

TRANSNATIONALISM, TECHNOLOGY AND TERROR: DIASPORAS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Diasporic dispersions around the world are not a new phenomenon. Human beings have from the very earliest times, first walked, then ridden, then sailed and now fly all around the globe for different reasons. These dispersals, voluntary as well as forced, have settled different parts of the planet Earth, and aided civilizations and economic developments in what have become modern nation states. Greek, Persian and Roman Empires in the ancient world spread their peoples, cultures and civilizations around their colonies and in turn were enriched by the resultant multiculturalism at their centers. The displacement of the Jews from their homeland, in Roman and Pre-Roman expulsions, resulted in Jewish diasporas in different parts of the Middle East, Asia, Africa and Europe. Maritime trade from the Eastern coast of India and then imperial forays from the Indian subcontinent spread Indian influence, religions and culture to regions in South East Asia.

In the West of Asia with the rise of Islam, the Arabs also became empire builders and imposed their military and religious writs on lands as far West as Spain and as far East as India. The resultant syncretic cultures, languages and civilizations are still evident today. The Central Asians and the Chinese had huge empires and spread their genes and technology to their colonies and were in turn influenced by their colonized peoples. The Russians Empire which extended right across the Northern Eurasian landmass was further expanded during the Soviet period to include Eastern European and Central Asian countries, which have now broken free from post-Soviet Russia.

While Spain and Portugal were the earliest colonisers from Europe in the Modern period, the rest of the continent caught up with them soon. The eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the age of European colonization, when European nations not only colonized huge swathes in Africa and Asia, but

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also moved its colonized peoples around their imperial possessions first as slaves and then as indentured labour.

These forced diasporas of millions of Africans and Asians were later accompanied by free entrepreneurial diasporas and in the second half of the Twentieth century by postcolonial diasporas which were at first primarily labour based but soon included those who had professional skills on offer.

These ancient, pre-modern and modern diasporas were set off by imperial powers. In the postcolonial phase diverse diasporas have been triggered by the decolonization of the countries ruled by European powers such as Britain, Spain, France, Portugal and Belgium among others. In the middle of the Twentieth century, these postcolonial diasporas were mainly a response to weak economic conditions in the former colonies and the need for labour in the erstwhile colonizing European countries due to the fatalities of the second world war and demographic slowdowns.

By the time we came to the end of the twentieth century these old colonial and newer postcolonial diasporas were being studied by the academia but were rapidly slowing down under the impact of globalization, economic liberalizations and rise of tiger economies in China, South and South East Asia.

Newer diasporas rose to take the place of the earlier labour and professional diasporas. The specialization of South Asians in Information Technology and Computer Software created a new diaspora of these 'Techies' who moved around the Western world offering their cyber skills. The Information Technology boom and the virtualization of work spaces meant that diasporas now were both physical as well as virtual. More and more outsourcing of computer related work was being done to individuals as well as companies located in Asian spaces.

Multinational corporations also internationalized their workforce to best exploit global talents in their special fields as well as reduce their operational costs, as these foreign workers were paid less than the ones from their own home countries. Diaspora critics and theorists today do focus on this new transnational diasporas which are so different from the traditional diasporas, in the sense that those in transnational diasporas are temporary residents who work on a contract basis and return to their native lands after the expiry of these contracts. They rarely have the facility of settling down in these countries and do not therefore fall into the category of traditional diasporics.

In fact the former colonizing world has clamped down on its residential permits and citizenships for such transnationals and even the families of the older traditional diasporics. Students from the countries which had created the professional diasporas of the second half of the twentieth century in countries such as the USA, Canada and UK, have also been submitted to stricter quotas and withdrawal of facilities of work permits after the end of their education.

The labordiasporas from the Indian sub-continent and South East Asia, in the oil-rich Arab countries constitute a special sub-group. Like the transnationals they

are issued time bound work permits and rarely if ever become citizens or permanent residents of these countries where they work. Economic slowdowns due to falling oil prices and oil production have jeopardised the existence of these oil-diasporas, which in turn has threatened the remittance economies of many home countries of these diasporics.

In the Post-Soviet Eastern Europe, diasporas to Western European countries and North America, driven by economic and professional compunctions, have led to the creation of substantial diasporic communities from these countries. However some of these Eastern European countries are now members or aspire to be members of the European Union. If so can they in the context of a European Union without borders, be seen as diasporics? If pre-Brexit Britons living in France and Spain were not diasporics, why do Romanians in Italy or Poles in Britain be termed diasporics and not European citizens?

In the context of Brexit, what happens to the rights of these communities in Britain and of Britons in various Western European countries? From European Union citizens or Expatriates do they now become diasporas which have to negotiate afresh their continuing presence in these countries? What also happens to professionals and labour from the European Union who now work and live in the U.K.?

Further, the twenty First century has seen the escalation of ethnic conflicts and religious wars resulting in droves of traumatized men, women and children knocking on the doors of Europe for refuge from slaughter and penury. These conflicts in Syria, Iraq and other West Asian countries have exacerbated the older conflicts in the North of Africa as well as in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. Repressive regimes in other parts of the world have also seen considerable number of dissidents seeking shelter in Europe, USA and Canada. European responses to these refugees have ranged from providing quotas for admission, to the firm closing of borders. While the USA has not been so welcoming, Canada has opened its borders to most of those who have sought refuge within their spaces.

This has resulted in a new diaspora – the refugee diaspora – which is very ethnically and linguistically visible today in countries like Germany where men from the Middle East try to recreate their old coffee house meeting spaces in new German cafes, even as their young women clad in hijabs, chatter animatedly in Arabic as they make their way to classes in German towns.

However, the refugee diasporas in Europe, especially in France and Germany are problematised by the escalation of terror attacks in these countries. These have created a backlash of racism and fascism aimed at these refugees. Border control authorities in Europe have the unenviable task of differentiating genuine refugees from terrorists who slip across with them. Ironically many of the *bona fide* refugees, who are turned away at European borders or not accepted by other Western countries, as they are suspected of being terrorists, are themselves victims of Terror and are fleeing these same or similar terrorists who have in their homelands been wreaking death and destruction on them in the name of religion or

ethnicity. These diverse diasporas of the twenty first century are rapidly evolving in different countries, bringing to the fore the need to update Diaspora studies with a focus on these issues.

So diaspora studies needs to take on board more squarely than before the transnational, techie groups and study how they have or have not taken on the diasporic traits of hybridization and hyphenation. The oil diasporas in the Gulf countries have been generally neglected by diasporic studies. This needs to change as in some cases the labour and professional diaspora in these oil rich Arab states is more than 30 years old. Yet they have no possibility of ever gaining permanent resident status let alone citizenship in these countries. This largely remittance diaspora needs to be fitted into the history of diasporas.

As for the economic diasporas from Eastern Europe into Western European spaces, if these diasporas identify themselves as Europeans, in the European Union space, can they be considered as diasporas or are they just Europeans who are asserting their legal and economic rights to work and live in other parts of the Europe. Or do these dispersals need to be studied in detail and as a separate subgroup of diasporic/ European studies? In a post-Brexit Europe new definitions of intra-European diasporas would need to be evolved and then studies.

The twenty first century refugees in Western Europe, USA and Canada would gradually become diasporic communities like the earlier refugees from the ethnic cleansing and terror in Sri Lanka in the late twentieth Century. These older refugees have in European and Canadian spaces already begun to establish their ethnic, religious and cultural presence. Will these newer bands of refugees be allowed to do the same? Or will they be constantly haunted by the concurrent presence and threat of terrorism in their new spaces? Will terrorism arising in their old homelands compromise their acceptance in their new homelands? Diasporic Studies needs to engage with old and new refugee diasporas.

How will these new entrants – transnationals or refugees – identify themselves with their old and new spaces? What about the economic consequences to them and to their new homelands by their presence? Will they be a drain on the economies of their new countries or instead enrich them by their labour and/or professional skills? Sociologically speaking will they be accepted in their new spaces, many of which have given them only grudging or conditional acceptance?

How will the history of the relationship of their co-religionists with Europe/USA impact upon their future in the European/American worlds? How will their presence in European and other Western spaces impact upon their own culture, religion and language and vice versa? Have these new diasporas started using literature, cinema and the social media to define themselves? How is such writing or cinema viewed in their home/host countries? These are questions that need urgent study by sociologists, economists, historians and theorists/critics of culture and literature, so as to bring the field of diaspora studies centrally into the twenty First century.