Diaspora

The word diaspora is derived from the Greek verb speirein meaning to scatter and dia meaning across, and has come to mean the dispersion of a population. It was borrowed from the religious vocabulary of Greek-speaking Jews in Egypt and the text of the Septuagint Bible, a translation into Greek of Hebrew and Aramaic texts for Jewish communities in or outside Palestine. The extension of the word to communities other than Jews was only really attested from 1968 in France, and only arrived in French dictionaries in the 1980s. English language dictionaries however indicate as early as 1961 that the term can apply to peoples other than the Jews. Thus there has been a shift from the Judeo-centred definition of a diaspora to a more open definition. From a semantic point of view, it can be a proper name when applied, in capitalised form, to the Jewish Diaspora. It can be a common name when it is used, with no defining precaution, to refer to various phenomena of dispersion of populations by the media. It can also be a semi-proper name when it takes on a categorical meaning implying a definition and the evidencing of types. There is then a shift from the mere word or term to the notion. It is above all from the 1980s that attempts at definition and conceptualisation were undertaken by sociologists and political scholars. For the concept of the diaspora to have a precise, heuristic meaning of any value, it is important to avoid applying it indiscriminately to any form of temporary or unstable dispersion. Any diaspora is the result of a migration, whether voluntary or otherwise, but an ethnic minority does not necessarily belong to a diaspora. It is obviously not the case of ethnic minorities living in their original territory as irredentist minorities (Hungarians in Slovakia, or Epirus Greeks north of Constantinople for example), who are "still there", rather than "from somewhere else" characterising migrants. It is not just any form of exodus or exile that necessarily leads to the formation of a diaspora, or at least not immediately. Migration for economic reasons does not automatically create a diaspora. For a diaspora to begin to exist, the feeling of belonging and an identity need to be maintained over time by conscious decision and indeed a degree of determination. In the original meaning of the Jewish diaspora following the first or the second destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, a diaspora emerged from the forced dispersion. This is also the case for numerous diasporas arising from a catastrophe or a genocide, as for the Armenians, the Assyrian Chaldeans and the Pontus Greeks. It is however often not possible to establish a clear distinction between people who migrate for political reasons and those who do so for economic reasons. There are more or less forced departures following oppression, famine, or living conditions that were felt to be intolerable by the individuals deciding to migrate. With the exception of extreme situations, motivations of political and economic origin are often mingled or concomitant. In addition, diasporas that become established over the long term can be derived from several migratory waves where some were mainly political in origin and others economic. For instance the present Armenian diaspora originates from the genocide of 1915-16, but is was preceded by a trading diaspora, the origin of which was both political and economic: that found in New Julfa in the 17th and 18th centuries. The forced, collective dispersion caused by a disaster of political or military nature feeds a collective memory. Diaspora space and territory need to be apprehended first of all in the receiving country, where the community ties are the essential factor, and then in the country orÂ«territoryÂ» of origin, which forms the attraction pole through collective memory, and finally by way of the system of relationships in the network-space connecting these different poles. The term of diaspora is more often used in a manner that is metaphorical rather than instrumental. Among the various criteria put forward by different authors, the four main criteria below can be noted:

• the population considered was dispersed to several places, or at any rate to more than one territory, not in the immediate neighbourhood of the original territory, under coercion (disaster, catastrophe, famine, extreme poverty)

• the choice of the country and towns of destination occurred through the migratory channels that, across oceans, link migrants to others already settled in the receiving country, the latter having the role of facilitating passage to the receiving community and the job market, and also of guardians of the ethnic or national culture

• this population integrates into the receiving country without being assimilated, i.e. sustains a consciousness of identity of variable strength, linked to the memory of the original territory and society and its history. This implied the existence of a fairly rich associative life and community links. It is an "imagined community" which is built on a collective narrative that links it to a territory and a shared memory, as is the case with a nation

• these dispersed groups of migrants (or groups derived from earlier migrations) maintain and develop one with another, and with the original society when it is still in existence, numerous exchange relationships (human links, merchandise and property of various sorts, information) organised in Â«networksÂ». This reticulated space links up poles that are not strictly hierarchised, even if some are more important than others. Relationships tend to be horizontal rather than vertical. This concept of the "community"

diaspora is increasingly frequently contrasted with the "hybrid" diaspora, which is clearly distinct from any centred model. This "hybrid" model was defined by English-language authors from the case of the black diaspora in the Americas, in the wake of the post-modern approaches. The authors (Stuart Hall and Gilroy) refer to the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, and the image of the rhizome rather than the root, i.e. a world of propagation and hybridisation, as opposed to a world of filiation and heritage. There is no hard core of identity, no continuity or tradition, as there is in the community model, but rather variable patterns and breaks, following a logic of hybridisation. The "hybrid" diaspora rejects any reference to nation and nationalist ideologies.

See also: Â«transnational communityÂ»

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