

Diasporas. By Stéphane Dufoix (translated by William Rodamor). Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. 160 pp.

As one of the founding coeditors of *Black Diaspora Review*—a new online journal sponsored by the Department of African American and African Diaspora Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington—I have been especially interested in and actively involved in examining and analyzing new works that enhance scholars’ understanding of and the sharpening of their critical acuity in defining the parameters of the concept *diaspora*. The aforementioned concept is now a building block for the foundations of many Black Studies (and I use the term in its broadest and most inclusive sense) departments and programs around these United States of America. As a consequence, the French sociologist Stéphane Dufoix’s *Diasporas*, originally published in 2003 as a part of the encyclopedic collection, *Que Sais Je?*, and translated from the French by William Rodamor, is an interesting yet at times problematic attempt to delimit the concept.

Dufoix is troubled by the “inflation” of the concept—an inflation that makes the term practically meaningless. He writes:

Today, its semantic horizon encompasses the challenges of modernity and supermodernity; it can designate both the root and rhizome; a persistence in time and space; the structures of state and territory, and their appearance; the static nature of identity or its constant transformation; all kinds of identities, from the most local to the broadest (human diaspora) while passing through every possible form of community ... globalization from above and from below; and both the ancient world and the world to come (108).

Dufoix therefore views his task in this slim volume as the construction of “a complex analytical framework that takes into account the structuring of the collective experience abroad based on the link maintained with the referent origin and the community stance this creates” (3). For him, the crux of the matter centers around diasporic communities’ major goal of reducing or dealing with distance from referent origin.

Dufoix begins by providing readers with the etymology of the term diaspora and traces the transmutation of the word over time. Furthermore, he identifies specific groups prone to dispersal, such as Jews, Blacks, Greeks, East Indians, Chinese, and Armenians. Finally, he develops schemata that purportedly serve as analytical frameworks for describing what constitutes a diasporic community. Dufoix formulates ideal types, such as “centroperipheral,” “peripheral,” “enclaved,” “atopic,” and “antagonistic,” in order to differentiate between “modes” of diasporic communities and to “structure the collective experience abroad” (62). That said, he, nevertheless, concludes, “Whether diaspora is a common word, a scientifically constructed concept, or a rallying cry that gives meaning to a collective reality it is highly contemporary” (106)—“but theoretically it is lifeless” (107).

The strengths of Dufoix’s book are apparent in its exposure of the inflation of the term diaspora and more importantly in the assortment of such insightful statements as:

... the world nicely fits the changes in the relationship to distance, in view of the quasi disappearance of time in the relationship to space. The technological possibility of proximity between people who resemble each other in some way—whether religious,

national, ethnic, cultural, professional, or other—allows nonterritorialized links (networks) to emerge (106).

Yet, despite Dufoix's emphasis on nonterritorial links, he nevertheless points out that Armenians in Issy-les-Moulineaux or Los Angeles; Italians in East Harlem or Bobigny; Jews in Alexandria, the Sentier in Paris, or New York; and Sikhs in Vancouver or London are essential communities, primarily because the new arrivals who concentrate in those cities reconstitute "fellow feeling." Although the big city model is no doubt an excellent example of essential diasporic communities, Dufoix ignores smaller cities, such as those college towns in the South and Midwest in which the concentration of new arrivals promote "fellow feeling" not only through institutions and practices but also through their adept use of technology. Furthermore, Dufoix's framework cannot deal adequately with Black diasporic communities whose members (take as examples many persons in the United States and Brazil) have lost contact with many of the fundamental institutions and practices that the new arrivals insist upon maintaining. Put another way, the "fellow feeling" reconstituted between African Americans and American Africans as well as those among American Africans themselves often makes for odious intraracial relations. An obvious example is the recent murders of young, upwardly mobile, American-African immigrants by street gangs in Chicago.

In short, if we are to conceptualize the term diaspora scientifically, more time is needed.

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