

Editorial Reflections

Let a Thousand Diasporas Bloom?

In a seminal 2005 article,¹ UCLA Professor of Sociology Rogers Brubaker provided a summary of the developing field of “diaspora” studies. Apparently, diaspora is one of those traveling terms. Its meaning is stretching semantically and conceptually to accommodate different academic and political agendas “in a veritable explosion of interest since the late 1980’s” (1). His concern is the dispersion of meaning to diaspora, what he calls “a ‘diaspora’ diaspora”:

The problem with this latitudinarian “let-a-thousand-diasporas-bloom” approach is that the category becomes stretched to the point of uselessness. If everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so. The term loses its discriminating power—its ability to pick out phenomena, to make distinctions. The universalization of diaspora, paradoxically, means the disappearance of diaspora. (3)

Brubaker sees that diaspora is treated as a collectivity, a condition, a process, or a field of inquiry. So he decides to respond to all this proliferation with an assessment that includes a series of perspectives on “diaspora.” Each of these perspectives provides a valuable compass for our understanding of diaspora in the field of missiology.

First, Brubaker analyzes three core elements that continue to be constitutive of diaspora: 1) dispersion in space; 2) orientation to homeland; and 3) boundary maintenance. Dispersion is the most widely accepted criterion, and the orientation to homeland was an original exemplar. The classical diasporas held “a real or imagined ‘homeland’ as an authoritative source of value, identity and loyalty” (5). But then the proliferation set in. Brubaker quotes Tololyan (1991, p. 4):

The term that once described, Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant,

expatriate, refugee, guestworker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community.² (3)

Brubaker, drawing on Clifford (1994),³ indicates that more recent discussions have de-emphasized the “continuous cultural connections to a single source.” (5) They would not see diaspora as a desire for return to the homeland as much as lateral connections and the “ability to recreate a culture in diverse locations.”⁴ (6) Amidst all these tensions, Brubaker says these three core elements

remain widely understood to be constitutive of diaspora. Some subset, or combination of these, variously weighted, underlies most definitions and discussions of the phenomenon. (5)

We might ask if we do not witness this latitudinarian tendency in our “diaspora missiology.” Our open and inclusive tendency to embrace all forms of global dispersion may make it difficult for us to exercise a discerning eye to the particularities of a certain demographic. If dispersion is the single criterion for diaspora, then we can expect any legacy with the homeland to get lost in all the migration. Might we feel less compelled to notice that traditional values still play an unconscious, taken-for-granted role in the global diaspora? If everything is diaspora, then nothing is diaspora.

Secondly, it’s Brubaker’s treatment of the third criterion of “boundary maintenance” that has tremendous relevance for our missiological discussion of diaspora. This criterion “involves the preservation of a distinctive identity vis-à-vis a host society (or societies)” (6), and seems to be an “indispensable criterion” in most accounts. It can involve deliberate resistance to assimilation, self-enforced endogamy, active solidarity, and dense social relationships. But this aspect also generates ambivalence, for “a strong counter current emphasizes hybridity, fluidity, creolization and syncretism.” (6) Brubaker notes the tension here between boundary-maintenance and boundary-erosion, a tension that often appears as the axis of our missiological debate over “ethnic groups.” This criterion certainly applies to second and third generations who manage bicultural identities, and Chong

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Kim has examined this whole reality in his article included in this issue (97–101). We also see this hybridity in Michael Rynkiewicz’s case study, also in this issue (103–14).

Thirdly, Brubaker asks whether we are seeing “the dawning of an age of diaspora (or) simply the proliferation of diaspora talk” (7). Does this proliferation of diasporas in the world constitute a radical break? And is that break a fundamental transformation in the social world or simply a shift in our perspective? Brubaker reminds us of Glazer and Moynihan’s observation in the sixties that “the point about the melting pot...is that it did not happen” (8). Culture did not go away. We can add that the accompanying “secularization thesis” which predicted the demise of religion was dead wrong as well. Somehow more primal values and orientations can persist through what would seem dissipating circumstances.

The epochal shift just isn’t so radical, for as Brubaker observes, there’s usually two sides to the coin. While there is an “unprecedented ‘porosity of borders’” (8), Brubaker notes that states have gained a greater capacity to monitor and control their populations. He adds that “while contemporary migrations worldwide are more geographically extensive... they are on balance slightly less intensive” (9). And “distance eclipsing technologies” now allow migrants a new means to sustain ties to the homeland. So, Brubaker tends to see more continuity than radical discontinuity in the diaspora.

Finally, Brubaker sees a problem when any diaspora is characterized as an “entity” that possesses quantifiable memberships (and this is certainly the concern of Michael Rynkiewicz on p. 107ff.).

Rather than speak of “a diaspora” of “the diaspora” as an entity, a bounded group, an ethnodemographic or ethnocultural fact, it may be more fruitful, and certainly more precise, to speak of diasporic stances, projects, claims, idioms, practices and so on. We can then study empirically the degree and form of support for a diasporic project among members...” (13)

In his book *Ethnicity Without Groups*,⁵ Brubaker speaks to the assumption he calls “groupism.” While he recognizes the potential solidarity of ethnicity and its capacity for groupness at any time, he wants to overcome the automatic assumption of

groupness among the diaspora. He insists that there has to be a way to emphasize hybridity, fluidity and biculturalism as an alternative to quantifiable bounded entities. Brubaker is making an important distinction for missiology to consider: that in our idea of “ethnic groups” there is actually a dual capacity for ethnicity and for groupness. The two are not the same, and as Brubaker indicates in his book, the latter has gone relatively unexamined (at least until the publication of this article).

I would suggest that frontier missiology needs to absorb and use Brubaker’s important distinction. The apparent loss of groupness across the diaspora can be deceptive. One might think their assimilation of a host culture (America) automatically erodes socio-religious identity, but often it’s the opposite. A latent ethnic solidarity, which can surface as religious defensiveness, can be even greater in the diaspora than in their home countries. It makes ministry unpredictable and complex and confounds any notion that easier access means easier ministry. And it can require unforeseen costs, the kind we see throughout the pages of Acts. Brubaker carries no missiological purpose whatsoever, but his sociological insights belong in the tool belt of those who minister among the diaspora. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Brubaker, Rogers. “The ‘Diaspora’ Diaspora.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 1–19. This article can be downloaded at http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/brubaker/Publications/29_Diaspora_diaspora_ERS.pdf.

² Tololyan, Kachig. “The Nation-State and Its Others: In Lieu of a Preface.” *Diaspora*, vol. 11 no. 1 (1991): 3–7 1991.

³ Clifford, James. “Diasporas.” *Cultural Anthropology* vol. 9, no. 3 (1994): 302–38.

⁴ Ibid. 304–6.

⁵ Brubaker, Rogers. *Ethnicity without Groups*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004.