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**The Conceptual Confusion Around 'Diaspora' Prevents  
Serious Analysis**

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## **The Conceptual Confusion Around 'Diaspora' Prevents Serious Analysis**

Much of the debate within the newly emerged field of diasporic studies is focused on defining what the so called 'diasporic communities' are and how they should be studied. The controversy stems not only from confusion over the term diaspora, but also the many similar terms of immigrants, exiles, travellers, nomads and transnational communities, as well as the many metaphors used in this discourse such as flows, boundaries, hybridisation, cross-pollination, creolisation, roots and routes. The debate reflects an anxiety within a field that has drawn scholars from varying disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, political science, human geography and cultural studies – an anxiety over what constitutes their new field of inquiry, and a competition over coining new terms setting (or re-setting) the limits of future research. In this essay I will follow the various debates over the terms 'diaspora' and 'diasporic communities' commenting on the different approaches set by some key scholars and then move on to suggest general steps that need to be taken if the field is to produce serious scholarship.

### **The history and diaspora of 'diaspora':**

Historically, the term diaspora was exclusively used in the context of Jewish history and the plight of Jewish people being dispersed 'among the nations'. In the late 20th century, however, the folk term became generalised on a grand scale. Since the 1970s, "diaspora" was increasingly used to denote almost every people living far away from their ancestral or former homeland.

Baumann [2000] argues that the adoption of the term by various academics has played a major

role in its increased use. The use of the term came at a moment when changes in the political and legal spheres in various industrialised nation-states were taking place. The adoption of new immigration laws or labour recruitment schemes in these states during the 1960s were followed by at times massive influxes of migrants from the East (predominantly Asia and Africa) to the West (mainly Europe, North America and Australia). These migrations were often drawn along the line of previous colonial relationships between home and host countries and challenged the (perceived) ethnic and religious purity of Western nation-states. In contrast to widespread assumptions of a rapid assimilation or expected remigration, many migrants opted to stay for long. They began to build their own social, economic and religious institutions in their adopted country of residence. In order to conceptually map and categorise these new and persistent national, cultural or religious groups of people and their institutions, researchers employed the old idea of 'diaspora'. Scholars in various disciplines in the humanities found in the term a good way to describe what they saw to be a peculiar form of social organisation and process of cultural exchange. The term which was almost exclusively used to describe the Jewish experience was adopted by the academy to refer to any processes of social dispersion and to relate to the countless communities described as dislocated and de-territorialised.

It is important here to point out the positive contribution which the term 'diaspora' has made to the study of immigrants and immigration. Although much work on diasporic communities, and indeed the whole interest in them, has become more fashionable recently as part of the more trendy field of globalisation, the term has certainly added a more human dimension to the study of immigration. It would suffice to consider the language that Held et. al. [1999 ] use to describe what they broadly term 'people on the move' to understand what is amiss in work similar to theirs. In their introduction to the chapter dedicated to the study of migration, the

writers state that The key concepts that can be brought to bear on patterns of migration concern the 'extensity' of migration, its 'intensity', 'velocity', 'impact' on home and host, states and societies, the 'infrastructures' of transportation and communication and the 'institutions' that sustain global labour markets and migration flows. The authors utilise terms often used to describe international trade and logistics to refer to the complex socio-cultural process of migration. As the terms they use indicate, immigrants are perceived as objects that are transported from one place to another. Had the authors used the same language to talk about oil or wheat as global products and their impact on national and global economies, one would not have noticed the difference. In fact, they go on at one breath talking about immigrants in the same language for more than forty pages before they mention that people can have other facets to their existence other than their labour. Considering such an over-simplistic approach, the benefits which a concept like the 'diaspora' bring become obvious. The introduction of this concept has certainly allowed for a much more comprehensive way of thinking about transnational communities that includes not only the economic, but also the cultural, the psychological and the social.

However, the term has been at the centre of much debate in the field. The noun diaspora (διασπορά) is derived from the Greek composite verb *speirein* (to sow) and *dia* (over). Whether this term has been first used to describe the experience of the Jews after their many dispersals is not entirely agreed on. While Cohen [1997] argues that the term was first used to describe the colonisation of Asia Minor by the Greeks, Baumann [2000] contends that the term never had any positive connotations in its classical use and therefore could not have been used to describe Greek colonialism. He goes on to argue that the term in its social sense was first used by Jewish translators to refer to the Jews who lived outside 'the Promised Land'. Its usage encompassed geographic, sociological, and soteriological semantics [316].

Nevertheless, this uncertainty around the term's classical use seems to be of little relevance since most scholars seem to be moving away from the Jewish diasporic prototype in the analysis of modern experiences. This movement is not only the result of an attempt towards a more inclusive definition that could accommodate for the differences between the various 'diasporic' groups, but also the result of a closer reading of the Jewish experience itself. The Jewish experience was not only non-diasporic at certain times, but also there is no consensus among different Jewish groups over what constitutes the Jewish diaspora.

More importantly, the modern use of the term diaspora was first taken up in African studies. This has coincided with a wave of political independence among African states. It also coincided with the anti-racist struggle by black communities in the West and many African thinkers and writers, both in Africa and abroad, becoming more vocal about racism and discrimination. The term was also used to describe Armenian and Greek communities. However, the institutionalisation of the term came with the launch of the academic journal *Diaspora* in 1991. Since then, it came to describe a much broader spectrum of communities. In the first issue of the journal, Tölölyan, its editor, declared: "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 immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guestworker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community" [1991].

This first issue of the journal also contained another important article which has since been cited as one of the first attempts a definition of the diaspora. In that article Safran [1991] lists six common features of diasporas; these are: (1) dispersal from an original 'centre' to at least two 'peripheral' places, (2) maintenance of a 'memory, vision or myth' about their original

homeland, (3) belief that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host country, (4) perception of the ancestral home as a place of eventual return, when the time is right, (5) commitment to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland, and (6) a consciousness and solidarity as a group that are importantly defined by this continuing relationship with the homeland. This definition was later picked up and elaborated on by Cohen [1997] who adds that the dispersal can be voluntary or involuntary, acceptable or traumatic; that the troubled relationship with the host country can also be coupled with the prospect of a distinctive creative, enriching life, if this country has a tolerance for pluralism; and that the sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members extends to other countries of settlement. He also goes on to categorise diasporic communities into four types according to their cause of dispersal. These four categories are: victim diasporas (e.g. the Jews, especially in the classical era, Africans and Armenians), labour and Imperial diasporas (e.g. British and Indians), trade diasporas (e.g. Chinese and Lebanese) and Cultural diasporas (e.g. Caribbean). Nevertheless, both Safran and Cohen stress that not all features should exist in a certain group to be labelled diasporic. The features they list are to function as a hypothetical, ideal type diaspora which no one diasporic group exactly fits. The result is that some groups can be more of a diaspora than others depending on their proximity to this ideal type. Furthermore, Cohen's four types do not divide the diasporic groups into neat categories. Any single diasporic group can fit into more than one category although it would fit one category better than the others. Within this scheme, social groups are either diasporic, non-diasporic or more-or-less diasporic.

In contrast to this approach of defining diasporas according to an ideal type (or ideal types), another approach, that suggested by Baumann [2000], focuses instead on one defining feature, with a stress on the adjective 'diasporic' rather than the noun 'diaspora'. For Baumann, “the

relational facts of a perpetual recollecting identification with a fictitious or far away existent geographic territory and its cultural-religious traditions' are taken as diaspora constitutive. If this identificational recollection or rebinding, expressed in symbolic or material ways, is missing, a situation and social form shall not be called 'diasporic'" [323]. The consequence of this approach is that any social group can be diasporic, but certain groups can be more diasporic than others. He also adds that "in contrast to most definitions, the approach underscores the significance of religion in diasporic constellations. This emphasis is meant to (re)direct attention and awareness to the prototypical role of religious identity in situations of settlement after migration<sup>1</sup>; of the perpetuation of a specific identificational difference; or, amongst other things, of the demarcation and strengthening of collective identity in a culturally foreign environment."

As a matter of fact, the three definitions and the two approaches have much more in common than not. The general theme is a triadic relationship between an original home, new hosts/homes and a community straddling the two through identification with the original home and its culture. More importantly, both approaches use term 'diaspora' – or 'the diasporic', in Baumann – to describe communities rather specific historical experiences or events of being 'diasporic'. The danger inherent in such a framework is not only treating the diasporic as an ahistorical feature of a certain community, but also the presupposition of the 'community' as a coherent and positive totality that can be defined in isolation from its historical context and those that lie outside it [cf. Laclau, 1990 and Mouffe 1993]. In short, both approaches risk essentialism.

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1 Thus going back to the prototypical Jewish Diaspora.

	<i>Safran</i>	<i>Cohen</i>	<i>Baumann</i>
<b><i>Spacial mapping and reason for dispersal</i></b>	Dispersed from an original 'centre' to at least two 'peripheral' places	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dispersed from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions</li> <li>Alternatively, the expanded from homeland in search for work, in pursuit of trade or further colonial ambitions.</li> </ul>	-
<b><i>Relationship to host country</i></b>	Believe they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have a troubled relationship with host societies, suggesting a lack of acceptance at the least or the possibility that another calamity might befall the group.</li> <li>Have the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism.</li> </ul>	The relational facts of a perpetual recollecting identification with a fictitious or far away existent geographic territory and its cultural-religious traditions
<b><i>Relationship to homeland</i></b>	Are committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland	Maintain an idealization of the putative ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation	
<b><i>Myth of homeland</i></b>	Maintain a 'memory, vision or myth' about their original homeland.	Maintain collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history and achievements	
<b><i>Group consciousness</i></b>	Whose consciousness and solidarity as a group are importantly defined by this continuing relationship with the homeland.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintain a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and the belief in a common fate.</li> <li>Maintain a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement</li> </ul>	
<b><i>Dreams of return</i></b>	See the ancestral home as a place of eventual return, when the time is right	Develop a return movement that gains collective approbation	

**Table 1. Comparison between Safran [1991], Cohen [1997] and Baumann's [2000] definitions of diasporas.**

### **Alternative approaches to diaspora:**

In contrast to all this, Clifford [1997] warns that diasporas should not be defined by recourse to an ideal type. His approach is more sensitive to the political discourses which play into the production of a diaspora, more specifically those of nation-states and autochthonous claims by what he calls “tribal” peoples. Nevertheless, he stresses that the dichotomy, particularly between the diaspora and indigenous groups, is not always clear-cut. In fact, autochthonous groups may well be diasporic as the case is with the aboriginal people for example. What Clifford aims at here, is to problematise the notion of 'place' or 'home' being a specific

geographical spot and replacing that with the idea of a 'bounded territory'. In fact, the idea of the 'boundary' is so central to Clifford's definition of diaspora that his project ends up being an attempt to define the boundaries of the term. He contends that diaspora is different from travel, in the sense that it is not temporary. It is also different from immigration in the sense that it cannot be assimilated into the national ideology of the host state; and from exile, in that it is about a community, not individuals.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to all these, the diaspora is about ways to stay in the host country, but be different. It does not necessitate a return to the 'homeland', but rather may well be structured around a tension between return and deferral [252]. In that, Clifford invites scholars to accept a loose definition of the diaspora that allows for a loosely coherent, adaptive constellation of responses to dwelling-in-displacement which the diaspora is essentially about. However, he is also quick to note that when diasporic experience is viewed in terms of displacement rather than placement, traveling than dwelling and disarticulation rather than re-articulation, then the experiences of men, rather than women will tend to predominate. At the same time, he does not offer any theoretical framework that allows the discourse to transcend its male bias. More problematically, and despite his anti-essentialist direction, he rejects the theoretical discourses informed by post-structuralism which suggests the possibility of a multiply positioned subject, thus clawing back to an essentialist approach to the social. What is rather puzzling is that Clifford does not make any effort to justify his position beyond it being his personal preference.

Nonetheless, Clifford makes important contributions to the discourse. As he observes, it is not easy to avoid the slippage between diaspora as a theoretical concept, diasporic discourses and distinct diasporic experiences of diaspora. However, while Clifford's project focuses on 'diasporic experiences' and calls for mapping them out in time and space, Brah's [1996] is rather different. She attempts to 'clear-up' the theoretical mess surrounding the field by

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2 This distinction is shared by Durham Peters [1999]

marking out the conceptual terrain which the term constructs. While Clifford problematises the early attempts at theorising the diaspora and dismisses them for being too essentialist and/or too rigid to allow for an analysis of many diasporic communities, what Brah tries to do in a clear Foucauldian fashion is to provide a 'cartography' of the discourse rather than the experiences. For her, the central importance of the concept of diaspora is that it “offers a critique of discourses of fixed origins, while taking account of a homing desire which is not the same as desire for a homeland” [180]. However, she introduces a new term to the existing lexicon of diaspora, that of 'diaspora space'. She defines this as “the intersectionality of diaspora, border and (dis)location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes”. She argues that diaspora space is inhabited not only by those who have migrated and their descendants, but also by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous.

The strength of Brah's project lies in the fact that it avoids the essentialist and restrictive tendencies of previous projects while at the same time providing a well developed theoretical framework. She stresses that the question to be asked “is not simply about who travels, but when, how, and under what circumstances?” [182]. Clearly, such a methodology allows for a very flexible discourse since it does not take certain conceptions about the diasporic experiences as pre-given, nor does it attempt to categorise the diasporas into the fixed taxonomy Cohen suggests. Such an approach allows the researcher to reconsider the basic questions of the research according to the historical case. It also tends to be far more sensitive to the politics and nuances of diaspora experience by being attentive to the configurations of power which differentiate diasporas internally as well as externally in relation to one another and in relation to the nativist position. Brah does not take the identity of the diasporic community as an essence but rather as a construct integrated into the practices of daily lives

that integrates the various and heterogeneous journeys of different people into one coherent narrative as it is lived and relived in practice and memory. This discourse, she argues, intersects with other discourses such as those of gender, race, class, religion, language and generation to produce differentiated and contested spaces even if they are implicated in the construction of a collective identity. Far from taking the dualisms around which identity is constructed as natural – for example, black/white, Jew/Arab, etc. – she takes these dualisms as tool for the deconstruction of the diaspora identity to uncover its underlying networks of power. More importantly, she does not conflate identity and the subject allowing for the understanding of identity as a performance that is played in specific contexts and in response to a particular discourse in a particular historical conjecture and situation. This rather broad definition of diaspora makes it very general and all-embracing. For those scholars that are concerned about the coherence and integrity of the field might find that quite unsettling. However, such a flexible wide-reaching concept is quite what is needed to allow for an open-ended discourse that does not rely too much on disciplinary power. In fact, within such a broad definition, the diaspora emerges not as a discipline, but rather as an “ensemble of investigative technologies” that allow for the historicisation and interrogation of various diasporas as consequently the whole logic and networks of power which lie behind them.

Brah does not stop at theorising the diaspora, but extends her project to include other related terms and concepts. She contends that borders are arbitrary metaphorical constructions rather than real hard realities, and is quick to note that metaphors, most importantly in this respect, the metaphor of the border, are part of the materiality of power relations invested and produced in discourse. The border in this framework is firstly an imagined line of distinction that can be represented through the mediation of discourse and may well be transformed into a

material reality. Such a theoretical approach allows for a rejection of the use of metaphors in the scholarly discourse over diaspora which is itself a product of and a tool for the perpetuation of the power-knowledge of the academic knowing subject. Contrary to Hannerz [2000], who finds the metaphor of the border innocuous enough to be embraced by scholars as long as it helps them understand better their object of study, she suggests that they should be interrogated and deconstructed. A similar attitude, I believe, needs to be cultivated towards the other metaphors infesting the discourse. The essential question to be asked is how useful is it to conceptualise the diaspora through concepts like 'flows' while there is nothing about people or culture that actually flows? Would it not be far more beneficial to start thinking in terms of mediation of people, culture and equally time and space, rather than the recourse to metaphorical language that is often more detrimental than useful? There is a serious lack of theorising in the discourse that needs to be addressed urgently if we are to be able to think outside metaphorical language.

### **Where do we go from here?**

In spite of its appeal in academic circles, the concept of diaspora remains the centre of much debate and contestation in the academy. Nevertheless, I tend to find this debate a sign of a flexible and open-ended discourse that is more promising than restricting. Despite concerns by various scholars that this confusion over the definition of diaspora as a category and consequently as field of inquiry might be detrimental for any serious analysis, this debate might help the discourse remain in a state of flux that prevents any institutional rigidity. It is important however, to accept this essential openness as a constitutive feature of discourse, to embrace it, in order to allow for our understanding of the field to develop.

Within the current debate over the definition or re-definition of the concept of diaspora as a theoretical term, I find Brah's theoretical framework the most promising. Far from defining a discipline, it only outlines a project that does not seem to predetermine the outcome of the research inquiry. It is also a project that privileges identity as a discursive practice rather than an essence that conflates the social and the cultural with space. Within this scheme diasporas can be studied within their historical and territorial positions as discursive formations and institutions that are productive of history itself. However, I still find Brah's project lacking in certain ways. It is rather surprising that such an open-ended inquisitive approach that claims not to presuppose or predetermine its object of study should remain blind to itself s a discourse. If the diaspora discourse is heavily invested in relations of power that need to be unravelled, the same should be said about the discourse on diaspora as well. To what extent is this seemingly neutral discourse involved in the production and maintenance of relations of power? To what extent is the discourse on diaspora involved in the production of diasporas, diasporic experiences and even diaspora spaces? Unless such questions are raised and answered, the project will remain incomplete. In fact Baumann hints to this when he comments that post-modern and post-structuralist notions of diaspora “primarily relate to the still few intellectuals and writers having stepped forth from the diasporic communities.” His justification of the reluctance to accept this general definition, however, reveals a rather condescending attitude typical of intellectuals towards their objects of study. The reason he gives for this is his doubt that “the diasporic ‘ordinary’ men and women think in such categories and subtleties” [323]. In short, his critique of intellectualism reflects the same attitude he critiques.

Another shortcoming of Brah's project is rather common among all the definitions of diaspora I have researched. It may well be a shortcoming of the concept of diaspora itself, but it is not

something that cannot be overcome through a re-definition. The concept of diaspora suffers from a general bias towards space. If this bias has been attenuated slightly by Brah's stress on the non physical aspects of space as constitutive of its physicality, it still needs to be expanded further to include time as an equally constitutive category of the diaspora. The absence of time from the discourse on diaspora is rather puzzling if one considers that the 'home' imagined through the diasporic discourse is not only distant in space, but also in time. More importantly, the construction of the diaspora identity is usually maintained through the continuity of time. Since narrative is what constructs the diaspora as a category, it is through the study of time in the narrative that one can better understand the diasporic experience. The inclusion of the category of time also allows for the expansion of the project to include the experience of individuals and collectives that can adopt diasporic attitudes although their experience does not include any spatial dislocation. By this category I wish not only to include what Clifford [1994] calls 'tribal' people, or what Brah calls the indigenous discourse of 'home' rather than 'homeland'. This move entails the inclusion of those that might experience feelings of dispersion as a result of their loss of home through urbanisation, modernisation and development as the case was with the inhabitants of the Docklands which Massey [1994] describes. It can also include other diasporic experiences such as that of the Palestinians who have not left their homes after the creation of the state of Israel and remain alienated and dislocated at 'home'. Thought of in such a way, the concept of diaspora can also allow for the study of revivalist discourses which aim at reconstructing a home lost through time rather than space.

That being said, I do not wish to suggest that time and space can or should be thought of as neutral homogeneous categories which the scholars of globalisation tend to suggest. Far from it, scholars need to stop thinking of a Euclidean space in which people simply live. They

should also stop thinking of time as simply a background in which events unfold or happen. Time and space need to be thought about as products of discourse – more importantly diasporic discourse – rather than an ontology. If we conceive of time and space as cultural products, we need to study what kind of time and space are being produced through this or that diasporic discourse and more importantly what its relationship to the subjects involved in its production or effect. Equally important is not to take 'home' as simply a point in space-time but as a cultural construct that can intersect or overlap that of time and space, but may also diverge from it or go parallel to it. The concept of home understood in such a way allows for the inclusion of the experience of the Chinese businessman which Ong [1993] describes which privileges 'the family' as home rather than any specific location. In that case Clifford's objections that this experience cannot be regarded as diasporic because it does not refer to a physical home become unfounded. Finally, scholars should avoid the current obsession with the study of non-Western immigration to the west, and think in broader terms that allow for the study of immigration within both the West and the non-West. This, I believe, will help the discourse move out of its Western-centric vicious circle of definitions.

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