

The Impact of Diasporas: Markers of Identity

Introduction

Abstract:

In 2010 the Leverhulme Trust made two Research Programme Grant awards to teams working on the 'Impact of Diasporas'. Eleven projects grouped within the Oxford Diasporas Programme at the University of Oxford have drawn on multiple disciplines to examine themes as diverse as diaspora engagement in war-torn societies, diaspora engagement policies, and stateless diasporas, and have worked in field locations from New Orleans and Kenya, to London, and Sri Lanka. In contrast, the work of the research team based at the University of Leicester has concentrated on the impact of diasporas in the distant past on Britain, with a particular emphasis on the first millennia BCE/CE. That interdisciplinary programme brings the skills of historians, archaeologists, linguists, social psychologists, and geneticists to seven distinct projects to challenge disciplinary boundaries and develop a new understanding about the impact of deep time diasporas on the formulation of identities in Britain, past and present.

Over the past two decades ‘diaspora’ has evolved from a term with a somewhat restricted usage to something considerably more ubiquitous, simultaneously crossing over from political and academic discourse into the vernacular. In academia, the word ‘diaspora’ has, rightly or wrongly, come to be applied to almost any population or group living outside its homeland, while in popular usage diaspora now seems to be a collective noun used to refer to anyone not at home; hence – presumably – a reference in *The Times* on 22 November 2014 to a ‘diaspora of journalists’, far from their Westminster home, standing outside UKIP’s Rochester headquarters.

It was not always thus. In its original formulation, diaspora referred to the dispersal of the Jewish people following the destruction of the First Temple. In the mid nineteenth century it was adopted by the Moravian Church to describe its congregation, and in the twentieth century it was extended to a limited number of peoples dispersed beyond their homeland, traumatically or otherwise: Armenians; African Americans; Greeks; Chinese; Lebanese. More recently, as noted, it has been applied to a wide range of migrant communities that exhibit – or are believed by external observers to exhibit – some sort of socio-cultural or political cohesion in the countries in which they now live. At the same time it is being increasingly seized upon by governments who see in the construction and development of a sense of belonging within these displaced migrant communities, potential for encouraging expatriate contributions to economic growth in the homeland (e.g.: Cohen 2008; Dufoix, 2011).

The widespread appropriation of the concept of diaspora in the contemporary world has also challenged scholars with interests in the human past to test the concept and its underlying theories against data from historical and pre-historic contexts (e.g.: Eckhardt, 2010; Abrams, 2012). For more recent periods, it is possible to scrutinise textual records (historical, literary, and linguistic) for evidence of both the fact and the experience of migration, and of the development of functioning diasporic networks; for more distant times – and indeed for archaeologists of all period and places – the material culture record dominates the data set, lately supplemented by analysis of biological evidence, derived both from ancient DNA and the genomes of contemporary populations. Debate over the role of human migration in culture change has always been a core theme in the study of the past; what diaspora studies brings to that scholarly heritage is a focus not only on the social impact

of perceived culture changes both on the recipient/host communities and on the migrant groups themselves, but also on the ways in which narratives of contacts with distant people and places were curated and reworked over time in order to sustain a link with a ‘remembered homeland’ and to reimagine that link for contemporary purposes and new generations. It is this sustained connection with a distant place, whether real or imagined, whether expressed through traces of language, artefacts, or DNA, which differentiates ancient diaspora studies from analysis of the fact of past migrations.

In 2010, in recognition of this growing interest across a number of disciplines, the Leverhulme Trust made two Research Programme Grant awards, both of five years’ duration, to teams working on the ‘Impact of Diasporas’. The diversity of diaspora studies is reflected by the very different approaches to the theme taken by the two research teams. Eleven projects grouped within the Oxford Diasporas Programme, based at the International Migration Institute at the University of Oxford, drew together researchers from across that university in disciplines such as anthropology, history, geography and sociology, working on themes as diverse as diaspora engagement in war-torn societies, diaspora engagement policies, and stateless diasporas, and in field sites from New Orleans and Kenya, to London, and Sri Lanka. The focus of the Oxford Diasporas Programme is, thus, modern and global; in contrast, the work of the research team based at the University of Leicester, in collaboration with the Institute for Name Studies at the University of Nottingham, has concentrated on the impact of deep time diasporas on Britain with a particular emphasis on the first millennia BCE/CE. This interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary programme on ‘The Impact of Diasporas on the Making of Britain: evidence; memories; inventions’, brings the skills of historians, archaeologists, linguists, social psychologists, and geneticists to eight distinct projects to challenge disciplinary boundaries and develop new understanding about the impact of deep time diasporas on the formulation of identities in Britain, in the past and in the present.

This special issue presents nine articles – four from the Leicester research group and five from Oxford, selected as representative of these 19 projects – that speak to the theme of ‘Markers of Identity’. Diasporas – like all cultural or ethnic groups – are distinguished by shared claims to identity that both provide for internal cohesion and mark them off from others. These commonalities are varied: they may be cultural, social or biological; more

specifically they may be religious, linguistic, performative, symbolic, genetic, or material in character. Identities so marked may be expressed and analysed through the study of archaeological artefacts, family or clan names, marriage patterns, residence patterns, economic activity, political practice, dance, dress and cuisine, the construction of heritage, and the use of vernaculars. In diasporic contexts these markers of identity often draw attention to a connection with a place that is distant in time or space, and might be curated differently at home and abroad leading over time to a divergence in expressions of belonging.

‘Identity’, like diaspora itself, emerged from a very specific psychological context (in this case a psychological one) to become something of a keyword in social science and the humanities; in the process, and again like ‘diaspora’, the term has risked losing acuity as it becomes a vague byword for individual or group characteristics. Early formulations of identity, whether individual or group, established a concept somewhat analogous to the homogenous and discreet ‘culture’ of early anthropology: an individual had an identity that developed over time but – and although it might undergo minor subsequent changes – was generally well established by the end of adolescence. Similarly, groups also had an identity that all within the group shared and allowed them to define themselves (and be defined by others), such as being Sioux Indians or US Government employees (Erikson, 1994: 22). But much as anthropology has taught us to recognise that cultures are neither bounded nor unchanging, so too ‘identity’ has become a term to describe a set of characteristics to which individuals and groups may differentially subscribe but which are neither fixed (either per se or in their relations with the individuals or groups they are intended to characterise) nor subscribed to universally.

In the contemporary context, therefore, identity may appear in two guises: as something that defines an individual or a group, and which is thus effectively unique (though rarely stable), somewhat akin to the notion of the self; or it is taken to refer to specific sets of characteristics, expressed in particular ways, to which both individuals and groups may subscribe in order to emphasise who they are and to distinguish themselves from others. Identity is mutable in this latter definition too, but it is differently constituted and more overtly political.

Most of the articles that follow subscribe to the second definition of identity, that of the set of characteristics – the markers – that people may draw on to define themselves and their positions in society. The first two papers, however, touch precisely on the interface between these two definitions of identity: as something singular that is applied as a defining characteristic of an individual or group, and one that is actively constructed by self-conscious selection or emphasis of certain criteria. The two papers by Jobling, Rastiero and Wetton, and by Scully, Brown and King, both deal with the use of DNA as a rudimentary marker of identity and discuss the widespread popular perception of genetic data as an inherent marker of the biological heritage of both an individual, and – by extrapolation – of the ‘population’ to which the individual considers him/herself to be a part. Both papers explore how DNA is often perceived as innate, immutable, and given, but is, in fact, subject to highly selective readings which contribute to the active construction of the identity both of individuals and of ‘imagined communities’ of individuals whose identity can be recalibrated following genomic exploration and the revelation of some form of shared ancestry.

Jobling, Rastiero and Wetton, explain how ancestry-tests that are based on analysis of the Y chromosome alone privileges the micro-narrative of just one ancestral lineage out of many thousands, and they discuss the tension between the academic enquiry of population genetics (which requires the aggregation of data from very many individuals) and the popular genetics of the individual (which draws specific inferences about an individual from generalisations of that pooled population data). This methodological tension between the objectives of academic genetics and popular understanding of that science is explored further in the case study described by Scully, Brown and King on ‘Becoming an Viking: DNA testing, genetic ancestry and surplus identity’. Using discourse analysis of data derived from interviews with participants in DNA ancestry research, the paper explores the importance of the mediation in low-stakes conditions of ‘surplus identity’ created by discovery of ownership of particular genetic markers that may be associated with a particular historical population.

Capper and Scully also use oral testimony to explore how another type of historical artefact is being used as marker of group identity in the present. Using interviews with museum volunteers, they show how the presentation and interpretation of the ‘Staffordshire Hoard’ of Anglo-Saxon gold objects, is contributing to regional identity by connecting with

the distant past. Their work shows that the Hoard has a particularly powerful resonance for a post-industrial community with a rich heritage in craft production thereby helping to authenticate local identity in the present through exposure to a collection of objects that were also powerful markers of group and individual identity in the early medieval past.

Markers of identity in the early middle ages are also explored by Vohra in her paper, which focuses on legal evidence from law codes and literature preserved in medieval Scandinavia to explore the ways in which people negotiated identity and belonging in different parts of the Viking world. Sustained socio-cultural contact between dispersed colonies reveals the Viking world to have been a functioning diaspora; Vohra's paper shows the importance of law in constructing identity in these colonies, and how analysis of it reveals ways in which people were able to negotiate their place in Viking lands.

Turning to more recent diasporic identities, Ahmed et al. take three case studies in East London and use them to challenge commonly held perceptions of migrant communities in urban contexts as constituting a 'mosaic' of discreet cultural communities, or of these communities as being temporary, one making place for another as successive waves of migration wash over the more deprived inner-city areas. The authors show instead how markers, particularly in the domain of religious practice, are often shared. Jews and Muslims occupy the same space; Hindus and Christians attend the same religious festivals and venerate the same saint; local churches cater to a variety of congregations, often simultaneously. Challenging the orthodoxy of analyses of processes of social change in migrant communities, the authors highlight how, slightly paradoxically, markers of identity do not always mark what they – in the popular imagination at least – are intended to mark.

In her analysis of identities in Martinique, Sheringham distinguishes three types of marker within which identities may be inscribed in Martinique: environmental markers, referring almost literally to physical markers, to how external influences have made their mark on the Martinican landscape; social markers, referring to the ways in which identity is marked by the social practices and values, and particularly of mobile (migrant? diasporic?) individuals who move between France and Martinique; and cultural markers, referring to the linguistic and cultural practices that marked Martinican (Creole) identity. That some of these identity markers are apparently contradictory but nevertheless manage to co-exist is a chronic conundrum of French overseas identities.

Sigona's article on statelessness among the Roma takes statelessness itself as a marker of identity, reformulating it not as a lack or an absence, an exclusion from the global hierarchy of those who participate, but rather as a category equivalent to, and with a similar political status as that of citizenship. To be stateless is, as Sigona put is 'a manifestation, one among many, of contemporary political membership'. This then accords the stateless with identity and agency. Sigona thus argues that the internment camp is thereby no longer a place excluded from the political process, but rather a place deeply embedded with power to subvert the established order; it is in an attempt to disempower the stateless that camps are characterised as 'out of place'. The difficulty of acquiring statelessness paradoxically highlights the fact that statelessness is as much an identity as citizenship.

Intra-African diasporas are the subject of the article by Bakewell and Binaisa, in which claims to diasporic identity are considered in the light of criteria by which diasporas are defined, rather than taking for granted claims by the groups themselves that they constitute a diaspora. Marking out the social boundaries of ethnic groups is part of the process of constituting a diaspora and the maintenance of ties to the homeland (a crucial part of the definition) requires the reproduction of markers that allow for members, or potential members, of a diaspora to assert their claims. Bakewell and Binaisa set emic and etic definitions against one another in their analysis of diasporic strategies of identity and the ways in which struggles for resources (be they economic, social, cultural or political) are fundamental to the dynamics of diasporic identity.

The theme of statelessness reappears in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh's analysis of the specific and rather exceptional case of Palestinians, for whom, and unlike the Roma, statelessness is disempowering and silencing. Furthermore, since the lack of a state is doubled by a lack of a homeland, Palestinian statelessness is thus at once a political status and an affective one. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh describes how Palestinians struggle against the social (rather than the legal) status of statelessness, a very specific status that implies a lack of a homeland, rather than being a general political condition of not having a nationality. Interrogating how identity markers constituted by the homeland, for Palestinians in diaspora, are at once present and absent, she suggests that the marker 'stateless' is a form of identity erasure, since it denies the very existence of that homeland.

This collection underscores the argument that markers of identity are fluid and contingent: that like identities themselves, markers are not stable and fixed indications of representations of a group or even of an individual, but are rather manipulated, shared, interpreted, contradictory, even misleading, and are employed as tools by those who find them useful in an effort to construct identities processually, to meet expectations, and to achieve goals. That markers are essentially arbitrary should surprise no-one who has read Saussure; these articles, drawn from a wide variety of disciplines and touching on an equally wide variety of evidence, remind us not to forget this fundamental truth that such things can be manipulated, are contestable, and are ultimately contingent.

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