

DIASPORA, JUDAISM, AND SOCIAL THEORY

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Introduction: Diasporas Past and Present

In the past decade, the concept of Diaspora has emerged as a pivotal issue in the social sciences after having been virtually ignored throughout most of the 20th century. A broad debate over the role of Diaspora in the contemporary world is taking place, particularly in the fields of anthropology, “cultural studies,” and in interdisciplinary magazines devoted exclusively to the topic. This concept has become critical to understanding the new institutional formats adopted by the new collective, transnational actors in a globalized world.¹

The previous disregard for this concept was associated with an analytical approach in which the sphere of modern society was circumscribed by the national state. In the context of emergent globalization processes, institutions previously obscured by the national state paradigm are attracting the interest of social scientists. Far from a purely academic exercise within the social sciences, the debate over the notion of Diaspora traces a rapidly expanding social phenomenon. Virtually all contemporary emigration movements tend to portray themselves as a Diaspora, leading the social sciences to refer to “deterritorialized ethnies” rather than “emigrant communities.” One has to go no further than the Internet to discover the almost daily appearance of new sites devoted to the most varied Diasporas, while a number of academic journals and news publications have changed their names to include Diaspora. Moreover, Diasporas have become an increasingly

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¹ “The postcolonial adaptations of the concept “Diaspora” emphasize the transnational, hybrid, and fluid communities created by both forced and voluntary migratory flows and suggest that in the era of decolonization these diasporic communities can be subversive of the brutally homogenizing ideologies and practices of nations and empires. They argue that the multiplying number of Diasporas whose members pour information, funds, and affection back and forth across national boundary lines works to unsettle nations ongoing attempts at “imagining communities” that are self-contained and nonporous. “Galchinsky, M., “Scattered Seeds: A Dialogue of Diasporas, in Biale, D., Galchinsky, M, and S. Heschel, (ed.), Insider/Outsider, American Jews and Multiculturalism, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998; p . 186.

important factors in international politics. To offer just a few recent examples drawn from the international political arena: the Kosovar Diaspora (particularly in Germany) has played a leading role in financing arms purchases for the Kosovo Liberation Army, while the Kurdish Diaspora has spearheaded demonstrations against the Turkish government – not to mention the role that the Jewish and Palestinian Diasporas have played in the Middle East conflict.

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Why this eruption of Diasporas? There is consensus in the literature on the subject that the emergence of new diasporic identities is associated with mass population movements in the contemporary world, modern communications and transportation systems, the crisis of the nation-state as the linchpin of ideological normativization, and the dislocation of traditional ideological and political frameworks as the main venues for the establishment of identities.² Peter Berger³ has referred to the modern condition as that of a “homeless mind” and Zygmunt Bauman⁴ has described the many similarities between the Jewish diasporic condition and that of post-modern humankind.

A different significant reason behind the increasingly prevalent concept of Diaspora, however, can be found in the success of the Jewish Diaspora and its support for the state of Israel. As far back as the early 20th century, African-American leader W.E.B DuBois described the mobilizing capacity of Zionism as a source of inspiration for African-Americans. Therefore, while many social scientists would like to portray Diasporas as tools of resistance against the dominant structures, what motivates most new Diasporas is their success as organizational mechanisms that foster solidarity in the face of adversity and facilitate social mobility,⁵ integration into the power structure, and participation in the national and international political system.⁶

² Regarding new collective identities and globalization, see Judit Bokser-Liwerant, “Globalization and Collective Identities,” *Social Compass*, 49 (2), 2002.

³ Berger, P., Berger, B. and H. Kellner, *The Homeless Mind*, Vintage Books, New York, 1973.

⁴ Cf. in particular, Bauman, Z., *Life in Fragments—Essays in Postmodern Morality*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995.

⁵ As evident in the literature from the area of social and economic studies, Diasporas are networks for securing social and economic leverage. Faist, T. offers an interesting case study in, “International Migration and Transnational Social Spaces,” *Achieves Européennes de Sociologie*, Tome XXXIX, No. 2, 1998.

⁶ Arafat himself raised the issue of the need to learn from the Jewish mobilization in support of the Zionist movement.

The experience of the Jewish Diaspora is an example for other groups struggling for recognition of their unique identities. As Walzer⁷ points out, the Jewish experience in the United States has demonstrated that if it is to prosper, diasporic leadership must become actively involved in mainstream political coalitions. “Cultures don’t survive in people’s heads; they need bounded spaces and organized activities...” (Ibid. p. 93). “The strength of multiculturalism depends on the capacity of all its groups to deliver the cultural goods.” (Ibid, p. 95).⁸

The example of Jewish institutions in the latter half of the 20th century was central to the development of what Walzer has described as the culture of victimization (“In multicultural politics it is an advantage to be injured. Every injury, every act of discrimination or disrespect, every heedless, invidious, or malicious word is a kind of political entitlement, if not reparation then at least recognition” Ibid89) and it inspired, and continues to inspire, other social groups with powerful memories of persecution and oppression. As Gilroy put it, “...I want to suggest that the concept of Diaspora itself provides an under-utilized device with which to explore the fragmentary relationship between blacks and the Jews and the difficult questions to which it plays host: the status of ethnic identity, the power of a cultural nationalism, and the manner in which carefully preserved social histories of ethnocidal suffering can function to supply ethical and political legitimacy.”⁹

While the Diasporas of the past had to confront opposition from the national state, in the current crisis of legitimacy afflicting democratic capitalist states, Diaspora takes on a new form and new opportunities for action and organization. What are the similarities and differences between traditional (and particularly the Jewish) Diasporas and more recent ones? Social research on the subject has tended to approach all Diasporas, old and new, as similar, generalizable phenomena. This methodological approach takes as a given, the question of whether a similar form of self-representation engenders similar practices and social institutions. It is a question that tends to be unanswered to the extent that the concept of Diaspora is reduced to the representation and

⁷ Walzer, M., “Multiculturalism and the Politics of Interest,” in Biale, D., Galchinsky, M, and S. Heschel, (ed.), Insider/Outsider. American Jews and Multiculturalism, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998.

⁸ Although we do not concur with Walzer’s assertion that “In contemporary multiculturalism the politics of interest is replaced or superseded by a politics of identity, where it is not the material condition of a group that is at issue but the value of a culture, history, a way of life,” *op.cit.*, p. 88. The politics of victimization may be viewed as another way of structuring and articulating interests.

⁹ Gilroy, P., The Black Atlantic-Modernity and Double Consciousness, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1994, p.107.

construction of collective identities. Yet as we shall see, although the Jewish experience cannot be considered normative, nor does it constitute sufficient basis for an empirical model, it offers a wealth of historical and bibliographical information and provides a healthy antidote to visions seeking to transform the Diasporas into the new redeemers of mankind.

This article is divided into two sections. The first critically analyzes the construction of the concept of Diaspora from two perspectives: as a normative notion of identity and as the development of an ideal type derived from historical experiences, and particularly Jewish history. In the second section, we discuss the difficult dialogue between Jewish studies and the current debate over Diaspora, arguing that both could benefit from an exchange that takes into account the experience amassed by Jewish historiography.

Defining *Diaspora*

Contemporary studies on globalization and culture that stress the hybrid, fluid, or transient nature of new forms of identity adopt the concept of Diaspora as a reference point that provides a more explicit and perhaps more stable profile around which to organize and explain the identities of marginalized groups in advanced countries today.¹⁰

The definition of what Diaspora really is, however, is far from clear. The literature can be divided, in broad strokes, into two camps: the first includes normative perspectives that approach the concept of Diaspora as a philosophically and politically correct instrument for social critique and intervention, while the second seeks to define and construct models of Diaspora based on socio-historical experiences.

Predominant in the Anglo-Saxon world, the first interpretation is largely influenced by, if not explicitly tied to, the postmodern philosophical debate—particularly Derrida’s critique of the concept of identity and essence—and is associated politically with the struggles for recognition of marginalized or oppressed groups (“identity politics”).¹¹ “Diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which

¹⁰ Hall, Stuart, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in Rutherford, J., (ed.), Identity: Community, Culture, Difference, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1990.

¹¹ The aforementioned text from Stuart Hall is paradigmatic of this perspective. With respect to Jewish studies, this view is exemplified in the work of J. Boyarin discussed below.

they must at all cost return, even it means pushing other people into the sea. This is the old, the imperializing, the hegemonizing form of ‘ethnicity.’ We have seen the fate of the people of Palestine at the hands of this backward conception of Diaspora (and the complicity of the West with it).”¹²

Nonetheless, adopting the concept of Diaspora as a normative ideal of identity raises a number of problems from the standpoint of the actual historical experience of Diasporas, especially longstanding ones:

1) Anglo-Saxon social scientists engage in a very singular interpretation of postmodern French authors: if, as they say, the French are known for glossing over political debates by transforming them into philosophical problems, by the same token, it could be said that the Anglo-Saxons destroy the autonomy of the field of philosophy by translating its issues into questions of social pragmatism. The transfer of the postmodern philosophical perspective on identity to sociological analysis is questionable at best and would require a level of philosophical development that is missing in most of current literature.

While deconstructing a narrative—in which any text can be read for what it omits or conceals—might be instructive, cannot be adopted in social sciences for establishing the processes of individual or social identities formation; identity is born of the institutional practices and material resources that enable communities to reproduce themselves, and not by the narrative of such practices. In the social sciences, the problem of identity stability should be related to social processes beyond the discourse of the actors. The reproduction of identities must be found in the existence of institutions that maintain consistent boundaries and group rules which, to a certain extent, are imposed by force. Notions such as hybrid, mutant, and transient identities do not preclude an examination of the mechanisms that ensure the institutional stability of collective identities.

2) A unilateral focus on the construction of narratives of *self* in social analysis implies a methodology of hermeneutic individualism afflicted with all of the limitations inherent to methodological individualism and its difficulty in explaining the formation of intra-subjective symbolic worlds of a longstanding cumulative nature. Similarly, to the extent that the concept of

¹² Hall, S., “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in Rutherford, J., (ed.), Identity: Community, Culture, Difference, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1990, p. 235.

Diaspora is reduced to an existential identity or condition, it fails to contemplate the whole issue of construction of social institutions.¹³ While claiming to advocate the respect for cultural particularisms in a globalized world, this perspective homogenizes and absorbs the question of the historical formation of symbolic worlds rooted in diverse histories and societies into a new world construct of individual identities as a *narratives of the self*. This bibliography, self-described as post-colonial and critical of western forms of oppression, comes across as profoundly ethno-centric and provincial by condensing the construction of symbolic worlds and collective action into a matter of identity politics, which are concepts that take on specific shades of meaning in the political and social texture of the Anglo-Saxon world. Factors such as specific historical conditions, the diverse trajectories of collectivities, and the fact that ethnicity itself is a concept related to a specific cultural context, are essentially ignored.

3) Paradoxically, the same analyses that disregard the existence of institutions—and their specific forms and power—in reference to their own subjects,¹⁴ emphasize this dimension when referring to the attributes of dominant groups: their technologies, their government apparatus, military force, and so forth (concepts which, by the way, are not deconstructed). The oppressed only have their mutant, hybrid, and fluid identities to offer, while the dominant groups are monolithic, institutionally organized, and capable of leveraging material and punitive resources. Inherent to this vision is an acritical idealization of the oppressed along with a complete lack of reflection on the different organizational and substantive forms of the new collective identities.¹⁵

4) By focusing the debate on the deconstruction of discourse, it would appear that it was Derrida's theory—and not democratic institutions—that fostered the emergence and legitimate expression of new identities. Perhaps because these critics regard democracy and citizenship as

¹³ Stuart Hall is conscious of the need to relate the issue he describes to modernity and globalization, but his conceptual development of identity occurs at a philosophical, ahistorical level. Cf. Hall, S., "Who Needs 'Identity'," in Hall, S, and P. Gay, (ed.) Questions of Cultural Identity, Sage Publications, London, 1997.

¹⁴ Perhaps because this would involve acknowledging that even among excluded groups, the establishment of new identities involves the mobilization of material resources, the construction of an apparatus, and the inequitable distribution of power and knowledge.

¹⁵ Among the authors who approach the issue of Diaspora from this standpoint, perhaps James Clifford offers the most balanced vision. Even so, it is permeated by a moralizing tendency that endorses theories by virtue of their non-Western or anti-Western values (concepts that clearly should be "de-essentialized") as well as the tendency to reduce the reality of Diaspora to a basically identity-cultural dimension. Cf. "Diaspora," Cultural Anthropology, Vol. 9, No. 3, August 1994.

givens, or perhaps due purely to intellectual irresponsibility, the fact is that in the whole debate over Diaspora, there are no explicit references to its political conditions of existence.

The emphasis placed on fluidity, ambiguity, openness, permeability, and porosity is, as Gerschiere and Meyer point out,¹⁶ a healthy antidote to the tendency in the social sciences of trying to determine boundaries, particularly in a globalizing world. What is not sustainable, however, is the assumption that the new identities represent the polar opposite of a globalized world. Following, for instance, Bauman's rationale,¹⁷ the contemporary predominance of fluid, unanchored, constantly mutating identities would not be the result of the critical endeavors of post-modern discourse. Rather they would be the expression of the workings and interests of a consumption-driven society, one that requires a social subject who is open to experimentation and lacking in rigid tastes and desires and who can be manipulated according to the dictates of market adjustments.

Identities as a system of institutions that stabilize and lend a sense of constancy and regularity to the experience of social interaction are a prerequisite for living in society in any era. Similarly, global identity, in other words the feeling of belonging to one world, is an identity with solid social and institutional underpinnings that coexists with others of a more "local" nature. Affirming that identities are institutionally constructed and therefore contain certain stabilizing parameters is not tantamount to advocating an essentialist vision that regards them as rigid, closed, or as discreet sets. To the contrary, identities exist to limit, control, and organize fluidity, ambiguity, or conflicting signals; and their effectiveness is always partial since they cannot avoid being influenced by the very processes they seek to control. Instead of an identity/fluidity dichotomy, the analysis should focus on how fluidity behaves within identities and how identities organize fluidity.

When the emphasis is on identities as they are experienced (ideally) by individuals rather than on collective constructs, the systemic dimension of the symbolic systems that ensure stability in collective life is lost. Applying Kelly's excellent critique¹⁸ of B. Anderson's view¹⁹ concerning

¹⁶ Gerschiere, P., Meyer, B., "Globalization and Identity: Dialectics of Flow and Closure," Development and Cultural Change, Vol. 24, No. 4, 1998.

¹⁷ Bauman, Z., "From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity," in Hall, S. and P. Gay, 1997, op.cit.

¹⁸ Kelly, J.D., "Time and the Global: Against the Homogeneous, Empty Communities in Contemporary Social Theory," Development and Cultural Change, Vol. 29, No. 4, Oct. 1998.

¹⁹ Anderson, B., Imagined Communities, Verso, London, 1993.

the emergence, in modern times, of an empty, homogeneous space-time in which different nations coexist side by side, we could say that discussions of identity today hone in on a single backdrop and temporality dictated by globalization. The construction of identities that are sustained over time relies on the establishment of the particular time frames around which to preserve and structure the myths, rites, and memory of the group. A calendar of its own, marking its own holidays, is an indicator of a nation's sovereignty, just as a calendar with an alternative time structure is a clear indicator of a particular culture, if not a civilization. During its struggle against the Church, the French Revolution sought, unsuccessfully, to impose a new beginning of time. For its part, in its effort to distinguish itself from Judaism, the Catholic Church gradually superimposed its own holidays on the days that Jewish holidays were observed. The enormous challenge for the social sciences, then, is to reconstruct the various layers of temporality—including the global—and the institutions that sustain them, to think about how they emerge, are transformed, or vanish, and to explain their conflicts and interactions, and how they are absorbed and negotiated by individuals, groups, and cultures.

In this sense, we concur with the views of Khachig Tölölyan – founder and editor of *Diaspora Magazine* – as expressed in his farewell article written on the occasion of his retirement from the Journal. In his synopsis of the debate, he discusses his reservations about the analytical and historical value of the current trend to generalize the concept of Diaspora to virtually any group residing outside of its place of origin. For Tölölyan, the Diaspora must have more defined contours and be associated with precise institutions and practices, something that the bulk of the literature completely disregards.²⁰

An example of the difficulty that post-modern theories have living with history, and with the moral ambiguity of all social phenomena, is the concept of Diaspora created by the Boyarin brothers.²¹ “What we wish to struggle for, theoretically...is an alternative to the model of self-determination, which is, after all, in itself a Western, imperialist imposition on the rest of the world. We propose Diaspora as a theoretical and historical model to replace self-determination...” (p.711). In the Diaspora, “...the collective security of Jews and the search for Jewish communication entails

²⁰ Cf. Khachig Tölölyan, “Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment,” *Diaspora*, 5:1, 196.

²¹ Boyarin, D. and J. Boyarin, “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity,” *Critical Inquiry*, 19, 1993.

a “...dissociation of ethnicities and political hegemonies...”(op.cit. p. 723)²² or would allow for “...important common interests with feminism and anti-imperialism...”. They are seeking the “essential” Judaism, which in their view, would be memory versus space, as opposed to Zionism with its emphasis on space and power.

Perhaps because it is so assertive, moralistic, and one-sided, this work is cited frequently in the literature on Diaspora. The essentialization of Judaism is applied to other cultures enabling the Boyarins, for example, to refer to “Christian European world dominance” (p. 108), echoing a phenomenon in which “enemies” can be analyzed from a pre-postmodern standpoint. And though the authors assert that their proposed concept of Diaspora has a historical basis, history has not been respected. Even the most compelling portion of the text—its critique of Zionism—is weakened by the omission of the historical context which led the Jews to identify with that movement, signifying something more than just an “epistemological detour.”

The Boyarins do not clarify the social and political context in which their ideal of a Diaspora would flourish. Their idealized view of diasporic rabbinic Judaism fails to take into consideration that it is grounded in a power structure, that up until modern times Jews in the Diaspora have always lived with stigma and profound insecurity (even in the Spanish Arab world which they specifically proffer as an example of a place where the Diaspora would approximate their ideal). They forget too that rabbinic Judaism represented a systematic effort to segregate the Jews from the surrounding population, based on the principle of “fencing the fence” (*gader al hagader*) in which biblical instructions regarding what is pure and impure were deepened, multiplied, and radicalized.

Although Zionism represented a break with the tradition of passively waiting for the Messiah, it did not invent the notion of Diaspora as a state of misfortune and suffering. This is found in Deuteronomy and throughout the Judaic religious tradition, just as support for Zionism among broad sectors of the Eastern European poor was based on their experience of persecution and not on an intellectual detour.

²² Boyarin, J., Storm from Paradise – The Politics of Jewish Memory, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1992 p.103. “In a sense, then, the controversial prophetic vision of the global link between the fate of the Jews and the fate of the world seems to be confirmed. Jewish survival does turn out to be inseparable from human survival. Our planet more and more clearly appears as a fragile life support system rather than the plane on which a grid is drawn, within which homogeneous human groups can comfortably place themselves. This does not guarantee Jews freedom from persecution in the short term; nothing can. But it is our chance for survival in the long term.” (p. 129).

Without a state structure or close communities to call their own, the Diasporas have had to learn to live with the dominant power: “Not constituting a truly autonomous polity, the Diasporas had to coexist with and accept different political contexts within a pragmatic realism.”²³ If many Jews in the modern world have adopted a dissident or critical posture, they are mainly secular Jews who have broken from or at least distanced themselves from their community frameworks. It is not that there are two opposing versions of Judaism, as the Boyarins’ Manichean vision would like to assert, but rather a fragmentation of Judaism, in which each individual produces its own brand.

As Galchinsky aptly point out in a direct criticism of the Boyarins, “Although recent postcolonial theories have much to recommend them, they need to be criticized for unduly minimizing the suffering that is the frequent companion of Diaspora, making unconvincing claims for the privileged visionary potential of Diaspora intellectuals, and decontextualizing the ideology of nationalism.” “Moreover, as a comparison with the traditional Jewish narrative of Diaspora articulated in Deuteronomy and subsequent prophetic and rabbinic literature will suggest, the postcolonial theorists have overstated the potential of the “Diasporas” to subvert nationalism and imperialism and they have understated its potential to subvert the Diasporans themselves.” (op. cit. pp. 186-187 and 202-203).

Authors such as Cohen, Safran, and Chaliand and Rageau approach the construction of the concept of Diaspora from a different perspective, using historical experience as their point of reference in a classical sociological approach. This construct takes the form of a definition of an ideal type based mostly, although not exclusively, on the Jewish experience.

Chaliand and Rageau²⁴ identify a set of criteria, that taken together or in various combinations, would constitute Diaspora:

1. A disaster the causes the collective dispersal of a group.
2. The role of collective memory in recalling the events that gave rise to the dispersal, creating, in this way, a cultural legacy.
3. Willingness to transmit this cultural legacy to others for the purpose of preserving a specific identity.
4. Permanence over time, which determines whether or not it actually constitutes a Diaspora.

²³ Cf. Biale, D., Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History, Schocken Books, New York, 1987.

²⁴ Chaliand, G. and J.P. Rageau, Atlas des Diasporas, Editions Odile Jacob, Paris, 1991.

Safran,²⁵ in turn, proposes six criteria to define a Diaspora:

1. Dispersal of a group from an original center to two or more peripheral areas.
2. Retention of a collective memory of the homeland.
3. Partial or total sense of alienation vis-à-vis the local society, coupled with a sense of a lack of acceptance by that society.
4. Belief that the native land is the true home to which they must one day return.
5. Belief in a collective commitment to restore or support the homeland.
6. Maintenance of some sort of ties with the homeland, which defines their self-awareness, solidarity, and relationships with others.

Cohen, however, is the most ambitious in his definition of Diaspora using diverse historical cases as a reference point.²⁶ According to this author, the following characteristics define a Diaspora:

1. “Dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions;
2. Alternatively, the 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, including its location, history and achievements;
4. An idealization of the putative ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation;
5. The development of a return movement that gains collective approval;
6. A strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history, and the belief of a common fate;
7. A troubled relationship with host societies, suggesting a lack of acceptance at the least or the possibility that another calamity might befall the group;
8. A sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement; and

²⁵ Safran, W., “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” *Diaspora*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1991.

²⁶ Cohen, R., *Global Diasporas, an Introduction*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1997.

9. The possibility of a distinctive reactive, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance of pluralism.” (p. 26)

Cohen’s ambitious undertaking evidences all the ambiguities and difficulties inherent to developing a relevant concept of Diaspora through the attribution of “typical” characteristics. It replicates on a larger scale the problems raised by Safran’s or Chaliand and Rageau’s definitions by intermingling group self-definitions with historical processes, fact with myth. (For example: “... there is considerable evidence to suggest that the Jews are not a single people with a single origin and a single migration history...” (p. 21), as if the myth had to be true, and again, “[i]n the Jewish case, the catastrophic origins of the Diaspora have been unduly (sic!) emphasized in folk memory...” (p. 27), as if there were a historiographically correct way of creating legends.) Cohen fails to analyze the social structures of Diasporas and the specific traits that they acquire in different historical contexts and, significantly, he makes no clear distinction between the Diaspora before and since the advent of the modern state. And while the Jewish experience is pivotal to his development of the concept of Diaspora, he is not sensitive to the various currents of modern Judaism that are grappling with this problem, and focuses essentially on Zionism. He even overlooks the important experience of the Bund, the Eastern European Jewish socialist movement that advocated cultural autonomy centered on the Yiddish language in Central and Eastern Europe rather than a return to homeland, or Reform Judaism which begun renouncing any expectation of a return to Zion.

One of the main shortcomings of these authors is their lack of references to the social and power structures within the Diasporas, their internal ideological diversity and myriad integration strategies, the variation among Diasporas based on the nature of their relationship with local society,²⁷ and the complex relationships among Diasporas and particularly between central and peripheral Diasporas. Notwithstanding their classical sociological approach, these studies tend to emphasize the identitary and cultural dimension, leaving aside the physical and political structures behind the reproduction of Diasporas throughout history.

In developing their concepts of Diaspora, the normative authors as well as those taking the historical experience approach tend to fall into common methodological traps. Diaspora is

²⁷ Which does not free Cohen of his desire to be politically correct, churning out such pearls as, “...the circumstances that surrounded the birth of the Israeli state were far from normal”. P 116. Meaning that there are *normal* ways to create a State?

presented as a concept determined once and for all by certain exemplary historical experiences or by a particular normative ideal. As a result, other self-defined Diasporas that lack the characteristics set forth by the ideal model come to be regarded as “semi-Diasporas” or “less authentic,” giving rise to peculiar phenomena such as the exclusion from the Jewish Diaspora of the Jews in the Bund or the 19th century Reform Jews, since the typical description of Diaspora included the aspiration of returning to the homeland.

As an alternative to the perspectives described herein, we propose the study of Diaspora, not as a normative concept or an ideal type, but rather as a field of comparative analysis in which no single Diaspora represents the ideal model—whether from an empirical or normative standpoint. Diasporas, therefore, encompass all social groups that identify themselves as such and the role of social theory is the comparative analysis of their origins and social and institutional structures. Diasporas are as many and as varied as those that have ever existed, exist today, or will exist in the future. This does not imply, however, defining Diaspora as an identitary concept that is fluid, open, constantly mutating, and lacking a fixed reference point. Sociological analysis must map out Diasporas in all their diversity, including their development of internal reproduction mechanisms and their interactions with their surroundings in particular socio-historical contexts.²⁸

Because each new “Diaspora” draws, in more or less explicit ways, upon the experience and notions of their predecessors, and by virtue of its position in Western culture, the Jewish experience—and only in this sense—offers a prototype, which is not to ascribe a normative value to it or suggest that it can serve as the basis for an empirical model or ideal type, even less so if we consider the tremendous variation within the phenomenon of Diaspora in Jewish history. Instead of an exercise in “normativization” or the construction of ideal types, more effort should be devoted to the analysis of concrete experiences that illustrate the conditions in which social groups today construct and confer specific meaning on the notion of Diaspora.²⁹

²⁸ Floya Anthias’ critique of the concept of Diaspora raises a number of interesting points. However, the argument that the concept of Diaspora is a particular kind of ethnic identity calls leaves aside the issue, taken for granted, of what “ethnie” means, which the author fails to provide. Cf. Floya Anthias, “Evaluating ‘Diaspora:’ Beyond Ethnicity?,” *Sociology*, Vol. 32, No. 3, August 1988.

²⁹ This perspective, of course, is close to the works of Gilroy, who endeavors to understand the forms and conditions for the existence of a black Diaspora. With good reason, Gilroy focuses in his texts—which have their own particular brilliance—on a creative analysis of a concrete community and he shows enormous flexibility in his understanding of the Diaspora as an historical and socially constructed phenomenon: “Textuality becomes a means to evacuate the problem of human agency, a means to specify

Diaspora as an Historical Concept: Lessons from the Jewish Experience

One of the main sociological lessons that can be drawn from the Jewish experience relates not to some quintessential trait that defines what a Diaspora is, but rather to the richness of the historical processes themselves and the wide range of models and institutions associated with them. These lessons include, but are not limited to, the following elements:

1. The particular forms that Diasporas assume cannot be analyzed independently of defined socio-historic contexts. The Jewish Diaspora took on very different contours and organizational forms during the Roman Empire, or Medieval times, or the modern period. Indeed, as Bernard Lewis³⁰ points out, contexts in which the Jews were not viewed as a significant other for the local culture, such as in India, were not conducive to the development of Jewish communities.
2. The Diaspora reproduces individual identities through institutions that establish boundaries, mechanisms for socialization, solidarity, and channeling conflict, and relationships with the “outside” world and with other Jewish communities. .
3. Many different relationships of solidarity, domination, and conflict are maintained within and among Diasporas, including power relationships and conflicts to establish hegemony. Usually dominated by one or very few centers, the peripheral Diasporas are constantly being colonized by the central ones.³¹
4. Diasporas (and particularly the elites within them) portray themselves, and indeed are portrayed by the outside world, through the lens of a unified image that belies their internal diversity. In the early 20th century, for example, there was tremendous cultural diversity among the Jews, in addition to their social and ideological diversity. To an Eastern European Jew, speaking

the death (by fragmentation) of the subject and, in the same maneuver, to enthrone the literary critic as mistress or master of the domain of creative human communication.” Gilroy, P., *The Black Atlantic –Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1994, p 77. The Jewish and Black experiences are not founded on an ideal or idealized model, but rather serve as a basis for pointing out influences, similarities and disparities. At the end of this work, he even relativizes the importance that the ethnic issue might have in the future by stating that, quite possibly, issues concerning sustainable development and the poor regions of the planet should be the primary challenges.

³⁰ Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1984

³¹ Jacqueline Nassy Brown rightly criticizes Gilroy for not paying sufficient attention to the power differential among black communities and their inter-relationships. Cf. Brown, J.N., “Black Liverpool, Black America, and the Gendering of Diasporic Space,” *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 13, No. 3, August 1998.

Yiddish was synonymous with being Jewish, while other Jews spoke only Ladino (mainly based on old Castilian Spanish), Arabic, or the local language, and Hebrew was spoken only by the most educated elite and only used for religious purposes.³² In addition to the language gap, Jews from different areas harbored deep-seated prejudices that were reflected, for instance, in the virtual nonexistence of inter-marriages between subcommunities residing in the same area.³³ Meanwhile, the outside world, and particularly anti-Semites, insisted on portraying Jews as a single homogeneous group.

5. In order for a Diaspora to emerge, there must be an intellectual elite able to assume custodianship of the cultural heritage. To exist in the form in which Jewish history has unfolded up to the present time, self-defined Diasporas require intellectuals who can develop an ideology, discourse, or mythology about them. Perhaps for this reason, the Gypsies, an oral culture lacking an *intelligentsia*, have never developed a vision of themselves as Diaspora. A Diaspora comprises a knowledge structure. Even when it is an exercise of resistance against the dominant culture, at its core it is organized around the unequal distribution of knowledge and institutional power.
6. At certain times in history, particularly times of crisis and social transformation, the dominant elite might be questioned by new leaders and intellectual and various definitions of what Diaspora means for the history of the group may coexist.
7. Diasporas are not homogeneous social structures; they are permeated by profound inequalities in the distribution of wealth, knowledge, and power, and by ideological, social, and gender conflicts.
8. The Jewish Diaspora always was made up of specific local communities, which absorbed certain aspects of the local cultures and developed their own interests and characteristics.³⁴
9. One of the most interesting phenomena concerning Diaspora is that it facilitates the study of the complex relationships between the global and local dimensions and the constant reabsorption and reinterpretation—based on the local circumstances of each community—of discourses and

³² Not to mention the prejudices within “Yiddishland” itself, between Hungarian, Polish, Lithuanian, and Bessarabian Jews, to name a few.

³³ Cf. Elias Canetti’s childhood memories in *A Língua Absolvida*, Companhia das Letras, São Paulo, 1989.

practices that originated in other contexts. Different currents of Judaism, such as the Bund, the reform movement, or Hasidism (an 18th century religious renewal movement), took on new meanings in each national context, even as others—the original ones—were abandoned in keeping with the particular circumstances of each community.

10. The relationships between the political and ideological power centers in the “homeland” and the Diasporas are tremendously complex politically, socially, and culturally; they involve ambiguous relationships of solidarity and conflict around the legitimate monopoly over the production of knowledge concerning what the authentic collective identity really is and who its main representative or spokesperson might be.³⁵
11. The modern nation-state has been the dividing line in the history of the Jewish Diaspora and since the time of Napoleon Bonaparte, Jewish intellectuals have tried to demonstrate that Judaism does not represent a danger to national integration. The current crisis of the nation-state, globalization processes, and the political and ideological hegemony of the United States—with its unique brand of ethnic integration—were necessary factors for the Diaspora to be regarded once again as a positive and inclusive asset. And last but not least, the existence of democracy is critical to understanding the circumstances in which a previously stigmatized institution can be transformed into a new form of community and personal development.

This description is not intended to be exhaustive but rather indicative of the relevant social processes that can be mined from the vast history of the Jewish Diasporas. A future comparative study of the different Diasporas might facilitate a more detailed examination of their distinguishing characteristics. Because of their extensive history, their complex ties with religious theology, their experience of anti-Semitism, and the secularization processes they have undergone in recent centuries, Jewish Diasporas undoubtedly will differ in significant ways from the “new Diasporas.”

Diaspora and Jewish Studies

Although Jewish studies occupy a relevant space in academia, not to mention the key contributions that Jewish scholars have made, and continue to make, to the social sciences, the

³⁴ Here we concur with Floya Anthias in her critique of the application of a concept of Diaspora that does not include issues of power and social inequality. Cf. “Evaluating ‘Diaspora: Beyond Ethnicity?’,” *Sociology*, Vol. 32, No. 3, August 1998.

³⁵ Cf. David Biale, *op. cit.*, on the use of the state of Israel as a way of endorsing the political project of Jewish American leadership.

Diaspora was never regarded as a significant subject of social analysis.³⁶ Jewish (and non-Jewish) social scientists shared the notion that the nation-state, or else humanity,³⁷ constituted society or was its equivalent, and therefore, was the basic unit of analysis.³⁸ This attitude, in turn, was convenient for Jewish studies, which propagated a secularized version (rekindled and invigorated by the Holocaust) of the image of a people chosen as the bearers of exceptional characteristics.

Although Jewish studies, in theory, should welcome efforts to rescue the concept of Diaspora in the social sciences, this is not the case. Biale and Galchinsky³⁹ interpret this divergence between the area of “cultural studies” (where much of the debate over Diaspora plays out) and Jewish studies, in light of the divergent experiences of the African American movement and that of the American Jewish community. While U.S. institutions to promote social mobility worked perfectly for the Jewish community and Jews gradually become “lighter,”⁴⁰ those same institutions

³⁶ In this regard, Irving Louis Horowitz’s argument (*The Decomposition of Sociology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994) that multiculturalists forget that the Jews were at the forefront of intellectual production and critical thinking in the social sciences in this century, misses the main point: the strategy of the majority of Jewish intellectuals was to conceive of modernity through the lens of liberal and socialist ideologies, without developing the specific aspects and contributions that the diasporic experience might have to offer to social theory and criticism.

³⁷ In her comparison of Franz Boas and DuBois, Julia Liss reveals the strategy of the former, a German Jew residing in the United States, to confront the problem of racism and prejudice from a humanistic and universalist standpoint based on knowledge, while DuBois fostered a nationalistic position of practical activism. In a way, this anticipated the different dynamics associated with the integration of the Jews and African Americans in North American society. Cf. Liss, J.E., “Diasporic Identities: The Science and Politics of Race in the Work of Franz Boas and W.E.B. DuBois, 1894-1919,” *Cultural Anthropology*, 13, (2), 1998.

³⁸ With the important exception of Bauman, who made the Jewish condition and its integration into modernity the twin pillars of his brilliant sociological analysis.

³⁹ Biale, D., Galchinsky, M, S. Heschel, (ed.), *Insider/Outsider, American Jews and Multiculturalism*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998.

⁴⁰ Cf. Greenberg, C, “Pluralism and its Discontents”, in Biale, D., Galchinsky, M. and S. Heschel, op. cit., describing how America and its institutions worked for the Jews and not for African Americans. Galchinsky, M., “Scattered Seeds: A Dialogue of Diasporas” in Biale, D., Galchinsky M., and S. Heschel, op. cit. “Moreover, its exceptionalism in Jewish history by no means implies that the American Jewish Diaspora is exceptional in world history. By regarding their Diaspora as unique and therefore incomparable, American Jews have neglected to participate in cross-cultural conversations to which they might make valuable contributions. They have enhanced their reputation among other diasporic groups as inward-looking and isolationist. They have alienated themselves from Jewish history as well as from potentially crucial resources, information, and support. And they have hampered their efforts to forge a constructive relationship with the state of Israel. Alienated from both “homelands,” American Jews have felt they had no choice but to create an existence unlike any their forebears ever knew. Because of their ideology of

proved to be particularly frustrating for African Americans. Biale also points to the difficulties Jews have had in moving beyond their self-image as an exceptional minority, the victim *par excellence*.⁴¹ Not to mention that affirmative action policies were, in U.S. academia, biased de facto against Jews, with the possible exception of Jewish women.⁴²

Approaching the Jewish experience as one case within the broader context of the comparative study of Diasporas is a difficult step for Jewish studies centers to take.⁴³ More painful still if one of the Diasporas included in this new intellectual space is that of the Palestinians, created in the interaction with Zionist colonization and in whose mythology the Jews occupy the space they themselves reserve for the Romans. This eventuality, however, offers an opportunity to rethink some core issues for the future of the Jewish people outside of the U.S. context and, in particular, the peripheral Diasporas and the social and political structures of the state of Israel.

Globalization, Diaspora, and Judaism

Factors such as the reassessment of transnational identities, globalization, and the social success of the Jewish Diaspora worldwide at the start of the 21st century, at a time when collective persecutions are not occurring, cast a new light on the State of Israel and the Diaspora.⁴⁴ The dream

exceptionalism, they have not, for the most part, looked to other eras of stability and promise in Diaspora Jewish history for aid in understanding their situation. In consequence they suffer an emotional and intellectual distance from Israel, the Old World, and the rest of Jewish history” (p. 201).

⁴¹ After WW II, Jews “...were no longer a minority that defined the central discourse of the majority culture.” Biale, D., “The Melting Pot and Beyond,” in Biale, D., Galchinsky, M., and S. Heschel, op. cit. p. 27. It is through the Holocaust, a European phenomenon, that the North American Jews reconstructed their identity as a minority with a “special” history.

⁴² Feminism was the only area in which postmodernism and Judaism would converge powerfully. While Jewish women remained oppressed and excluded in Jewish cultural practice, socially they would benefit partially from affirmative action policies to employ women.

⁴³ There were, however, certain isolated efforts in this direction. Cf. Silverstein, L.J. and R. L. Cohn (ed.), The Other in Jewish Thought and History, New York, New York University Press, 1994, and Kepnes, S., Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age, New York, New York University Press, 1996.

⁴⁴ “While the traditional Jewish narrative may be useful in calling attention to an excess of idealism in postcolonial discourse, postcolonial discourse may in turn be useful in calling attention to an excess of exceptionalism in American Jews’ attitude toward Diaspora. Here, therefore, we must attempt to engage three parties in dialogue at once.” (Galchinsky, M., op. cit. p. 198). “Still,

of normalization of the Jewish people—a dream guided by Zionism—appears to be coming true, but inversely: the diasporic condition is becoming the norm and nationalism an ideology in crisis. Moreover, the historical sense of overcoming the diasporic emanated not only from Zionism but from all modern Jewish renewal ideologies. If the world has become “Judaised” then the diasporic Judaism has been “normalized” through avenues that no one anticipated, it means that new transformations are underway in the Jewish Diaspora. While a detailed analysis of the new forms and challenges associated with the Jewish Diaspora lies beyond the scope of this work, we can list a few that certainly indicate that the definitions of what Diaspora means, using the Jewish historical experience as a reference point, must be constantly revisited.

The first issue is the diversity of the Jewish people. With the advent of modern times, Judaism became increasingly diversified and divided into sometimes opposing currents represented by sweeping inclusive and exclusive ideologies, each of which advocated its own response to the quandary of incorporating Judaism into modern institutions and ideologies. In recent decades, this situation gave way to a homogenizing trend as the distances between the various currents were reduced by the effects of World War II, the Holocaust, the creation of the state of Israel and its wars against Arab countries, and by virtue of a move toward social homogenization. While it would appear that this trend is coming to a close, there is no evidence of a return to the internal disparities among homogeneous currents observed in the last century. Judaism is emerging increasingly as a personal construct: each individual appropriates and consumes different products from among those offered by the different cultural currents both within and external to Judaism. It has come to

despite its somewhat incoherent efforts to find a generalizable definition for “Diaspora,” its overly sanguine conception of the exiled intellectual’s vision, its insufficient appreciation for Diasporans’ suffering, and its rather ossified ethical compass, the postcolonial discourse of Diaspora may have much to offer Jews” (Ibid. p. 193). “..if American Jews began to see their experience within the framework of transnational migrations, they might discover that they are not so exceptional after all. They might find analogs for their vision in other diasporic communities” (Ibid. p. 207). “ Given the American Jews’ unprecedented attempt to remain in existence side by side with an existing Jewish state, elements of this alternative vision may be of more use to them at present than the traditional narrative. For postcolonialism has described a diasporic consciousness not based on a hierarchical distinction between center and peripheral, nor on a coding of the homeland as whole and sacred as against the cursed and fragmented Diaspora. The Diaspora’s relationship to the homeland is not imagined as a sinful community’s repentant desire for a prior sacred place, but as a living and ongoing exchange of information, financial and political support, contractual obligations, and above all affection. These communities do not regard violation of the relationship as a sin against the sacred but as a transgression against kinship, friendship, and contract” (Ibid., p. 207- 208).

resemble a market of cultural products, circumstantially consumed, with a revolving door through which one may enter or leave at any time.

The primary challenge for Judaism today is that of restructuring its diasporic institutions in order to adapt them to the new meaning that Diaspora has taken on in a globalized, individualized world organized around consumption-driven subcultures. The circumstances of the new century, in the words of Gauchet,⁴⁵ are defined by the end of finite history, that is, the end of secular ideologies about the meaning of history. This is already leading to a redefinition of secular Judaism and other Jewish religious currents oriented toward the social world. The fashion of Jewish mysticism reflects a transformation of the market of Jewish products in the 21st century, oriented towards self-help, which indeed is attracting a large following of consumers of esoteric products, both of Jews and non-Jews.

The Jewish Diaspora should construct a new identity that is not founded (or at least not mainly) on persecution and victimization.⁴⁶ As long as the current period of non-persecution persists, the Diasporas should avoid reconstructing themselves as a group rooted in stigma and instead choose the positive aspects they have to offer in the present, and becoming capable of complete openness to mixed marriages,

The State of Israel, in turn, represents a typical example of a systematic effort on the part of a national state to eradicate the cultural diversity and the “memory of Diaspora” from among its population. Unquestionably, it was an effort that persisted at least until the late 1960’s, with society’s active and conscious collaboration. Still it was a concentrated and systematic cultural homogenization effort, an attempt at social engineering to eliminate the diversity and cultural richness of Judaism nurtured over its long diasporic trajectory. The imposition of a single language,⁴⁷ attempts to create a secular Jewish culture based on the love of nature and the land, and contempt for the Diaspora as a source of values and creative experiences were all integral aspects of the normativizing and disciplinary effort of the ideological and educational system installed in Israel.

⁴⁵ Gauchet, M., *La Religion dans la Démocratie*, Gallimard, Paris, 1998.

⁴⁶ “...Jews at the end of the twentieth century are rapidly becoming...a community of choice.” Biale, D., op. cit., p. 31.

The enormous challenge facing the state of Israel today is that of achieving a harmonious coexistence between democracy and ethnic and cultural diversity. At the moment, the State of Israel civil rights regime uphold only one religious current: Orthodox Judaism.⁴⁸ The conflicts between the Ashkenazim and Sephardim and the persistently strong bonds between emigrants (the Russians in particular, but not only) and their places of origin make it possible to reexamine the issue (when it is not tainted by the conflict with the Palestinians or the Arab world) of the unity and diversity of the Diaspora and of the Jewish people. The case of Israel sheds light on a new category, that of the multidiasporic condition, in which the return to the national homeland could signify “the creation of a new diasporic situation.”⁴⁹

Should history confirm these considerations, we can expect that the Museum of the Diasporas located in Tel Aviv will be reorganized sooner or later: instead of showing a trajectory in which all Diasporas feed into Israel, it should show a more diversified and open path, in which the Diaspora (including that made up of the large number of Israelis who opt to leave the country) remains a constant in Jewish history.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ The imposition of Hebrew, far from a nostalgic return to the Biblical language, was the main mechanism used to unite and recreate a new national culture. Other options were available for a national language at the start of the Zionist colonization, particularly Yiddish and German.

⁴⁸ Cf. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, No. 3, Vol. 21 (May 1998) analyzing Israeli society and Sorj, B. and G. Flin, in *Transe*, Rio de Janeiro, Record, 2001.

⁴⁹ A significant case is the last wave of Jewish emigration from the former Soviet Union: in Israel the immigrants insisted on preserving and cultivating the Russian language and culture. Or the fascinating case of the mother of a friend who spoke Yiddish in Poland, Polish in Brazil, and Portuguese in Israel.

⁵⁰ It is possible to assert that a smaller people can only survive in the long term if it can successfully dissociate its fate from one particular space, as Richard Marienstras has done in his pioneering works, Cf., *Être um peuple em Diaspora*, Paris, François Maspero, 1975.