Diaspora Consciousness

Diaspora as a type of consciousness emerged in response to the essentialist discourse that had previously dominated earlier theorizations of the term as a social form and method of categorization (Cohen 2019: 27). Essentialism denies the idea that identity is constantly becoming and that identity construction is a discursive space and instead fixes identity within a set of grounded attributes. Stuart Hall refers to this idea as a “closed” ethnicity where ethnicity “depends very much upon an essential conception of group, tradition, or homeland” (Yon 1999: 89). Thus there is the notion of uniformity.

William Safran, in later musings on diaspora after his seminal 1991 article, made the distinction that “diasporic consciousness is an intellectualization of an existential condition.” Gijsbert Oonk expands that diaspora today must be understood as “a type of consciousness [that] emphasizes the variety of experiences, a state of mind, and a sense of identity.” Diaspora as a type of consciousness puts greater emphasis on describing the variety of experiences, states of mind, and senses of identity that comprise diasporic subjectivities (Oonk 2007: 11-12). Diaspora consciousness is a particular kind of awareness said to be generated among contemporary transnational communities (Clifford; Safran). Notions of what constituted ethnicity became more fluid, hybrid, and negotiated, and “diaspora” was a way of mapping how complexity and difference arouse as cultures traveled, interacted, and mutated (Brah 1996; Clifford 1992). It’s particularity is variously described as being marked by a dual or paradoxical nature, i.e. it is constituted negatively by experiences of discrimination and exclusion, and positively by identification with a historical heritage or with contemporary world cultural or political forces (Vertovec 1997). This is in line with Clifford’s suggestion that “diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension” (312).

Diasporic consciousness entails a state of mind or sense of identity- a sense of awareness of being and belonging both “here” – in the host country- and “there”- in the “home” country (Clifford 1994, Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk 2005:17-20, Vertovec 1997). In his analysis of the Black Atlantic, Paul Gilroy also describes this duality in consciousness- with direct allusion to W.E.B DuBois’s notion of “double consciousness”- with regard to diasporic individuals’ awareness of decentered attachments, of being simultaneously “home away from home: or “here and there.” Gilroy’s work emphatically shows how diasporas are not just the results of historical events, rather they are made and discovered through the reflective and creative practices of memory. A history of “diaspora” may be discovered after the fact, as Stuart Hall describes in his account of the creation of an Afro-Caribbean historical consciousness during the 1970s (1990: 231). Similarly, Clifford proposes that “the empowering paradox of diaspora is that dwelling here assumes a solidarity and connection there…[It is] the connection (elsewhere) that makes a difference (here)” (322).

Diasporic consciousness may also be invented and performed through interventions in the cultural field, including the use of invented traditions. If one can speak of a will to hybridity (Born and Hesmondhalgh 200:19), then the cases discussed by Feldman and Sarkissian suggest that in some places, a “will to diaspora” may also be emerging, in which older transnational connections are re-imagined as diasporas.

Focus on the formation and performances of diasporic consciousness. Here there may well be an abundance of metaphors in deployment, but they are the metaphors of the diasporic subjects themselves, not of the outside academic observer. In recent years, intellectuals and activists from within these populations have increasingly begun to use the term “diaspora” to describe themselves: we have witnessed the emergence, James Clifford notes, of “diasporic language [which] appears to be replacing, or at least supplementing, minority discourse” (311).

A diasporic consciousness ostensibly implies that there are ties within the diasporic community. This idea includes ‘a recognition of the unique community existing between members of the diasporan group” (Butler 2001: 208). In Jordan, the Circassians arrived in waves of immigration before the foundation of the nation-state and the formulation of a national narrative that propagated Jordanian identity as Arab, Muslim and Bedouin. They were included in the formation of the new state and integrated into its institutional structure. However, as time passed and a variety of new immigrants entered the diaspora space who didn’t necessarily know the history of their contributions to Jordan, some Circassians began engaging in a form of self-essentializing, or a strategic essentialism that has allowed Circassians group consciousness to bond under the notion that they have been othered. Calling oneself a Circassian can connote a tradition of Circassian music and dancing, colorful ethnic dress, and imply a degree of honesty and ethical behavior, but it also allows the group to mobilize politically and lobby to maintain their status in Jordan. However, what should be remembered are the differences within, not just the differences between. In that sense, individuals are seen not merely as objects of structures but as subjects who are producing and acting upon structures even as they are constrained by them (Yon 2000: 126). Individuals within a diasporic group do not need to subscribe to a particular set of attributes, other than the fact that they are part of a community with various roots and routes. Identity categories may be claimed in order to distinguish oneself as a member of a perceived group. As it is then, the notion of diaspora dispels such archaic ideas as notions of culture as a set of immutable attributes belonging to one group. The notion of diaspora allows for identities to be constructions. The concept of diaspora takes into account the memories of a homeland, imagined or real, and combines them with the knowledge of a new space. Again, a tension is created between “here” and “there,” “now” and “then,” “us” and “them.” “Cultural identities are the points of identifications, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture” (Hall 1990: 226). In the making of culture, there is a continuous splitting and splicing. Identity it always being produced and reproduced. If identity is a production, and is always in process, the very authenticity and authority of cultural identity should be questioned. Thinking about identity is important to think about in the sense of “becoming” or “being.” In this sense, there are “points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are,’ or rather, ‘what we have become” (Hall 1990:225). Cultural identity is constantly transforming and evolving. Identification for diasporans, especially members of the cultural institutions, becomes problematic at times. In the institutions, the differences within are not always acknowledged and essentialist forms of representation are reiterated. Discourses of culture and identity are continually seen to be represented by those who speak for “their people.” Members are compelled to fit into whatever idea of group attributes is dominant at the time. This does not allow for individual identities to bring what is culturally relevant to the discussion.