U.S. Diasporas and Homelands in the Era of Transnationalism

The manner in which a state conceives and conducts its foreign policy is greatly affected by [its] national particularities.


Both the involvement of U.S. diasporas in the politics of their countries of origin (whether they be independent states or aspiring to statehood) and their attempts to shape or at least influence American diplomacy directed at their homelands have been long-standing preoccupations of American scholars and politicians. Students of American ethnicity and U.S. foreign affairs have debated how diasporas shape American perceptions of what the U.S. national interest is and have questioned whether diasporic identification with ancestral homelands has hindered America’s national cohesion and civic culture.1 Although many scholars agree that U.S. diasporas are increasingly influential in shaping America’s international relations, there are in fact only limited comparative studies and inconclusive findings as to whether and how diasporic dedication to the homeland’s political affairs affects the American state and its culture.2

The uncertainty and lack of consensus on these questions are best manifested in the changes over time found in the works of Louis Gerson, among the pioneers in the study of American diasporas. In The Hyphenate and Recent American Politics and Diplomacy, Gerson alerted Americans to what he viewed in 1964 as the perils of ethnic politics:

Many ethnic leaders have been increasingly successful in making many Americans believe that they and their children and their children’s children are duty-bound to act in their interest of their
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ancestral land – that the emotional umbilical cord can never be severed. A belief is thus being perpetuated that the United States is a multinational state which cannot and should not be fully united. The doctrine, “once hyphenated, always hyphenated,” is a threat to American unity, but it is more than a threat to the majority of immigrants and their descendants, whose loyalty and devotion to America – a sanctuary from the ills of their homelands – is unbounded.³

Thirteen years later, even though the civil rights movement had stirred the political activity of previously excluded groups, Gerson seemingly reversed himself to echo and share early twentieth-century author and playwright Israel Zangwill’s optimism concerning the American melting pot. Such an optimism does not fear the emergent ethnic activism as a threat to continued ethnic integration:

American culture and society have continuously been reinvigorated and shaped by successive waves of immigrant groups and their descendants. Without exception, all immigrants who decided to settle in the United States wanted to be integrated into the American society and gain full access to its values. This stands in sharp contrast to the experiences of ethnic minorities in other societies.⁴

Gerson’s optimism has been questioned by some recent critics of the growing presence of “ethnic zealots” in American politics and culture, as well as by others who are troubled by what they see as alarming manifestations of intolerance and balkanization in America’s big cities.⁵ Journalist Tamar Jacoby has argued that

in the past twenty years, in part with the sanction of the liberal establishment . . . we’ve come to think that we owe our primary allegiance to our particular small communities, that the big community is ill-defined, hard to get our hands on, and that underneath we are really different. We have a benign idea of a mosaic, but it never remains benign. It invariably degenerates into “us vs. them.” There is a basic polarization and distrust that leads to friction on every issue. One wouldn’t want to end all particular allegiances, but the pendulum has swung too far.⁶

Such critics of the rising tide of ethnicity are often rearticulating an old American fear that the devotion to ancestral homelands further exacerbates domestic ethnic strains and endangers the fabric of American society.⁷ They point to numerous instances of domestic
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ethnic rivalries prompted or fueled by diasporic relations with ancestral lands; of these, the most salient current examples are taken to be the heated feuds between African- and Jewish-Americans and American Serbs and Croats. Equally relevant are the tensions between Hispanics and blacks in Miami, which grew primarily out of local struggles over cultural, economic, and political domination, but were heightened after the summer of 1990, when Miami Cuban-Americans snubbed South African civil rights leader Nelson Mandela for embracing Castro. In return, African-Americans declared a boycott of tourism that cost Miami’s economy about $50 million and was lifted only in the summer of 1993.8

The fear of balkanization is not predictably or merely rhetorical, a cover for various forms of racism, though it can be that. Many observers sincerely wonder whether Americans remain united in their commitments and distanced from the politics of other countries, a distance that is regarded as essential for domestic stability. Their anxiety is characteristic, in that it replaces earlier American fears about the wars and discords of the rest of the world, which the United States sought to keep at bay and from which it made attempts to isolate itself, both by distance and, if necessary, by the coercion of its own citizens. Today, as various forms of state breakdown (e.g., the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia) multiply the number of countries aspiring to join the United Nations and also multiply wars and misery, Harvard's Charles S. Maier writes:

The same tides of fragmentation that have overwhelmed the Balkans and the old Soviet Union also lap at Western democracies. Navigating this turbulent current in national and international politics requires a balancing commitment to civic universalism. If Americans wish to construct a new framework of international principles, they must take care not to encourage the same centrifugal impulses that contribute to conflicts they find so appalling abroad.9

In the past decade, questions of identity and culture have also been fueled by, and become an integral part of, the growing debate over immigration and America’s absorptive capacities, with concern over the economic impact of migrants often serving as a pretext for consideration of more fundamental issues of national identity and civic culture. The ethnic makeup of the United States is changing
very rapidly, as “almost all the recent migrants [have come] from Asia, Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean,” a result of the lowering of immigration barriers since the 1960s, and especially since the mid-1980s. U.S. census figures released in 1992 indicate that 8.6 million immigrants were admitted to the United States during the 1980s, and “[a]lthough migrants add less than 0.5 per cent to the U.S. population each year, immigrants and their offspring are expected to be responsible for almost two-thirds of the net population increase over the next 50 years.” This would mean 70 million out of an overall increase of 106 million between 1990 and 2040, bringing the total U.S. population to 355 million. In Los Angeles, the nation’s second largest city, by the end of the 1980s “49.9 per cent [of residents] spoke a language other than English at home; 25.3 percent spoke Spanish.”

There is a strong American tradition of making political use of such statistics, with those expressing nativist sentiments portraying each successive wave of “unassimilable” immigrants as a prelude to imminent national disaster. Myron Weiner, noting John Higham’s comments, writes that

in 1888, the American Economic Association offered a prize of $150 for the best essay on the theme “The Evil Effects of Unrestricted Migration.” . . . [its president] argued that migrants created unrest in the labor force and were a threat not only to American prosperity but also to social and political stability. He further voiced the fear that the immigrant flows consisted of people who were unassimilable to American values. “The entrance into our political, social and industrial life of such vast masses of peasantry . . . degraded below our utmost conceptions, is a matter which no intelligent patriot can look upon without the greatest apprehension and alarm.”

Despite what may charitably be described as the weak predictive ability of such doomsday prophecies, they have frequently resurfaced and continue to have a strong political impact, as demonstrated in 1994 by the overwhelming passage of California’s antiimmigrant Proposition 187. Although fear of immigrants in the 1990s is sometimes couched in more sophisticated terminology than its nineteenth-century precursors, the message remains the same: “Immigration in general is a threat to the ‘nation’ that is conceived of as a
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singular, predominantly Euro-American, English-speaking culture.”15

A somewhat new variation on an old theme is concern over the growing “transnationalism” of many immigrants, meaning that, far more than their predecessors, they keep “one foot” in their home country and the other in the United States. Improvements in transportation and communication and easier access across frontiers have increased immigrant mobility and contact with home countries, helping immigrants to remain a powerful political, economic, and social force in their homelands, and enabling political actors abroad to mobilize and vie for their support. When leading South Korean politicians rushed to Los Angeles after the 1992 riots promising financial support and diplomatic pressure to secure relief for Korean store owners who had suffered losses, they reinforced the image of Korean-Americans as a “colony” of the homeland.16 At the same time, countries such as the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Israel have extended or are considering extending voting rights to their diasporas. In March 1998, Mexico also opened a five-year window allowing emigrants who had lost their citizenship upon becoming U.S. citizens to apply to regain their economic and social rights as Mexican “nationals,” a status more distinct in name than in substance from that of “citizen.”17 This is expected to result not only in significant numbers of naturalized U.S. citizens reclaiming Mexican nationality, but also in more Mexicans resident in the United States – no longer under threat of losing their rights as Mexicans – applying for American citizenship.

Some observers maintain that immigrants are far less likely to make efforts to assimilate or to acquire American citizenship due to their continued cultural attachments to their country of origin and the problems they face at home caused by renouncing their original citizenship. “American citizens further worry that even for those newcomers who do become citizens, group-oriented policies like the amended Voting Rights Act and bilingual education encourage them to identify as members of racial and ethnic groups rather than as members of the entire American people.”18 When the number of new immigrants seeking to acquire citizenship diminished, there were concerns over their lack of attachment to the United States. However, when large numbers rushed to become citizens in 1996–
97 because of new legislation limiting social benefits to noncitizens, concern was expressed over whether the motivation for acquiring citizenship was proper — that is, with America’s national interest in mind.

The question has been raised as to whether the newcomers, who often hold dual citizenship, can be reconciled with the republican vision of citizenship in the United States. New U.S. citizens must swear that they “renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which [they] have heretofore been a subject or citizen.” Yet the U.S. government does not compel “naturalizing citizens to prove that their renunciation is legally effective in the country of origin and does not prohibit native-born citizens from becoming citizens of other nations.” This, in effect, leaves space for multiple loyalties on the part of both native-born and naturalized American citizens. Regardless of whether immigrants take citizenship or choose to avoid it, proponents of immigration reform claim that “transnational immigrants threaten a singular vision of the ‘nation’ because they allegedly bring ‘multiculturalism’ and not assimilation.” In addition to being perceived as a threat to the cultural coherence of the United States, transnationalism has even been described as a challenge to the very sovereignty of the country. Massive immigration from Mexico and the new trend toward rapprochement and reconciliation between the Mexican government and Mexican-Americans have raised unfounded anxiety over Mexican political separatism. “More than 7 million Mexican-born immigrants reside in the United States, and their U.S.-born offspring add up to millions more.” Mexican-Americans make up the majority of the U.S. Hispanic community, projected to become the largest ethnic minority in the country within the next decade. “In Houston, the nation’s fourth-largest city, Hispanics have overtaken ‘Anglos’ as the city’s largest ethnic group, largely because of immigration from Mexico.”

Transnationalism has long had important political implications in the United States, with candidates at every level of government making “electoral pilgrimages” to places such as Israel, Ireland, and Italy. The destinations are changing, however, reflecting new demographic trends, particularly in America’s large cities. For example, one of the candidates in the race for the 1997 Democratic mayoralty nomination in New York City visited the Dominican Republic in
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November 1996 as part of her effort to gain the support of the 4 percent of voters of Dominican background, “the fastest-growing ethnic group in the city.” In close elections like recent New York mayoralty races, such new communities can play a decisive role. “An estimated 100,000 voting-age adults [were] naturalized in the New York area in [1996].”

The idea of a transnationalist threat to American unity has received new theoretical backing from Samuel Huntington’s much-debated thesis, which stresses the expanding dominance of “civilizations” in world affairs and the persistence of “kin-country” and “diaspora” loyalties that run much deeper than assimilationists are willing to admit. In the post-cold war era, diasporic communities which are intensely involved in prolonged conflicts of their kin countries and/or communities muster considerable political influence over their host governments, redefine their national interest, and affect perceptions of identity in both their old and new countries of residence. This thesis has particular bearing on the American context, where contemporary nativists and right-wingers have objected to immigrants from foreign countries as the “bearers of foreign and less desirable cultural values.” Given that by 2050 white America is expected to lose its majority to Hispanics, Asians, and blacks, Huntington wonders whether the trend toward “the de-Westernization of the United States . . . means its de-Americanization in the democratic sense.” He warns that, if the pillars of American identity – the democratic liberal principle and its European heritage – are further eroded, the United States might find itself, like the former Soviet Union, falling “onto the ash heap of history.”

Today, when the United States is searching for a new sense of purpose in its foreign relations, and multiculturalism has heightened concerns over the nature of American identity, it is time to reevaluate the international and domestic effects of U.S. diasporas. What is the role of U.S. diasporas in American foreign policy? Do their voices threaten to balkanize the American national interest, or are they constructive? What is the relationship between a diasporic group gaining an effective voice in U.S. foreign policy and its adoption of American political ideals? What function do ethnic lobbies serve in America’s global role as the champion of democratic ideals? Does ethnic commitment to ancestral countries impede U.S. domestic cohesion and encourage subnational loyalties? And how do ethnic
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Americans affect the identity and politics of their country of origin or symbolic homelands?

This book will examine all of these questions. It will be argued that the negative impact of ethnic involvement in U.S. foreign affairs has been exaggerated and even falsified. Involvement in U.S. foreign policy is in fact often one of the clearest indications that an ethnic community has “arrived” in American society, and that it has demonstrated its willingness not only to reinforce and uphold American values such as democracy and pluralism inside America, but to promote these values abroad. The marketing of values such as democracy, human rights, free-market economics, and religious pluralism is likely to reflect positively on U.S. civic culture by marginalizing contrary forces of isolationism and separatism, and discouraging tendencies toward domestic balkanization. In addition, by involving themselves in the affairs of their ancestral countries, U.S. diasporas become critical players in defining the national identity and political ethos of their homelands.

In this book, “diaspora” will be defined as a people with common ethnic-national-religious origin who reside outside a claimed or an independent home territory. They regard themselves and/or are regarded by others as members or potential members of their country of origin (claimed or already existing), a status held regardless of their geographical location and citizen status outside their home country. Members of a diaspora are called upon periodically by ethnnonational elements inside or outside the home country’s territory to subscribe to a particular cause or group as an expression of their ethnnonational loyalty.27

Historically, diasporas in the United States have been highly dedicated to political causes in their country of origin, often seeing themselves as representatives of their old country abroad. Some older diasporas, like Jews, Greeks, and Italians, have often lived vicariously through their ancestral home countries, rather than actively trying to change their governments. Politics in the home country is important for their political identity in America, and they are more likely to support existing regimes whose policies coincide with American liberalism and/or U.S. foreign objectives and actively oppose those which do not. They tend to embrace their homeland in a way that is not threatening to their identity within the parameters of American
pluralism, but they must always defend themselves against the charge of divided loyalties.

For example, the Jewish lobby in the United States has always portrayed its devotion to Israel (the symbolic homeland) as an extension of its allegiance to American democratic values and strategic interests. Jewish organizations have a relatively strong track record in terms of influencing U.S. government policy. Yet they have found themselves torn increasingly between their obligations to the symbolic homeland and the United States. This conflict of interest derives from the Jewish position inside the United States vis-à-vis other ethnoracial and religious groups, as well as the government. This discord is also compounded by the growing divergence in terms of culture and values between Israeli society and large segments of American Jewry.

During the last decade or so, the often acrimonious debate among orthodox Israeli Jews and their non-orthodox American counterparts over the status of Reform and Conservative Jewish conversions and religious observance has strained and confused American Jewish ties with Israel, shifting alignments of religious and political loyalty. The orthodox hegemony in Israel is no longer acceptable to the majority of American Jews, who have come to see in it a danger to their own identity as Jews. Consequently, we have witnessed a new campaign by American Jews to change religious practices inside the state of Israel by encouraging the growth of pluralistic denominations. This process, although still in its early stages, may very well have significant consequences for Israel’s redefinition of its Jewish identity. Altogether, American Jews continue to maintain strong relations with Israel, a fact used by both the U.S. and the Israeli governments to advance their respective agendas. Indeed, the vulnerability of diasporas to the charge of dual loyalty is a lever that either home or host country can use to motivate or stymie diaspora political activity. Thus, diasporas may function as pawns used to communicate between the United States and their native countries.

The nature and range of diasporic involvement in the home country’s affairs depend largely on the size and diversity of the overseas community and are highly affected by the ability of diasporic institutions to generate and sustain a sense of communal identity. Ethnic cohesion is a complex and multidimensional factor. It relates to levels
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of interaction among group members as well as their connection with outsiders. Laurence Kotler-Berkowitz has written that “interaction among ethnic group members occurs in social, political and economic structures; occupation, residence, education, politics, family and friendship networks, social organizations, and institutions are specific structural spheres within which ethnic group members interact. The more ethnic group members interact frequently and non-conflictually in structural spheres, the higher the level of ethnic cohesion.” Although on the face of it ethnic cohesion is the best condition for ethnic mobilization, cohesion that is insular can impede the ability of the group to break into positions of influence in the larger society and into mainstream political institutions. Altogether, it is often difficult to assess the size of the diaspora, its composition, distribution, and especially its propensity to engage in home country politics.

To gauge diasporic makeup and political tendencies, one must take into account different waves of migration and degrees of assimilation and identity in the host country, as well as the migration politics of the home country. As a scholar of overseas Chinese has recently observed, diasporic identities are constantly undergoing transformation, influenced by factors such as race relations in the United States, American relations with the home country, and the home country’s policies toward its overseas constituencies. Moreover, the durability of diasporic institutions and their success in appropriating and activating old identities (ethnic, cultural, religious, or national) is greatly influenced by factors in plural societies that drive ethnic group members “to break with cultural traditions and develop different cultural activities and patterns, leading to cultural division.” The host government’s view of the home regime (friend or foe) as well as the host society’s changing perception of ethnic diversity is also a critical factor in sustaining diasporic identity and politics. For example, despite their rapid Americanization, by 1914 German-Americans still remained “by far the best organized of all foreign elements” in the United States. However, war frenzy and growing suspicion of German-Americans’ alliance with the pan-German movement in Berlin prompted American demands for total assimilation and unqualified renunciation of past loyalties. By 1940, the few remnants of German identity and institutions that had sur-