Definition: **diaspora** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Dispersal of the Jews, initially from Israel and Judah 586–538 BC after the Babylonian conquest (the Babylonian Captivity, or exile); and then the major diaspora following the Roman sacking of Jerusalem in AD 70 and their crushing of the Jewish revolt of 135. The term has come to refer to all the Jews living outside Israel.

‘Diaspora’ is sometimes applied to the enforced dispersal of other peoples; for example, that of the Armenians by the Turks between 1909 and 1915 and of black Africans as a result of the slave trade.

Summary Article: **Diaspora**

From *Encyclopedia of Identity*

Since the days of early human settlement, groups of people have moved from their homeland, sometimes seeking a better life and at other times forced by circumstances, such as violence, to flee the place they call home. The term *diaspora* generally refers to any group of people who have been dispersed or have migrated from their homeland. In ancient times, diaspora referred to colonization and, later, to forced exile. In the 20th century, as diasporic groups settled throughout the world and gained significant political, economic, social, and cultural influence, the term *diaspora* broadened to include many other types of migration and groups of people. An understanding of diaspora is essential for comprehending historical events and current forces, such as globalization, as well as the formation of ethnic, national, and transnational identities. This entry (a) provides an overview of the history and definitions of the term *diaspora*; (b) discusses models of diaspora, focusing on their general characteristics and categories; (c) describes issues that concern postmodern scholars who study diaspora; and (d) discusses relationships between diaspora, politics, and conflict.

**Definitions of Diaspora**

*Diaspora* derives from the Greek verb *diaspeirein*, which is composed of two parts: *dia* “about, across, over” and *speirein* “to scatter.” Like other words derived from the same root, including *spore*, *sperm*, and *spread*, diaspora conveys agricultural images of the dispersal and sowing of seeds and their natural reproductive process.

The ancient Greeks used the word *diaspora* to describe the colonization of Asia Minor and the Mediterranean during the Archaic period (800-500 BCE). The Greeks expanded their territories and created a diaspora through military conquest, colonization, and migration. Displacement of Greek-speaking peoples also occurred as a result of poverty, overpopulation, and interstate war. In antiquity, the Greek historian Thucydides used the term *diaspora* to describe the exile of the population of Aegina after its destruction. In this particular case, however, the rupture and scattering of the “parent” city did not produce an “offspring,” a new settlement that clearly traced its heritage back to its ancestor.

When capitalized, Diaspora refers specifically to Jewish communities and the historical events that led to their dispersion. The origins of the Jewish Diaspora are linked to the capture of Jerusalem and the
destruction of its First Temple in 586 BCE. At this time, a sizable number of the nobility and leading citizens were deported to Babylon. Their exile lasted until 538 BCE, when the Persian king Cyrus the Great permitted groups of Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. The completion of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 516 BCE marked the end of the prophesized 70 years of captivity. In an early Greek translation of the Torah (the Septuagint), the word Diaspora referred to the Babylonian exile, as well as to other instances in the Old Testament that describe the scattering of peoples.

Since the Babylonian exile, there have always been a large number of Jews living outside the boundaries of their ancient homeland. Around 250 BCE, the Greek-speaking world began using Diaspora to refer to the large, well-established Jewish communities in the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean regions, many of which were centers of culture and learning. With the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE and Judean defeat by the Romans, the Jews lost their homeland and religious center. The Jewish Diaspora became more widespread, with communities established in many areas of Asia and Europe. In modern times, Jews have migrated to the Americas, South Africa, and Australia. Today, the capitalized term Diaspora still refers to Jewish communities that exist outside Palestine or modern Israel.

The meanings and implications of diaspora changed dramatically during the 20th century. Until the late 1960s, the Jewish experience was considered the prototypical diaspora, with its characteristics of forced exile, suffering, and loss of homeland. Greek and Armenian dispersions were also cited as notable examples of classical diasporas. Since the late 1960s, diaspora has been used to designate many different groups of people, including ethnic and racial minorities, immigrants, alien residents, expatriates, overseas communities, sojourners, migrants, exile groups, and political refugees from various regions of the world. In addition to referring to groups of people, the term diaspora has also been used to refer to the dispersion of a language or culture or any object that is scattered from its origin or center.

Since 1990, there has been increasing academic interest in diaspora as an area of study. The scholarly journal Diaspora was established in 1991. The discipline of diaspora studies emerged as an important area of research about the same time as related studies on transnationalism, globalization, nationalism, and postcolonialism. Scholarly discussions about diaspora have addressed issues of identity, ethnicity, hybridity, community, migration, displacement, political movements, economic networks, gender, sexuality, and cultural politics. Scholars have theoretically approached diaspora either as a descriptive tool or as a process. They have developed different models of diaspora, which examine various characteristics and categories of diasporic communities.

Models of Diaspora

The concept of diaspora implies a relationship between different societies, cultures, and groups of people. The three social spheres include the dispersed group, the host societies or countries where the group resides, and the homelands (real or imagined) or nation-states to which the group has maintained a connection. This triadic relationship is a principal feature of diaspora.

William Safran and Robin Cohen developed models that list specific characteristics of diasporas. These models emphasize the relationship of the diasporic group to the homeland but also reflect the tension between home and abroad. Members of a diasporic community experience conflict between living “here” and being from “there.” Safran and Cohen both suggest that a cultural group should possess
several of the following characteristics in order to be considered as a diaspora:

1. The specific cultural group involved has migrated from a homeland to several different countries, rather than just one, as often happens in borderland cases. Cohen adds the idea that dispersal may often be caused by a traumatic event, the memory of which creates group cohesion.

2. The group has developed a collective memory and myth about the homeland. This idea of a shared origin and birthplace facilitates the grounding of a diasporic consciousness and its legitimacy. Ancient and revered myths help ethnic groups distance themselves from others and provide them with a sense of superiority.

3. The dispersed group idealizes the ancestral homeland, whether it is real or imagined, and wants to return there when conditions allow. The presence of a return movement assists the diasporic group in resolving differences that exist between its current situation and its idealized past.

4. The diasporic group has a commitment to the continuing support of the homeland, which may include maintaining or restoring a homeland to its former condition. Cohen further suggests that a diaspora may assist in the actual creation of a homeland.

5. The group has a continued relationship with the homeland that significantly defines its collective identity.

6. The diaspora has a troubled relationship with the host society. Many groups have experienced alienation, marginalization, discrimination, antagonism, or violence in their countries of settlement. Coping mechanisms include identification with fellow members of their diaspora in other countries and the possibility of return to the homeland.

In his model, Cohen includes four additional characteristics. First, he broadens the definition of diaspora by including groups of people who have left their homeland to search for work, who are part of trading or commercial networks, or who have migrated into foreign regions as imperial or colonial settlers. Second, he stresses the necessity of a strong ethnic group consciousness that must emerge and be sustained over a long period of time. A diaspora must retain its link to the homeland and its history, maintain a distinctive ethnic identity, and resist assimilation. Third, he emphasizes the relationship between co-ethnic communities, that is, those from the same homeland that are settled in different countries. A sense of empathy and solidarity among these various diasporic groups can transcend nation-state boundaries and significantly enhance the communal myth of belonging. Transnational relationships are held together by bonds of language, religion, culture, and a sense of a common destiny. At the same time, the relationship between scattered co-ethnic communities may be characterized by a great deal of tension. Fourth, Cohen addresses the quality of life in diaspora communities. He refers to the possibility of a diasporic group living peacefully within a tolerant society, one in which a collective identity is preserved and creativity is nurtured. Cohen argues that diasporic identity should be viewed in a positive way; the tension among the various identities (ethnic, national and transnational) can have creative and enriching outcomes.

In addition to specifying general characteristics that all diasporas share, Cohen divides diaspora groups into five main types and chooses one or more ethnic groups to represent each of these types. Cohen acknowledges that some groups belong to several categories; other groups change categories over time. He classifies the wide range of communities that have been dispersed for various reasons into victim, labor, trade, imperial, and cultural diasporas.

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/diaspora
Victim Diasporas

Jews, as well as Africans, Armenians, Irish, and Palestinians, among others, have been classified as “victim,” or refugee, diasporas. The Jewish experience has served as the foremost example of diaspora for more than 2,500 years, though it is more complex and diverse than is usually acknowledged. The victim category emphasizes a long and descriptive list of characteristics, including the following: a catastrophic event that precipitates the diaspora, forced movement, dispersion, exile, captivity, enslavement, collective trauma, oppression, persecution, displacement, homelessness, statelessness, powerlessness, alienation, isolation, insecurity, affliction, suffering, loss, incompleteness, loneliness, and sadness. Victim groups, in particular, sense a constant loss and longing for the lost homeland, one to which they are unable to return. As much as possible, they re-create the religious and communal structures of the homeland. Typically, victim groups were viewed as unwelcome minorities in their host communities and experienced the insecurity of diasporan political and economic life. The characteristics of victim diasporas are affirmed by the communities, as well as by outside observers.

Labor Diasporas

Cohen defines labor diasporas as those that occur when groups migrate overseas in search of work with the following qualifications: (a) retention of a strong cultural identity over an extended period, (b) maintenance of a strong homeland connection and origin myth, and (c) experiences of social exclusion in host countries. In contrast, migrants who move between their homes and workplaces are not considered a labor diaspora because they are not permanently dispersed. Differences in social class, during initial migration and over time, significantly impact the upward mobility of a diaspora. John Armstrong differentiates between the elite or “mobilized diaspora” with language, network, and occupational skills and the exploited or “proletarian diaspora,” largely unskilled labor with limited communication skills. Labor diasporas are transitional in nature; they may assimilate within a few generations as social mobility increases. Cohen cites the example of the Indian labor diaspora of the 19th century, when millions of indentured servants were recruited to work, primarily in agriculture. Other labor or service diasporas include the Chinese, Japanese, Sikhs, Turks, and Italians.

Trade Diasporas

Trade diasporas are networks of merchants who move, buy, and sell their goods over long distances. Trade diasporas existed in ancient times, with the Phoenicians and many other groups of people, and in 16th-century Venice, which controlled trade between Europe and Asia. More recent examples of this type of diaspora include Chinese traders in Southeast Asia and Lebanese merchants in West Africa and the Americas, as well as present-day Indian and Japanese business and professional workers. Trade diasporas may depend on the initiative of families or individuals, but they may also be supported by a government or state.

Imperial Diasporas

In an imperial diaspora, a colonial power establishes settlements for colonial or military purposes. The ancient Greeks were an early example of this type of diaspora. Many centuries later, European trade diasporas evolved into imperial diasporas. Colonists from Britain, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Germany, and France were dispersed to many parts of the world, where they occupied the land and subordinated the indigenous peoples. The British were particularly successful in founding overseas colonies; the British imperial diasporas in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa have long maintained a political and cultural connection with the homeland, though many factors have weakened
Cultural Diasporas

Cohen uses the term cultural diaspora to describe the features of many migration experiences in modern times. These postcolonial identities are characterized by fragmentation and hybridity. The peoples of the Caribbean form a cultural diaspora, one that is united by music, literature, art, religion, politics, and lifestyle, as well as migration. More recent examples of cultural diasporas include the Chinese and Indians.

Critiques of Models

Models can be a useful starting point for exploring the basic characteristics of diasporas, but there are limitations. For example, because Cohen's model emphasizes the idea of homeland and attributes that are more closely associated with the victim type, certain diasporic groups are likely to be overlooked. In addition, this model categorizes people into homogenous groups, without taking into account the many differences that exist among them. Some scholars have questioned the assumptions behind these types of models, including fixed ideas about nationality, identity, home, and exile. Rather than using descriptive models for categorizing diaspora, postmodern scholars approach diaspora as a process.

Postmodern Approaches

The fluidity, heterogeneity, hybridity, multiplicity, and mobility of diasporic identities and communities are of central concern for scholars who take a postmodern approach. Diasporas are heterogeneous social groups; that is, there are various segments within the same diaspora. These segments have different interests, defined by class, gender, sexuality, disability, generation, age, ethnicity, language, occupation, ideology, and religion. Complex, unequal, and constantly changing power relations within a diaspora affect the relationships the diaspora has with outside entities. Diasporas represent the postmodern condition, an existence that incorporates the dangers and rewards of living in and belonging to multiple places. Diasporic individuals must confront the paradoxes of multiple belonging, sometimes described as double perspective or double consciousness.

Hybridity is a fundamental characteristic of diasporic identities. Because the experience of diaspora takes place at multiple locations, cultural formations incorporate elements from the host society, homeland, and other diasporic sites. Cultural forms have become considerably more hybrid and globalized, especially among diasporic young people, who identify with more than one cultural heritage. Diasporas depend on cultural practices, such as music, dance, literature, visual arts, and film, for their very existence. Diasporic musicians, writers, and artists are important agents in documenting the history and traditions of their communities and in facilitating social change.

The phenomenon of diaspora has been profoundly affected by globalization, technological changes, and increased movement of people and ideas. These developments have made it easier for diasporas to build and sustain links with their homeland and co-ethnic communities, and these developments have increased their political influence. Yet, because diaspora communities transcend physical space and reach across international borders, they challenge the spatial and territorial assumptions of community and politics. James Clifford has approached diaspora by looking at what it is defined against: specifically, the nationstate and indigenous groups. Diasporas can be perceived as a threat to the nation-state, because political, economic, and social developments are taking place outside its
boundaries and the political expression of diasporic communities cannot easily be controlled by either the homeland or host countries. The multiple loyalties of diasporic communities (host country, homeland, and co-ethnic groups) work against the notion of allegiance to one nation-state. Diaspora offers an alternative identification to nation-state, but it interacts with the state in social, economic, legal, and political contexts.

**Diaspora and Politics**

Diasporas are significant international political forces. They have an influence on events that reach beyond one location, and they have access to international organizations, media, and host governments. Diasporas may exercise their political power by influencing events within their places of residence, such as elections, or outside of them, such as a foreign policy action.

The concept of diaspora has typically been studied in terms of its relations with hostland and homeland politics, but diasporas can also be approached as transnational political systems, with political practices that cross borders. In this view, a diaspora forms its own political system, which is supported by the political and organizational infrastructures of the homeland and host countries. As a transnational system, diasporic politics operates outside a fixed territorial space and connects various actors and political organizations and institutions in the homeland, hostland, diaspora, and transnational extensions of these entities.

**Diaspora and Conflict**

The relationship of diaspora and conflict is complex and multifaceted. A diaspora can affect a conflict in many spheres, including political, military, economic, social, and cultural. In each of these areas, a diaspora may wield influence—directly on the host societies or indirectly on the homeland. Different groups and individuals within the same diaspora may have various approaches, interests, and objectives within the same conflict. Individuals and organizations within the diaspora can play contradictory roles, some contributing to peace and others to conflict. Even when these segments have more unified objectives, the diaspora can play several roles in relation to a specific conflict: a positive role in peacemaking, a negative role as a contributor to continued conflict, or a neutral role. Diaspora involvement can be both positive and negative in the same conflict, because it may have different objectives at different stages of the conflict. Diasporas have differing capacities, opportunities, and motivations to intervene in conflicts. Some of the factors that determine a diaspora’s role in a conflict include its strength and level of political organization in the host country, its ability to exert political pressure in the home country, the issues of concern in the conflict, and the international attention given to the conflict. Homeland conflicts can have economic and social consequences for a diaspora and can affect its identity formation and treatment in the host country.

**See also**

Ethnicity, Globalization, Group Identity, Hybridity, Immigration, Modernity and Postmodernity, Nationalism, Transnationalism

**Further Readings**


https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/diaspora

Little, Bliss S. and Broome, Benjamin J.

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA


Copyright © 2010 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/diaspora
APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA