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Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return

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1. Minorities, Aliens, and Diasporas: The Conceptual Problem

In most scholarly discussions of ethnic communities, immigrants, and aliens, and in most treatments of relationships between minorities and majorities, little if any attention has been devoted to diasporas. In the most widely read books on nationalism and ethnonationalism,¹ the phenomenon is not considered worthy of discussion, let alone index entries. This omission is not surprising, for through the ages, *the Diaspora* had a very specific meaning: the exile of the Jews from their historic homeland and their dispersion throughout many lands, signifying as well the oppression and moral degradation implied by that dispersion. But a unique phenomenon is not very useful for social scientists attempting to make generalizations. Today, “diaspora” and, more specifically, “diaspora community” seem increasingly to be used as 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 that “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.

Basing their studies on a fairly broad working definition of diaspora such as that of Walker Connor, “that segment of a people living outside the homeland” (16), scholars have applied the term to Cubans and Mexicans in the United States, Pakistanis in Britain, Maghrebis in France, Turks in Germany, Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, Greek and Polish minorities, Palestinian Arabs, blacks in North America and the Caribbean, Indians and Armenians in various countries, Corsicans in Marseilles, and even Flemish-speaking Belgians living in communal enclaves in Wallonia. Lest the term lose all meaning, I suggest that Connor’s definition be extended and that the concept of diaspora be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics: 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original “center” to two or more “peripheral,” or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are ap-

propriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. In terms of that definition, we may legitimately speak of the Armenian, Maghrebi, Turkish, Palestinian, Cuban, Greek, and perhaps Chinese diasporas at present and of the Polish diaspora of the past, although none of them fully conforms to the "ideal type" of the Jewish Diaspora.

2. Diasporas in Comparison

The Armenian diaspora condition resembles that of the Jews most closely. Armenian ethnicity and the solidarity of the Armenian community are based on a common religion and language, a collective memory of national independence in a circumscribed territory, and a remembrance of betrayal, persecution, and genocide. Like the majority of Jews, most Armenians live outside the ancestral homeland and have developed several external centers of religion and culture. Like Jews, Armenians have performed a middleman function in the host societies among which they lived; they have been high achievers, have been prominent in trade and commerce, and have made contributions to the science, culture, and modernization of the host society. They have had a clear orientation toward their community but have not chosen to live in ghettos. The fostering of the Armenian language has been important, but this has not prevented Armenians from being fully immersed in the language and culture of the host society. The church has played an important role in maintaining Armenian ethnicity, although there are two competing administrative centers of the Armenian church (with different degrees of ethnopolitical commitment), church attendance has been falling off, and the degree of religiousness has varied from active, even exclusive, preoccupation to indifference. One is born into the Armenian community, but one may leave it; exogamy is discouraged, but increasingly practiced; non-Armenians are regarded as "foreigners" (*odars*—the Armenian equivalent of *goyim*), but they are admitted, albeit selectively, into the community (O'Grady 76–81).

As in the case of Jews, there is among Armenians a continuum of ethnicity ranging from assimilationism to intense ethnopolitical mobilization (see Kirkland). The former has been found most frequently in the United States, Australia, Canada, and other "pluralistic" settler societies and is reflected in the Armenian Catholic church; the latter has tended to maintain itself in the Middle East, where communalistic and semiautonomous institutions were customary (e.g., the *millet* system of the Ottoman Empire), and is reflected in the Armenian Apostolic church. As in the case of Jews since the reestablishment of Israel, there is a controversy about whether there is indeed a place to return to—and whether, therefore, the diaspora can be ended. To be sure, there is an Armenian republic, but it is a severely truncated land—most of historic Armenia is in Turkey—and as a Soviet province has had neither genuine national independence nor even (at least until the era of *glasnost*) adequate autonomy to develop fully its traditional culture, which includes the Armenian variants of Christianity.

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Historically, the Polish situation could be compared to that of Armenians and Jews. After the destruction of Polish independence, Polish national consciousness was perpetuated by Poles living under a variety of conditions. Between 1792 and 1918, both the Poles of Russian Poland and those of the Austrian province of Galicia maintained the Polish language and culture with variable success—the former clandestinely, the latter more openly; but these Poles had not been physically removed from their land and could not, therefore, be considered a diaspora. Diaspora would be equally inappropriate as a term to describe the condition of the Poles under German occupation and as inhabitants of a Soviet satellite country, under which they could be considered an oppressed nationality, as could the Hungarians in Transylvania, the Moldavians in the Soviet Union, and, indeed, the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. However, the Poles who settled in France between the Polish insurrection of 1830 and the end of World War I (like the poets Mickiewicz and Slowacki), and many who fled Poland between 1939 and 1944, could be considered members of a genuine diaspora. They regarded themselves as temporary residents, were convinced that “Poland [is] not yet lost as long as we live,”² vowed to fight for the reestablishment of the Polish state, and meanwhile also acted as “fighting middlemen” in the service of the causes of their host countries. They established a variety of institutions, such as churches, schools, and journals, designed to maintain Polish culture and identity³ and during this period of their residency in France, for example, “many Poles considered it a sacrilege to speak French in their homes” (Malet 36). The diasporic dimension of the Polish nation was illustrated in a saying that made the rounds during World War II to the effect that Poland was the largest country in the world: its government was in London, its army was in Italy, and its population was in Siberia. It should be noted, however, that the mass of Polish immigrants who came to the United States after the 1880s were not a diaspora: they came to settle and to work; and most of their offspring readily intermarried and assimilated, no longer spoke Polish, and were not much concerned with the political fortunes of their progenitors’ homeland.

If the extended definition above is slightly attenuated, then the Maghrebi and Portuguese *immigrés* in France and the Turkish *Gastarbeiter* in Germany may be considered diasporas. Yet their condition differs markedly from that of the Jews and Armenians. Unlike these two latter, Maghrebis, Portuguese, and Turks were not forcibly expelled from their countries of origin, countries that (regardless of regime) have continued to exist in space and time. Therefore, neither group has had the political obligation, or the moral burden, of reconstituting a lost homeland or maintaining an endangered culture. Both the Maghrebis and the Portuguese are officially welcomed as two of many actual and potential elements of a societal melting pot and of a constantly evolving French nation; and, on the level of public authorities, efforts have been made to “insert” them into the French economic and political systems. (Jews and Armenians, too, have been officially welcomed as settlers in various societies at various times—for example, the former in fourteenth-century Poland and the latter in various regions of the eastern Mediterranean, but in both cases the places from which they departed were places of oppression).

Nevertheless, a diaspora consciousness is perpetuated in both the

Maghrebi and Portuguese communities: many Maghrebis speak of a “fermeture relative du système politique national” and find assimilation impossible so long as *francité* is equated with European and Christian (or Judeo-Christian) origins and customs and so long as Islamic culture (no matter how secularized and diluted) is regarded as incompatible with it (Jazouli 37; see Club 54 et passim). That is why many French refer to even those Maghrebis who have forgotten most of their Arabic and who speak and write in French as “immigrés de la deuxième génération” or as Algerians,⁴ and in so doing reinforce the Maghrebis’ diaspora consciousness.

The Portuguese immigrants fit much more comfortably into traditional French culture and society; yet in their case, too, a diaspora consciousness persists, though for different reasons: the relative physical proximity to the home country facilitates ongoing relationships with it, and the “underclass” condition of the Portuguese expatriates causes them to understate the poverty of the real Portugal and to develop a somewhat idealized image of a mystical Portugal and Portuguese civilization (Lusitanism) (Hily and Poinard 160–62).

The members of the Turkish community in Germany, though much more secularized in their behavior than their Maghrebi confreres in France, have a more highly developed diaspora consciousness. This is reflected in the results of a recent opinion poll, which revealed that 53% of the Turks were hoping to return to Turkey within the next few years and that only 5% were planning to remain in Germany permanently (Deutschland-Nachrichten 8). To some extent, this attitude represents an internalization of the “myth of return” (*Heimkehrillusion*) that is assiduously fostered by German elites and policymakers who fear an inundation of the country by foreigners (*Überfremdung*) and who insist that Germany is not a country of immigrants (Salt 167; Safran “Islamization”). The myth of return itself—and the diaspora consciousness with which it is associated—may be related to the very nature of German society, which has been traditionally defined “organically” rather than “functionally,” that is, whose citizenship has tended to be based on descent rather than birth (or long residence) in the country.

Not all “dispersed” minority populations can legitimately be considered diasporas. Contrary to the opinion of Richard Marienstras, the Flemish-speaking Belgians who live in their own communities in Wallonia, surrounded by French speakers, or vice versa, are not, simply by virtue of their physical detachment from a particular linguistic center, a diaspora. They have not been exiled or expatriated, and their condition is the result of demographic changes around them. They are, in short, an enclave enjoying full linguistic autonomy and political equality. Similarly, the Magyars of Transylvania cannot be regarded as living in a diaspora. Despite the fact that (under the dictatorship of Ceausescu) they did not enjoy full cultural autonomy, the Magyars of Romania were not dispersed; rather, their communities were politically detached from the motherland.

The Gypsies are a truly dispersed and homeless people; their political powerlessness has rendered them subject to persecution and—under Nazi rule—to genocide. They may be regarded as constituting a classic diaspora in the sense that through however many generations they can trace their residence in a host country, they evince “the spirit of the first generation in the links they maintain with [their] traditional structures (Liégeois 142).

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They are even a “metadiaspora” in their economic rootlessness: in their exclusion—largely, in effect, a self-exclusion—from the economic life of the host society, they represent the epitome of the Jewish *Luftmenschen* of Eastern Europe. But their situation is not quite comparable to that of other diasporas: to a certain extent, their homelessness is a characteristic of their nomadic culture and the result of their refusal to be sedentarized. Moreover, diaspora consciousness is an intellectualization of an existential condition: the Gypsies have had social and economic grievances (see Liégeois), but they have not been asking themselves questions about “the Gypsy problem” in the way that the Jews have thought about a “Jewish problem,” the Poles about a “Polish problem,” and the Arabs about a “Palestinian problem.” The Gypsies have had no myth of return because they have had no precise notion of their place of origin, no clear geographical focus, and no history of national sovereignty. The absence of such a myth might be a consequence also of the absence of Gypsy (Sinti or Romani) schools even in areas of heavy Gypsy concentration, and (in view of the social structure of Gypsy communities) the absence of a Gypsy intellectual elite that would articulate demands for such schools. All this may explain why at a world Gypsy congress held in 1978 there was an emphasis on overcoming negative images of Gypsies and on ending discrimination in housing and health, but there were no references to an original homeland (Puxon 5–6; 13–14).

In several respects, the Palestinian⁵ diaspora resembles the Jewish and Armenian ones. Hundreds of thousands of Arab residents of what became the state of Israel were expelled, encouraged to flee, or impelled by conditions of hostility to leave. They have memories of their homeland; their descendants cultivate a collective myth about it; and their ethnic communal consciousness is increasingly defined by—and their political mobilization has centered around—the desire to return to that homeland. There is a network of institutions in Middle Eastern, West European, and North American countries that serve émigré Palestinians and a variety of journals that foster a continuing identification with the homeland. Indeed, PLO leader Yasir Arafat may be said to personify the Palestinian diaspora: he has no permanent home or office address, and he has been moving from one Arab capital to another (see Ibrahim).

Arguably, not all the Palestinians living outside Israel or pre-1948 Palestine constitute a genuine diaspora. Like the Sudeten and Silesian Germans who fled or were expelled from Czechoslovakia and Poland and who settled in the German Federal Republic, and unlike the Jews or the Armenians, the vast majority of Palestinians (i.e., those who have not emigrated to the United States or Western Europe) do not live altogether as “strangers in strange lands”: in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, they live within the territory of the “Arab nation” (*al umma ‘al ‘arabiyya*). They may be deprived of political rights whether they live in conditions of impoverishment (as in the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip) or hold well-paid jobs and live in relative comfort, as until recently in Kuwait. Yet they have not had to make the kinds of cultural or linguistic sacrifices characteristic of other diasporas: they continue to speak their language and practice their religion. It is true that there were numerous village traditions that set the Palestinians apart from the inhabitants of Syria; still, dislocation from one’s native village—with its own ambience, traditions, and local dialect—does not automatically

bring about a diaspora condition; if it did, a population that moved from a village in France to a place in francophone Belgium—and, indeed, many of the inhabitants of modern countries marked by geographical mobility—would have to be considered as living in a diaspora.

Half the Palestinians (i.e., those who live outside of the kingdom of Jordan) do not live in a sovereign state with a Palestinian majority, and many Palestinians do not live in an Arab state at all; however, the absence of political sovereignty (or self-determination) does not constitute *ipso facto* a diaspora condition; in fact, before the establishment of Israel, Palestinians in Transjordan and in what (since 1949) has been called the “West Bank” did not regard themselves as living in a diaspora (see Al-Shuaibi). Moreover, there is a great deal of disagreement about the exact territorial dimensions of the Palestinian homeland.⁶ Regardless of these uncertainties, both the physical fact of a growing Palestinian diaspora and a collective diaspora consciousness cannot be denied; and while that consciousness may be diluted in the case of relatively prosperous Palestinians who have settled in Western countries, it is strongly perpetuated among the children of refugees and expellees.

In a physical sense, it is possible to speak of a Corsican diaspora; well over half of those who acknowledge their Corsican ethnicity as a continuing aspect of their being live outside the island, most of them concentrated in the Marseilles area. Many Corsicans (including those who no longer speak the Corsican language) continue to be involved in their homeland by keeping their names on the electoral registers of the island’s communes and by returning there regularly to vote (Safran “Mitterrand” 48–49).

The consciousness of diaspora is particularly strong among those Corsicans who have found their social and economic adjustment to mainland conditions difficult; to them, *Corsitude* reflects a “mythification of the past,” and to be Corsican is to be part of a “magical-religious world” that cannot be found on the French mainland (Dressler-Holohan 81, 84). And regardless of how often these mainland Corsicans visit their native island, they preserve an idealized image of the Corsican village which, although far from perfect, is a place “where one can take off one’s mask” (85). (This attitude is quite similar to the romanticization of the East European *shtetl* by third-generation American Jews [see Zborowski and Herzog]—except that what is being idealized in the latter case is not a “homeland” but a “primary diaspora.”) Such a diaspora consciousness does not affect most of the third-generation Corsicans who have become *embourgeoisé*. To them, Corsica is merely part of metropolitan France.

The Indian diaspora is a genuine one in several respects: its spread across three continents, its long history, its auxiliary (or middleman) role within host societies, and the varying attitudes of its members—ranging from integrationist to particularist. But the Indian diaspora differs in important ways from that of the Jews and Armenians: an Indian homeland has existed continuously, that homeland has not been noted for encouraging an “ingathering” (see Helweg), and Indian diaspora status has not always been associated with political disability or even minority status. The homeland myth is not particularly operative where the Indian diaspora is in the majority (as in Fiji) or where it constitutes a large, well-established, and

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sometimes dominant minority (as in Trinidad and Tobago, Nepal, Guyana, and Sri Lanka).

The diaspora of the Parsis is in several respects comparable to that of the Jews: its members have been held together by a common religion, and they have engaged in commerce and the free professions, have been pioneers in industrial innovation, and have performed various useful services to the ruling class. Like the Jews, the Parsis have been loyal to the government. But unlike the Jews, they are not widely dispersed but concentrated in a single area—the Bombay region of India. Moreover, they have no myth of return to their original homeland, Iran, whence they emigrated in the eighth century. The weakness of the Parsis' "homeland" consciousness can be attributed in part to the caste system of India and the relatively tolerant attitudes of Hinduism, both of which made for a greater acceptance of social and ethnocultural segmentation and made Parsis feel less "exceptional" (see Zenner).

The far-flung Chinese expatriate communities also constitute genuine diasporas. They have shared the cultural preoccupations of the Jewish and Armenian minority communities in their efforts at maintaining a variety of communal institutions; and like Armenians in Asia Minor, Jews in Poland, and Indians in South Africa, they have been identified with "pariah capitalism" in that they have functioned as intermediaries between the subsistence agriculture of the native majority and the more commercial and industrial concerns of foreign countries and of a part of the domestic elite (see Chun). The Chinese, however, have always been able to return to a homeland that was politically independent and in which their culture predominated and flourished. In fact, many of the Chinese in Southeast Asia were motivated by the desire "to make enough money . . . to bring it back with them to their homeland" (Chun 235). However, the homeland myth—and with it, diaspora consciousness—has been attenuated in several locations, but for opposite reasons: where legal and political disabilities have been removed and economic opportunities have expanded, so that the knowledge of the Chinese language and the connection with Chinese culture have become weak (as, increasingly, in the United States and Canada); and where the Chinese community has become so dominant that it has been able to secure an institutionally guaranteed status for its culture—in effect, to recreate a Chinese community outside the original homeland, but with more appealing political and economic conditions (as in Singapore). It is interesting to note that after the end of the war in Vietnam, many ethnic Chinese, while perhaps continuing to maintain a homeland myth, did not go "home"; instead, they went from a less attractive diaspora to a more attractive one. They went from Indochina to France or the United States—just as many dissatisfied Jews went from the Soviet Union to North America or Western Europe, instead of Israel, and many blacks went from the West Indies to the United States or Britain, instead of Africa.

In recent years, the black communities of the Americas have increasingly been referred to as diasporas. Like the Jews and Armenians, black Africans had been victimized by imperialism, forcibly uprooted from their homelands, and dispersed, only to be subjected to disabilities and persecutions in their host societies (see Skinner). Like Jews and Armenians, American

blacks have a homeland myth, but—in contrast to that of more recent black immigrants to France—it can no longer be precisely focused. For this reason, African “Zionist” efforts have not been successful and have not gone beyond the “repatriation” of several hundred blacks from the United States, the West Indies, and England to Sierra Leone in the eighteenth century and the settlement of small groups of American blacks in Liberia in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, American blacks no longer have a clearly defined African cultural heritage to preserve. For these reasons, American blacks attempting to maintain—and rationalize—their ethnoracial distinctiveness (and their status as a diaspora) have seen the need to *create* a culture that is different from that of the majority; however, some elements of that culture, such as “Black English,” have low prestige and impede social mobility, whereas others, such as “Black Islam,” have been artificial grafts lacking a convincing connection with black experience. (To some extent, “Black English” is comparable to Yiddish, which, as the idiom of a closed and impoverished society, was held in low esteem—on the one hand by those who favored Hebrew because it was the language of the homeland focus, and on the other hand by those who had adjusted to an “improved” diaspora and who favored the language of the host society.)

Since a specific homeland cannot be restored to American blacks, their homeland myth is translated into solidarity with African liberation struggles and the support of a variety of the aspirations of the sub-Saharan black states, including the fight against apartheid in South Africa and demands for increased economic aid to African nations. It is further translated into a general support of the Third World.

The Hispanic (or Latino) community in the United States has not generally been considered a diaspora. The Mexican Americans, the largest component of that community, are either descendants of those who had settled in what is now the United States before the arrival of the Anglos or (first- or second-generation) immigrants from Mexico who came in search of a better future. Although subject to periodic discrimination, they are assimilating at a steady pace. While they occasionally deplore the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo under which, in 1848, Mexico was forced to cede territory to the United States, celebrate Mexican folk festivals, and maintain contact with relatives left behind, Mexican Americans do not cultivate a homeland myth (see Garza)—perhaps because the homeland cannot be easily idealized. The poverty and political corruption of Mexico (which is easy enough to observe, given the proximity of that country) stand in too sharp a contrast with conditions in the United States.

There is, however, a Cuban diaspora. Half of the 800,000 (mostly middle-class) Cubans who left their island, voluntarily or forcibly, after the installation of the Castro government found refuge in the nearby Miami area. They kept alive the hope of returning to their homeland as soon as the Castro regime was overthrown and initially resisted the idea of giving up their Cuban citizenship. However, their experience with the Batista regime is too recent to serve as a prototype of a democratic Cuba that might be constituted after the replacement of Castro. Moreover, as time passes, the Castro regime endures, and as Cubans become more involved in United States politics, the myth of return becomes attenuated with the second generation (see Pedraza-Bailey; Portes and Mozo).