Israel-Diaspora Relations: “Transmission Driving-belts” of Transnationalism

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Some General Considerations

“Diaspora” (Dufoix, 2008), a word of Greek origin, designates the dispersal throughout the world of people with the same territorial origin. A descriptive notion, dispersion often receives with religious or ideological connotations such as in the Hebrew token of “galut” (exile) that is imbued with messianic aspirations of “Return.” Understandings attached to the diasporic condition may vary both within and between diasporas. As a rule, diasporans aim for absorption within their new environment, but when they attach to their dispersion a particular significance that merits enduring loyalty, they still attempt to remain distinct from “others,” as a diasporic community. The institutions and networks that they establish, then bring them to adopt the usual syndrome of an ethnic group grounded in an awareness of primordial particularism (religion, origin, or a language). This means that diasporans’ (unavoidable) adjustment and acculturation to their environment do not inevitably lead to loss of all concern for original identities.

Establishing a diaspora community, however, is not a uniform process and it can vary from one community to another—in the same society, and in different settings. Robin Cohen (2006) distinguishes between the “solid” diaspora marked by powerful myths of a common origin territorialized in a “old country,” and the “liquid” diaspora that is constructed through new cultural links and the replacing of sacred icons. One novelty of our era, however, resides in the frequency of the sense of attachment to a “territorialized origin” that relates collectives of the same origin to each other transnationally. “Transnationality” implies that dispersed groups perceive themselves as forming “one diaspora” that, under an appropriate token, also encompasses the country of origin: the “Jewish diaspora” refers to Jews’ dispersed communities; the “Jewish world” to the same, including Israel.

Another growing category in this era of multiple diasporas consists of the “returnees.” Germany and Japan are examples, besides Israel, that are witnessing the immigration of diasporans who—even after many years of
“exile”—have decided for ideological or instrumental reasons to “return home” (De Carvalho, 2002). Those returnees have absorbed the culture of their diasporic environments, which has dug cultural and social gaps between them and the homelanders that they rejoin. Hence, they may eventually see themselves as a “special tribe” and rebuild a new community where the previous national token becomes a diasporan identity and the previous national one, a diasporic allegiance: in brief, adhering to the “diasporic code” but in inverse mode. The common denominator of all cases pertaining to this category of transnational diaspora consists of their illustrating entities considering themselves as such, i.e. as part of a transnational entity. Narratives account for the condition of dispersal and assess its challenges.

A growing body of research focuses on transnational diasporas against the background of the phenomenon's spreading and increasing importance. Some researchers still stick to the assimilationist paradigm and emphasize the role of the specific—uniformization versus pluralist—central policies in the new groups' social, cultural, and political insertion. Other scholars insist more on diasporans’ own velleities, and point out that immigrants and their offspring tend today to be unwilling to abandon their identities while acquiring their new national tokens (Basch, Glick Schiller & Szanton Blanc, 1994; Glick Schiller & Fouron, 2003). The nation-state “container” view of society, it is contended, has definitely become outdated.

Some scholars associated with the postmodernist trend launch ideological attacks on the very assumption that diasporas, ethnicity, and race are topics of study in their own right. These notions distort democracy and reduce people to symbols. Identity is but a means of exploitation. Among the more positivist scholars of diasporas, a distinction should be drawn between those emphasizing the impact of contingencies on diasporans’ aspirations, and those focusing on cultural and identity aspects. In the first group, Covers and Vermeulen and their colleagues (1997) describe cases where diasporic identities are assumedly molded by economic interests and power relations. Tsing (2000) and Anthias (1998) deny, from this perspective, that our world has entered a new era. Diaspora communities, like many other groups, are simply instances of social mobilization (Anderson, 1991).

Other conceptualizations of diaspora underline shared identities as significant elements of their own (Cohen, 1997; Safran, 1991; Tölölyan, 1996). Whatever the importance of circumstances, they believe, there can be no diasporic community without a consciousness of diaspora—even though it does not presuppose consensual formulations among its individual members. This approach does not reject the mobilization dimension, nor the assumption of fluidity of collective boundaries, but it does reject the necessarily a priori