return when the time is right;
5. that are committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland, and;
6. of which the group’s consciousness and solidarity are “importantly defined” by this continuing relationships with the homeland.

So, during the 90’s, many typologies were proposed to understand and to describe the diasporas. For example, Alain Medam (1993) proposed a typology based on the degree of cohesiveness and the dynamism of the diasporic organization. In this perspective, Medam differentiates “crystallised diasporas” and “fluid diasporas.” In the former type, he presents some dynamic diasporas characterised by the efficiency of their transnational networks; as, for example, the Chinese diaspora. For another specialist of this question, Michel Bruneau (1995), the typology must be based on the diasporic organisation. He defined three major types of diasporas:

1. the entrepreuneural diasporas (i.e. Chinese or Libanese);
2. the religious diasporas (i.e. Jews or Greeks);
3. and the politic diasporas (i.e. Palestinians, Tibetans).

By mentioning Palestinians and Tibetans, authors as Gabriel Sheffer have introduced clearly the political dimension which was underrepresented in the diaspora literature. Seven years after the publication of his book, Gabriel Sheffer (1993) proposed to operate a distinction between diasporas: those without State of origin, called stateless diasporas (ex. Palestinians) and those with a State of origin, defined as state-based diaspora. This typology allows the description of the fluidity of the forms of organization in ethnic groups along their history: as for the Jews who were state-based, stateless and, since1948, state-based. Robin Cohen (1997a), in “response” at this territorial point of view proposed a typology set up on some empirical observations with five types:

1. Labour diasporas (i.e. Indians);
2. Imperial diasporas (i.e. British);
3. The trade diasporas (i.e. Chinese, Lebanese);
4. And the Cultural diasporas; with the Caribbean case.

This last type of diaspora – the cultural diaspora – with the Caribbean case became one of the most stimulating and productive type. It comes from the fact that most of the actors of this group, most of the leaders were (and still tend to be) intellectuals, writers, very active in the public sphere. The diaspora discourse, in its cultural dimension, offered a large place to the notion of hybridity, used by post-modernist authors to denote the evolution of new social dynamics as mixed cultures. The French Caribbean is a good example of the emergence of the question of hybridity (Chivallon, 1997). Books written by Edouard Glissant present clear reference to rhizome identity (concept developed by Gilles Deleuze, notably in his book Mille plateaux co-edited with Felix Guattari, 1980). In this field, conceptual researches are developed also with reference to “travelling cultures” theorised by James Clifford (1994) and found a substantial added value in the debate about the Black diaspora and in the work of Paul Gilroy. Cohen (1997a) summarised this current by quoting that in this perspective: “diasporas are positioned somewhere between “nations-states” and “travelling cultures” in that they involve dwelling in a nation-state in a physical sense, but travelling in an astral or spiritual sense that falls outside the nation-state’s space/time zone.”

So, on one hand, we face with this kind of intellectual position a very different space of thoughts in comparison with the problematic described previously. The nation-state, as Paul Gilroy (1994) described, is the institutional means to terminate diaspora dispersal: on one side, through the assimilation and, on the other side, through return. On the other hand, we are also at a converging point because all these researches lead to the same questions about the connection between nation-states and diasporas.

Globally, all this activity and effort of conceptualisation were productive even if the outcome suggest that nothing was clearly delimited and that one of the characteristics of the concept of diaspora is a strong propensity to overlap the proposed and mobilised notions: perhaps due to the development of the theoretical discourse on globalisation.

II. Merging the concept of diaspora in the globalisation and transnationalism discourses

The research carried out during the 90’s, viewed the emergence of the notions of transnational space, transnational communities, nations unbound notably with the work produced by Basch, Glick-Schiller and Szanton Blanc (1994). These three authors summarized the convergence of all these problematic when they
quoted that the contemporary diasporas are “nation unbound” who “reinscribe” space in a new way. They maintain that in contrast with the past when nation-states were defined in terms of a people sharing a common culture within a bounded territory. This new conception of nation-states includes as citizens “those who live physically dispersed within the boundaries of many others states but who remain socially, politically, culturally and often economically part of the nation-state of their ancestors” (see Basch et al., 1994). At this stage of analyse, the risk of confusion becomes more and more present. It is probably due to the fact, as underlined by James Clifford (1994) that, “an unruly crowd of descriptive/interpretative terms now jostle and converse in an effort to characterise the contact zones of nations, cultures and regions.”

In the group of diaspora “specialists,” the difficulty of managing all these terms is confirmed. In the concluding chapter of two reference books on diasporas -the book of Robin Cohen (1997a), Global Diasporas: An introduction, or in the Nicholas Van Hear book (1998) – New diasporas –, both are devoted to diasporas in the age of globalization and transnationalism. In a recent paper about “Transnationalism, Globalization and Diaspora,” Paul Kennedy and Victor Roudometof (2001) confessed that despite the important contributions of the last ten years, the theorisation of the transnational experience (and its ties to globalisation) remains incomplete. Even if all these elements constitute a strong basis for work, there remain some difficulties of conceptualisation because the diasporas keep an image of a particular social form needing a proper space of theorisation and, in the same time, progressively, the notion became just a particularity of the worldwide social form described under the denomination, transnational communities. This statement confirms the difficulty of differentiating diaspora and transnational communities. One hypothesis should be that, in fact, there are no differences between the realities covered by the two concepts? And, in fact, this statement was clearly expressed by Kachig Tololyan mentioning that “Diasporas are the exemplary communities of the transnational moment” (Shuval, 2003) and deciding, in 1991, to name his review Diaspora… A Journal of Transnational Studies.

More recently, to clarify this question, some elements were provided by Nicholas van Hear (1998) when he suggests defining diasporas on three minimal criteria:

1. the presence abroad is enduring, although exile is not necessarily permanent but may include movement between Homeland and new host countries;
2. the persistence of the presence abroad although the exile is not necessarily permanent since movements between the land of origin and new home countries can develop;

3. there is some kind of exchange –social, economical, political or cultural– between or among the spatially separated populations comprising the diaspora.”

And Nicholas van Hear suggests that for the transnational community definition that this “is a more inclusive notion, which embraces diasporas, but also populations that are contiguous rather than scattered and may straddle just one border”. But, after this proposition, Van Hear raises up, perhaps the most important question, “is the formation of transnational communities and diaspora now inevitable concomitant of migration?” And, finally, this proposal underlines the idea that the two terms are tools permitting the analyse of the questions of identity and belonging that are hardly interrogated. The recent book – *Global sociology* – by Robin Cohen and Paul Kenendy (2000) confirmed this sentiment. In their book, they have presented a chapter on identity and belonging in which one sub-chapter is devoted to transnationalism described via three examples: *The cosmopolitan city, diasporas, diasporas and a global business*. All this contributes to underline that the researchers have to pay attention to these multiple inclusions of the notion of diaspora. These elements add to confusion but ask questions on the permanence of the term of diaspora in the “age of globalisation” seems validate (Cohen, 1997b) and on the capacity of the new forms of migration to evolve “automatically” in a space transcending the national frontiers.

In terms of analyse, all these factors contribute to relegate the notion of diaspora to “historical migrants” and to privilege the question of time as Marientras (1989) and Medam (1993) proposed and to prefer the term of transnational communities to the newest migrant groups, presenting a multipolarised organisation. Nevertheless, this statement is an unsatisfactory answer as is, also weak, the idea that diaspora “refers specifically to the movement –forced or voluntary- of people from one or more nation-states to another” and that transnationalism “speaks to larger, more impersonal forces – specifically those of globalization and global capitalism” (Braziel, 2003). Once again, this ineffectiveness seems due to the fact that it is simply impossible to cover by one notion, with a large part of affect, a plurality of human reality. As James Clifford (1997) underlined, the different attempts to list some working definitions are productive but present some difficulties to fit with an “ideal type” of diaspora. In fact, a large part of the problem is also due to the production of various analyses from very different scientific positions: some researchers can put the label “diaspora” to a group of people by referring to their history (exile,
existence of a collective trauma) or by considering the religion and a memory of
the homeland, some others can make this choice in regards of the density of the
social relationships in a dispersed group. Globally, various elements who are
presenting a real efficiency but also some important obstacles for comparison.
Some researchers are dealing with the identity question and some others are
speaking from a structural point of view. The Turkish migrants are a good
example of this confusion. Many researchers refer to a diasporic structure but
hesitate to speak of them as a Turkish diaspora. In this “time of confusion,” two
methodological points of conclusion could be proposed to explore the variety of
the social and spatial dispositions of these migrant groups. First, all the
researches on diasporas should be based on a strong theoretical infrastructure
(characteristics of diaspora group, of homeland, of host) as proposed by Judith
Shuval (2003). Secondly, following the Van Hear proposal, it could be useful for
those who want to explore the notion of diaspora to pay attention to one
question: how can we explain and characterize the passage from migrants to
diaspora? This prospect is all the more stimulating as it makes emerge
fundamental questions in the field of the diasporas studies which are the
allegiance, engagement, trust, ethnic solidarity or the moral co-responsibility (as
developed by P. Werbner in the Diaspora volume) and makes it possible to
highlight specificities of the social forms observed. For that, I will suggest to
refer to the recent work of Gabriel Sheffer (2003) who dealt with this question.

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