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The Concept of Diaspora in the Contemporary World

The shortcomings of this paper, particularly in this disciplinary context and in the company of such experts in the social sciences, should be rather obvious. Although I will speak wearing my hat of historian of national (and nationalist) culture, I acknowledge nonetheless that my general framework of understanding and addressing these issues will be drawn inevitably from the epistemological inventory of literary studies and my own disciplinary boundaries. On the other hand, it may be perhaps reassuring that the impetus and indeed departure point for the brief meditations that follow is the problematic usage of diaspora precisely in and by the domain of literary studies. Thus, whatever may be said to condition this shortcoming will be subjected to critique.

To get on with the matter at hand: I find the contemporary proliferation of uses of the notion of diaspora exceedingly curious. In the last two decades, particularly in the broader terrain of the humanities in American universities, diaspora has attained the full-fledged status of a concept with a multiplicity of philosophical, psychological, linguistic, and literary references. In literary studies especially, it has become by now entirely conventional (that is, it has assumed the order of self-evidence) to speak in terms of “diasporic language” – of the “diaspora of meanings” over a supposedly unchartable textual terrain. Jacques Derrida’s legendary treatise *La dissémination* (1968) is now over thirty years old and so deeply inscribed – one is tempted, in like spirit, to say diffused, disseminated – within the institutional language of literary studies that it has been laid aside, nearly forgotten, as faint tradition. Yet, this literal translation from the Greek – diaspora to dissemination – is emblematic of a whole set of terms that seem intertwined with the meaning of diaspora and are themselves implicated in a general process of “autonomous conceptualization”: cosmopolitanism, migration, exile, displacement, homelessness, border identity, crossover culture, transnationalism, long-distance nationalism, nomadism, hybridity, and so on.

What do I mean by saying that diaspora has achieved an “autonomous conceptualization”? In a most basic sense, I am referring to an act of disjoining the notion of diaspora from its various historical manifestations – from the evidence of diaspora (political, economic, sociological, psychological, cultural) in specific communities under specific historical conditions. Though such historical instances may yield very productive results under comparison (which is precisely the work of this conference), so much that we may even begin to theorize certain elemental figures pertaining to diaspora communities as such, we would all agree, I believe, that the historical particularity can never be placed

under erasure, as one would say in philosophy. And yet, this is precisely what happens when diaspora becomes the key word to describe a conceptual pattern, a semantic condition.¹

We have thus reached – in American universities at least – the phenomenon of an emerging (but nonetheless wholly underwritten institutionally) discipline of Diaspora Studies. This seems to me the most puzzling of all. How does one “do” Diaspora Studies? What does it mean to do Diaspora Studies? Though often the personnel sought for such positions targets scholars of actual diasporic communities, fully versed in the social-historical details needed in order to pursue this object of study, the rubric enabling this whole edifice to stand institutionally is the autonomization of diaspora as a concept of general utility. At the limit, this seems to delineate and qualify a field of study (which entails no less than the assumption of an autonomous epistemological terrain), or an area of study (and here, the geographical basis of so-called “area studies” has surely served as a model, even if inadvertently). It is, of course, absurd to pose the question: “what is the area of diaspora studies?” – the multiple but precise geographies of diasporic communities render such quest inoperative.

I find it difficult to provide a concise explanation for this phenomenon. If one is to take seriously the residual power of cultural tendencies and trends, it is possible to attribute the newfangled fashion of alleged diasporic phenomena to the increasing preference for structures of decentering and dispersal, as the positivist hold of grand narratives, linear progression, binary logic, or causal stability on the methodology of social and historical sciences has significantly weakened in the last two-three decades. Admittedly, we cannot ignore the significant shift in social-historical reality throughout the globe during this same period: the magnitude of mass migrations due to the rapid deterioration of safe political and economic conditions in many places in the world; the questioning and redrafting of national boundaries, often with acts of remarkable violence that tear the social fabric and create conditions of mass refugee populations; the enormous changes in communication and transportation technologies that facilitate mobility and

¹ Even the best intentions to take on this conflation of terms by resisting its tendency to efface historical particularity do not evade, in the last instance, the trap of autonomous conceptualization. See indicatively the important but maculate (because it supposes itself as all-inclusive) issue on *Diaspora and Immigration*, V.Y. Mudimbe and Sabine Engel eds., *South Atlantic Quarterly* 98(1/2), Winter-Spring 1999.

speed on an unprecedented scale, so that the *topos* of inhabitation itself comes to bear the mark of uncertainty. In other words, today's assessment of diasporic communities cannot be easily disentangled from the examination of globalized transnational social-political structures or the resurgence of fierce micronationalisms often within previously uncontested national boundaries. As a result, a basic conflation (indeed confusion) between migration and diaspora emerges, not merely within the scholarly ranks but also at the level of self-representation. Migrant communities seem to turn themselves into diasporic communities, perhaps in an attempt to invent for themselves a frame of reference different from the standard one that always harkens back to nineteenth-century immigration.

For instance – and I use an example that does not pertain to the specific focus of the conference but nonetheless illustrates the conceptual abuse I am describing – the Greek-American community has shifted its own self-identification from an immigrant culture that aspires toward national conformity in accord with the assimilationist (melting-pot) ideology of Americanism to a self-styled diaspora community whose distinct voice jostles for position in the newfangled multicultural marketplace. The consequence of this shift is greater attunement to both the symbolic existence and the real politics of motherland Greece, with actual links being forged so that the American-born community might act occasionally as foreign policy lobby power for the ancestral country. Schematically perhaps but not inaccurately, this particular characteristic may be considered as the forging of diasporic culture out of immigrant culture, whereby the national ancestral center does not preside as the departure point of dispersal across other national boundaries but as the retroactive symbolic center whose claim can be “cashed in” for an improvement of social and cultural status within the land of immigration. This is a peculiar phenomenon, wholly commensurate to the times we live in, whereby the so-called ‘postmodern’ and post-colonial’ reality has spawned a resurgence (albeit in mutated form) of nationalist passion.

In contrast to this forging of diaspora out of immigration, proper diasporic communities – at least in ethno-social terms – can only be those communities existing within specific national boundaries not as immigrant but as indigenous populations that do not possess national sovereignty of their own: the Kurdish and Palestinian cases are currently the most significant, given the profoundly complex geopolitics involved. On the other hand, one can hardly say that the cultural issue of the Armenian diaspora, for example, is resolved by the sheer inauguration of an Armenian nation after the breakup of the Soviet republics. Nor is the issue of Jewish diaspora resolved by virtue of the existence of the state of Israel, though here – both because of the enormous historical and geographical scale of the Jewish diaspora and the internal and highly problematic complexities of the various Jewish populations returning to claim a national position, often in order to buttress the nationalist claims of State power – the matter is singular and indeed pushes the categorization to the limit.

Ironically – and this is what really concerns us here – the real social and economic history of diaspora in the nineteenth century (and before) is rendered absent from this (re)invention of diaspora in the late-twentieth. This goes hand in hand with how the ‘elevation’ of diaspora into a methodological-epistemological concept worthy of institutional recognition seems to coincide either with the retreat of diasporic culture in the real world (its absorption by either transnational or micronationalist determinations) or with its diffusion into phenomena of mass migration. Any explanations here eschew the realm of self-evidence. One is tempted perhaps to speak of the shift in the ‘nature’ of capitalism – by all accounts, more of a shift in means than in nature – which is conceived, in the prevalent idiom of the day, as the shift from industrial capital and its reliance on labor to so-called finance capital and its reliance on information technology. You hear often these days from the gurus of financial markets the term “teconomy” as a way of denoting the extreme dependence of today’s economy on technology. (It’s doubtful that the more obvious etymological dimension of this awkward ‘Greekism’ registers at all; ‘teconomy’ might mean literally the condition in which technology has become the law.) Yet, whatever this shift may signify, or however it may be determined, the foundational ways of capitalist relations have hardly been changed or overcome. And since, according to the premises of this conference, the very conditions of diaspora are implicated in the history of capitalism (including its long prehistory in mercantile relations, strictly speaking), to discover that ‘diaspora’ has become an autonomous concept devoid of its social-historical content at the very point when capitalism’s entrepreneurial networks are operating with breadth and speed of unequal scale is at the very least puzzling.

Perhaps I may be revealing a certain prejudice, but the incapacity of newly constituted “Diaspora Studies” to take into account the longterm historical coincidence between diaspora communities and capitalism is due to the profoundly narrow understanding of ‘societies of the East’ (for lack of a more precise term) that characterizes the anglo-american academic institution in our time. One of the first things inscribed in my memory as a young student of contemporary Greek history was that the benefactors of this tiny emergent nation in the mid-nineteenth century were all ‘Greeks from abroad’ – *heterochthonous* Greeks, as the term of the day had it – that is, people whose capital (not merely financial but also cultural) was always external to the national boundaries. That my earliest reading of Marx a few years later revealed to me that capital was constitutively external to national boundaries drew strength not from the theory’s powerful rhetoric but by coming to confirm an already understood historical condition.

Yet, ironically, this sort of national-historical knowledge does not seem to have achieved an institutional existence in this odd new ‘discipline’. The vast history of the ‘societies of the East’ – diasporic in an essential way, both socially and economically – does not seem to have found paradigmatic status in the context of a ‘discipline’ that would

have had no meaning (indeed, no name) without this history. Likewise, I might add, the obsession with the notion of 'multiculturalism' that I encountered in American campuses in the 1980s – which, incidentally, fed even further the empty autonomization of the concept of diaspora – was utterly mystifying in its ignorance of the inimitable historical conditions of multiculturalism in the South-Eastern Mediterranean that had gone on for millennia.

Such historical slippages become abundant, it seems, the more the terminology of social-historical conditions stretches out into greater and greater generalization and permeable all-inclusiveness. The current academic obsession in certain circles with 'globalization' emulates the ahistorical conceptual abuse of the old arguments on 'multiculturalism'. What does it mean to say that we live in the era of globalization? The globality of capitalism is at the very least basic to its constitution, though here too those who argue for globalization to have been in existence in the mercantile economy of the Italian Renaissance or the earliest instances of European colonial exploration (following, wittingly or not, the pattern of Immanuel Wallerstein's world-system theory) labor under the same degree of conceptual abuse, even if in the opposite direction. In both cases, historical differences are outmaneuvered on the basis of economic formalism of one sort or another. The point is surely not whether capitalism is now or has always been global – because no doubt the very logic of capitalist markets is to seek to exceed boundaries – but whether the globality of capitalism achieves meaning according to its specific historical content, which is to say, according to the political dimensions that characterize it. The 'exploration' of the African continent and the slave trade from Africa to the Americas for the financial profit of European national states were surely instances of a 'global' economy, but their political dimensions are hardly similar to those of American technological patents currently being manufactured by cheap Asian labor for the benefit of multinational corporations that market products worldwide and account for the validity or 'legality' of their profit margins not to some national State tax structure but to the ruthless logic of the global stock exchange. It is the political economy of today's globalization that matters, not globalization itself as some sort of chimeric condition of capitalism.

Both the diasporic phenomenon itself and the history of the concept of diaspora cannot be evaluated outside of an assessment of the historical particularities of capitalism as political economy. For example, the fact that the large diasporic populations in the fringes of Europe (Jews, Greeks, Armenians) distinguished themselves as entrepreneurial networks of the first order is entirely commensurate with the imperial framework within which (and because of which) they flourished socially and culturally, as well as economically. Their mobile 'family-centered' mode of mercantile enterprise was particularly successful against the grain of the colonialist economies of the industrial-capitalist powers, where private enterprise benefitted consistently from its alliance with the administrative apparatus of the colonialist State. Diasporic entrepreneurial networks took advantage of both the more open-ended administrative structure of their 'host' State (the

multiethnic and multicultural 'laissez-faire' of, say, the Ottomans or the Hapsburgs) and the more than less politically centralized apparatus of colonialist power with which they did business 'abroad'. Broadly speaking, it is just this co-occurrence between the residual 'feudal'-imperial framework of societies of the 'East' and the advancing colonialist framework of rapidly expanding industrial capitalism of societies of the 'West' that enables 'diasporic capitalism' to flourish in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe and its periphery.

Likewise, the shift in the significance of diaspora from a designation of a social phenomenon that had distinct economic parameters to a rather historically disembodied concept whose parameters are at most strictly cultural is due to the shift in political economy that characterizes capitalism in the latter half of the twentieth century, whereby both age-old imperial administrations and colonialist structures collapse dramatically in favor of the political triumph of the nation-form and the ensuing transnational ('globalized') labor, technology, and commodity markets. One can see how, according to the political-economic terms of this shift, the prominence of diaspora as a designation of an entrepreneurial network gives way to a designation of mass migrant labor. Similarly, the social-cultural significance of diaspora, which once underlay the economic force of such communities beyond their State borders, now fades and is replaced by the discursive formation of so-called 'minority culture' and more recently 'identity politics'. It is a matter of elementary historical thinking that the very notion of minority culture is inconceivable in an imperial or even colonialist framework. Communities that identify themselves as minorities (social, ethnic, linguistic, religious, or broadly cultural – it makes no difference) can only arise – that is, can only give themselves meaning – within a national, if not indeed nationalist, configuration. The concept of minority meant nothing to the Ottomans and to the communities subjected to their political and economic control. But it begins to take shape, even if not yet identified as such, precisely during the time of the general nationalization of society that takes place in the Empire's Balkan provinces during the mid- to late-nineteenth century.² Thus, only if the Bulgarians can be conceptualized as a ethnic minority population within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire, can they get to graduate to full-fledged national status. Yet, precisely because the historically multiethnic and multicultural infrastructure in this region cannot be so easily eradicated, the Bulgarians – I am only taking this case as an example – must deal with the Turkish, Romanian, or Gypsy minorities within their assumed national boundaries even a century past their national institution. In other words, both minority discourse and identity

² The concept of "nationalization of society" belongs to Etienne Balibar. See his "The Nation Form: History and Ideology" *Fernand Braudel Center Review* 12(3), Summer 1990, 329-361. I elaborate on this concept in my *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization, and the Institution of Modern Greece* (Stanford University Press, 1996), 10-46.

politics, as they are fashionably designated nowadays, emerge out of and obey the tenets of nationalist logic oftentimes against the social-historical terms of the communities they represent.

But next to this extensive nationalization of society during the latter half of the twentieth century, which goes hand in hand with the transnationalization of capital, the significance of diaspora as a socio-economic category is rapidly eroded. On the socio-economic front, diaspora is replaced by discourses of migration and eventually by the more abstract and rather lazy designation of 'post-coloniality'. On the strictly semantic or more conceptual front (but what could this mean?), diaspora remains viable, even though its content becomes now more elusive than ever. Of course, one can understand how and why the concept of diaspora in the contemporary world comes to be occupied by references to communities of migrant labor, as this is after all the chief social and cultural element of transnational capitalism following the era of decolonization and Third-World national independence movements. What is striking, however, is how often this designation slips into explicit articulations of the nationalist logic that generates it: diasporic communities now come to embody the symbolic cohesion of ancestral nationality, often even voluntarily assuming the agency of the nation abroad, in a bizarre (ultimately paradoxical) simultaneity of both confirming and exceeding national boundaries. This seems to be followed in scholarly considerations as well; diasporic communities have become nations themselves, even if of a 'different sort'. Anthony Reid, for example, explicitly adopts as stalwartly common and modern Abner Cohen's definition of diaspora as "a nation of socially interdependent, but spatially dispersed communities"³ – showing directly that the spatial fluidity or social heterogeneity of the diasporic community does not seem able to stand on its own signification but needs the reliability of the nation-form.

³ Quoted in Anthony Reid, "Entrepreneurial Minorities, Nationalism, and the State" *Essential Outsiders*, Daniel Chirot and Anthony Reid eds. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 33-71. The same national designation of diaspora communities, even when acknowledging their problematic relation to the ancestral center, characterizes Gabriel Sheffer's introductory essay to his *Modern Diasporas in International Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 1-15.

The option to identify diasporas under the logical rubric of national communities ultimately compromises their idiomatic historical character: the fact that diasporic networks are not only comprehensible within the particularity of their social-historical conditions but that, even more, they are exemplary in harnessing the forces of their social-historical particularity to the utmost advantage of their reproductive capacities – which is to say in effect, their actual survival. More than the allegedly nostalgic anchor to the presumed national home that might provide the security of self-reference, diasporas are fueled by an idiomatic ethos, built into the very terms of their historical resilience.⁴ The remarkably successful economic capacity of diasporic entrepreneurial networks during the height of industrial-colonialist capitalism, without necessarily subscribing or submitting to its institutional apparatus, might be explained according to such an ethos. >From this standpoint, it is precisely the fact of this success, based largely on the evasion of a centralized or State-propelled relation to historical contingency, that gives diasporic communities both their extraordinary mobility and the articulate image of social-ethnic cohesion, not the other way around. To consider diasporic communities as traces of a national community, or even at best as non-ideological extensions of the nation-form, is to read this historical equation backwards. It is also, by extension, to misread the problematic conceptual significance of diaspora in the contemporary world, thus risking the possibility that the profoundly rich history of diasporic communities until the recent past is either fetishized as an once-upon-a-time glorious achievement or, conversely, occluded by a formalist or ahistorical conceptualization believed to encapsulate some sort of epistemological essence. In either case, diaspora falls right off history's field of vision.

⁴ In a very intelligent article, Vassilis Lambropoulos has argued for this point as diaspora's "ethos of dwelling." See his "Building Diasporas" *Crossings* 1(2), Fall 1997, 19-26.