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 Diaspora studies: Roots and critical dimensions

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When my son wonders who he is, he is also asking question about the future. For my part, I hope that his future and that of his generation will have many roots and many pasts. I hope, especially, that it will be a future where his identity will be a matter of rich and complex negotiation and not the result of some blind and official decree.

-- R. Radhakrishnan

Diaspora discourse involves at least two critical dimensions: the first concerns the issue of naming, guided by such questions as whom to call diaspora and under what criteria; the second extends this process of naming to the establishment of diaspora as a comprehensive theory for studying multiple forms of migrations. This article outlines the insights of some of the most repetitively consulted scholars in diaspora studies. My attempt is to synthesize their conceptualisations into a representative research framework.

Critical roots

The concept of diaspora is associated with migration and dispersal. The term, in common parlance, signifies any people living outside their homeland (Anand, 2003, p. 212; Conner, 2001, p. 16). In contemporary media, diaspora is used “as a substitute for any notion of expansion and scattering away from the centre” (Tölölyan, 1996, p. 10). In a broader sense, diaspora encompass a multitude of ethnic religious and national communities -- such as political refugees, alien residents, guest workers, immigrants, expellees, ethnic and racial minorities, overseas communities -- who find themselves living outside of the territory to which they are historically ‘rooted’ (Carter, 2005, p. 55; Shuval, 2000, p. 42). Taken in the light of its conceptual eclecticism, diaspora is “a term of self-identification among many varied groups who themselves or whose

forbearers migrated from one place to another or to several places” (Vertovec, 2005, p. 2).

Etymologically, the term “diaspora” comes from the Greek verb *diasperien*, which is a composite of *dia* meaning “across” and *sperien* meaning “to sow or scatter seeds” (Braziel and Mannur, 2003, p. 1). Thus, the term as Tölölyan discerns has “an etymological relation between sperm and diaspora,” suggesting dispersal as a productive process. He clarifies, “For the Greeks, ‘*diaspeirein*’ was originally an abrupt but natural process, the fruitful scattering away of seeds from the parent body that both dispersed and reproduced the organism” (1996, p.10). The term in this sense had a positive reference to power and proliferation.

Diaspora gained a new semantic dimension when it came to be used to refer to the Jews after the destruction of Jerusalem and razing of the walls of its Temple in 586 BC by the Romans. Then it became a constant metaphor for people who suffered “loss of homeland and ethnocidal violence” (Tölölyan, 1996, p.12). Mentions of diaspora underscored the elements of exile and loss and gave it a negative meaning signifying, in William Safran’s terms, “the oppression and moral degradation implied by that dispersion [of Jews]” (1991, p. 83). This is to say that any consideration on diaspora in the past was selective for dispersion that entailed forced expulsion, complete loss of homeland and long-term experience of trauma.

In the recent years, however, there have been attempts at redefining diaspora in new contexts of dispersals. Hence, Tölölyan’s affirmation, “Where once were dispersions, there now is diaspora” (1996, p.3). Diaspora now carries not only its two historical meanings but also other acquired significations. It retains the idea of dispersal and productivity from the Greek roots. It equally signifies the condition of forceful dislocation of people and resultant experience of bitterness associated with Jews. Broadly, diaspora functions as a

metaphoric designations for several categories of people – expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities *tout court* – in much the same way as ‘ghetto’ has come to designate all kinds of crowded, constricted, and disprivileged urban environments, and ‘holocaust’ has come to be applied to all kinds of mass murder. (Safran, 1991, p. 83)

Diaspora’s eclecticism owes much to the scholarly applications which have been concurrent with media’s repeated use of it as the signifier for any type of dispersal. It has evolved from the restricted Jewish concept of uprooting and trauma into a pervasive field of studies focusing more on the forms of identification. In other words, the evolution of diaspora conforms with what Said (1983) purports about theory as travelling and getting new semantic magnitudes: “Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another” (p. 226). Anand (2003) complements this idea in more general terms:

It [diaspora] has traveled beyond the confines of its Jewish- centered definition to charted and uncharted, familiar as well as strange territories. ... As a trace of titanium in an iron alloy can transform its properties, so also the contacts between the concept Diaspora and specific historical and cultural contexts have had constitutive influence on its present-day meaning. (p. 212)

As such, diaspora encompasses other different fields of studies, and at the same time becomes a part of them. Braziel and Mannur (2003) admit that there has already been an “explosion” of diaspora in diverse fields like literature, sociology, anthropology, film studies, queer theory, area studies, and ethnic studies (p. 3).

Some theorists advocate the need of both observance to and transcendence from the classical origins and connotations of the term even though “its changed meanings offer a new and exciting way of understanding cultural differences and identity politics” (Cohen, 1997, p. 6). Others speak for re-conceptualising it in new contexts of dispersals. Reis (2004), for instance, calls for the shift from the “classical” notion of diaspora to a “broader conceptualisation” that allows the “inclusion of immigrant communities that would be otherwise sidelined in the conventional literature of diaspora” (p. 42). She asserts that “contemporary diasporas” are formed in the context of globalization where new cases like the opportunity seeking people are accommodated, and in such case displacement “arises due to situations that are neither traumatic nor associated with disaster.” Reis further demands for the inclusion of cases like “pursuit of work and the seizing of opportunities to study and travel abroad, facilitated by the globalising process,” as they also count as “sufficient reasons to stimulate the diasporic process in the contemporary context” (p. 49). Indeed, Reis expands Sheffer’s notion of diasporas that includes:

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. It is evident that as a result of recent waves of labour migration to Europe, the Persian gulf, and north America, new diasporas are constantly being formed. (Sheffer, 1986, p. 3)

Sheffer here approves of the fact that new types of diasporas are emerging through labour migrations. Besides, he underscores three basic requirements for a people to qualify as diaspora. First, they must be of “migrant origins,” not necessarily the victims of forced expulsion. Second, they must be “residing and acting” in the host lands, which means having power to show presence to speak. Third, they must retain “sentimental relations” with the homelands, which means retaining a connection to the roots but not necessarily in physical terms.

Safran, Cohen, and Tölölyan have contributed greatly in setting parameters for diaspora studies in the light of the contemporary eclecticism of the field. It should however be noted that even though they admit evolution of the concept, they are for a conditional flexibility in bringing new cases of dispersions within the spectrum of diaspora. According to Safran (1991), an “expatriate minority” may be called diaspora when its members share several of the following six features:

1. They, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from an original ‘centre’ to two or more foreign regions;
2. they retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland including its location, history and achievements;
3. they believe they are not – and perhaps can never be – fully accepted in their host societies and so remain partly separate;
4. their ancestral home is idealized and it is thought that, when conditions are favourable, either they, or their descendants should return;
5. they believe all members of the diaspora should be committed to the maintenance or restoration of the original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and
6. they continue in various ways to relate to that homeland and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are in an important way defined by the existence of such a relationship. (pp. 83-84)

Central to this checklist are at least three fundamental parameters that would define a dispersed group as diaspora: first, relocation in two or more foreign destinations after the dispersal; second, retention of memory, vision or myth of the homeland as a cause for commitment to its maintenance; and third, continued interrelationship among the dispersed groups resulting from “ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity.” Safran also discerns the desire of a physical return as a possible culmination of connection to a homeland. Moreover, his list does not specify whether dispersals are caused by forceful

expulsion or any other forms of voluntary migration. But he asserts dispersed people's lack of creolization rooted in the belief that the host community will never accept them.

Cohen (1997) has a nine-point list to complement Safran's. He avers that dispersed communities should have at least these common characteristics to be recognised as diaspora:

1. dispersal, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions,
2. expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions,
3. a collective memory and myth about the homeland,
4. idealisation of a putative ancestral home and a commitment for its maintenance or creation,
5. development of a return movement that gains collective approbation,
6. a strong ethnic group consciousness based on a common history and belief in a common fate,
7. a troubled relationship with the host society suggesting a lack of acceptance,
8. a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement,
9. the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism. (p. 29)

Cohen's list underlines at least four distinctive features of diasporic identity: traumatic dispersal, development of return movement, troubled relation with the host society, and possibility of creative and enriching life in the host society. Moreover, he broadens the concept including three other reasons for diasporization apart from forced expulsion: search of work, pursuit of trade and colonization. In this way, including the classical Jewish paradigm Cohen prepares a typology of at least five different diasporas: victim, trade, labour, imperial and cultural diasporas (pp. 26-27).

Tölölyan's observations slightly differ from Safran's. As summarised by Louis-Jacques Dorais (2001) from the article "Rethinking Diasporas...", the features that Tölölyan identifies are as follows:

1. The diaspora has its origin in the fact that a large number of individuals were forced to leave their country by severe political, economic and other constraints
2. Before leaving the country these people already shared a well-defined identity
3. Diasporic communities actively maintain or construct a collective memory, which forms a fundamental element of their identity
4. These communities keep more or less tight control over their ethnic boundaries, whether voluntarily or under constraint from the host society
5. Communities are mindful to maintain relations among themselves
6. They also wish to maintain contacts with their country of origin, provided it is still in existence. (pp. 5-6)

This checklist also underscores three basic elements in the characterization of diaspora: a forced dislocation from the country of origin; a shared identity among members of community; and maintenance of contact with the homeland. Tölölyan includes at least two elements that Safran does not. The first is the root of dispersal, the "severe political, economic and other constraints." The second is the fact that the group's identity is predetermined so that the construction of collective memory is possible.

Tölölyan, Cohen, and Safran strike a balance between the classical and contemporary notions of diaspora by identifying common traits that stem from all forms of dispersals: desire to retain originality, reorientation towards actual or imagined homeland, and empathy among the members of the dispersed groups. They deserve credit for building a legacy for diaspora studies with their primary framework of analysis as mentioned

above. But the emergence of new theorists who explore new dimensions in the meaning of diaspora cannot be ruled out. Interesting to note, most of the observations on diaspora happen to take a three-dimensional framework. Surrounding the aforesaid three elements – dislocation to two and more countries, relationship within the diasporic groups and reorientation to a homeland – there have been several attempts at amplifying the concept. These new attempts deserve mention here in that they help reveal extent of the semantic eclecticism diaspora enjoys in the recent years. To begin with, Vertovec (1997) explores three dimensions in the contemporary use of diaspora:

Within a variety of academic disciplines, recent writings on the subject convey at least three discernible meanings of the concept ‘diaspora.’ These meanings refer to what we might call ‘diaspora’ *as social form*, ‘diaspora’ *as type of consciousness*, and ‘diaspora’ *as mode of cultural production*. (pp. 277-278)

In Vertovec’s terms diaspora as a social form refers to three factors; the *process* of becoming scattered, the *community* living in foreign parts, and the *place* or geographic *space* in which the dispersed groups live (p.278). Diaspora as a *type of consciousness* refers to “variety of experiences, a state of mind and a sense of identity” (p. 281); and “awareness of decentred attachments, of being simultaneously ‘home away from home’ or ‘here and there’ or awareness of multi-locality” (p. 282). Finally, as a *mode of cultural production* diaspora is known to be born out of the “worldwide flow of cultural objects, images and meanings” and is usually “conveyed in discussions of globalisation” (p. 289).

Anand (2003) classifies existing diaspora theories within what he calls “three common conceptualizations of diaspora” (p. 215). The first conceptualisation is the “most accommodating and less sophisticated version” in which diasporas are taken as actors in the international politics as delineated in the ideas of Sheffer. This category emphasizes the need to look at the

“triadic networks of homeland (or trans-state organisations), host country and ethnic diaspora” (p. 215). The second category draws upon complementary as well as contradictory elements within the definitions offered by Cohen, Safran and Tölölyan (p. 216). Anand’s third dimension entails entire stock of serious theorization on diaspora. It concerns “less with description and prescription and more with critical reflection and reflexive theorization” (p. 218). Tölölyan’s analysis of the evolution of diaspora both as a social, political, cultural entity and a field of scholarship comes under this category.

A research framework

The above considerations lend adequate foundation for a representative research framework. The underlying parameters in such framework normally include the conditions of diasporization, diasporic experience and diasporic identity politics. The following basic “categories of analysis” presented by Butler (2001) can be taken as a representative research paradigm for all types of dispersals:

1. Reasons for, and conditions of, the dispersal
2. Relationship with the homeland
3. Relationship with the hostlands
4. Interrelationships within communities of the diaspora
5. Comparative studies of different diasporas. (p.195)

The first four points of the list are sufficient to become a new framework of analysis. The first point encompasses the roots and processes of diasporisation, while the remaining three constitute the facets of diasporic identity politics. What makes this framework worth consideration is its applicability. As Butler states, “If information about single diasporas can be grouped into the first four categories of inquiry, it will then be possible to engage in comparative diasporan study.” He further suggests “concentrating on shared and essential aspects of diasporas rather than on the idiosyncrasies of specific groups” in order for such a framework to “have the advantage of applicability to all diasporas” (pp. 195-196).

A more contemporary approach to diaspora studies expands on Cohen's (1996) postulation: "in the age of cyberspace, a diaspora . . . can be held together or re-created through the mind, through cultural artefacts and through a shared imagination" (p. 516). The recent take underlines the need to reconsider the earlier paradigms through redefinition of the role of time and place. This means, in cyberspace representation and identification can transcend the physical elements such as the places of origin and relocation. Anyanwu (2004) considers the internet as a "new habitat of modern sojourners" that "abolishes geographical boundaries and creates room for more migrants to inhabit" (p. 7). This is to say that as a new habitat, and with abolition of geography, internet incorporates both diasporas and natives and concurrently brings them in a common interactive frame. Such inclusiveness further questions the elements of the history of migration and relocation. In Tsagarousianou's terms, this is the condition of "temporal convergence" of its sojourners stemming from "a sense of contemporaneity and synchronicity" (2004, p. 62).

Furthermore, diaspora scholars redefine diasporas as imagined communities deriving what Anderson (1997) calls for a nation. For example, Sökefeld (2006) suggests defining diaspora "as imaginations of community that unite segments of people that live in territorially separated places" (p. 267). In this sense, segments of dispersed communities are bound together by sharing the imagination of a similar origin, identity and fate beyond geographical distance. Tsagarousianou maintains that emergence of diasporic identity stems from dispersed population's "ability to imagine themselves as such, to imagine and construct the relevant transnational linkages and appropriate discourses" (2004, p. 63). Sökefeld's idea of diaspora as a unity of "territorially separated" people, and Tsagarousianou's view of their ability to "construct transnational linkages" and "discourses" highlight the role of internet. Without internet neither is achievable to the extent of being recognized.

Butler's categories of studying diaspora are based on what he calls three sites in which diasporas take form: the homeland, the hostland and the diasporan group itself (2001, p.195). Diasporic identity politics is the construct of the third site – the diasporan group. It is the set of strategies that dispersed communities employ in constructing and affirming diasporic identity in at least two forms. First, they try to maintain originality through what Safran and Cohen call retention of “a collective memory, vision, or myth about their homeland.” In other words, they construct and idealise an imagined homeland as a symbol for identification.

Second, identity politics very often takes the form a strategy for asserting power to create, mobilize and control resources. Diasporic identity in this sense becomes “an issue of movement and mobilisation” (Sökefeld, 2006, p. 267), or “an occasion for the celebration of multiplicity and mobility” (Tölölyan, 1996, p. 28). The strategies that diasporas apply to affirm their identity are varied. According to Cohen (1996), they manifest in the activism of migrants to “retain dual citizenship, agitate for special trade deals with their homeland, demand aid in exchange for electoral support, influence foreign policy and seek to protect family immigration quota” (p. 519). Such activism and exertion of power makes diaspora “a dynamic process in constant search for autonomy and identity” not necessarily estranged by destiny in a geographically fixed host land (Anyanwu, 2004, p. 4).

A more inclusive approach to diaspora studies should focus on Butler's third site, the “diasporan group.” Homeland and hostland are entrenched in the migrants' recognition of who and where they are. For instance, in calling Nepali migrants as “Nepali/Nepalese Diaspora,” the signifier “Nepalis” or “Nepalese” naturally entails the existence of Nepal as a nation and an identifier. Similarly, diaspora, which inherently signifies dispersion (movement and distance) implies the existence of a destination, a hostland.

Since all the contingent factors discussed above hardly appear in any existing frameworks, it demands for an alternative framework, which should balance the emphasis on “abolition” of time and place by cyberspace with the need to consider them as fundamental sites of constructing diasporic identity. The new framework derives two important dimensions from all of the aforesaid checklists and paradigms. The first dimension comprises the process of diasporization such as dispersion, relocation, and the experience of diasporic condition. The second involves the politics of construction and assertion of diasporic identity. Three essential elements of identity politics are included in this: social, cultural, economic and political relationships with the homeland; interrelationship among the members of the diaspora, and diaspora’s relationship with the hostland.

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