



DIASPORAS

STÉPHANE DUFOIX

WITH A FOREWORD BY ROGER WALDINGER

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What Is a Diaspora?

“Diaspora” is a Greek word, derived from the verb *diaspeiro*, which was used as early as the fifth century B.C. by Sophocles, Herodotus, and Thucydides. The modern usage of “diaspora” stems from its appearance as a neologism in the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek by the legendary seventy Jewish scholars in Alexandria in the third century B.C. In the so-called Septuagint Bible, “diaspora” is used twelve times. But it doesn’t refer to the historic dispersion of the Jews who were taken as captives to Babylon after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., or to any other human historical event. Contrary to what has often been claimed, “diaspora” was not used to translate the Hebrew terms *galut*, *galah*, and *golah*. These were rendered in the Septuagint by several Greek words: *apoikia* (emigration), *paroikia* (settlement abroad), *metoikia* (emigration) or *metoikesia* (transportation), *aikhmalosia* (wartime captivity), or *apokalupsis* (revelation). Instead, “diaspora” always meant the threat of dispersion facing the Hebrews if they failed to obey God’s will, and it applied almost exclusively to divine acts. God is the one who scatters the sin-

ners or will gather them together in the future. Relying on works by other historians of religion such as Willem Cornelius van Unnik and Johannes Tromp, Martin Baumann shows that it was only in later Jewish tradition that the meaning of “diaspora” changed to designate both the scattered people and the locale of their dispersion.¹

In the Christian tradition, the New Testament (where “diaspora” appears three times) presents the church as a dispersed community of pilgrims waiting to return to the City of God. The eschatological waiting connected with “diaspora” tends to disappear in the fourth century, only to resurface during the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, when it describes Protestant minorities in Catholic countries, or the reverse.

To understand the growing popularity of the term during the second half of the twentieth century, it is essential to examine two examples that are strongly both linked and opposed: the “Jewish diaspora” and the “black diaspora.”

THE JEWISH AND BLACK/AFRICAN DIASPORAS

The Jewish Diaspora

Considering the Jewish experience of dispersion means taking into account all of Jewish history, which is marked by constant swings between the centrality of the land of Israel—where no sovereign Jewish power existed between 586 B.C. and 1948—and the growth of one or more centers outside it. The French sociologist Shmuel Trigano counts no fewer than nine “geopolitical structures,” or “geons,” of world Judaism.²

What he calls “the unfinished space” corresponds to the period of geographical instability (1250–586 B.C.) when the territory was initially divided among tribes until the founding of the Davidic king-

dom, then split into northern and southern kingdoms, and finally saw the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Assyrian king Nebuchadnezzar. “The bipolar world” (586–332 B.C.) marked a break in the unity of the people between the Israeli and Babylonian hubs. Most of the Jews had been deported (*galut*) to Babylon, and some chose not to leave when it became possible to return home. This bipolarity survived the conquest of Israel by Alexander, but the Babylonian center lost some of its influence in the “Judeo-Western system” (332 B.C.–A.D. 224). Though not politically independent, Jews were present in the land of Israel even after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in A.D. 70, which is usually given as the start of the Jewish “diaspora.” The Jews left Israel only after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the fourth century, because of persecution suffered under Byzantine rule.

A new geon, “the shattered world” (A.D. 224–630), saw the Babylonian hub develop as the first Jewish center outside of Israel. Arab expansion starting in the seventh century gave the Jewish world a common geopolitical framework. In this “sea of oneness” (A.D. 630–1250), Babylon was joined by a new hub on the Iberian Peninsula, the site of a Jewish golden age in artistic, scientific, intellectual, and political domains. During this period, the distinction was first drawn between the Iberian Jewish communities, the Sephardim—from *S’farad*, meaning “Spain” in medieval Hebrew—and those who traveled from Israel through Italy to settle in Italy, France, and the Rhineland and were known as the Ashkenazim, from *Ashk’naz*, the Hebrew term for the Germanic countries. Fleeing anti-Semitic persecutions in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Ashkenazim would turn tolerant Poland into “the star of the North” (1250–1492). Meanwhile, the Catholic Reconquest and the Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century ended the Arab presence in

Europe and in the Baghdad Caliphate, bringing the Jewish Iberian and Babylonian hubs to an end. The expulsion of the Sephardim from Spain in 1492 and their dispersal to the Ottoman Empire, the cities of northern Europe, Galilee, and the Americas transformed the Jewish world into a “compass card” (1492–1700) marked by the establishment of many small centers focused on commerce and banking. The crisis then faced by the Marranos, the crypto-Jews expelled from Spain, signaled the decline of the earlier centers and the emergence of Prussia and France as countries where citizenship for Jews became possible. France declared the emancipation of the Jews—that is, the end of special laws and the proclamation of equal rights—on 27 September 1791. Some Germanic states adopted similar principles in the first half of the nineteenth century, but they did not apply to the whole of German territory until after the empire was unified in 1871.

As the Russian hub grew in size, the influence of the Ottoman and Middle Eastern ones diminished. This “tripolar world” (1700–1948) went into decline at the end of the nineteenth century with the rise of anti-Semitism in France (the Dreyfus Affair) and Germany, as well as in Russia, where the tsars encouraged pogroms against Jewish shtetls. The migrations to the West began then: 2.7 million people between 1881 and 1914, and 860,000 from 1915 to 1939. The consequences of the Nazis coming to power in Germany in 1933—persecutions, World War II, and the launching of the “final solution” with the Axis powers’ support—led to the destruction of the Jews of Europe, 6 million of whom would die in the Holocaust. Europe’s Jews represented 72 percent of the world Jewish community in 1850 and 57 percent in 1939; after the war, that figure fell to 32 percent. The creation of the State of Israel in May 1948 inaugurated the current “duopoly” (1948 to the present). It is characterized by the

coexistence of a state for the Jews and the maintenance of a non-Israeli Jewish identity now mainly centered in the United States.

For the American political scientist Daniel Elazar, the Jewish people represent “the classic diaspora phenomenon” by reason of their capacity to preserve their “integrity as an ethnoreligious community” despite more than two thousand years of existence without political power over their own country of origin.³ Moreover, the continual Jewish migrations during those two millennia favored religious identification based on a shared temporal and religious rhythm rather than on shared land. The existence of the Jews as a political entity (*eda*, in Hebrew) rests on the idea of a covenant between God and the twelve tribes of Israel. Its principles are found in the Torah, which is both the name of the first five books of the Bible and the collection of the rules of Jewish life (Talmud and commentaries). The *eda* is unusual in being at once dissociated from a territory yet needing one in order to be fully realized. From the very beginning, the organization of the Jewish people in spatial circles (local, regional, and global associations) rather than geographical ones allowed an extended family or tribe to move through wider and wider levels when dispersion imposed a redefinition of the spatial frameworks. The local circle often matched a city’s limits, and a regional one those of a state or a continent. But from the fifth to the eleventh centuries, the *eda* rested on the institution of the Resh Galuta, the head of the exile community in Babylon. When this position disappeared with the end of the Muslim empire, respect for the Torah was Judaism’s sole remaining inclusive force.

The emergence of Zionism at the end of the nineteenth century marked a passage to new forms of representation. The persecutions suffered by the Jews in central and eastern Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century led to the formation of small

organizations aimed at founding agricultural colonies in Palestine. A return to Zion, the mountain that rises above Jerusalem, became a goal. Zionism developed in the Russian empire as early as 1882, but it was the publication of *The Jewish State*, by Theodore Herzl, in 1896 that marked the birth of Zionism as a political movement advocating the founding of a Jewish national homeland. The First Zionist Congress, which met in Basel in 1897, chose the two goals of establishing a national assembly of the Jewish people through the election of delegates from all the communities, and creating a national homeland by encouraging emigration to Palestine. The first point saw the establishment of what would become the World Zionist Organization, which attracted tens of thousands of individual members in 1897 and had a million by 1939. The World Jewish Congress, created in 1936, allowed for national groupings. But the Zionist movement was divided over two issues involving a homeland: the respective roles of religion and politics, and the approach to founding a state. Between the two world wars, after the defeat of the 1917 Balfour Declaration and as more and more Jews immigrated to Palestine, the Zionists split again, this time over the question of violence. The Socialists advocated a nonviolent approach and the encouragement of immigration; Vladimir Jabotinsky's "revisionists" and their military wing, the Irgun, decided in 1936 to respond with violence to Arab terrorism and, later, to British domination.

Giving an overall estimate of the world's Jewish population and its geographical distribution presupposes knowing who is Jewish. Current statistics generally follow a definition that is broader than that prescribed by halakha (tradition), which dictates every aspect of Jewish life and says that one must be born of a Jewish mother or ritually convert to Judaism. The figures usually put forth take into account what the demographer Sergio DellaPergola calls "the core

Jewish population,” which includes all those who consider themselves to be Jews.⁴ It should be noted that this definition, though founded on a subjective conception of Jewishness, is more restricted than that which operates in the framework of Israel’s Law of Return. The most recent version of this law includes spouses, non-Jewish children and grandchildren, and their spouses.

At the beginning of 2006, according to DellaPergola, the world Jewish population numbered about 13.1 million, of whom nearly 81 percent lived in two countries: the United States (about 5.3 million) and Israel (5.3 million out of a total population of about 7 million). Ninety-five percent of Jews are concentrated in ten countries: the United States and Israel, France (491,500), Canada (373,000), the United Kingdom (297,000), Russia (228,000), Argentina (184,500), Germany (118,000), Australia (103,000), and Brazil (96,500).⁵

The Black/African Diaspora

It is no accident that “diaspora” has been applied to the situation of the descendants of Africans living on other continents. Indeed, even before the word was used, the parallel was being drawn in the nineteenth century between the Jewish and black dispersions in the writings of the first thinkers of the “pan-Africanist” cause, W. E. B. DuBois and Edward Blyden. For blacks, the biblical episode of the Exodus—escaping from slavery and reaching the Promised Land—had special resonance. Jews and blacks are linked by the role of Africa in Jewish history. Blyden considered the Jewish question to be the “question of questions,” and he admired Zionism for undertaking and organizing a return to the land of origin. He himself “returned” to Africa in 1850 in the context of a program launched in the 1820s to settle former slaves that led to the creation

of Liberia. Aspirations for a return to Africa from the United States and England took shape as early as 1787, when the British government supported settlement in Sierra Leone, and continued into the early twentieth century. In the 1920s, Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey, the head of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), advocated the founding of a black nation in Africa. The 1920 Declaration of the Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World proclaimed the black race's right to self-determination and chose red, green, and black as the colors of the "African nation." But the project of return depended on a shipping company, the Black Star Line, and its financial difficulties led to Garvey's downfall. He was imprisoned and then expelled from the United States and the UNIA. With that, the "back-to-Africa" plans came to an end.

In spite of the link between the Jewish and black peoples established by the idea of a return to the land of origin, none of those militant theoreticians used the word "diaspora." Until now, scholars all agreed that the first written occurrences of the expressions "African diaspora" and "black diaspora," and the use of "diaspora" to describe the situation of blacks living outside of Africa, dated from 1965. And that is what I wrote in the French edition of this book, citing articles by George Shepperson and Abiola Irele.⁶ I did note that the expressions and issues were not new inventions but had already been circulating in intellectual circles since the mid-1950s.

My research since 2003 reveals that not only did the idea occur earlier but the terms themselves did, too. They were often used to explicitly draw an 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: “The Negro is not going to leave here for two reasons: In the first place *this is his home*, and in the second place *there is nowhere to go*. He is not going back to Africa any more than the white man is going back to Europe or the Jew is going back to Palestine. Palestine may be rehabilitated and Europe be Americanized, but the Jew will not lose his worldwide citizenship, nor America fail of her geographical destination as the garden-spot of the world. The Negro will do his part to carry the light of civilization to the dark corners of the world, especially to Africa; dark, mysterious, inscrutable Africa; the puzzle of the past and the riddle of the future; the imperturbable mother of civilizations and peoples. 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.”⁷ Soon afterward, in 1917, the analogy 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 2 July, and the Kishinev pogrom in 1903, during which more than fifty Jews were killed: “Kishinev and St. Louis—the same soil, the same people. It is a distance of four and a half thousand miles between these two cities and yet they are so close and so similar to each other. . . . Actually twin sisters, which could easily be mistaken for each other. Four and a half thousand miles apart, but the same events in both. . . . The same brutality, the same wildness, the same human beasts.” The editorial went on: “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.”⁸ The Jewish editorial writer is proclaiming the “Negro diaspora.” But those two

occurrences hardly spelled the formula's success. Not until the 1950s and 1960s would its usage become common among English-speaking historians of Africa, like Basil Davidson,⁹ and, especially, among French scholars and intellectuals.

In 1951, the French ethnologist and great Haiti specialist Alfred Métraux set out the idea that Africa is not merely surviving in Haiti but is actually alive and well there, and that its vitality stems from the "physical energy" and the "strength of soul" shown by the slaves and their children in resisting cruel treatment: "The black 'diaspora' has been a benefit for the New World, a benefit that we are just now becoming aware of as we see the lengthening roll of blacks distinguished by their talents in the most varied domains."¹⁰ In his 1961 book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon writes of "the Negro diaspora, that is, the tens of millions of blacks spread over the American continents."¹¹

From the mid-1970s, publications started to multiply that used "diaspora" to refer to an ever vaster population that included, in addition to the transatlantic trade, the Muslim slave trade in the Middle East and Asia, as well as voluntary migrations. The broadest definition is the one given by the historian Joseph Harris in 1982: "The African diaspora concept subsumes the following: the global dispersion (voluntary and involuntary) of Africans throughout history; the emergence of a cultural identity abroad based on origin and social condition; and the psychological or physical return to the homeland, Africa."¹²

A major phenomenon lies at the root of this dispersion: the slave trade. Slavery existed in the societies of antiquity, but it reached unprecedented and systematic proportions in the Muslim world and in European societies and their colonies. Blacks were captured, bought, sold, transported, and put to work. In the framework of its

westward expansion starting in the seventh century, Muslim civilization operated a trans-Saharan slave trade involving 7.5 million people between 650 and 1900. To that figure must be added the approximately 3.5 million slaves bought or seized in raids in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on the east coast of Africa and sent north, for a total of approximately 11 million. Eleven million is also the generally accepted estimate of the total number of slaves shipped to the Americas during the transatlantic commerce between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries: 4 million to Brazil; 2.5 million to the Spanish colonies; 2 million to the British West Indies; 1.6 million to the French West Indies and Guyana; 500,000 to North America (the British colonies, then the United States); and 500,000 to the Dutch West Indies and Suriname.¹³

These men and women were uprooted from the African soil and separated from their families and communities for centuries, deprived of institutions, and condemned to an existence that the sociologist Orlando Patterson qualifies as “social death.”¹⁴ Do they and their descendants still share—or have they ever shared—a common identity? If so, what is it? Their origin in Africa? Their skin color? The transmission of practices and beliefs across the ocean and through the generations? The experience of slavery itself? These are the questions around which the debate about the black/African community—or communities—has focused. Its main thrust is an examination of the connection with Africa: continuity with or rupture from the origin; or to the contrary, the absence of an origin and the development of a common culture precisely founded on hybridity. The word “diaspora” gives meaning to both.

The reference to Africa functions on several levels: heritage, the claim of skin color, Afrocentrism . . . The link to an African origin is always viewed in its cultural, racial, or historic dimensions when

answering the question What is African in the “African diaspora”? The French anthropologist Christine Chivallon shows that the debates by both academics and activists about the Africanness of certain community, family, or religious practices in the Caribbean or the Americas range along three axes: perfect and pure continuity; creolization as a meeting of two worlds and the formation of a new, culturally complex one; and alienation.¹⁵ The third situation, which is especially present in works on the French West Indies, stresses the interiorization of colonial structures and the impossibility for Caribbean peoples to appropriate their history in a republican framework that prevents the claiming of origins. Isolated and discriminated against because of their skin color, blacks have reversed the stigma, turning it into a banner of unity. But being a “black nationalist” means different things to different people. In the Négritude movement, Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor advocated the symbolic return to an ancestral Africa; Pan-Africanism demanded political self-determination for the Africans of Africa; and Afrocentrism inverted Western ethnocentrism, making Egypt and/or Ethiopia the first civilization. The ambiguity of a real or symbolic return to Africa is clear in the Jamaican Rastafarian movement. Born in the 1930s, it views the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie as the black god incarnate and considers whites inferior to blacks. But in fact, the return is only a fiction, a way of keeping alive and reinventing an Africa whose territory is the memory of dispersion itself, more vibrantly alive in the scattering than it would be in a reunion.

THE RECENT HISTORY OF AN ANCIENT WORD

“Diaspora” may be an old Greek word, but it was rarely used in other languages before the nineteenth century. In the first diction-

ary of modern Greek (1659), it describes both dispersion in the wider sense and the Greek presence throughout the world. Its use in *Moral Philosophy* by Iosipos Moisioudax (1761) is plural: Greece is “all the diasporas of the Greeks.”¹⁶ It is still used in that sense today, mostly in the singular.

Aside from that special case, “diaspora” in European languages related only to theology or the study of religions until the middle of the twentieth century. In 1754 it appeared in the title of a book by Edward Weston on the condition of Jews in England.¹⁷ The *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* noted the appearance of the term in French in 1908,¹⁸ but it had already been used by Ernest Renan in his *Histoire du peuple d’Israël* in the early 1890s.¹⁹ “Diaspora” was often used in Germany, England, and the United States during the nineteenth century. It referred either to the Bible—the Old Testament texts on the dispersion of the Jews, and the New Testament texts on the situation of the Christian church scattered among heathens—or to nonbiblical cases of a people or a group dispersed but unified by their religion, such as the Armenians and the Moravian brethren. The Moravian case is especially interesting. The church was born of the Hussite reform movement that developed in the Czech countries in the fifteenth century. Forced into exile after the Battle of White Mountain against the Catholics in 1620, the Moravians founded their church in Saxony in 1722. In 1742 a system of missions was established to evangelize and maintain connections among the faithful in Europe. In 1750 it took the name of Diaspora of the Church of the Brethren, in a reference to the Gospel of Peter. According to Edmund de Schweinitz, the author of the 1859 *Moravian Manual*, this diaspora then numbered nearly eighty thousand people.²⁰ In American encyclopedias at the

end of the nineteenth century, the word “diaspora” is connected to the Moravian Church, not to the Jewish people.

Instances of the phrase in dictionaries at the beginning of the twentieth century sometimes acknowledged its plural usage. Thus, its first appearance in the British *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* in 1913 reads: “Applied collectively: a) to those Jews who, after the Exile, were scattered through the Old World, and afterwards to Jewish Christians living among heathen. Cf. James i.1. b) by extension to Christians isolated from their own communion, as among the Moravians, to those living, usually as missionaries, outside of the parent congregation.”²¹ By contrast, in the 1929 *Larousse du XXe siècle*, the meaning of the word is limited to the Jewish example: “*Relig. hist.* The dispersion of the Jews driven from their country by the vicissitudes of their history through the ancient world.”²²

Until the 1950s, “diaspora” had no possible meaning except religious. Yet in the 1931 edition of the American *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, historian Simon Dubnov, the author of the entry “Diaspora,” felt that the term should not be limited to Jewish or religious history: “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 but 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.”²³

Dubnov’s text played a major role in the diffusion of the term

“diaspora” itself, and in both its progressive secularization in general and its gradual separation from the historic experience of the Jewish people in particular. While some scholars read his entry as a call to restrict the term to the case of the Jews, others saw it as an opening. In 1949, the American sociologist Rose Hum Lee relied on Dubnov—whom she quotes at length in an early footnote while carefully omitting the phrase about the Greeks and the Armenians—to show that “Chinatowns are a type of segregated communities of people separated from their homeland but whose dispersion differs from the historical ‘diaspora’ of the Jewish people scattered throughout the Greco-Roman world.”²⁴

Ten years earlier, the sociologist Robert Park, whose previous work focused on the “marginal man”—the question of the stranger so dear to Georg Simmel—took a completely different tack.²⁵ Having found in the “emancipated Jew” a kind of model of a person caught between two cultures, Park in 1939 reframed Dubnov to enlarge the use of “diaspora” and 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.”²⁶

Park’s usage seems to have gradually displaced Dubnov’s, to the point that Park himself is sometimes quoted as the source of this definition.²⁷ In fact, Dubnov is absent from the 1968 edition of the *Encyclopedia*, and the “Diaspora” entry reappears only in 2001, written by the British sociologist Robin Cohen.²⁸

This expanded usage began to appear in newspapers and dictionaries in the 1960s. *Le Monde* wrote of a “Czech diaspora” in 1968.²⁹ In 1980 the *Dictionnaire des mots contemporains* adopted the extension of the definition to “other populations besides the Jewish people.”³⁰ In 1961 *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*

added this new dimension: “dispersion (as of a people of common national origin or of common beliefs” and “the people of one country dispersed into other countries.”³¹

This progressive shift of a word designating the historic situation of a people or religious groups to a generic term has been especially apparent in the social sciences.

DIASPORA AS A CONCEPT

Except for the article by Simon Dubnov cited above, “diaspora” as a concept is almost absent from the social sciences lexicon before the 1960s.

1. The Emergence of a General Concept

Until the mid-1980s, “diaspora” was used in two separate and independent ways, without any real effort to define it: as a name for certain populations living outside a reference territory, and as a specialized concept describing African trading networks.

During this period, scholars commonly used the term to refer to four groups of people: Jews, people of African origin, Palestinians, and Chinese. As we have seen, the expressions “black diaspora” and “African diaspora” took off in the late 1960s and early 1970s and have continued to spread.³² Qualifying the “overseas Chinese” as a “diaspora” dates back at least to the end of the 1940s, but its growth in popularity stems from anthropologist Maurice Freedman’s work on Chinese family structures in the 1950s and 1960s.³³ The Palestinian case is even more interesting. The first mention of “diaspora” in connection with Palestinians apparently appears in a 1965 United Nations report, but the term became much more widely used after

the 1973 Yom Kippur war. Its use is especially potent, since the Palestinian dispersion was born of a conflict with the State of Israel. In 1985, the scholar Walid Khalidi wrote, “Just as all Jews in their Diaspora would not or could not live in Israel, not all Palestinians in their Diaspora could or would live in the Palestinian state. But just as Israel works its magic on the Jews of the Diaspora, the sovereign state of Palestine . . . will work its magic on the Palestinian Diaspora.”³⁴ In this period, the word was gradually being applied to other groups too, such as the Armenians, Dominicans, and Irish.

At the end of the 1960s the concept of “trading” or “commercial” diasporas emerged among historians of Africa, beginning with Ivor Wilks’s and Abner Cohen’s works on West African peoples, notably the Hausa and the Mandé. Popularized by Paul Lovejoy and Philip Curtin, the concept referred to merchants’ long-distance networks along commercial routes. Cohen describes a trading diaspora as “a nation of socially interdependent but spatially dispersed communities.” This is a broad category, and it includes commercial networks in Asia and South America in which both business and religion—especially Islam in the case of North and West Africa—play a primary role in forging cohesion.³⁵

In 1976 the American political scientist John Armstrong proposed an initial typology of “diasporas” as “mobilized” or “proletarian.”³⁶ But it was with the 1986 publication of *Modern Diasporas in International Politics*, edited by the Israeli political scientist Gabriel Sheffer, that the field shifted to a general theoretical approach based on a comparative perspective, comparing Jews, Armenians, Turks, Palestinians, Chinese, Indians, and so on. The fundamental issue was less developing a theory of diasporas—as the German sociologist Robert Hettlage suggested in 1991³⁷—than defining the term in

the social sciences. Three kinds of definitions can be distinguished: open, categorical, and oxymoronic.

OPEN DEFINITIONS These offer a loose and nondiscriminating view of the object of study and leave the door open to an undetermined number of a priori cases. The earliest definition is Armstrong's: "Any ethnic collectivity which lacks a territorial base within a given polity, i.e., is a relatively small community throughout all portions of the polity."³⁸ This includes groups of nomadic hunters or herdsmen, as well as what he calls "Gypsies." Sheffer's position too is an open definition, but it is much more elaborate. In the introduction to his 1986 book, he subtracts the possibility of nomadism from Armstrong's position and adds a fundamental element: the maintenance of a link with the place of origin. "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."³⁹ A "diaspora" must therefore have a number of factors involving the origin of the (voluntary or forced) migration; settlement in one or several countries; maintenance of identity and community solidarity, which allows people to make contacts between groups and to organize activities aimed at preserving that identity; and finally, relations between the leaving state, the host state, and the diaspora itself, the last of which may become a link between the first two. In 2003, Sheffer revisited at length the definition of what he now calls "ethno-national diasporas."⁴⁰

CATEGORICAL DEFINITIONS These place the object of study within a matrix of strict criteria that must be fulfilled for it to war-

rant the scientific designation as a “diaspora.” Both categoric and categorical, the criteria are designed to differentiate between “true” and “false” diasporas. At times, asking whether a given population is or is not a diaspora has become some studies’ primary focus. There are two kinds of categorical definitions, depending on whether the diaspora must satisfy one or more than one criterion. An example of the first kind appears in an editorial by the French geographer Yves Lacoste in the special 1989 issue of the journal *Hérodote* devoted to the “geopolitics of diasporas.” Lacoste says that “true” diasporas can be recognized by “the dispersion of the major part of a people.”⁴¹ His main criterion isn’t the absolute number of people who have left, but their number relative to the country’s total population. So while there may be some 20 million Chinese in Southeast Asia, they can’t claim to be a “diaspora,” because, though their number is considerable, it is insignificant compared to the billion Chinese in China. By this definition, there are only five diasporas: the Jewish (Ashkenazim and Sephardim), Lebanese, Palestinian, Armenian, and Irish.

In 1991 the American political scientist William Safran made the first attempt to construct a closed conceptual model with multiple criteria. He suggests, “lest the term lose all meaning”⁴² limiting the term “diaspora” to minority expatriate communities whose members shared *several* of the six following characteristics: their or their ancestors’ dispersion from a “center” to at least two peripheral foreign regions; persistence of a collective memory concerning the homeland; certainty that their acceptance by the host society is impossible; maintenance of an often idealized homeland as a goal of return; belief in a collective duty to engage in the perpetuation, restoration, or security of the country of origin; and maintenance of individual or collective relations with the country of origin. Unlike Sheffer’s definition, Safran’s seems historically embodied by the Jewish dias-

pora, in its structure if not directly in its formulation. As an archetype, the Jewish diaspora is therefore anterior, original, and superior to all others. If a comparison can or must be made, it will be not so much *among* diasporas as between each of them and the Jewish diaspora, which provides the criteria. It is also present in the “iconoclastic” concepts presented by Robin Cohen in his 1997 *Global Diasporas*, the first major general study of diasporas written by a single scholar.⁴³ Cohen uses Safran’s criteria but modifies them slightly. He merges idealization of the country of origin with the commitment to its maintenance and security and adds the eventual creation of a state. To those criteria he then appends four more: voluntary migration (for business, work, or colonization); an enduring ethnic awareness; the emergence of new creativity; and a feeling of empathy and solidarity with “fellow ethnics” in other countries. As a result, Cohen produces a list of nine “common characteristics of a diaspora” coupled with a typology that distinguishes diasporas according to their primary identity: victim (Jews, Africans, Armenians, and Palestinians), labor (Indians), trade (Chinese), cultural (the Caribbean), and imperial (British, French, Spanish, and Portuguese).

OXYMORONIC DEFINITIONS These are rooted in the appearance of postmodern thought in the 1980s and are the heirs of various currents critical of modernity, notably the works of Michel Foucault. In France they crystallized around the philosophers Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari. Modern societies, which are characterized by a belief in reason, progress, universality, and stability, are confronted by emerging postmodern societies dominated by doubt, fragmentation, the end of great narratives of truth and science, racial mixing, and fluid identities. Postmodernism spread through most of the social sci-

ences, in particular sociology and anthropology. In the 1980s it encountered the English “cultural studies” movement, which studied subaltern or postcolonial subcultures (workers, minorities, immigrants, and so on). In that setting, a vision of “diaspora” developed that was radically different from both the open and the categorical definitions. Where those definitions stress reference to a point of departure and maintenance of an identity in spite of dispersion, postmodern thought instead gives pride of place to paradoxical identity, the noncenter, and hybridity.

Three authors writing in English played an important role in establishing this vision: Stuart Hall, James Clifford, and Paul Gilroy. Of “diaspora,” Hall wrote in 1990: “I use this term 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, imperialising, hegemonizing 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*.”⁴⁴

The postmodern vision introduced a break between modern forms of diaspora, whose archetype is the Jewish model, and its new forms, whose archetype is the “black diaspora.” *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy’s 1993 book on the “black diaspora,” has become a cultural studies classic.⁴⁵ In a 1994 article, he insists on the “plural status” that can be seen in the word’s history, where “diaspora-dispersion” and “diaspora-identification” have coexisted in opposition, with the first tending to the end of dispersion, unlike the second, which is written in living memory. Taken in this second sense, the “diasporic idea” allows one to go beyond the simplistic

view of certain oppositions (continuity/rupture, center/periphery) to grasp the complex, that is, the joint presence of the Same and the Other, the local and the global—everything that Gilroy calls “the changing same.”⁴⁶ In a 1994 essay, the American anthropologist James Clifford, known for his studies of “traveling cultures,” also opposes two visions of “diaspora” while rejecting the “postmodern” label: an “ideal-type” vision founded on the accumulation of criteria and the built-in relationship to a center, and a decentralized vision more focused on the frontiers of the diaspora than its core, in order to understand what diaspora is opposed to. According to Clifford, this is the static nature of the nation-state: “Diasporas have rarely founded nation-states: Israel is the prime example. And such ‘homecomings’ are, by definition, the negation of diaspora.”⁴⁷

2. French Thinking about Diasporas

In 2005–6 two collective works on the question of “diasporas” were published in France.⁴⁸ But France began theorizing about the term “diaspora”—considering it in an abstract form and openly—only in the 1980s. Earlier French or French-language publications with “diaspora” in their titles mainly concerned the Jewish people. In addition to the “Diaspora” collection launched by the publisher Calmann-Lévy in 1971, a few books or brochures appeared about the Jewish people or the relationship between the State of Israel and Jews living in other countries. The periodical *Les Cahiers de diaspora* was launched in 1979, and the term “diaspora” was also applied to other populations, in particular Armenians, Africans, and more rarely, Chinese.⁴⁹ But these usages avoided the issue of definition.

As both the geographer Michel Bruneau and the anthropologist Denys Cuche note, geographers and historians were the first to raise

the possibility of making “diaspora” a category and trying to define it.⁵⁰ The French geographer Maximilien Sorre used the word as early as 1957 to designate the space that national minorities occupy in foreign countries.⁵¹ The French geographer Pierre George, however, proposed an initial definition in 1984. Diaspora was characterized by dispersion and fed by successive exoduses, forced or voluntary, and by ethno-cultural segregation and conservation of cultural practices despite contacts with the surrounding population. “The reference is valid if the signs symbolizing membership in a collectivity and shared relations between the cores of the diaspora and between those cores and the leaving homeland endure.”⁵² The distinctive criteria of diasporas are a community of history, belief, reference territory, and language between the dispersed cores. But again, the category is based on the archetype of the Jewish diaspora. In his 1975 book, *Être un peuple en diaspora*, Richard Marienstras suggests that the unique Jewish situation of a nonterritorial mode of living “in diaspora” should not be considered abnormal in the system of nations.⁵³ In 1985 he laid out the conditions that make other diasporas possible. Against the current temptation to use the word “to designate any emigrant community whose numbers give it visibility in the host community,” he stressed the central role of time in determining “true diasporas.” “We can be fairly sure that the Chinese, Roma, Armenians, and Jews ‘live in diaspora’ and will continue to do so for some time to come. For other emigrant communities, this is less certain.”⁵⁴

The age of monographs began in the late 1980s. The decade after the special 1989 *Hérodote* issue saw a proliferation of symposia, collective works, and journal theme issues, crowded with singular studies of this or that “emigrant community” by academics specializing in the study of certain “diasporas” or “diasporic” phe-

nomena within a population. Among French specialists, one can cite the geographers Georges Prévélakis and Michel Bruneau for the Greeks; the historian Pierre Trollet, geographer Emmanuel Mung, and sociologist Live Yu Sion for the Chinese; the anthropologist Martine Hovanessian and historian Anahide Ter-Minassian for the Armenians; and the anthropologist Christine Chivallon for West Indians and the “black diaspora.”

At the same time, more general thinking was developing, although timidly, about the concept and its usage, along with the consideration of approaches to the meaning(s) of “diaspora,” the conditions of its use, and its ambiguities. Four scholars of this aspect of the discussion are worth mentioning.

In 1993 the French sociologist Alain Médam noted the transformations of the term. As “a proper name that has tended over time to become a common name,” the word has lost its distinctive character, as well as its negative connotation: at a time of globalization of the economy and culture, “‘diasporians’ [*diasporéens* in the original French] are no longer traitors, but go-betweens.”⁵⁵ Ignoring the battle over definitions, Médam suggests ways to grasp the current diversity of “diaspora” situations by way of typological oppositions, depending on their age, recognition, organization, or lifespan. Those situations can be rigid or fluid, official or clandestine, dynamic or amorphous, reversible or irreversible. While focusing on each case’s uniqueness, Médam paradoxically mentions the need to return to the archetype of the Jewish diaspora “as a way of getting a little closer to essential characteristics.” Permanence, which is the essential criterion of any diaspora, is possible only when it involves a territory that has no borders and is not limited to a specific piece of ground. For Jews, that abstract territory has been the Torah.

The anthropologist Christine Chivallon has a completely differ-

ent point of view. In 1997 she set out to study the implications of the use of the word “diaspora” for West Indians.⁵⁶ Though widely used by the British, the word was practically absent from French research until recently. In French studies, “diaspora” is synonymous with the persistence of awareness and the community link in spite of dispersion—a concept that contradicts the notion of the fragmentation, not to say absence, of a West Indian identity shaped by the slave trade, slavery, and assimilation. By contrast, British postmodern theorizing about diaspora (Hall and Gilroy) puts the nomad and the hybrid first, as we have seen. The West Indian world (Hall) or the black Atlantic (Gilroy) became the prototypes of the diaspora seen as “fluid and mobile.” In France, this concept was represented only by the literary *créolité* (creoleness) movement, notably by Patrick Chamoiseau and Edouard Glissant. Chivallon goes farther. Theories that condemn rational thought’s capacity for exclusion and inferiorization are merely obeying the same logic while reversing its values: “The unstable identity is now estimable,” whereas the fixed and centered identity is stigmatized. Though presented as neutral, these concepts are freighted with intentions and carry implicit classifications through the dualities they express, in the English-speaking world and elsewhere. In 2004, Chivallon wrote a pioneering book examining the question of the black diaspora from the perspective of the Caribbean.⁵⁷

The anthropologist Martine Hovanessian, who studies the Armenians, has also considered situations of extreme exile, characterized by massive exodus and the loss of homeland. In 1998 she undertook to sum up six years of research on the notion of diaspora. Having stated that it involves a construct, she insists on the necessity of considering the issues involved in its use, whether by the groups themselves (self-designation) or by scholars given to distinguishing

between “true” from “false” diasporas. What matters, Hovanessian writes, is “untangling the links between the social reality and the notion.”⁵⁸ The term is a perfect echo of the transformations of the contemporary world (fragmentation of, and challenge to, the nation-state) because of the network structure of diasporas. In fact, the globalization of the migratory space favors their emergence, which allows one to go beyond the single relation between the sending country and the host country, suggesting the possibility of spaces for economic and cultural relations *between* the nation-states. Diasporas are closely linked to considerations of problems of minorities and the “ethnic factor,” she writes, and are often thought of as “transmission belts between the minority culture and the national host culture.”⁵⁹ For Hovanessian, however, the question of connection and social sense is even more important. Diasporas primarily born of the loss of a national territory create a sense of identity in their exile situation, a national imagination that supports the maintenance of solidarity in dispersion. So the maintenance of myths—of origin or of return—is therefore the foundation of a *modus vivendi* among states.

In 1999 the sociologist Dominique Schnapper weighed the value of the word with respect to the sociopolitical environment and made the connection between the shift in the meaning of “diaspora” from pejorative to positive, and the development of transnational phenomena that relativize the significance of a national model.⁶⁰ The confluence of the political, the cultural, and the economic within the framework of the nation-state has become less pertinent, favoring a disassociation between the territories of residence, belonging, and subsistence. This context favors diasporic thought, but it is necessary to specify the limits of a term whose contemporary use is so sloppy that it is becoming simply a synonym for “ethnic group.” “Diaspora”

will remain scientifically useful only on two conditions, writes Schnapper: first, its use must be neutral, neither pejorative nor eulogistic; second, it must concern, independently of the circumstances of the dispersion, “all dispersed populations, whatever their prestige, that maintain ties among themselves, and not only to the Jews, Armenians, Greeks, or Chinese.” These ties must be “institutionalized . . . whether objective or symbolic.” Schnapper is here touching on the differences between a word in its ordinary meaning and a category of scientific thinking.⁶¹

THE AMBIGUITIES OF A CLICHÉ

In the space of about fifteen years, “diaspora” has evolved into an all-purpose word used to describe a growing number of populations. Both in the media (television, print, and radio) and in scholarly publications, it has replaced such terms as “exile” and “foreign community.” It is increasingly being used without any definition in a scope that is both wide and loose. “Diaspora” now means “ethnic community separated by state borders” or “transnational community.” Schnapper was right to underscore the importance of transnational phenomena in the word’s changing meaning, but the role played by social scientists in the extension of its possible limits must also be taken into account. This extension is due to two phenomena: the influence of theories of globalization and postmodernism since the 1980s, and the creation of publication sites specifically dedicated to so-called transnational phenomena that use “diaspora” in their titles.

From the early 1980s, three new expressions have appeared in the social sciences that favor broadening the dimensions of the notion of diaspora: “postmodernism,” “globalization,” and “transnationalism.” We have already noted the importance of the first of these.

The second, “globalization,” appeared in the mid-1980s, in particular in the writings of sociologist Roland Robertson, to designate the intensification of relations at a global scale and the growing consciousness of the wholeness of the world.⁶² After that, many sociologists and anthropologists (Anthony Giddens, Ulf Hannerz, Ulrich Beck, and Zygmunt Bauman, among others) considered the study of society at the planetary level, taking into account the growing importance of flows—human, economic, and financial, but especially informational and cultural ones—which have made possible an unparalleled degree of interaction between the local and the global. As the American anthropologist Arjun Appadurai says, cultural deterritorialization opens the path to imagining multiple possible existences. He uses the term “ethnoscape” to describe “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers, and other moving groups and persons [who] constitute an essential feature of the world.”⁶³ It is between nation-states that certain activities and connections acquire their full meaning. Specialists in international relations have underscored this “transnational” dimension. As early as 1972, Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye stressed the growing importance of networks and nonstate actors (nongovernmental organizations and multinational businesses).⁶⁴ In his 1990 book *Turbulence in World Politics*, American international relations theorist James Rosenau opposed the “state-centered” world to the “multi-centered” world of individual and collective nonstate actors.⁶⁵ In the early 1990s, anthropologists Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton argued for a new concept to describe the life of migrants who no longer feel forced to break with their culture and country of origin. In their 1994 book, *Nations Unbound*, they write: “We define ‘transnationalism’ as the processes by which

immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call these processes transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders.”⁶⁶ These “transmigrants” develop and maintain all sorts of relations—familial, religious, economic, and political—with the place they come from, thereby laying the foundations of nonterritorial nations. While the authors insist that this kind of nation is not diasporic, it is undeniable that the spread of new concepts like transnationalism has influenced the use of “diaspora,” which has come to stand, for many people, as a synthesis of everything that operates *through* states.

Moreover, “diaspora” has become an intellectual rallying cry. The 1991 launching in the United States of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* has clearly played a role in this development. In its maiden issue, editor in chief Khachig Tölölyan writes that, while the nation-state remains the principal form of political organization, the world has entered a “transnational moment” where nonstate forces threaten the stability of borders. “We use ‘diaspora’ provisionally to indicate our belief that the term that once described Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrants, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community.”⁶⁷ Since 2002, the Diasporas Study Center at the University of Toulouse–Le Mirail has published a journal called *Diasporas, histoires et sociétés*. Its goal isn’t so much the study of diasporas as that of “diaspora problems” (countries dreamed of and promised, returns, conversion, and loyalties), with the understanding that “studying diasporas comes down to examining the vast lexical and semantic fields which tirelessly describe the migratory challenge.”⁶⁸

The growth in the number of phenomena and populations covered by “diaspora” has understandably attracted critics who focus either on the word’s lack of theoretical power or its inability to describe certain phenomena. The sociologist Floya Anthias has shown that, when the notion of “diaspora” is used as a “typological tool” (Cohen) or as a description of a “social condition” that challenges nation-states (Clifford), it fails to articulate the differences *within* diasporas, in particular the role played by differences of sex and class in the perception or the construction of ethnicity.⁶⁹ For his part, Östen Wahlbeck, a specialist in Kurdish studies, correctly insists on the need to move beyond real-world definitions based on limiting criteria, toward an ideal-type definition of diaspora.⁷⁰ To the German sociologist Max Weber, the ideal type was not a description of reality but a conceptual tool used to better understand it. Such a usage of “diaspora,” which is more conceptual than descriptive, makes it possible to stress a population’s common characteristics without giving it a global definition as a “true diaspora.” Another aspect of criticism focuses more on the word’s inflation, in an attempt either to “save” the concept from complete dilution⁷¹ or to understand the challenge of such a “diaspora industry.”⁷²

The unbelievable proliferation of studies focused on the theme of connections—of all sorts—that are established, preserved, or undone beyond borders has produced a raft of scientific terms constructed with the prefixes “trans-” (transnationalism, translocality, transculture, and transmigration) or “cyber-” (cyberculture, cybernauts, and cyber communities). Adjectives like “transnational,” “diasporic,” and “global” are being appended to classical concepts: transnational social space, transnational network, global or diasporic public sphere or public space, transnational social movements—the list is a long one. The lexicons of many disciplines,

such as anthropology, political science, and sociology, have been considerably reworked in the last fifteen years, to the point where some subject specialists have started rearticulating these concepts to integrate them into an expanding analysis of the transnational and the global. New, ever more encompassing terms have also seen the light of day, such as “globalized communities” and “global networks.” The first is the result of work by the sociologists Paul Kennedy and Victor Roudometof,⁷³ who have attempted to draw up a general chart of transnational phenomena, in which the globalized communities are distributed among five types: national or transnational communities where membership arises from ethnic or national origins; those once founded on a country of origin but whose connection with a homeland is now only symbolic; lifestyle and activity communities built around sports or culture; activist communities pursuing global solutions to political or ethical problems; and finally, groups based on a shared profession or activity. The second concept, that of “global network,” was the principle behind the 2001 founding of a new journal *Global Networks* by the leaders of the British Transnational Communities Programme. Its mission is the study of all those “social, economic, political, and cultural networks” created by the “dynamic and often flexible connections among individuals, members of a family, businesses, social groups, and organizations.” These are the “emerging transnational actors” who “represent the human face of globalization” at the planetary level.⁷⁴

Taken in all its usages, “diaspora” is like the god Janus: It looks both to the past and to the future. It allows dispersion to be thought of either as a state of incompleteness or a state of completeness. The issue of origin arises in both cases.