The concept of ‘diaspora’
and the ‘transnational social space’
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‘In linguistics, as any other discipline, there are two basic devices for avoiding the obligation and trouble of thinking in responsible, theoretical and, consequently, philosophical terms. The first way is to accept all theoretical views wholesale (academic eclectism), and the second is not to accept a single point of view of a theoretical nature and to proclaim ‘fact’ as the ultimate basis and criterion for any kind of knowledge (academic positivism).

The philosophical effect of both these devices for avoiding philosophy amounts to one and the same thing, since in the second case, too, all possible theoretical points of view can and do creep into investigation under the cover ‘fact’. Which of these devices an investigator will chose depends entirely upon his temperament: the eclectic tends more to the blithe side; the positivist, to the surreptitious.’ (Voloshinov [Bakhtin] 1973)

Defining diaspora has been the recurring aim of a large number of scholars from social sciences as diverse as anthropology, sociology, political science or international relations. Different types of definitions have emerged, but none of them has succeeded in generating unanimous consent. In this paper, I review the different attempts at defining the term as an operating concept of social sciences. I argue however that all definitional attempts are doomed to fail, primarily because ‘diaspora’ is a politically heavily charged term. Independently of scientific definitions, social actors use the language of diaspora in different contexts, with different aims and results and therefore constantly redefining, in practice, the groups and practices that are labeled as diaspora. Instead of defining the term a priori, I therefore propose to start from the social actors’ practices and to look at when, why and what for is the language of diaspora used. The inability to use ‘diaspora’ as a sociological concept calls in return for the definition of alternate concepts to define groups in dispersion. I first analyze the question of the definition, then move to the effects and social currency of the diasporic discourse; finally I propose alternate concepts of transnational fields and transnational social space in order to analyze diasporic discourses and practices.
1. Defining diaspora.

‘Diaspora’ is a word whose use is relatively recent in the social sciences. It has always followed, in its journey through texts and practices, the political projects of a determinate number of social groups more than the scholarly interest for a specific ‘social form’. Historian of religions Martin Baumann first locates the word diaspora in the third century B.C. under the feather of Alexander the Great’s Judeo-Hellenic translators, as a technical term to indicate the dispersed condition of the Jewish people (Baumann 2001). The first occurrences of the word ‘diaspora’ used as a designation of a non-Judaic people appear in the United States in the early 1950s. In the discipline of political science, the 1976 article of John Armstrong is the first to propose a definition of the term that goes beyond the Jewish acceptance (Armstrong 1976). The use of the term is generalized around the 1970s, and becomes a real buzz word in the 1990s. In political science, as well as in the fields of sociology and anthropology, the term ‘diaspora’ becomes very popular among ‘transnationalists’: it is in fact a term that corresponds perfectly to the scholars’ new theoretical concerns. A higher level of institutionalization is reached when Kchachig Töloöyan founds a central journal of the subfield in 1991, Diaspora, a journal of transnational studies. I first examine what have come to be accepted definitions of diaspora in the literature, then explicit the problems they pose.

a. Classical definitions of diaspora.

Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen, assessing in their 1999 book the body of literature that emerged on the topic of diasporas, distinguish a several uses of the term. I will here discuss two of them: diaspora as a social form and diaspora as consciousness, (Vertovec and Cohen 1999)¹.

Diaspora as a social form

A certain number of authors have intended to fix the analytical boundaries of the term, in order to make it a discriminating and operating concept of social science. William Safran (1991), Gabriel Scheffer (1986) and Robin Cohen (1997), the central authors in the subfield of diaspora studies have largely contributed to diffuse this understanding of the term. Preoccupied by the increasing use of the notion in the literature, their intention is double: on the one hand to propose a definition that goes beyond – even if it uses it as a model – the Jewish dispersion, on the other hand to distinguish diasporas as social groups that present original characteristics. Drawing from a large empirical and historical literature, they outline a certain number of criteria which mark the specificity of these social formations. Robin Cohen, building on the works of Safran, lists nine defining features of diasporas.

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¹ The two other terms are diaspora as a mode of cultural production, and diaspora as political orientation. ‘Diaspora as mode of cultural production’ is an intermediary category that is conflatable, according to Cohen, to the second one, ‘diaspora as consciousness’ Robin Cohen, "Changing meanings and Limits of the concept" (paper presented at the Conference: La notion de diaspora: Approche théorique à partir de divers expériences diasporiques, Poitiers, France, 15-16 mai 2003), 6.. Diaspora as political orientation is discussed further on.
Table 1. Defining features of diasporas according to Robin Cohen (1997:29).

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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dispersal from an original home land, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions;</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>alternatively. The expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions;</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>a collective memory and myth about the home land, including its location, history and achievements;</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>an idealization of the putative ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation;</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>the development of a return movement that gains collective approbation;</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and the belief in a common fate;</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>a troubled relationship with host societies, suggesting a lack of acceptance at least or the possibility that another calamity might befall the group;</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement; and</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism</td>
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This definition could be qualified, with Stéphane Dufoix, as ‘positivist’. Among the many problems linked to it, the most important one is that it presupposes a social reality that exists and corresponds precisely to the term, as well as an objective scientific language that is not affected by social and political processes. In fact, the definition only comes after the social actors have played out and used the term in their social and political practices. What if a social actor, through the language of diaspora, intends to designate a community that does not fit Safran’s or Cohen’s definition, complying to all but one or two criteria? Is it to the scholar to academically deny the claim that is being formulated in the social realm? Can there be a distinction between ‘true’ and ‘fake’ diasporas, as Dufoix points out? (Dufoix 2003).

Diaspora as consciousness

Stuart Hall (1990), James Clifford (1994) and Paul Gilroy (1994) bring a substantively different light on the notion. For these authors, it is not question of building a sociological object, but rather of seizing processes. Processes of identification, of hybridization, of interactions with historical and geographical contexts, symbolic struggles and ‘strategies of preservation of the community’. ‘Thus the term diaspora is a signifier, not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement’ (Clifford 1994:138). The very definition of the term diaspora is therefore at the center of these interactions, in a logic of differentiation by the social actors of what is a real diaspora and who belongs to it. The scholars who try to define a typology should therefore be considered, as Tölölyan underlines it, only as a voice among others in this game of definitions, in a given historical, intellectual and political context.

\(^2\) ‘However the ranks of the politically find institutionally engaged usually do not include some of the most important ethnodiasporic figures – the loosely connected scholars and intellectuals who produce a
Ragazzi: The concept of ‘diaspora’ and the ‘transnational social space’

Although approaching the definition of diaspora in terms of ‘signifier’ (Clifford), ‘Changing same’ and ‘double consciousness’ (Gilroy) debunks the inherent essentialist danger of defining diaspora as ‘social form’ there is an other risk in following this line of thought without precaution. It is to confuse the rightly emphasized game of definitions and appropriation at the discursive level with social processes and practices. What is in fact absent of these conceptualisations is the necessary attention for ‘who’ practically embodies discourses of diaspora, ‘why’ and ‘in which contexts’. Consider for example this affirmation by Clifford: ‘Peoples whose sense of identity is centrally defined by collective histories of displacement and violent loss cannot be ‘cured’ by merging into a new national community. This is especially true when they are the victims of ongoing, structural prejudice. Positive articulations of diaspora identity reach outside the normative territory and temporality (myth/history) of the nation-state’ (Clifford 1994:307). After having deconstructed a priori definitions of diaspora, it seems quite surprising to formulate a priori statements about social and political behavior without considering historical social practices in which the language of diaspora is mobilized.

b. Diaspora as a category of practice.

A satisfying approach to ‘diaspora’ must therefore be able to avoid the essentializing bias of the positivist definition and acknowledge the attention for discourse of the culturalist approach, but it should also provide a satisfying understanding of the social dynamics at stake. In this context, I propose, following Stéphane Dufoix (2002) and Rogers Brubaker, to start from the practices of the social actors, and to examine ‘diaspora’ not as a category of analysis (not as a concept), but as a category of practice.

Rogers Brubaker argues that the problem of the various theories of nationalism, not only the ‘primordialist’, but also the ‘modernist’ and ‘constructivist’ is that they mistake categories of practice as categories of analysis: ‘[they] take a conception inherent in the practice of nationalism and in the workings of the modern nation-state system – namely the realist, reifying conceptions if nations as real communities – and it makes this conception central to the theory of nationalism. Reification is a social process, not an intellectual practice.’ (Brubaker 1996:15). He therefore moves on to propose new research questions: ‘We should not ask what is a nation but rather: how is nationhood as a political and cultural form institutionalized within and among states? How does nation work as a practical category, as classificatory scheme, as cognitive frame’(Brubaker 1996:15). In a very recent article, he formulates a similar proposition for the notion of diasporist discourse, and above all writers, musicians and other artists who produce high and low cultural commodities that underpin diasporic identity (from music to TV programs, from novels to calendars and religious objects) Kchachig Tölölyan, “Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power In the Transnational Moment”, Diaspora, n°. 1 vol. 5, 1996.

3 ‘A full explanation of why such conceptions of diaspora – broader, more accommodating, more ‘empowering’ – have proliferated requires an exploration of the transformation of universities, the emergence of literary and cultural theory, the elaboration of theories of pluralism and multiculturalism, the change in American, Canadian and Australian immigration laws around 1965 et cetera.’, Ibid., p. 16.

diaspora (Brubaker 2005). Framing the question in terms of category of practice forces us to dwell into the way categories work.

What exactly are categories, and how do they operate? According to philosopher of language John Searle, categories are the building blocks of our social reality. It is through categorisations formulated in language that we are able to distinguish different units from the brute reality that surrounds us: a tree from the forest, a mountain from a hill. But categorisation does not only operate as a form of identification. Categorisation also means the attribution of a particular function to what is defined. (Searle 1995:42). The act of naming, or categorizing, is only possible through language, it therefore falls under what Searle, drawing on John Austin, defines as speech acts. As for certain acts such as lying, or promising, naming can in fact only be done through a certain type of utterance. (Austin 1971).

Stéphane Dufoix has, the first, proposed to theorize the notion of diaspora as a performative utterance, drawing on the re-appropriation of the speech act theory by Pierre Bourdieu (Dufoix 2002). Following Searle’s reading of Austin, Pierre Bourdieu introduces the importance of social relations of power in understanding the conditions of possibility for successful speech acts – therefore successful categorizations – to occur (Bourdieu and Thompson 1991). Bourdieu recognizes the performativity of language as the central feature in creating the social reality through categorizations. For him, however, the felicity of speech acts does not depend so much on the respect of the linguistic rules, as it can be found in Austin or in Searle, but in the relations of power, and namely the position of authority of he who utters the performative. In Bourdieu’s words, ‘the symbolic power, the power to constitute the given by uttering it, to act on the world by acting on the representation of the world does not reside in the ‘symbolic systems’ under the form of an ‘illocutionary force’. It accomplishes itself in and through a defined relation which created the legitimacy of the words and the persons who utter then, and it operates only inasmuch as those who are subject recognize those who exert it’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992a:123). When it comes to identity politics, the particularity of the performative utterance is to draw the lines between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of a group conceived as a social category.

To assume that ‘diaspora’ is a speech act therefore implies to focus on the field’s inclusion and exclusion discourses and practices linked to the performative nature of the utterance. But it also implies to focus on what are the functions attributed to the category, and what do these categorizations do. Thinking of ‘diaspora’ as a signifier therefore means thinking of a performative utterance crystallizing a certain number identification (individual) and mobilization (collective) processes, related more or less vaguely to ideas of distance, ethnicity and religion, vis-à-vis a a real or imagined territory, and being though in terms of one or more particular social or political function(s).

As we are talking about a political act, a political process, it is therefore more appropriate to speak in terms of ‘diasporisation’: it is in fact question of giving a certain number of characteristics to phenomena and to change the nature of the representations and practices related to this phenomenon, by calling them ‘diaspora’. ‘Diaspora’ relates

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to different images; so these processes should be thought in accordance to all the connotations, the values and the norms associated with the idea of ‘diaspora’. This definition complexifies, but is consistent with Gilroy’s changing same and Clifford’s signifier. All these different words are different accounts of the ‘diasporic experience’ in a given context, at a given time. But the question is then the following: What does the use of the word diaspora (symbolically and practically) do? What are the symbolic and practical consequences at stake? I put outline three main effects of the diasporic discourse.

**c. Three effects of the diasporic discourse.**

Following what has been stated above, it can be said that ‘diaspora’ is the object of a permanent redefinition in given historical times and territories. It is permanently defined from both inside and outside as the result of processes of inclusion and exclusion. Consequently, Percy Hintzen’s analysis (Hintzen 2003), that sees the diaspora primarily as a phenomenon related to modernity and the Nation-state, those of Riva Kastoryano (2003) that on the contrary consider the diaspora as a pre-modern phenomenon, the studies which insist on the local scale of the diasporic activity and the ones that privilege their transnational character, the studies that insist on the diasporas’ bellicose tendencies (Anderson 1998), dangerous for the national interest (Huntington 1997, 2005, T. Smith 2000) and those which, on the contrary, insist on their capacity of democratization and benevolent influence on the American Foreign Policy (Shain 1999), all these approaches can be somehow reconciled. All these points of view are at the same time valid and erroneous: their principal pitfall is to regard ‘diaspora’ as a homogeneous group, a social form.

In a nutshell, the overall idea could be formulated in these words: There is no such natural thing as ‘diaspora’, there is not a ‘diaspora’, ‘diaspora’ is nor does not do anything. ‘Diaspora’ is an identity and political program that produces ‘effects of truth’. The agents to be observed are therefore the institutions, the entrepreneurs, the producers of authorized discourses. The speech act ‘diaspora’ essentially produces three effects of truth. I derive this analysis from the ‘three illusions’ of essentialist definitions of diaspora pointed out by Stéphane Dufoix (1999).

**The illusion of a homogeneous community**

1. The first assumption that can be formulated is the illusion produced by the word ‘diaspora’, the illusion of an institution act. ‘Become what you are. This is the formula that underlies the performative magic of all the institution acts’ (Bourdieu 1982:127). Following Paul Gilroy, it can be said that the strength of the word diaspora is to categorize, i.e. in the meaning of kategoresthai: to publicly notify to somebody what he is and what he should be (Bourdieu 1982:127). Consequently, ‘diaspora’ is a strong identification tool by which identity processes are created and/or recreated. This gives rise, for those who consider themselves, or are considered as members of the ‘diaspora’ the illusion of a homogeneous community.

Accordingly, the definition of diasporas given by Yossi Shain at the beginning of his book fits this logic. Diasporas are defined as ‘a people with common national origin who reside outside a claimed or independent home territory. They regard themselves or are regarded by others as members or potential members of their country of origin (claimed
or already existing), a status held regardless of their geographical location and citizen status outside their home country’ (Shain 1999:8). ‘Diaspora’ obliterates its heterogeneous composition of political refugees, senior executives, third generation farm laborers, members of opposition political parties: it does not matter if the refugees arrived two weeks ago or if they are Americans ‘of Croatian background’. ‘It is truly a question of ventures aimed at creating a common ‘authorized’ history [...] favorable to the expression of a common dimension of the origins’ (Ma Mung 1999:92). By a ‘social magical act’, the word diaspora symbolically obliterates every geographical, professional or social solidarity, to reveal one and only one community: The ‘diaspora’.

A ‘natural’ bond with the land

2. The second effect of truth of the word ‘diaspora’, and it is undoubtedly the most specific characteristic of this type of mobilization, is that it gives rise, in the symbolic imaginary system, to a territory from where the whole community originates, and with whom the ‘imagined community’ has a special, historical, natural relationship. The ‘diaspora’ is therefore naturally in contact with ‘the homeland’.

A legitimate interlocutor

3. Consequently, once an institution (group, club, party, church), achieved to convince of the illusion of the existence of the diaspora, it can assert itself as a legitimate interlocutor. A legitimate interlocutor regarding hostland authorities, homeland authorities, and its own mobilized members. Why? Because it represents ‘all the Armenians of the United States’ for example. For the Hostland government, it draws its legitimacy from the fictitious bond that the word diaspora gives it with its land; for the homeland government, the ‘diaspora’ draws its legitimacy from the fictitious bond which unites a homogeneous community; finally, vis-à-vis the mobilized members, it is a combination of both, that sums up with the double legitimacy which it already has towards the two mentioned authorities. Saying ‘diaspora’ politically, for a community, means specifically to claim the right to belong to a remote national community, and to claim all the consequent rights. Our assumption is thus the following: A third effect of truth of the word ‘diaspora’ is to invest its authorized speakers of a specific legitimacy, with respect to the homeland, the hostland and the potential members of the ‘community’, enabling them to mobilize according to certain specific guidelines, certain specific repertoires of collective action and institutionalization.

As a conclusion to this section, I therefore (temporarily) define the process of diasporisation as the political act of creation of a homogeneous group whose identity and loyalty is considered to be naturally (biologically, culturally, historically) linked to a

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6 It can be noticed in this respect that only a reflexive sociology makes it possible to seize the constructed nature of the phenomenon. The ideas of identifications and changing sames are in fact only analysis seized by the sociologist. Paradoxically, the performative utterance, the ‘speech act’ uttered by the social actors, on the contrary, finds its legitimacy and its strength from the fact that it invents an essentialized ‘community’. The homeland is the ‘land of the ancestors’ and the ‘community’ is understood as real and homogeneous (whereas it is imagined and heterogeneous, in particular by the effects of generation, which are to be taken into account in the definition of identity). This is exemplified in the founding paradox of the state of Israel: a changing same (the diaspora) that legitimizes its territorialization by putting forward the image of an immutable, historical, natural bond with the land of Eretz Israel.
distant homeland, in order to legitimate a discourse of transnational politics and the use of a particular repertoire of transnational collective action.

2. Defining what a diaspora does.

The attention for diasporisation processes requires a methodological displacement from the analysis of diaspora as an a priori category to the analysis of the social practices through which diasporas are constituted by various enunciators in positions of authority. Diaspora is here understood as a performative utterance, a word that produces particular ‘effects of truth’. But in order for the diasporisation speech act to be effective, it needs to be understood by a specific audience, it needs to meet ideas, conceptions, images about ‘diaspora’ that are somehow already existing and taken for granted. ‘Diaspora’ has to be already an idea that is understood, that is associated with a particular history, a set of political struggles, of organizations, more generally, it has to deal with a particular form of de-territorialized political action that is already considered as legitimate. Several authors, including Dominique Schnapper (2001), Kchachig Tölölyan (1996) and Richard Marienstras (1985) have pointed to the fact that the discourse of diaspora is increasingly understood as a legitimate – and even desirable form of individual identification and collective mobilization. Two concepts are central here: Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of repertoire of enunciation, and Charles Tilly’s concept of repertoire of contention are crucial to understand the way in which the speech act functions. In this section, I therefore explicit these two concepts, before discussing the different positions of enunciation of the diasporic discourse.

a. Defining repertoires of enunciation.

In her 2001 article, Dominique Schnapper noted that ‘it is not by chance that Palestinians think of their historical destiny in these terms and fight politically to impose the term. The celebration of the efficiency and the value of diasporas has imposed itself as a successful theme’(Schnapper 2001:29). The motivations for a political actor to use one particular form of rhetoric over another lie in its anticipated capacity to ‘touch’ an audience, and to provoke a particular effect. In this sense, saying ‘diaspora’ means to mobilize a whole repertoire of meaning that is associated with this word. The work of Bakhtin allow us to formulate three important points to theoretically apprehend this question.

First, political actors do not ‘invent’ the discursive devices they will use in order to advance their claims. Rather, they choose within a choice of possible repertoires, and most probably they choose the one they believe provides them with the highest degree of ‘resonance’. It is in this sense that Bakhtin argues that ‘it is not experience that organizes expression, but the other way around – expression organizes experience. Expression is what first gives experience its form and specificity of direction.’ (Voloshinov [Bakhtin] 1973:85). Thus, assertions (or speech acts) exist only as a response to a previous assertion. It is in this sense that ideological formations can only be understood as

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dialogical – in dialogue with a pre-existing discourse. (Voloshinov [Bakhtin] 1973:103). Finally, it is to be noted that the choice of a particular language implies that the actor is constrained by the inner logic of the discourse: expression forms experience in the sense that when defined as ‘diaspora’, a group is expected to behave like one. Categorization is prescription.

Second point, these discourses to not ‘float freely’ in society: They are made available through the social and political history of one or more groups, and they are determined by the material conditions of possibility in which they emerge (Voloshinov [Bakhtin] 1973:21). This posits, as we have seen through Bourdieu’s conceptualization of speech acts, that discourse is always socially situated what is to be analysed is not so much the history of a word but the history of its social uses. Diaspora, as a repertoire of enunciation is therefore inevitably charged by the history of the different groups that have used it before.

It is however important to emphasize a third point. If it is important to posit discourses as socially embedded, one should not fall into the risk of structural reductionism. There is a certain autonomy of the sign, and the discourse of diaspora, as any other discourse, is by definition the locale of symbolic struggles between different social actors, be it to define the ins and outs of the diaspora or the goals of the ‘diaspora’. And it is precisely this struggle that will form an important part of our analysis. In his marxist terminology, Bakhtin anticipated Gramsci in stating that ‘various different classes will use one and the same language. As a result, differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign becomes the arena of the class struggle’ (Voloshinov [Bakhtin] 1973:23). This leads us therefore to analyse a second form of sedimented ‘blueprints’, this time not at the level of discourse, but at the level of practice; through Tilly’s concept of repertoires of contention.

b. Defining repertoires of contention.

As we have seen, the strength of the diaspora repertoire is to be found not in the history of the word itself (as Austin would search for the illocutionary force of a performative), but in the set of individual and collective processes of identification and mobilization that have shaped and that have been shaped by the use of the word. It is true that the connotations of the word have changed, but what is more important is that the guidelines, the routines for action have changed too. In this sense, the use, by an actor, of a particular form of diasporic political discourse means also the importation of a particular repertoire of action: the category that is used determines the modalities of action that are expected.

For Tilly, the notion of repertoire of contention ‘helps describe what happens (in the ways that people act together in pursuit of shared interests) by identifying a limited set of routines that are learned, shared, and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice’ (Tilly 1995:41-42). An example will illustrate the way in which diaspora has become a traveling repertoire of action: the political conception of diasporic ‘return’. The Rastafarian movement and the Garveyist movement were fascinated with the Jewish experience of Zionism: they identified to the Jewish condition as a people without a land, victim of slavery like the Jews in Egypt, scattered throughout the world, condemned to live under the political domination of other nations. And as they identified with the Jewish condition, they identified with a particular kind of the Zionist political movement.
of diasporic consciousness and return to the homeland. In this sense, the description of the Black ‘community’ as a group sharing the Jewish fate, enabled the leaders to prescribe the mobilization of a similar repertoire of collective action to the Zionist repertoire: political activism, return etc. As specialist of Marcus Garvey Robert Hill put it, ‘the redemption of Africa, which Garvey took to mean that Africa must be for the Africans, and them exclusively, was thus on a par, ideologically, with the Zionist goal of restoring Palestine for the Jews’ (Sundiata 2003:26) or Marcus Garvey himself: ‘Thanks to Zionism, a very recent growth considering the age of the Jew, they can betake themselves to a national home in Palestine...this is a good object lesson for the Negro’(Sundiata 2003:26). We find similar references in the words of pan-Africanist George Padmore: ‘Afro-Americans can’t organize no nations because the man ain’t gonna let them. But they got people and knowhow to give to Africa, and a strong Africa’s gonna let them. Study Israel and the Jews scattered all over the world’(Gaines 2006:45).

My question in this dissertation is therefore not: ‘What is the history of the word?’ or ‘What is a real diaspora?’ But: what do people mean when they say ‘we are a diaspora’, and what are the political consequences of this act? What does the constitution of the diasporic discourse write as a history of action, as an understanding of shared temporality (both in the sense of a ritual time and a approach towards one past and one future) rather than a shared territory: How does the discourse of identity: ‘who are we?’ shaped the discourse of action: ‘what can or should we do?’

c. Institutionalized discourses of diaspora.

We can of course see the presence of competing discourses of legitimate action regarding what is called the ‘diasporic condition’, but it can be stated that there is a passage from a dominant discourse on the ‘pathological condition’ (linked to the dominance of the nation state model) of diaspora, typical of the late XIXth century – leading to repertoires of return and nation-building – to the idea that the ‘diasporic condition’ is embedded in our mobile modernity, and as such, constitutes a state of affairs that has or can be used as resource (repertoire of political structuring and/or control of dispersion) (Marienstras 1985, Schnapper 2001). These repertoires however do not replace one another, they are fluid and segmented, and they can be contradictory.

This current dominant set of discourses on the diasporic condition therefore implies a new reading of the former dispersions and a look at the historical dispersions as a raw model for its actual organization, structuration and functioning. If we are, too, a diaspora, we should behave like one. And how a diaspora behaves depends on the repertoires of action of particular times and places. Diaspora is a differentiated encapsulating notion of repertoires of action, able to give a ready answer to every kind of political situation. And here comes the centrality of the Jewish model as a category of practice, at different levels, that correspond to many representations: in its ability to preserve a collective identity in dispersion, in its special relation to the state of Israel, in its ability to influence American politics and so on. It is in this sense, the current use of ‘diaspora’ has to be understood as a metaphorical denomination relating to a particular History.

But what is exactly this repertoire? Which sort of assumptions do actors draw on when they utilize the discourse of diaspora? In the search for a corpus of commonly and publicly shared assumptions about what a diaspora is and what a diaspora does, the model proposed by the ‘positivist’ scholars becomes at once useful. Not so much as a
category of analysis, as a conceptual tool, but rather as a well-documented list of common sense assumptions about the definitions and activities of diasporas. In this sense, what is captured in a very systematic manner by Cohen is the current social value of the discourse of diaspora. From the assumptions about what are the criteria for the definition of a diaspora, we can derive the main lines of discourse regarding the function of diaspora as a performative. This could be summarized in the following table:

Table 2. Robin Cohen reversed: *Global Diasporas* as a prescriptive discourse.

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<tr>
<th>WHAT A DIASPORA IS ACCORDING TO COHEN (1997:25)</th>
<th>IMPLIES: A « REAL » DIASPORA…</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Dispersal from an original home land, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions</td>
<td>3. …should maintain its memory and myth about the homeland, including location, history and achievements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Alternatively. The expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions</td>
<td>4. …should be collectively (politically) committed to the homeland (state) maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even creation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. A collective memory and myth about the home land, including its location, history and achievements</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. An idealization of the putative ancestral home (state) and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The development of a return movement that gains collective approbation;</td>
<td>5. …should return to the homeland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. A strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and the belief in a common fate</td>
<td>6. …should maintain a strong ethnic group consciousness over a long time and develop a sense of distinctiveness, (look for) a common history, and a common fate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. A sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement</td>
<td>7. …should have a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism</td>
<td>8. …should have a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerant form of pluralism.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By reversing the use of the criteria, we can here find both the ‘effects’ of the diasporic speech act outlined in I.1.c., and the commonly assumed ideas about the behaviour and obligations of a group when it defines itself, or is defined as a diaspora, namely the prescribing effects of the categorization: The maintenance of a collective transnational identity (3 and 6), the commitment to the homeland and to the community’s unity (4 and 6), possibly the return to the homeland (5) etc. Once we have defined diaspora not as a social concept but as a political discourse that produces particular ‘effects of truth’, the task is now to define who are the diasporic actors’, and which are the sociological concepts to seize their practices.
3. Locating diasporic actors, defining transnational fields and social space.

If the problem of diaspora is addressed in terms, then what is at stake is the structuration of both identification and mobilization – representations and practices – that take place under the name of ‘diaspora’. The questions which rise are then the following ones: who says ‘diaspora’? Who is in competition for the monopoly of the definition? Another question concerns the formulation of conceptual tools: if ‘diasporas’ are not the agents, where is agency to be found? Who are the enunciators of the diasporic discourse, the actors of the diasporic practice? In this section I first outline four ‘poles’ of enunciation of the diasporic discourse, four kinds of actors that structure the discursive field of diaspora. This in return calls for the specification of the sociological tools that are used in order to conceptualize social formations in dispersion, i.e. the social space in which the actors formulate discourses and practices of diaspora. For this, in the second section of this part I review the most accepted conceptualizations of the transnational and point out to a certain number of problems they pose. I then propose in a third part the use of ‘transnational fields’ and ‘transnational social spaces’ as less problematic alternatives.

a. Defining diasporic actors.

It can be stated that first actors to use the word, the original coiners ‘diaspora’ (as a translation of ‘galut’) are the Judeo-Hellenic translators mentioned by Martin Baumann (2001). Successively, the notables, the literates, the writers and the Jewish philosophers in exile gave the term its reality, by the history they wrote. Similarly, the coiners of the ‘African diaspora’ were born at the beginning of the XXth century, when ‘the African diaspora’ is mentioned for the first time. In a certain way, Robin Cohen and William Safran currently have the same function as the Judeo-Hellenic translators for a certain number of other populations who, in the name of the criteria established by these authors, also claim their right to be recognized as a ‘diaspora’. In an increasing fashion, governments too, become candidates for the definition and the delimitation of what is or what is not a diaspora, putting into gear all the administrative and bureaucratic force which can be deployed for the delimitation of the inside and of the outside. The denomination of diaspora can therefore come from ‘the outside’ of the ‘diaspora’ but, obviously, from ‘the inside’, too: the Judeo-Hellenic translators were Jewish, the ‘African diaspora’ thinkers though of themselves as part of it for their majority and, as it has been underlined in the first pages of this paper, the authors who take interest in diasporas are for their great majority related to a diaspora. ‘Diaspora’ can therefore be uttered by several actors. Obviously, all the actors do not have the same positions of authority in the same fields and all the actors cannot claim to produce an authorized discourse. Nevertheless four significant poles of speakers can be outlined.

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9 A question raised by several scholars about the diaspora, in particular by Kirshenblatt-Gimbett: ‘That said, can (or should) the discursive field of “diaspora” that Clifford maps out so insightfully remain exempt from the risk of practicing the discourse that is being analyzed?’ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimbett, "Spaces of Dispersal", *Cultural Anthropology*, n°. 3 vol. 9, 1994, p. 340.
Ragazzi: The concept of ‘diaspora’ and the ‘transnational social space’

1. The group itself

‘Diaspora’ can be ‘said’ by the group, the ‘community’. Here again, it is necessary to be careful not to ‘essentialize’ the group: it is dangerous to speak about ‘communities’. If we look at what occurs in the uses of diaspora, we realize that the agency is found in the institutions that structure the groups. The institutions are the conveyors of group identity as much as this identity defines them. The institutions express the claims of the group as much as they are themselves the expression of these claims. It is thus necessary, when focusing on a ‘diaspora’, to concentrate on the various associations, churches, newspapers or any other actor in competition for the symbolic and practical definitional monopoly.

2. The hostland

In the ‘host country’, ‘diaspora’ can be the result of an administrative or governmental labeling at the scale of a city, a region or a country. But it can be used in a more diffuse way by the institutions of the dominant social groups to designate a population that is not integrated (or not intended to be) in the local/regional/national identity. (For example the ‘diaspora’ of the Jewish ghettos, Chinatowns or West Indians of California).

3. The homeland

No discourse, nor practice, can originate from mythical homelands. However, discourses and practices can originate from the governments that control the land or continent referred to by the myth in a precise historical moment. For example the State of Israel, lead by the government of Ariel Sharon in 2003 can take the place of the ‘promised land’. From these governments, a determinate type of discourse can emerge (for example, when Ariel Sharon states that he conceives his mandate not only as the unification of Israel but also that of the ‘Jews in the world’ (Shain 2001:77), or when the Irish President entitles one of her speeches ‘Cherishing the Irish diaspora’ and likewise a set of practices, for example by facilitating the return and the obtaining of citizenship, or by integrating the ‘diaspora’ in the national community at the political level. The ultimate form of integration in the political life of the ‘homeland’ being obviously the election of members of the diaspora at the Parliament itself (as it is the case in Croatia).

4. The Scholars

It seems finally necessary to include, in a reflexive dimension, part of the academic field in the diasporic discursive arena of. Researchers nourish and take part in the symbolic struggles for the term’s definition, establishing a priori criteria and distinctive typologies, which are then reintroduced in the social actors’ language, charged of an academic legitimate weight. As Dominique Schnapper notes: ‘[...] we should also be aware of the fact that the academics (savants au sens du ‘savant’ et du ‘politique’ de Max Weber) do not escape better than others ambient values. Are we capable of evaluating the positive or negative meaning of the term and to use it in a neutral manner in order to

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10 ‘Even then I was acutely aware of how broad that term the people of Ireland is and how it resisted any fixed or narrow definition. One of my purposes here today is to suggest that, far from seeking to categorise or define it, we widen it still further to make it as broad and inclusive as possible’ (Robinson 1995)
make it a useful tool of knowledge? Can we, better than the others, resist to the current fashion of diasporas? (Schnapper 2001:33)

b. The space of diaspora: conceptualizations of the transnational

As we have seen so far, diaspora is both a discourse and a practice. The specificities of the diasporic discourse is that it formulates the possibilities of identifications which go beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. It posits a scattered unity and a myth of the origins. In this sense, however, the discourse does not say anything about the practice. A diasporic discourse can be used, as it is in many instances of the African-American struggles, in very localized and geographically fixed contexts. The diasporic discourse need not automatically refer to a transnational condition; the practices of diaspora cannot be a priori determined: they are the result of historically and socially located struggles. It is however true that the transnational content of the diasporic discourse can occur within contexts that are not bound by the frontiers of a nation state. In this case, we need concepts to define these social formations and the practices that take place within them.


Transnational communities: the risk of the essence.

One of the most diffused concepts has been the one of ‘transnational communities’. Alejandro Portes, along with other sociologists of migration, have coined the term in order to describe the ‘working-class response to the globalization of capitalist production’. In this sense, ‘what common people have done in response to the process of globalization is to create communities that sit astride political borders and that, in a very real sense, are ‘neither here nor there’ but in both places simultaneously’ (Portes 1998:3). The concept is often associated with Smith and Guarnizo’s ‘transnationalism from below’, a form of transnational activity to be distinguished from the transnational practices of corporations and governments (L. Guarnizo and Smith 1998b). The main problem of this concept lies in the term ‘community’. Even if quite diffused within American sociology, community is always at risk of assuming the existence of a united, homogeneous and clearly bounded group. Søkefeld and Scewhalgin have already pointed out this pitfall, insisting on the need to focus on the agents and the institutions rather than on a hypothetical ‘community’: ‘In order to explore how this common imagination is produced and disseminated, why it is embraced and shared by particular people who thus imagine themselves as belonging to a ‘diaspora community’ we have to abandon the loose use of the concept ‘community’. Instead we should look for institutions and agents
which produce, reproduce and spread the imaginations in question’ (Sökefeld and Schwalgin 2000:3).

Transnational social fields: the risk of homogeneity.

Nina Glick Schiller has proposed one of the most interesting approaches to conceptualize transnational social relations. Her definition of the transnational social field is worth quoting at length:

[transmigrants] ‘live within a ‘transnational social field’ that includes the state from which they originated and the one in which they settled (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994). A social field can be defined as an unbounded terrain of interlocking egocentric networks. It is a more encompassing term than that of network which is best applied to chains of social relationship specific to each person [...]. The concept ‘transnational social field’ allows us a conceptual and methodological entry point into the investigation of broader social, economic and political processes through which migrating populations are embedded in more than one society and to which they react (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994). Because it focuses our attention on human interaction and situations of personal social relationship, the concept of social field facilitates an analysis of the processes by which immigrants continue to be part of the fabric of daily life in their home state including its political processes, while they simultaneously become part of the work force, contribute to neighborhood activities, serve as members of school and community boards and enter into US politics.

The concept of transnational social field is extremely useful in that is supposed a conceptual frame for the production of discourses and practices of actors living in transnational settings which still maintains elements of structure: structure of the home societies, of the host societies and the migrants themselves. Over ‘community’, ‘social field’ presupposes conflict and competition instead of unity and identity. The problem – even if it is not reflected in Glick Schiller’s use of the term – is that it presupposes only one kind of structuration of the transnational experience. ‘Social fields’, in contemporary societies are multiple and complex, and structure differently values and practices of different groups such as intellectuals, artists, businessmen etc. It is my argument that this complexity is reflected in the transnational condition.

c. Diasporic fields and the transnational social space.

This is why I propose to conceptualize the transnational in terms of a multiplicity of transnational fields (which need to be qualified: transnational field of professionals of politics, transnational field of businessmen, transnational field of artists etc.) occupying a transnational social space structured by home and host states. I follow here Bourdieu’s definition of the ‘field’ as ‘a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions. [...] in highly differentiated societies, the social cosmos is made up of a number of such relatively autonomous social microcosms, i.e., spaces of objective relations that are the site of a logic and a necessity that are specific and irreducible to those that regulate other fields’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992b:97). I therefore conceptualize diaspora politics as involving a multiplicity of fields within a broader transnational social space (what Bourdieu in this definition defines as social cosmos).
It is therefore important to note that the different fields such as the bureaucratic fields of ‘home’ and ‘host’ states, the field of diasporic institutions in different countries, the transnational political, artistic and economic fields that constitute ‘the diaspora’ are not the same field (as one might think following Nina Glick Schiller’s definition). Thinking the difference between a field and a social space allows us to understand the interrelation, at the transnational level, between agents whose habituses and stakes are not similarly oriented, but that are still affected by common problems and are in struggle, at different periods of time over the monopoly of symbolic and material power of ‘the diaspora’. The specificity of the different positions and interactions can however not be determined a priori, and can only be the result of a historical and sociological account.

To understand the structuration of a transnational social space by different interacting and overlapping social fields as both the result and the conditions of possibility for diasporic identification and mobilization to take place allows us to avoid one first mistake which consists in attributing to structural conditions the role of agency, as it is commonly done when diasporic politics are not explained by a sociology of the actors, but by a description of the conditions for their action. This is for example the principal fallacy of Benedict Anderson when he tries to attribute extremist positions simply to the fact of living in a diasporic setting (Anderson 1998:62). But it also permits to avoid a priori statements about the ‘hegemonic nationalizing’ projects of states in which transmigrants are supposedly caught (Basch, et al. 1995:36). The territorial nation-state is sometimes, but is not always the hegemonic governmental project (37). In return, diasporic practices cannot be seen as a priori acts of glorified ‘resistance’ to state practices (intended as emancipatory politics). Nor the nationalist nor the emancipatory character of diasporic social actors can be derived, a priori, from their diasporic condition. (L. Guarnizo and Smith 1998a:5). What is important to bear in mind therefore is that the transnational social space does not provide answers in itself about the behaviour of social actors, but its structuration in different transnational fields allows to spell out differentiated effects of the structuration of agents habituses.

On the other hand, if it can be said that it is increasingly the locale for the definition and the struggle over a wide range of issues linked to modern state and its citizenry such as national belonging, civil rights, cultural rights, political representation, citizenship, obligations of taxation, military service etc... the transnational social space (as opposed to the national social space) is the arena of those struggles, where various governmental institutions, social movements, political groups, unions are involved.

Conclusion.

I have therefore put forward the following ideas. After a review of the current definitions of diaspora, I have argued that it is impossible to use the word as an efficient and heuristic concept of social science because of its high ‘social value’. There will always be a social actor to give a new definition to the term. In this sense, the analysis is enriched by an approach considering diaspora a category of practice rather than analysis. Building a category however means inevitably to associate a social function to a group: in this sense, diaspora can be understood as a performative utterance, a ‘word that does things’: it creates the illusion of a dispersed but homogeneous community linked
‘naturally’ to a homeland. Drawing on increasingly diffused taken for granted assumptions about what diasporas are, it allows for the legitimization of a particular kind of transnational politics, that can be the fact of homeland institutions, hostland institutions, or institutions of the groups in dispersion. This kind of politics often takes place in a transnational social space structured by homeland and hostland governments, where actors are in competition among differentiated transnational social fields. After having made explicit my theoretical understanding of processes of diasporic identification and mobilization, I move to the conceptual tools needed to seize processes of governmental attention to populations abroad.
Ragazzi: The concept of ‘diaspora’ and the ‘transnational social space’

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18
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