Although the concept of a *diaspora* has been recognized in the social sciences for about 40 years, its preconceptual history is much longer and not very well known. Despite some thorough studies devoted to either the whole period (Dufoix 2017) or only a part of it (Baumann 2000; Edwards 2001; Krings 2003; Tromp 1998; Van Unnik 1993), a few factual errors keep being transmitted from text to text, thus impeding an accurate vision of the different processes that uses of the word have undergone historically. First, *diaspora* is undoubtedly a Greek word (διασπορά) encompassing the idea not only of ‘dispersion’ but also of ‘distribution’ or ‘diffusion’, and, as such, does not carry a negative connotation. Second, in Greek it has never been used to describe Greek colonization in the Mediterranean. Third, it is not a translation of the Hebrew words *galuth* or *golah*, meaning ‘exile’ or ‘community in exile’. In this chapter, I address the evolution of the uses of the word from its Greek origins to the mid-1970s when it started to become an academic concept.

**A religious word**

The first occurrence of the noun ‘diaspora’ can be found in the Septuagint, the translation into Greek of the Hebraic Bible, in the third century BCE. Contrary to a widely held view, the 14 appearances of the word ‘diaspora’ in the Septuagint are not translated into a specific Hebrew word; the Hebrew words *galuth* or *golah*, which mean ‘exile’ or ‘banishment’, were not among the list of words translated as *diaspora*. In fact, the uses and meaning of *diaspora* in the Septuagint should be understood in a theological sense. *Diaspora*, then, does not indicate an historical dispersal, such as the Babylonian exile of Jews in the sixth century BCE, but describes the divine punishment – dispersal throughout the world – that would befall the Jews if they failed to respect God’s commandments. Not only does the word refer to a theological, eschatological horizon, and not an historical situation, but the dispersal, as well as the return of the dispersed, is a matter of divine, and not human, will. The Jews could be dispersed and finally reunited at the end of time because they were the ‘Chosen People’.

Certain historical events gave the threat of dispersion a form of reality from the first century CE onwards. The Roman destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem in CE 70 and its repercussions, such as the repression of the Bar-Kokhba uprising in CE 135, gradually made Jewish
dispersion out of Palestine a real and terrestrial phenomenon. Consequently, the Jewish rabbis assimilated their current exile from the Holy Land (galouth) into the fulfilment of the curse in Deuteronomy. The meanings of diaspora and galouth were thus confounded, but since Judaic Rabbinism aimed to restore the superiority of the Hebrew language, the word diaspora itself was withdrawn from the Jewish lexicon. Beside this, the rise of Christianity created competition between the two religions. In the New Testament, the term diaspora referred to members of the Christian Church being exiled from the City of God and dispersed across the Earth. The condition of dispersion was understood as the very proof of their being the Chosen People. Christian writers eventually abandoned diaspora in the second century CE, limiting its use to the Jewish dispersion as an exemplary curse for their sins. As a result, the word ‘diaspora’ acquired a negative connotation.

From the third century CE onwards, Christianity gradually abandoned Greek in favour of Latin. In the Vulgate (fourth century), we generally find the noun dispersio or conjugated forms of the verb dispergere being used to translate diaspora. Yet, Greek remained the language of the eastern part, and this linguistic division entailed different uses of the Bible, with the Vulgate progressively becoming the western Bible and the Septuagint remaining that of the east. It is therefore not surprising to see authors from the eastern part of the Roman Empire using diaspora not only in the second (Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria), third (Origen) and fourth centuries CE (Athanasius, Eusebius of Caesarea, Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa) but also later, in the fifth century (Cyril of Alexandria, Theodoret). Of the 271 mentions of diaspora in the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae, as many as 134 (slightly fewer than half) are attributable to only nine authors, all of whom were from the eastern half of the Roman Empire. The usage of the term can be attested until the end of the Byzantine Empire. There are several references to diaspora in the texts of Gennadius Scholarius, who became ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople in 1454, the year following the fall of the city to the Ottomans. These show a variety of meanings ranging from the ‘diffusion of the gospel in the entire world’ to that of the ‘dispersion of men’.

A new religious meaning emerges in the eighteenth century with the rise in Germany and diffusion abroad of the Protestant Moravian Church, also known as the Unity of Brethren. From its base in Herrnhut (Saxony), members of this Church were sent to countries in Europe – the other German states, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, France and Great Britain – where they influenced early Methodists, as well as the United States, where the conversion of the natives became one of their principal tasks. In the mid-eighteenth century, another aspect of the evangelizing mission, officially known since the mid-nineteenth century by the (capitalized) name ‘Diaspora’, developed in parallel, and its reach was limited to the European continent. It implied missionaries keeping in touch with various evangelical missions in other countries (Schweinitz 1859: 66–8). In this case, ‘Diaspora’ is not the name of the dispersion but the official name of the link, for in the Moravian Brothers’ lexicon, the ‘Diaspora mission’ signifies both the maintenance of the link and the statistical addition of all members living abroad in the ‘continental province’. This mission and its name spread beyond the limits of the Unity of Brethren to become a policy of support for Protestant minorities. In 1843, this policy was institutionalized, with the creation in Frankfurt of an organization named Evangelische Verein der Gustav-Adolf-Stiftung (Evangelical Association of the Gustav-Adolf Foundation), usually called Gustav-Adolf-Werk (GAW), which set itself the goal of organizing assistance for these minorities (Röhrig 1999). The reference to the religious concept of Diaspora, considered here as a dispersed geographical condition calling for the maintenance of a link between the dispersed communities, is constant. In 1838, this conceptualization of the ‘Protestant Diaspora’ as a minority in Catholic countries was taken up and inverted by German Catholics through the
intermediary of the Ludwig Missionary Association (Ludwigmissionsverein) and, particularly, following the creation of the Boniface Association (Bonifatiusverein) in 1849 (Röhrig 1993).

The Jewish debate

While diaspora is undoubtedly linked to Zionism, the association is more complex than commonly believed. Zionism emerges geographically in the diaspora, but it finds its political specificity in the refusal of the diaspora (shlihot ha-galuth) as a condition to create a state within the borders of which Jews could feel safe. The publication of Herzl’s Der Judenstaat (Herzl 1917) in 1896 and the holding of the first Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897 both mark the beginnings of a new political programme that insists on the necessity to hasten the creation of a haven for the Jews. This contradicts the main religious principle that only God can organize the return of the Jews to the Holy Land at the end of time. On the one hand, diaspora (galuth) is the sign of the Jewish election. On the other hand, it is nothing but the weakening of the community and the risk of being exterminated.

The rise of Zionism entailed a great debate about the future of the Jews and about the solutions to be found. An active role was played by two Jewish figures, the Russian historian Simon Dubnow and the Russian thinker Asher Ginsberg, better known under the pseudonym of Ahad Ha’am. Dubnow defended the idea of a Jewish autonomism in which the preservation of the diaspora could be linked with the citizenship of Jews in the countries in which they lived. The most emblematic presentation of this perspective is to be found in an 1898 article (Dubnow 1958: 109):

The Jews as inhabitants of Europe since ancient times demand equal political and civic rights; as members of a historic nationality united by a common culture, they demand as much autonomy as is appropriate for any nationality that strives to develop freely. If these two demands are satisfied, the patriotism of the Jews in all the different countries will be beyond doubt. The Jew who lives a life of peace and quiet in his fatherland, can well be an English, French or German patriot and can, at the same time, be a true and devoted son of the Jewish nationality, which, though dispersed, is held together by national ties.

For Ahad Ha’am, dispersion had spoiled the Jewish nation. It therefore needed to rejuvenate itself, less through the intermediary of religion than through that of Jewish culture. It was this latter that would be reborn in Palestine, in the context of a ‘Jewish colony’, which would, in time, become ‘the centre of the nation’ (Ha’am 1962: 78). This vision opposed religious orthodoxy by according a pre-eminent place to culture in the maintenance of unity; it opposed political Zionism by privileging the role of the nation over that of the state; it opposed assimilation by emphasizing the national existence of the Jews; and finally, it opposed the maintenance of Jews in a single diaspora by stressing the necessity of regenerating a national culture threatened by impoverishment. Ahad Ha’am’s response to Dubnow’s affirmation of the diaspora was that the latter corresponded to the ‘position of a lamb among wolves’ (Ha’am 1959: 270).

The creation of the State of Israel in 1948 opened a new era. As a Zionist state, it soon insisted on the need for every Jew to practise aliyah (‘going up’ to the homeland), and early Israeli governments were tough on Jewish organizations that upheld the right of Jews not to return, as did the American Jewish Committee (Feldstein 2006). This state of tension between Israel and the Jewish diaspora lasted until the late 1960s. The situation in the Middle East, as much as Israel’s victory, considered ‘miraculous’, in the Six Day War in 1967, led to a different type of relationship between Israel and Jews around the world. After 1967, a singular relationship of
recognition emerged between these two entities, which bestowed a new meaning on the word *diaspora* and which was manifested in Hebrew through the adoption of the term *tfutsoth* – literally meaning *dispersion* – in place of *galuth*. Consequently, a form of link was established with a given state that did not imply possessing the nationality of that state: it was a type of belonging that was not a legally constituted status and that went beyond the exclusively juridical link that tied an expatriate – a citizen of one country living on the territory of another – to a state that recognized him or her as such and whose legitimacy the person in question also recognized.

The complexity of the meanings of *diaspora* in Jewish history can be organized according to two axes: the first separates conceptions founded on exile from those founded on community. In the first case, *galuth* calls for a return that must occur in time, be it eschatological in the case of Judaic Rabbinism or political in the case of Zionism; in the second, *galuth* is separated from the question of a return and calls for the constitution of links in space, either without a state in the case of diasporism, as Dubnow for instance proclaimed it, or with a state (or a centre according to Ahad Ha’am) as we can see in the recognition of *tfutsoth*. Four different meanings of *diaspora* thus coexisted, whose emergence is not simultaneous but historically stratified (see Table 1.1).

### The first scholarly uses

From the first decades of the twentieth century onwards, several general processes characterize the evolution of *diaspora*: first, secularization, that is, the extension to nonreligious meanings; second, trivialization, namely the widening of the spectrum of relevant cases; and third, but only later, formalization, or the establishment of criteria that allow the shift to occur from a definite to an indefinite category with its subtypes.

Simon Dubnow’s 1931 ‘Diaspora’ entry in the *Encyclopaedia of the social sciences* marked a fundamental milestone in extending the term to other populations and to the academic world. The first paragraph (Dubnow 1931: 126) is rather eloquent:

> Diaspora is a Greek term for a nation or part of a nation separated from its own state or territory and dispersed among other nations but preserving its own national culture. In a sense, Magna Graecia constituted a Greek diaspora in the ancient Roman Empire, and a typical case of diaspora is presented by the Armenians, many of whom have voluntarily lived outside their small national territory for centuries.

For the first time, *diaspora* is understood as a category with different instances. That this entry was included in an important publication allowed for its further use. The American sociologist Robert E. Park took it up a few years later, applying it to the members of different Asian groups living far from their countries, but adding a geographical dimension: ‘there are, at the present time, between 16,000,000 and 17,000,000 people of Asiatic origin living in the diaspora, if I may use that term to designate not merely the condition but the place of dispersion of peoples’ (Park 1939: 28). American sociologist Rose Hun Lee, who trained in the sociological tradition of Chicago and whose doctoral thesis was devoted to the Chinatowns of the Rocky Mountains,
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presented a conceptualization of diaspora that drew on Dubnow but that she limited to the
Jewish case, insisting on the fact that the dispersion of the Chinese people differed from that of
the Jewish people (Lee 1949: 422). Yet, in her 1960 book on the Chinese in the United States,
she uses the word diaspora several times and always in the context of the Chinatowns, which she
describes as ‘communities in diaspora’ (Lee 1960: 56).

Such an extension of the possible cases of diaspora is also visible in the work of the British
historian Arnold J. Toynbee. When the first volumes of his monumental A study of history were
published in the 1930s, his use of the word was associated with the idea of the fossilization of a
civilization, mostly the Jewish one. Thirty years later, in the twelfth volume, he reconsidered
his prior judgement, acknowledging the cohesive function of diaspora, and suggesting that the
Jewish diaspora was not exceptional and that its characteristics were to be found among other
populations (Toynbee 1961: 111–17). In 1972, when revising his whole work, he (Toynbee
1972: 65–9) goes as far as writing that:

The accelerating improvement in means of communications of all kinds may do more to
promote the creation of diasporas by facilitating it than the Assyrian war-lords were ever
able to do by force. In a society that is ‘annihilating distance’, world-wide diasporas, rather
than local national states, look like ‘the wave of the future’. The transformation of the
world into a cosmopolis favours social organization on a non-local basis.

Elsewhere, Toynbee (1965: 81–2) had even hoped ‘to see the number, size and importance of
the world’s diasporas increase in size as never before’.

People heard him, for a non-conceptualized usage of diaspora, open and often without much
continuity, started flowering between the 1940s and 1970s in fields such as geography, history
and anthropology. However, even when these uses became cumulative in a subfield, they hardly
spread across disciplines. The appearance of the word in the academic lexicon helped to open
the space of usage, but without leading to an accumulation of references. Beside the Chinese,
Indians, Greeks and Armenians, it was possible to find growing references being made to the
Dominicans, the Irish, the Koreans, the Hungarians, the Finns, the Ukrainians, the Québécois,
the Croats, the Polish and the Puerto Ricans as diasporas, yet without any single definition of
what a diaspora was.

Diaspora as a motto

The growth in the uses of the term diaspora is not just associated with the logic of academic dif-
fusion, but has also benefited from a change in its semantic charge from negative to increasingly
positive. In this respect, from the mid-1960s onwards, it became more and more popular in
some social circles eager to display their identity as both irreducible to the boundaries of a nation
(because of its dispersed condition) and united by a common heritage, ancestry, civilization, lan-
guage, ethnicity and race. This trend was especially current among groups of people in America
who insisted on being recognized for their specificity rather than merely discriminated against or
condemned to assimilation. The case of the African Americans is emblematic of this tendency.

Until quite recently, scholars all agreed that the first written occurrences of the expressions
‘African diaspora’, ‘black diaspora’, and the use of diaspora to describe the situation of blacks liv-
ing outside Africa, date from 1965 (Irele 1965; Shepperson 1966). In fact, as some scholars have
already suggested though not demonstrated (Edwards 2001), both the idea and the words them-
selves occurred earlier. They were often used explicitly to draw the analogy between Jewish
history and black history, or to note the existence of discrimination that both groups faced in the
countries in which they lived. In *American civilization and the negro*, first published in 1916, the African-American thinker and doctor Charles Victor Roman raised the question of the future of blacks in Africa and the American South. He wrote that ‘the slave-trade was the diaspora of the African, and the children of this alienation have become a permanent part of the citizenry of the American republic’ (Roman 1921: 195). Soon afterward, in 1917, the analogy between blacks and Jews was drawn on the Jewish side. On 29 May 1917, a Yiddish newspaper, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, made the connection between the race riots that erupted in East St Louis, Illinois, on 28 May 1917 and the Kishinev pogrom in 1903, during which more than 50 Jews were killed.

The situation of the Negroes in America is very comparable to the situation of the Jews . . . in Russia. The Negro diaspora, the special laws, the decrees, the pogroms and also the Negro complaints, the Negro hopes, are very similar to those which we Jews . . . lived through.

*(quoted in Diner 1977: 75–6)*

Despite these two occurrences, the word *diaspora* was rarely used to describe people of African origin. It was not until the 1950s and 1960s that its usage became more common in academia. We find it in the texts of English-speaking historians of Africa like Colin Legum (1962: 14) and Basil Davidson (1964: 38), and of French scholars and intellectuals like the French ethnologist and great Haiti specialist Alfred Métraux (1951: 21), or the French psychiatrist and writer Frantz Fanon. In *The wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (1961: 148) described ‘the Negro diaspora’ as the ‘tens of millions of blacks spread over the American continents’. It seems that a distinction needs to be established between the sporadic British or French academic or militant uses of the term in the 1960s, including those of Irele (1965) and Shepperson (1966), and the development of an actual self-description as a *diaspora* by fractions of the African-American population. From the late 1960s, academic and non-academic publications using the term *diaspora* to refer to black people residing outside Africa started to multiply in the African-American community. This use was characterized by its looseness and by the absence of any real reflection on its origins or Jewish flavour. The term *diaspora* provided black people with a name for themselves. It served as a reminder of their historical tragedy and, by emphasizing the connection and the return (spiritual and intellectual if not physical), as a positive way of recovering a sense of unity with Africa. This emphasis established the existence of continuities, or survivals, between black people living outside Africa and their African origin. This was all the truer for those fractions insisting more on blackness than on the achievement of civil rights (for a deeper analysis, see Dufoix 2017, chapter 5). The quest for black pride and the will to recover their lost history led to the constitution of the discipline of Black Studies in American universities in the late 1960s (Rojas 2007). The term *diaspora* – along with other words such as *ebonics* – was inherently part of a new lexicon that aimed to give positivity to a previous stigma, seen for instance in John Paden and Edward Soja’s (1969: 437) report on the African experience:

> What has been the imprint of the Afro-American community on the modern culture of the Western Hemisphere? This question, which is the basis of all ‘Afro-American Studies’ programs can only be posed in brief in this lecture. Yet it is clearly related to ‘African Studies’, for this black ‘diaspora’, transplanted from Africa primarily by force, consists of nearly a third of the world’s black people.

The scholarly–activist mix characteristic of this development was not limited to academic circles, but made its way into popular black magazines such as *Negro Digest* and *Black World*.
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To create an Institute for African American Studies in Atlanta, Vincent Harding, head of the department of history and sociology at Atlanta’s Spelman College, wrote an open letter to black students in the North. He told them ‘it will need millions of dollars, the best staff from every part of the African diaspora, students who are ready to take care of business, and it must have continuous exposure throughout the black community’ (Harding 1969: 13–14). Though barely conceptualized, by the mid-1970s diaspora had become a social and political motto, a rallying cry that could be used in a positive way and, as Saint Clair Drake’s (1975) seminal article clarified, one progressively dissociated from the Jewish prototype.

Proto-definitions

Apart from Dubnow’s, there was no general or widely discussed academic definition of diaspora until the late 1970s; the social science literature contained only a few attempts that were rarely cited or adopted. The first author bold enough to go beyond mere analogy and to propose an actual definition seems to have been the French geographer Maximilien Sorre, who gradually transformed his supple use of the word into a geographical concept. In *Les fondements de la géographie humaine*, he used it in a sense close to ‘number of emigrants’ for three populations that had hitherto not been referred to in this way – ‘the Japanese diaspora was smaller than the Chinese diaspora. Likewise the Hindu diaspora’ (Sorre 1947: 279). Twelve years later, he made it the name of a particular space, occupied by ‘national minorities in a foreign land’, who enlarge the national space ‘as long as they maintain their original links with the mother country’ (Sorre 1957: 95). The reference to minorities is also found in the work of British anthropologist Maurice Freedman – a specialist on the Chinese family inside and outside China, about which he used the phrase ‘Chinese diaspora’ (see Freedman 1966). In his earlier research on the Jewish community in Great Britain, Freedman (1955) established parallels with other communities, for he assumed that the supposedly unique character of the Jews was a fallacy and that an analysis of the relationships they maintained with their social environment was required within a sociology of race relations. In this respect, Freedman (1955: 236) proposed a conceptual definition of a diaspora based on the existence, outside the borders of the countries to which they claimed to belong, of communities working to maintain their cultural specificity in the countries in which they found themselves:

There are other ‘diasporas’, notably those of the Chinese and the Indians, in which it is common to find the overseas sojourners accused of trying to maintain an imperium in imperia, of fostering a separatist educational system, of breaking the loyalty of citizens to the land of their birth by stimulating the use of a foreign language and by inculcating the political and cultural values of a nation across the seas.

Other attempts, as in the cases of ‘trade diaspora’ and ‘diaspora nationalism’, were more circumscribed. In the late 1960s, Abner Cohen, a British social anthropologist of West Africa, proposed using the concept of ‘trade diasporas’ or ‘commercial diasporas’ to refer to the spatial organization of the trading peoples of West Africa, such as the Hausa, Mandé or Dyula. Having evoked the economic organization of the Hausa as ‘a far-flung diaspora, which consists of a network of localized Hausa communities’ (Cohen 1969: 9), he reintroduced the concept later in the year at an international seminar on the development of African trade in West Africa since the nineteenth century, which took place in Freetown in December 1969. In his paper, Cohen developed the idea of ‘commercial diasporas’ to describe ‘a nation of socially independent, but spatially dispersed communities’ (Cohen 1971: 267). Although criticized by the conference
participants, other scholars in the field of African economic and social history, such as Paul
Lovejoy (1973) and Philip D. Curtin (1984), soon appropriated the concept.

If not the first to link national minority to diaspora (see Macartney 1934: 57), the Australian
political scientist Kenneth Minogue was probably the first explicitly to associate diaspora with
nationalism. He defined diaspora as the scattered members of an ethnic group wishing to return
to its historical or claimed homeland (Minogue 1967: 13, 106). Four years later, Anthony D.
Smith elaborated a typology based on Minogue’s work, which distinguished three forms of
nationalism – territorial, mixed and ethnic. Here, Smith saw ‘diaspora’ as a rare subcategory of
the ethnic type characterized by a search for greater cultural autonomy. As he put it, ‘the only
mode of ensuring the survival of the culture and its bearers is through evacuation of communi-
ties to a territory outside the hostile areas’ (Smith 1971: 222), with the classic cases of this type
being Garveyism, Zionism, the Lebanese, Liberians, Greeks and Armenians.

If the secularization of the term diaspora, multiplication of its possible occurrences, and grow-
ing academic use were undoubtedly prerequisites for its more general conceptualization, it did
not automatically or immediately result in systematic attempts to provide academic definitions,
for these began only from the late 1970s onwards.

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