CONTEMPORARY DIASPORAS, NATIONALISM, AND TRANSNATIONALISM POLITICS

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Nowadays more and more peoples define themselves as “diaporas.” The term itself has become increasingly widespread in public life, sometimes in unexpected ways. For instance one may be a member of an artistic or intellectual diaspora, or a member of a group which identifies itself through a specific way of life, or a particular way of thinking. Sports also can be perceived as such an experience. Recently the French Ministry of Education has introduced the word in official texts to designate the dispersal of scholars across several countries. Social sciences, especially Cultural and Gender studies, use the notion to analyse a large range of situations related to various ethnic or sexual identities (“queer diaspora”). The phenomenon is fashionable. What was a painful condition in the past has gained a positive status. Being a diaspora has even become a force and a political slogan.

In the context of globalisation, the diaspora model has become a political reference which goes beyond frontiers and enables claims of legitimacy to be made in international public opinion. Those claims have grown in different ways. Basques, Irish, Amerindians, Romanians, Italians, Lebanese, Palestinians, Chileans, Sikhs, Turks, Kurds, Afghans, Gypsies, and so on, as well as the archetypal Jews, Greeks, Armenians or Chinese, all form part of the variety of current diasporas. Beyond their differences, they proclaim the values of transnational solidarity in a world where national identities seem to be outdated and old-fashioned. The diaspora may represent an alternative to traditional social and political relations. It provides legitimacy to people aspiring to independence and recognition. The notion of diaspora gives them powerful arguments in their struggle,

1 I thank Dominique Schnapper for having allowed me to base a part of this paper on our common study published in 2006: Bordes-Benayoun and Schnapper, Diasporas et Nations.

as Bassma Kodmani-Darwish says about the Palestinians, calling them a “diaspora in gradual change”:

The myth of an established diaspora has its virtues. It allows the leaders of the emerging national entity to claim the advantage that will be derived from the educated and flourishing Palestinians’ contribution to building the young State. More fundamentally, it may be useful to reformulate in positive terms situations that have been so far perceived as negative experiences.³

This complete reversal of the meaning of diaspora is amazing. It has acquired a positive sense according to the current weakening of patriotism, the relative dwindling of the concept of the nation, the protest against State control and representative democracy and the denial of westernisation, the contestation of national integration models, the praise of generalised multiculturalism, the preference for mobility and all forms of mixing of cultures. The sociologists’ interest in Diasporas has grown with this heightened interest in the small, “the different, the eccentric, the borderline, the marginal, the outlying, the underground, the minority, the unofficial, the mixed, and the half-breed.”⁴ The flexible notion of diaspora is supposed to resolve all the problems that ethnic categories failed to do before. Unlike ethnicity, which hardens the features of the “other” by assigning it to a defined location, Diaspora will alleviate the sense of “otherness”, and give way to changing and vague identities. The diaspora somehow seems to exert a fascination, because it embodies the myth of a world free from national fences and old barriers. And despite the persistence of the need to flee persecution and war, the idea of a happy exile, the feeling of freedom, the pleasure of adventure and the sense of resistance to an overpowering fate are probably more attractive.

**Diasporas as a Symbol of the Non-National**

During the nineteenth century, belonging to a diaspora (that is to say: a people that retains the sense of a common fate despite its geographical dispersion), used to inspire suspicion and rejection on the part of the host society. It appeared as a threat to the