Marketing the American Creed Abroad

This book examines the interaction of domestic and foreign issues in the lives of ethnic Americans. Arguing that the damaging impact of ethnic influences on U.S. foreign affairs has been overstated and misrepresented, Shain brings a new dimension to the public debate on multiculturalism by exploring its transnational aspects. Ethnic groups, despite residual attachments to their homelands, do not betray American political values and ideals, but, on the contrary, their involvement in homeland-related affairs has been instrumental in disseminating those values inside and outside the United States. Shain evaluates ethnic groups in the United States from a broad theoretical and comparative perspective, and his case studies include, among others, Arab-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and African-Americans.

Yossi Shain is Associate Professor and Chairman of the Department of Political Science at Tel-Aviv University. He is the author of The Frontier of Loyalty: Political Exiles in the Age of the Nation-State and coeditor (with Juan Linz) of Between States: Interim Governments and Democratic Transitions. He is also editor of Governments-in-Exile in Contemporary World Politics and coeditor (with Aaron Klieman) of Democracy: The Challenges Ahead. He has been a visiting professor at Yale University, St. Antony’s College, Oxford University, Wesleyan University, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, and Middlebury College.
Marketing the American Creed Abroad

DIASPORAS IN THE U.S. AND THEIR HOMELANDS

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To Eytan and Emily
Contents

Preface and Acknowledgments

1 U.S. Diasporas and Homelands in the Era of Transnationalism
2 U.S. Ethnic Diasporas in the Struggle for Democracy and Self-Determination
3 Arab-American Identity and New Transnational Challenges
4 Transnational Influences on Ethnoracial Relations in the United States: The Case of Black-Jewish Disputes
5 “Go, but Do Not Forget Me”: Mexico, the Mexican Diaspora, and U.S.-Mexican Relations
Conclusion: Diasporas and the American National Interest

Notes
Bibliography
Index
Preface and Acknowledgments

This book focuses on the interaction of domestic and foreign issues in the lives of ethnic Americans and seeks to add a new dimension to the public debate on multiculturalism by exploring its transnational aspects. Thus, the book examines the effects of this transnational nexus on questions of politics, culture, identity, and loyalties inside the United States, as well as on countries of origin or symbolic homelands, in an attempt to better understand and conceptualize the impact of homelands and ethnicity on U.S. domestic and foreign affairs. In other words, what is being sought is a broadening of analytical scope to reflect the internationalization of these issues.

Throughout American history, U.S.-based ethnic diasporas have been involved in the affairs of their countries of origin or of their symbolic homelands, and ethnic lobbies are known to be an integral part of American politics. There has been a great deal of analysis of individual theories and case studies of ethnic involvement in U.S. foreign policy, and many observers have pointed to the ability of ethnic lobbyists to influence U.S. foreign policy makers on issues related to their ancestral homelands. This ability is broadly perceived to be on the rise, especially after the end of the cold war and the collapse of the Soviet Union, and with the declining power of the traditional professional elites who had dominated U.S. foreign policy since the end of World War II. Indeed, in recent years, scholars, journalists, and politicians have given greater attention to the role of ethnicity in U.S. foreign affairs, with differing interpretations as to its impact on the U.S. national interest.

Although many observers agree that U.S. diasporas are increasingly influential in shaping America’s international relations, there
PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

are in fact only limited studies and inconclusive findings as to whether and how diasporic dedication to homeland political affairs affects U.S. foreign policy and bears on American interests abroad. Even less attention has been paid to the issue of how ethnic involvement in homeland affairs impacts on U.S. civic culture and ethnic relations, and on the character and politics of the home country itself. Moreover, there have been few attempts to integrate the various relevant aspects of diasporic political activity, ethnic identity, and politics inside the United States.

My major argument is that the damaging impact of ethnic influences in U.S. foreign affairs has been overstated and misrepresented. Ethnic involvement in U.S. foreign affairs may be seen as an important vehicle through which disenfranchised groups may win an entry ticket into American society and politics. Indeed, one of the signs that an ethnic group has achieved a respectable position in American life is its acquisition of a meaningful voice in U.S. foreign affairs. Yet in order to obtain such a role, ethnic officials must first demonstrate their determination to advocate the principles of pluralism, democracy, and human rights abroad. In fact, in the aftermath of the cold war and with the advent of a more unipolar, ideological world order that favors democracy and the free-market economy, ethnic lobbies are likely to become mobilized diasporas. They are “commissioned” by American decision makers to export and safeguard American values abroad and are expected to become the moral conscience of new democracies or newly established states in their homelands. Such commissioning, in turn, further legitimizes the ethnic voice in America’s external affairs and enables diasporas to push American policy makers to adhere to America’s neo-Wilsonian values of promoting democracy and openness around the globe, even when such policies seem to obstruct ad hoc strategic interests.

Another central argument of my book is that the new foreign-policy role of ethnic groups is likely to reflect positively in American civic culture by reinforcing the values of democracy and pluralism at home. Contrary to conventional wisdom, I maintain that diasporic politics has the potential to temper, rather than exacerbate, domestic ethnic conflicts, because it discourages tendencies toward balkanization inside the United States. In many ways, then, the participation of ethnic diasporas in shaping U.S. foreign policy is a force of social integration and political inclusion.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thus, this book introduces a new perspective on the debate over multiculturalism and the changing character of American society, concentrating on the various aspects of relations between U.S. ethnic diasporas, their American environment, and their countries of origin or symbolic homelands. This nexus has deep historical roots in the United States as a country of immigrants with a legacy of racial exclusion. It is also a product of the changing nature of American politics and society and the empowerment of ethnoracial groups in electoral systems, as well as the growing foreign-policy role of individual members of Congress and even local governments.

In “the era of multiculturalism,” when the demographic makeup of America is changing dramatically, when American institutions no longer impose cultural assimilation on citizens, and when diasporic elites are less inhibited by charges of disloyalty in promoting ancestral identities among their constituencies, the role of diasporas in American politics gains in intensity and importance. The openness of the American political system to ethnic voices has allowed many newly organized diasporas to acquire a meaningful role in U.S. foreign policy, especially on issues concerning the nature of the regime and the economic policies of countries of origin or symbolic homelands. Alongside the more established groups of Greek, Armenian, Irish, and Jewish descent, the more recently empowered diasporas of African, Arab, Cuban, Dominican, Filipino, Haitian, Korean, and Mexican origin have discovered that they can unite and mobilize their community abroad more effectively by pursuing causes directly relating to their homeland, than when engaged in factional struggles for ethnoracial leadership within the United States, especially when such struggles involve intractable sociopolitical and economic issues. Indeed, many countries of origin have discovered the critical role of ethnic lobbies in the United States, and these countries’ leaders are taking action to build and sustain their U.S.-based compatriots’ loyalty and attachment in order to further their own interests. Such policies of diasporic recruitment and rapprochement may also force changes of political behavior and even identity inside the countries of origin.

The various dimensions of the diaspora-homeland nexus have developed over time as functions of a changing American identity. These include American self-definition, the nature of the diaspora, the goals of U.S. foreign policy, and, most recently, the increasing
impact of the international flow of capital and the development of transnational modes of transportation and communication. All of this leads us to the working assumption that domestic conflicts regarding American identity and the homeland factor among American ethnic groups are inextricably linked.

This book presents primary research and specific cases on diasporic politics in an attempt to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of “homelands” as both a domestic factor and an international element in American society. Particular experiences are addressed in detail to illuminate and inform the theoretical underpinnings of the book. They therefore provide a narrative but also a basis for thorough analysis and further investigation.

Over the past few years, many people have asked me what it is that motivates a native Israeli to work on American politics and culture? I am probably not sufficiently reflective or self-analytical, but I truly never considered my personal life as relevant to the writing of this book. One of the manuscript’s referees expressed his surprise that a foreigner would write about American ethnic identities, and strongly suggested that I “write a preface that lays out aspects of... personal biography and intellectual evolution that are relevant to the study.” When my editor then made the same request, I decided to try to provide an answer.

I was born and raised an Israeli, with all of the benefits and the “baggage” that comes with that identity. I grew up believing firmly in the historical and political vision of Zionism, which treated diasporic life as a lesser existence. In spite of the Zionist effort to negate diasporic life and envision the “New Jew” as an antithesis to Jewish life in the Galut (exile), the Galut features of Jewish life in Israel have persisted and intensified. Moreover, despite the strong presence of socialist elements in the early years of the Jewish state, from the outset American tradition, culture, and spirit were seen by Israelis as political and social models worthy of emulation. Israel’s ongoing efforts to assimilate diverse waves of Jewish migration into a melting pot, its pioneering spirit, and its biblical connections, as well as the adoption of democratic principles, were perceived and presented as analogous to the American experience. To the extent that Israelis looked outward, it was always to the “American dream” as a point of reference. This link was reinforced in my childhood experience by the special military and political relations that have created a certain
PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

perception in the Israeli public that we are something of an extension of America, our big brother.

In 1983, I left Israel to pursue a Ph.D. program at Yale. I was just turning twenty-seven and had very little sense of the world outside of Israel. My formative American experience was what Eva Hoffman has called the problem of “Lost in Translation.” The scope of the project ahead of me, including the large amount of reading and writing required in a foreign language, was almost overwhelming, yet at the same time challenging, exhilarating, and almost addictive. Yale’s Sterling Memorial Library became my second home – perhaps even my first – and the more I became comfortable with reading and writing English (an ongoing, indeed lifelong, process), the more I became engaged in American life, interested in its history, and fascinated by its dynamics.

I became an avid consumer of American news and culture, from daily and weekly newspapers and magazines and late-night TV shows, to more literate commentary on American history and culture. Although I constantly evaluated my American experience through the Israeli prism, I found myself becoming more and more at home in my temporary adopted country. From Rogers Smith I learned about American identity. From my instructor, the late Joseph Hamburger, and my friend Steven Smith I studied the philosophy of the founding fathers and discovered Tocqueville. Robert Dahl and David Mayhew taught me about the workings of American politics and government. Juan Linz, my mentor, gave me the comparativist perspective when studying American institutions. It was during my years at Yale that debates on multiculturalism began to take center stage in American intellectual life. As I became embroiled in the political and scholarly debates over the growing assertion of ethnicity, I felt uneasy about the focus on America’s domestic agenda and the absence of a transnational dimension. Richard Rodriguez’s Hunger of Memory provoked my thought about bilingualism in a country of immigrants. I always felt that the recovery of Hebrew was the single most important factor in the Zionist revival, yet I bemoaned the intense pressure that had been exerted on my parents’ generation to reject other languages as remnants of a despised diasporic existence. Joan Didion’s Miami shifted my growing interest in exile and diasporic politics from the European to the American scene.

I began studying diasporic politics when I wrote my dissertation
PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

on the politics and the loyalty dilemmas of opposition groups in exile. The writing of Alexander Herzen taught me more about the subject than any subsequent readings. When in 1986 people across America were mobilized by African-American leaders to protest apartheid, I became convinced that “multiculturalism” is a deeply transnational phenomenon, which ties U.S. identity to international politics and transnational movements. When in 1990 Khachig Tololyan asked me to join him in establishing Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies, I was happy to find a friend with whom I have continued ever since my intellectual discovery. Professor Tololyan’s comments on this manuscript and our numerous discussions have enriched my work greatly.

I was always certain that my life in America was only a temporary stage before returning to my homeland. With my American wife Nancy Schnog, however, I felt that the “threat” of losing Zion was real. “Will my children ever know what Israel is all about?” Am I bound to send them to a Jewish Sunday school, which seemed to me, at the time, so diasporic – that is, lesser in comparison to Israel’s “authentic Judaism.” My early reluctance to take American citizenship, even when I was entitled to it, was certainly out of fear of confusing my identity and loyalty. It was Raymond Aron’s writings on citizenship that reinforced my belief that citizenship largely defines one’s national loyalty in interaction with members of other nation-states and denotes which government is responsible for an individual’s security. In this respect, loyalty cannot be split. Yet, in recent years, with the declining role of nation-states as the sole determinant of national identity and the growing fusion of cultures across frontiers, I am no longer certain about the possibility of sustaining political or cultural uniformity, certainly not my own.

It was Nancy, a scholar of American Studies, who taught me more than anyone else about America. Her love of New England and her constant encouragement of me to read American literature have contributed a great deal to my understanding of America. The more I stayed in America, the more I became sensitive to and knowledgeable about Jewish issues (an effort I had never felt the need to make as a secular Israeli), and fascinated by the special character of diasporic institutions. I was also surprised to find myself so entrenched in American politics and society, almost an American patriot, defending the country’s global importance in front of my academic friends,
PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

who were gloomy and could only see its international faults. Remem-
ber – those were the Reagan-Bush years.

Both my children, Eytan and Emily – to whom this book is
dedicated – are American and Israeli citizens, speak English and
Hebrew at home, and from the first day of their lives have felt natural
in this duality. For years we lived in a perpetual state of transnational
movement, shuttling between Middlebury, Vermont, where Nancy
became a professor of American studies, and Tel-Aviv.

The idea of this book grew and developed during these years of
wandering. Myron Weiner inspired me to think about the role of
American diasporas when he invited me to talk about the subject in
the context of regime change at the Center for International Studies
at MIT in December 1991. His comments on an early draft and
insightful remarks by Nathan Glazer helped me in rewriting an essay
for Weiner’s book, International Migration and Security, a version of
which appeared in Political Science Quarterly (1994–95). This essay
became the basis for Chapter 2 of this book. I wrote parts of Chap-
ters 1, 2, and 4 when I was a visiting professor at Middlebury Col-
lege. I am indebted to Murray Dry, Noah Pickus, Russell Leng,
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Council of Learned Societies for their generous financial support.
Some early findings were published in Diaspora in spring 1994.

While I was a visiting professor at the Fletcher School of Law and
Diplomacy, I began researching and drafting the materials for Chap-
ters 3 and 4. I thank my student Yves-Rose Saint-Dic for teaching
me about Haitian-Americans. Peter Berkovitz always provided an
attentive ear. My analysis of Arab- and African-Americans as players
in American foreign policy appeared in Foreign Policy in the fall of
1995. A generous fellowship at St. Antony’s College enabled me to
broaden my understanding of diasporic politics through the lens of
the European experience. I remain indebted to my colleagues at St.
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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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It was in England, surprisingly, that I began finding strong research links to the Mexican-American–Mexican relationship. The Mexican ambassador to the United Kingdom (and previously Mexican consul in Los Angeles), Andres Rozental, opened doors to sources in Mexico and provided important documents. Rodolfo O. de la Garza broadened my intellectual scope and directed my attention to many sources. The Mexican ambassador to Israel, Jorge Alberto Lozoya, who was personally involved in the Mexican Foreign Ministry’s early diasporic plans, carefully read my work and provided excellent comments. Lozoya referred me to Professor Jorge Bustamante, the leading intellectual who facilitated the rapprochement between Mexico and its diaspora. His writings and our subsequent correspondence further benefited my analysis. Finally, Carlos Gonzalez Gutierrez, Director de Asuntos Comunitarios in the Mexican Foreign Ministry, who made use of my early findings in his own writing, enriched my own with his latest analysis of the Mexican diaspora. A version of Chapter 5 will appear in Political Science Quarterly.

Elizabeth Feingold, Wadia Abu-Nasser, Irit Tau, Guy Ben-Porat, and Shlomo Berman were excellent research assistants. They provided materials, helped in translations from Arabic and Spanish, and made critical comments. Many of my colleagues at Tel-Aviv University deserve my gratitude for reading, listening, and advising. David Vital posed many important questions early on. Avi Ben-Zvi shared with me his unparalleled insights into Israeli-American affairs. Aharon Klieman never forgot me when he came across relevant information, and he enriched my knowledge of U.S. foreign affairs. Azar Gat and Gil Merom made important comments and provided
PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Obviously, I remain solely responsible for the content and analysis of this book.