Diaspora

The notion of diaspora is not new; it was used in the classical period in relation to Jewish populations. The use of the term has proliferated and now applied to many, including, for example Armenians, Chinese, Greeks, Kurds, Tamils. Conceptually the term itself has gone through revisions and common features of diasporas have been discussed by, for example Cohen (1997), Tölölyan (1996) and Saffran (1991). Common features can include, but are not exclusive to, the dispersal from an original homeland, collective memory and myth about the homeland, and boundary-maintenance. Brubaker has resisted discussions of diaspora ‘in substantialist terms’ but rather sees it ‘as an idiom, a stance, a claim’ (2005:12).

Brah (1996) has brought our attention to the study of ‘diaspora space’, examining the political and cultural space where belonging ties and identities brought from home are crafted as well as challenged. This ethno-political/spatial turn in the study of diasporas makes the translation of socio-political identity (to the international community, to home, to their newer generations and to the host community) a central focus for the study of diasporas (Demir 2015). Such spaces and ties can be seen as ‘too limiting’, as an ‘extension of the nation-state model’ (Soysal 2000:3). However, as Werbner (2005) has highlighted, diasporas can be ethnic-parochial but also cosmopolitan; they can highlight contingency, hybridity and indeterminacy against essentialist conceptualisations of nation, race and culture (Gilroy 1993). The latter perceives diasporas as dynamic and evolving instead of a static and atavistic entity, not just in terms of the identity connections they maintain with the home and the host, but also in their development over time (e.g. how ‘Turkish economic migrants’ over time became ‘Kurdish diaspora’ in London (Demir forthcoming 2016).
Essential Readings:

Further Readings:

Questions:
How has the concept of diaspora been developed and how has it evolved?
What are the significant differences between being a migrant and being a member of a diasporic community?
In what ways can we distinguish what is diasporic from the transnational?
How do diasporas take part in, and connect to, global social movements, alternative rebellions, battles, solidarities, new global politics, and cosmopolitan worldviews?
How do diasporas sustain belonging ties and make sense of dispersion (e.g. roots, rootedness, routes, homeland)?
How does the social and political context of the host countries affect diasporic experiences and the connections diasporas make with the new home (e.g. openness and acceptance vs xenophobia)?

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